Fluctuating Identities and Postcolonial Discourse in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Lare Damlègue

Abstract

This article discusses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's critical views on identity as a fluctuating reality and assesses the socio-cultural factors that attend characters' identity mobility in postcolonial cultural spaces. It specifically considers migration and identity shifts as survival imperatives in postcolonial spaces where migration becomes dialectical in the 'in' and 'out' dynamics that engage Africans in conversation with world cultures. Using Edward Said's reflections on exile and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the article revisits discursive tenets of Afrocentric advocacies crossing thereby a gap in cultural diplomacy that redefines the African as world citizen. Thus, between home and exile, the discussion opts for a negotiated dwelling space where one finds complete fulfilment.

Keywords: Identity, migration, counter-discourse, postcolonial space.

Introduction

This article focuses on the literary analyses of behavioural shifts of characters from African-based perception of life to American and British-based understanding following their migration in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah.*[1] Critical approaches of the African migrant novel have highlighted aspects of postcolonial realities without specifying how the identity of characters fluctuate from one cultural environment to the other and especially how their identities match with the realities of survival. Gichingiri Ndigirigi asserts that the main concern of Adichie in *Americanah* is to prove that "travelling to and dwelling in metropolitan spaces gives Ifemelu the opportunity to eventually get to know Americans well enough to write about their tribalisms in popular blogs."[2] Mary Jane Androne takes a different stance, saying that the goal pursued by Adichie is to tell how "deterritorialization" helps to define the context within which migrants like Ifemelu exist and suggest the moment of alienation and exile.[3] Cristina Cruz-Gutierrez detaches herself from the previous views by taking *Americanah* as Adichie's narrative of what she calls "hairitage" which she views as "transitioning and third wave

Lare Damlègue is Associate Professor of Anglophone African Literature at the Université de Lomé in Togo (West Africa). Email: laredamlegue@gmail.com.

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[1] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013).

[2] Gichingiri Ndigirigi, "Reverse Appropriations and Transplantations in *Americanah*", in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu (New York: James Currey, 2017), p. 199.

[3] Mary Jane Androne, "Adichie's *Americanah*: A Migrant Bildungsroman", in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyou, (New York: James Currey, 2017), p. 229.

movement."[4] It follows that criticism stumbles on the specific question of identity fluctuations or shifts whereby characters take postures and assume varying roles depending on the imperatives and the needs of survival.

That is why this study is focused on identity fluctuations explaining the postcolonial forces that bring about such instability in the heroine Ifemelu's life in connection with the realities of immigration in America. The specific question answered is how postcolonial forces of survival and cultural relocations operate to incline immigrant characters like Ifemelu and Obinze to identity fluctuations and flexibility, causing them to take different roles, remodel their functions to survive in the new geographical space and cultural locations they are make to live in? Here I draw on postcolonial theory, specifically Edward Said's reflections on exile[5] and Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and otherness[6] will be used to sustain my argument. Two main points will be discussed: 1) The perception of African home and identity; and 2) identity fluctuation or shift and the heroine's survival strategies.

African Home, Exile, and Identity: Literary Articulations of the Postcolonial Subject

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said asserts that migration creates a consciousness of exile and a double consciousness of culture, setting and home. Migration also creates the awareness of double identities, the original one and the received one:

> Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that to borrow a phrase from music, is contrapuntal... Both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual occurring together contrapuntally.[7]

This formulation by Said situates my idea that Adichie exploits the fluctuation of characters' identities to produce a discourse that the postcolonial space in African novel is a sphere of identity relocation. Similar to Said, Bhabha highlights the idea that the postcolonial subject is an ambivalent one.[8] There is need to exploit Bhabha's cultural theory and Said's ideas of exile and how these reshape the perception of the postcolonial immigrant subject in *Americanah.* The intersection of their advocacies reveals that exile is seen as an outgrowth experience of colonialism, for people in the context of colonialism were deported to meet the demand of the colonizer, which was to neutralize resistance to colonialism. Several socio-economic and cultural forces forced people into exile: the imperial imposition of colonial rule; the occupational policy of African lands by the colonial settlers; and the desire to expand the empire through state legislations to mention but a few.

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[4] Cristina Cruz-Gutierrez, "Heritage Matters Transitioning and the Third Wave Hair Movement in 'Hair', 'Imitation' and *Americanah*," in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, Ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu (New York: James Currey, 2017), p. 259.
[5] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (London : Granta Books, 2001), p. 180.
[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 49.
[7] Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Stories*, p. 194.
[8] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 122.

Nowadays, migration is the new form of exile, in that people migrate under the pressure of multifaceted urgencies like the desire to escape poverty and make a better living, running away from political persecution, the pressure of economic hardships, and the attraction of educational opportunities. Migration reveals the vulnerability of African socio-economic apparatuses and the superiority of American and Western ones. The idea of universal imposition of civilization that was rejected by African postcolonial intellectuals like Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (b. 1938) returns on the surface with greater force as the Western and American educational standards, cultural norms, and economic infrastructures are considered the best so that those immigrants who shape their lives and living on these models become role models in Africa. Economic development levels cultural success and the immigrants are tossed between their former African cultural identities and those of the host countries. For example, Simon Gikandi foregrounds that the postcolonial subject inhabits the postcolonial theory and their historical experience inhabit the postcolonial world.[9] His reflection implies that the parallelism between immigration and exile, bereft of ambiguities, forms the hiatus of unstable identities which in Bhabha's interpretation reformulates otherness, the perception of the West by the East, the North by the South. The most relevant marker of the postcolonial theory that explains Adichie's characters' self-perception in terms of identity shifts and remodelling comes as cultural interpenetration so that the postcolonial immigrant subject is in-between two cultures. The ubiquity of that subject renders his/ her cultural and sometimes intellectual fixation difficult as the instability of the received values and the acquired ones leave him/ her perplexed when faced by the complexity of choices in the host countries.

The geographical relocation engenders cultural reorientations that hardly mediate satisfactory outcomes. The homecoming (both physical and cultural) as operated by both Obinze and Ifemelu definitely resets the centre of curiosity, as the immigrants seem to reconsider their home country as the place of self-fulfilment. It follows that the original self-fulfilment seems to be found at home but only after the immigration experience. This problematizes Adichie's creative philosophy especially as the postcolonial migrant finally harvests from his/her migrant's adventures unfulfilled dreams that still looms a harbinger in their illusionary expectations. By identity I mean those characteristics or traits, social behaviours, and language, that distinguish a character or group of characters from another. As African characters in Adichie's *Americanah* (Ifemelu, Obinze Aisha, Alima, Chijioke, and Emeka) display traits, use language and perform actions with an African (Nigerian) background when they are in Nigeria. In the United States, they change attitudes and language, and perform actions that at times are different from their original ones. The first change of identity applies with Ifemelu who is unable to work with her student visa and had to use Ngozi Okonkwo's social security card: "I begged her and she agreed to let you work with her Social Security Card."[10] Ifemelu working with Ngozi Okonkwo's social security card means she uses a fake name and identification (age, skills, and competences). Ifemelu working with that card would henceforth answer as Ngozi Okonkwo and not as Ifemelu. She would imitate that character in

[9] Simon Gikandi, "Poststructuralism and Postcolonial Discourse", in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, eds Tejumola Olanyan and Ato Quayson (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 616.
[10] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 131.

skills and competence to survive. As the narrator says, "America had subdued her."[11] Apart from Ifemelu, Aunty Uju, an Igbo woman, rejects Igbo as the official language to be taught to her child Dike; "Please don't speak Igbo to him," she said, claiming that "this is America."[12] Indirectly she denies her Igbo origins and identity to assume English ones. She further argues: "If you are not careful in this country [USA], your children become what you don't know. It is different back home [Nigeria] because you can control them. Here no."[13]

The idea is that children also change identity from Africa to America. While they are easy to control and educate in Africa, they are not easy to control in America. For instance, with regard to sex, Halima asserts that never in Africa are people taught about sex at an inappropriately early age: "When a girl is thirteen, already she knows all the positions. Never in Africa."[14] Adichie's *Americanah* is a postcolonial novel, and the storyline critically assesses the heroine Ifemelu's migration experience in America and her lover Obinze's experiences of migration in London. The reader can perceive aspects of shifting dialectics between Africa as home with stable cultural values of friendship, love, sharing, and dreams on the one hand, and England and America on the other. Africa perceived as home is marked off by its identification of societal problems that render difficult the emancipation of young people and create in them the desire to migrate in America or Europe to fulfil their dreams of prosperity. Africa therefore is the symbol of fragile identity: fragile economies punctuated by corruption, unstable political life, violent electoral processes, inadequate health institutions, fragile educational systems characterized by ill-equipped universities and schools, and a fragile military and security systems, unable to guarantee peace and protection to citizens. This postcolonial spectre of Africa as a difficult place for youth to successfully forge ahead is at the centre of their dreams to settle abroad in American and European metropolises. The African youth's life of dreams and future plans progressively gives way to disillusionment as Ifemelu and Obinze travel respectively to the America and England.

Both characters in *Americanah* display different identity traits throughout the novel to survive. Setting - namely place and time - is a determinant regarding the type of decision and action characters take and do. Nigeria in the novel is depicted as a symbol; it is a place of juvenile leisure. It is also a place of petty opportunities. Lagos is a city which, like most African cities in postcolonial time, faces several challenges. Joblessness, underpaid employment, and menial jobs like hair plaiting, cab driving, and petty trading. The life of most city dwellers is precarious. Women like Aisha and Alima are hairdressers. Chijioke works as cab driver, and Emeka is a security man.[15] Lagos is a city where life is costly, and most Lagosians have difficulties making ends meet. Ifemelu's father lost his job at the Federal agency because he refused to call his new boss 'Mummy'.[16] There are few stable families like those of Ifemelu and Obinze where parents are relatively well-off. This set of characters do not have fixed identities as they fluctuate between joblessness and underpaid jobs. While being described as 'home', the postcolonial west African city of Lagos presents difficulties for city dwellers,

[11] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 135.
[12] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 134.
[13] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 134.
[14] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 126.
[15] Adichie, *Americanah*, pp. 34, 21.
[16] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 56.

among which are unemployment and the cost of living. Adichie's presentation of Africa verges on realism, in that Nigeria becomes repulsive for the young. Nigeria, the epitome of Africa, seems to offer few opportunities to the youth to forge ahead. Although it is 'home' in the primary sense of the term, the Nigerian home, an epitome of African, is unappealing, inviting the citizens to choose 'home' in European or American countries. To escape, Nigerian citizens, namely the youth, opt for immigration to Western cities.

Said's theory of exile allows me to note that Western metropolitan cities like London and New York with renowned universities, job opportunities, and splendid infrastructures, attract African youth as glittering images of blissful life. Access to such places is highly esteemed by African youth as the greatest achievement of their life. Specifically, the youth hold such images of America from the television advertising and films that present Western countries like idealistic places: "She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions in shampoos and cars and packaged foods, and in her mind they became the real America she would only see when she moved to school in autumn."[17]

Characters like Obinze and Ifemelu would give all to migrate to have access to better studying and living conditions. Dreaming of a better future means for these young man and woman to study abroad and get a foreign university degree. Lagos also represents for these young characters a place of uncertain future. Before they migrate to London and New York, Obinze and Ifemelu give little consideration to their hometown as a place that contributed to forge their teenage character. Two identities are presented by the novelist: Obinze and Efemelu as Nigerian teenagers coming of age and in search of their own identities, and secondly as African youth incarnating African values of self-assertion. In the first place, identity appears as personhood in construction forged by local cultural, socio-economic, and political realities. Such identity is strongly influenced by formal and informal education, the socio-economic life and trends in the country, and the political realities. When for instance Nigeria is viewed by most Nigerians as unsafe place in terms of job security, Obinze and Efemelu are both teens and passionately in love. Their romance goes beyond the control of their parents. Nigeria is also presented as a place of uncertainty as most young students are doubtful about their future careers. Following Said, I maintain that culture diffuses identity.[18]

African culture diffuses African identity. It is in this context that Simona Bertacco asserts that postcolonial textualities play with multiple languages and that language is transformative.[19] That means African experience is carried and expressed through the cultural experience of Africans. This can be verified in *Americanah.* Nigeria is the point of departure. For Nigerians, values include but are not limited to: the value of life in community; interpersonal relationships; respect for elderly people or for old age; caring for others; belief in chastity, and respect for sex in marriage. Stress is put on modern school education as the doorway to professional opportunities. The more advanced a person is in school education, the more diplomas s/he will have, and the more chances s/he stands to get employment. Uneducated people end up in menial jobs.

[17] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 139.
[18] Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Stories*, p. 199.
[19] Simona Bertacco (ed.), "The Fact of Translation in Postcolonial Literatures," in *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures, Multi-Lingual Contexts, Translational Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-13.

Another important identity trait is that characters in the African setting are strongly religious, yet syncretic, mixing Christian and traditional beliefs. As people weave traditional beliefs with Christian beliefs, religion verges on mere cultic formalism: "The gods, the hovering deities who gave and took teenage loves had decided that Obinze would go out with Ginika."[20] Such a statement is made by the narrator, a Christian in Ifemelu's family. The belief in traditional gods and in their power to effect change in people still hover in the minds of African Christians, a situation which poses the problem of true conversion and true Christian identity. Pentecostalism preaches new birth and the regeneration of the heart. Yet, characters go to church but still live their old lives. A case in point is Chief Omenka, who is known to be a generous donator in the church but is also known to be a corrupt person, even by Ifemelu:

> Next Sunday, at a special thanksgiving service, the garlands would hang around the thick neck of Chief Omenka and the smaller necks of his family members. He had donated two new vans to the church.[21]

When Sister Ibinabo asks Ifemelu to join the girls preparing decorations for Chief's thanksgiving, her reply is "why should I make decorations for a thief?"[22]

It is also said that Sister Ibinabo is such an influential elderly woman in the church that she counterbalances the pastor's decisions in the marital choices he makes. This portrayal of Sister Ibinabo makes the reader aware of the the problematic nature of Nigerian churches:

> Sister Ibinabo was powerful, and because she pretended to wear her power lightly, it only made her more so. The pastor it was said did whatever she asked him. It was not clear why; some said she started the church with him, others that she knew a terrible secret from his past, still other that she simply had more spiritual power that he did but could not be pastor because she was a woman.[23]

Here, Adichie brings to the fore a problematic spiritual conversion of people in Africa and the possible inference of ungodly spiritual power with the church. To say that Sister Ibinabo has more spiritual power than the pastor himself is another way of questioning who really leads the church. But the more important portrayal of identity is that of Ifemelu. She is portrayed as an inquisitive girl; she criticizes and speaks her mind. She refuses to make decorations for Chief Omenka because for her, the man does not deserve the honour of the church, due to the fact that he is a "thief" (a corrupt man who embezzled public funds for personal ambitions).

From a postcolonial perspective, Ifemelu's arrival in America is a transfer from one geographical space to another, with a corresponding change in cultural habits. America is a new setting. Tactics for survival are not the same as in Nigeria. African identity appears as the bulk of 'dos' and 'do nots' that were part of characters' lives before their physical transplantation in America. The struggle for survival, namely, finding decent accommodation, the imperatives of schooling, the search for a job to sustain her education, bring new forms of

[20] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 66.
[21] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 61.
[22] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 62.
[23] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 60.

perception to Ifemelu's life, obliging her to change her identity. The American environment is capitalist, where much stress is put on material possessions and money. In addition, racism renders the access of Blacks to job facilities difficult: "I only became black when I came to America."[24] Ifemelu's statement is evidence that racism, or the social treatment of individuals on the basis of their skin colour, has caused her to change her identity. This is evidenced by the fact that she acknowledges that in Nigeria she did not have any awareness of being Black:

> I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black… When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you are alone together because it is just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better because we are worried they will say we are overreacting.[25]

This passage demonstrates that racism constitutes a fundamental reason why some African immigrants change attitudes to survive in America. When a character like Ifemelu is disqualified for a job on the basis of her skin colour, she is likely to explore other avenues to survive. For instance, on many occasions, Ifemelu accepted sex-oriented jobs just to make a living. She also developed blogging as a means of survival.

> She broke up with Curt a few weeks after that, and she sighed on to WordPress. And her blog was born. She would later change the name, but at first she called it Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a non-American Black on the subject of Blackness in America.[26]

Here, it is the fragile relationship that explains the fact that Ifemelu has changed her mind with regard to romantic love. Unlike the former Ifemelu she was in Nigeria, she is now one who builds her relationships on the interest she can have with regard to her future plans.

Dating a man like Curt was done on the basis of calculated interests, and the relationship breaks up when she decides that in the future, Curt would not meet her expectations with regards to her survival needs. After breaking up with Curt, she ironically writes in her blog:

> The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. Not the kind of safe, shallow love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable. But real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. And because the real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it, even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved.[27]

[24] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 359.
[25] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 359.
[26] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 366.
[27] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 367.

The statements here are ironical in the sense that true romantic love between Black Americans and White Americans according to Ifemelu is impossible. It is impossible because racism, the complexes of superiority and inferiority interfere with and renders it fragile. In addition, the rule of survival imposes one to be in possession of both money and intellectual skills. The due date of school fees passed without her paying, and she worried about the possibility of being expelled. The notifications she received frightened her the more "Your records will be frozen unless payment is received by the date at the bottom of the notice."[28] Such notifications created more psychological trauma to the heroine as her mind is troubled about their consequences. Her first reaction to the problem was to look for job. She was ready to accept the first job offer, yet none was within her reach; "She applied to be waitress, hostess, bartender, cashier, and then waited for job offers that never came, and for this, she blamed herself. It had to be that she was not doing something right; and yet she did not know what it might be… Her meagre bank account was leaking money."[29]

The postcolonial subject according to Said is in search for both home and identity.[30] As a general rule, identity change is marked by the shift in peoples' character as they abandon certain values and embrace others for the sake of survival, on the one hand, and on the other, to conform to the mainstream cultural space in which they now live. The direct confrontation of African/ Nigerian female migrants with the American setting in the novel transform them into resistant women, ready to readjust values in time and space, to better face life's challenges. Nevertheless, such change seems not to meet the approval of most of their contemporaries, who see the new phenomenon of emerging women as negative and unbecoming:

> Nigerian women came to America and became wild. Igbo Massachusetts Accountant wrote in one post; it was an unpleasant truth but one that had to be said. What else accounted for the high divorce rates among Nigerians in America and the low rates among Nigerians in Nigeria? Delta Mermaid replied that women simply had laws protecting them in America and the divorce rates would be just as high if those laws were in Nigeria.[31]

The idea that continental African women change temperament once they migrate in America presupposes that the American cultural system transforms people. One such transformative element is the laws that protect women. The idea is reinforced in the novel: "You have been brainwashed by the West."[32] If the blame is put here on women, men also make themselves pervasive by seeking to marry health professionals to make money for them once they migrate to America; "Nigerian men were cynical when they went back to Nigeria looking for nurses and doctors to marry only so that the new wives would earn money for them back in America."[33] Adichie brings her story to what I term narrative justice as she strikes the balance between men and women in terms of accountability with regard to change. In other words, she makes the point that if one blames women for character change, men are equally to blame for

[28] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 161.
[29] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 161.
[30] Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Stories*, p. 200.
[31] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 144.
[32] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 144.
[33] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 144.

the same identity change and are perhaps even worse. Another warning is given to Ifemelu by a taxi driver, "You have to be very careful or America will corrupt you."[34]

America seen from the perspective of the taxi driver is a transformative setting that likely corrupts immigrants so they shift from good manners to bad ones. One way in which American setting brings immigrants to change identity then is to put pressure on their psychology. Back in Nigeria, Ifemelu was a disciplined student in love with Obinze, whom she strongly believed would marry in the future. Yet, once in America and under the pressure of lack of money, Ifemelu forgets about Obinze to have sexual relationships with other men. The difficulties for her begin with the impossibility of her working on a student visa: "You can't work with your student visa, and work-study is rubbish, it pays nothing, and you have to be able to cover your rent and the balance of your tuition."[35] Change is also seen in Aunty Uju:

> Aunty Uju, too had changed. At first, she had sounded curious, expectant about her new life. 'The place is so white', she said. 'Do you know I went to the drugstore to quickly buy lipstick, because the mall is thirty minutes away and all the shades were too pale! But they can't carry what they can't sell! At least this place is quiet and restful, and I feel safe drinking the tap water, something I will never even try in Brooklyn.'[36]

Adichie thus engages her characters in conversation with world cultures; Africans trapped between their identity and the imperatives of survival make adjustment of values, behaviour, attitudes, and identity to redefine themselves in an environment where multiplicity of cultures and values bring one to enter in a global dialogue, and remodel self not system. Conversing with world cultures enables people to adopt those values that can be constructive for forging ahead and surviving time and space. It is for that very reason that Mark, a character in the novel, observes: "America has always been kinder to immigrants than Europe."[37]

The meaning of this postulate is that Ifemelu grows from naivety to maturity when she leaves Lagos to study in America. As a teenager in Lagos, a secondary school student, she had no experience regarding the world of employment, the true nature of love, and the whims of patriarchal society. She took it for granted that life was easy, that people were honest, and that society was amenable to helping people in difficulty. In her adolescent love for Obinze she thought she could have her way easily, make and unmake relations at will, travel all over the world, and achieve the impossible. She was imbued with a sense of unstoppable progress. In context, Ifemelu dreamt of a world where she would be able to achieve much in a short and limited span of time: furthering and completing her studies, and getting a job. America would offer her such an ideal world. As for Obinze he also lives in a world of dreams about the possibility of forging ahead in the United Kingdom. Travelling to England would mean for him opening spaces for broader opportunities, namely attending the best universities, furthering and completing his education, settling, getting a job, and eventually marrying and building a family. Both Ifemelu and Obinze dream of being reunited and marrying in the future. In their email conversations, Ifemelu refers to Obinze as "ceiling," a nickname originating from their

[34] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 255.
[35] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 131.
[36] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 211.
[37] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 339.

romantic and sexual intimacy in Lagos. Ifemelu's change of behaviour starts when she is faced with the challenges of accommodation, school fees, and personal maintenance in America. In search of job, she was faced with the realities of racism, whereby as a Black applicant, she would not easily find a position. The postcolonial geographic space (the cost of living in America) and the demands of education fees made getting a job a double necessity to meet the demands of survival and the education.[38] In Baltimore, Maryland Ifemelu applied for many jobs but did not have the chance to be accepted to work. In Brooklyn, New York she was also confronted with the pressure of rent and had to accept the job of massaging with a male tennis player. That ended up being a sexual encounter not real employment. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania she struggled with rejection, unemployment, and sex exploitation. Racism increased Ifemelu's awareness as a Black African woman in search of identity and fulfilment.[39]

Ifemelu's identity fluctuated between African morality and US migrant morality, whereby in the former she was morally disciplined, and sexually oriented toward her lover Obinze, while in the latter she became a woman with interest-oriented sexuality. To be specific, Ifemelu, by cutting contact with Obinze, meant to use time for herself and be able to switch on to other more lucrative adventures. Here, Adichie problematizes the condition of women in a postcolonial patriarchal society. Thus, for Ifemelu, survival is more important than ethical values. She has to survive as her parents do not monetarily support her. Ifemelu also changed her attitude vis-à-vis the internet. She was not a blogger in Nigeria, but the survival imperatives and internal conflicts brought her to become one in America. From an internet free-person, Ifemelu became internet expert, a blogger for two reasons. She advertises items for sale to earn money, and she speaks her mind about racism and social injustice, intending to bring change in the country. Internet education equipped her with the necessary tools to express freely opinions about the American lifestyle, ethnic problems, gender issues, racial classifications, and the popular opinion of Americans about a Black president, to mention but a few topics. Ifemelu now is vested with multiple identities via her blogging competence as her fame grows.[40] By the time she found new way of getting self-fulfilment, her Nigerian lover Obinze has also faced rejection and difficulties in England. He attempted to marry an English girl to get the citizenship to stay in London, but was expelled by the police after paying a consistent amount of money for that purpose. The misadventure faced by Obinze brought him to a new awareness of life in England, as the police agents filter the immigrants to expel the intruders.

In *Americanah* Adichie raised the issue of working using someone else's work permit. The novelist proves that it is a bad practice which can cost the security and endanger the life of the culprits. In her philosophy, one needs to earn a living by telling the truth about one's personal identity. Under the strain of survival difficulties, changing one's name, occupation, marital status, or affiliation may seem salvatory for a moment, but such false information sooner or later becomes dangerous for the informant in that s/he may be deported.

[38] Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi, "'Reconfiguring Others': Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2017), pp. 37-55.
[39] Augustine Uka Nwanyanwu, "Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile, and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*", *Matatu*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2017), pp. 386-399.
[40] Serena Guarracino, "Writing 'so raw and true': Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*", *Between*, vol. 4, no. 8 (2017), pp. 1-27.

From Vulnerability to Resistance: Identity Shift and the Heroine's Survival Strategies

It is a fact in *Americanah* that, Africans migrating to the United States of America face the reality of racism and the high cost of life. Ifemelu's resistance led her to a new identity. The same happened with Aunty Uju. The change of identities involves the following steps. First, change of names: Ifemelu worked with her cousin's work permit, thus, responding to another name. Likewise, Obinze, by accepting to marry the English Cleotilde to stay in England, indirectly changed his name and status.[41] Second, identity shifts concern also the change of character and behaviour: Ifemelu became resistant to man-made hardships and fragile love relationships. Third, there is also change of worldview: Ifemelu's stay in Philadelphia enlarged her scope of vision and world perception. She became more aware of the reality of racism as she confronted it daily.[42] She also changed her perception of people around her as she met good and bad friends. That led to the fourth change, the change of language: Ifemelu and Obinze went through experiences that reshaped their languages. At the beginning of the novel when both were in Nigeria, they were speaking with adolescent assurance about their future success. As time went by and they experienced life in America for Ifemelu, and England for Obinze, they changed their ways of speaking as they become more cautious, having arrived at the certainty that in life, things should not be taken for granted.[43] Fifth, change of thought systems and values occurred when Ifemelu and Obinze respectively in Philadelphia and London shifted to focusing on survival strategies.

When Ifemelu arrived in Philadelphia, she took three jobs to be able to survive: "Me you can see I am working three jobs and yet it is not easy."[44] The first types of resistance are physical and intellectual. To be able to do three jobs a woman must be physically strong, resistant, and intellectually productive. This is also the case with Aunty Uju, who displayed significant energy in her jobs. Ifemelu also took several jobs to survive, combining school with employment in homes and grocery stores. Resistance to patriarchy and its unfair system to women characterize Adichie's narrative in *Americanah*. In the postcolonial cultural space and geographical avenues that transpire in the novel, few women have viable economic power that can sustain life and help them not depend entirely on men or on job offers from men. In the case of Adichie's heroine, romantic love and friendship with men is resorted to as a means of earning livelihood, not to fill the social need of companionship. In that context, it is not far-fetched to assert that victimization looms large both as a narrative strategy and a critical projection of women's trauma in the postcolonial survival situation. To be specific, the postcolonial Ifemelu is engaged in a battle with the patriarchal world to make a living, to defend her dignity, to emerge as a voice and to redefine her place within the confines of male-dominated limitations that seek to make of women second-class citizens.

Adichie is a gender sensitive writer, and consciously unveils the troubles of her heroine as coming not only from the disfavoured geographical location of Nigeria, which is unsuitable in terms of decent education and underpaid jobs, but also as originating from spaces tainted

[41] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 343.
[42] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 390.
[43] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 429.
[44] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 131.

with gender oppositions that prey on all female. Aware of the mode of operation of male dominated society, she matches her novel to her manifesto, *We Should All Be Feminists*:

> So in a literal way, men rule the world. This made sense—a thousand years ago. Because human beings lived then in a world in which physical strength was the most important attribute for survival; the physically stronger person was more likely to lead. And men in general are physically stronger. (There are of course many exceptions.) Today, we live in a vastly different world. The person more qualified to lead is *not* the physically stronger person. It is the more intelligent, the more knowledgeable, the more creative, more innovative. And there are no hormones for those attributes. A man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent.[45]

This idea is repeated in *Dear Ijeawele… Or the Feminist Manifesto into Fifteen Suggestions*:

> It is of course true that men are in general physically stronger than women. But if we truly depended on biology as the root of social norms, then children would be identified as their mother's rather than their father's because when a child is born, the parent we are biologically – and incontrovertibly – certain of is the mother.[46]

All Ifemelu's love partners are men and respond to the postcolonial perception of patriarchy, the social organization where most economic powers are concentrated in the hands of men. Obinze, Ifemelu's Nigerian boyfriend, Curt the man she met on the train, Blaine, and the tennis coach, are all men who contributed to her stress and distress. Emerging in a new light with a new identity, Ifemelu's experience in America, especially her confrontation with the patriarchal world, matches with the disenchantment of the postcolonial female subject in quest for self-fulfilment and better living conditions. The postcolonial female subject in mobility either from African rural areas to the city or from continental Africa to American or European metropolises is described in most African narratives as a stressed and restless subject tossed from man to man. The first and second generations of African novelists writing on migration, internationally recognised have highlighted that aspect of the postcolonial female subject's plight. Adichie's compatriot Buchi Emecheta, narrated with craft Adah's story in *Second-class Citizen*,[47] where Adah had serious setbacks in her life with Francis whom she married in Lagos and joined in London. The same troubled life is found in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*,[48] with Mara, the female protagonist who had to turn to prostitution in England to survive. Men troubling women in the postcolonial space over survival needs is a long-established narrative tradition that questions the reasons for women's inability to cope with life without men's contribution. Cyprian Ekwensi's (1921-2007) sex worker Jagua Nana and her daughter come to mind.[49] In addition, in Adichie's earlier novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun,* the female protagonists migrate from

[45] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Knopf, 2014).
[46] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele… Or the Feminist Manifesto into Fifteen Suggestions* (New York: Knopf, 2016).
[47] Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1987).
[48] Amma Darko, *Beyond the Horizon* (London: Ayebia, 1995).
[49] Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* (London: Penguin, 2018 [1961]); Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana's Daughter* (London: Spectrum Books, 2005 [1986]).

Nigerian rural area to Lagos, the urban centre,[50] while in *Americanah,* living in a foreign culture, America, reshaped Ifemelu. The quest for education and employment resulted in a series of humiliating experiences as well as enriching encounters.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's resistance to patriarchy resides in her ability to face hardship and precarity in American society predominantly capitalist, where money regulates people's lives. Surviving as an immigrant in a capitalist society denotes her capacity to confront and solve her own problems: for instance, at the time she was waiting on a social security number and work permit, she needed money to survive and lived on very limited means. Her resistance is seen in her ability to confront unscrupulous men with frank speaking. For instance, when the man in Ardmore diverted his job advertisement of office work to a "help relax" one, she refused the offer, though she desperately needed money. Equally important are her encounters with men on trains whom she never wrote to. Ifemelu's resistance is in line with the characteristic postcolonial resistance of women against oppressive structures.

Patriarchy is overarching in the male-dominated and money-oriented culture sustained by white racism against the black community. Resistance to racism also foregrounds the heroine's capacity to survive despite the alienation caused by the culture of racism.[51] The American economic system lays emphasis on jobs, salary, and the domination of white over blacks on the one hand, and the exploitation of the poor by the rich on the other. Ifemelu gets a student visa and leaves Nigeria for the United State, Princeton to pursue her studies at Princeton. Full of dreams for education and career success, she faces hardships and trials in Brooklyn where job opportunities are not only for intellectuals, but also those who meet racial and ethnic criteria. The introductory sentences of the novel read:

> Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean street and the stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell.[52]

Adichie structures her narrative with setting. Although the novel has three different settings, Africa (Lagos), Europe (London), and America (Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Baltimore), she opens the story with America before introducing Africa where the narrative really begins. This choice is strategic and ideologically oriented. Adichie portrays America as a place of positive dreams for her African characters, who perceive it as ideal to make a better living. Yet, America is a place that shapes her African characters, forcing them to change. It is a place where racism flourishes in social institutions and relegates Africans to third or fourth zones of citizenship.

[50] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York : Anchor Books, 2006).
[51] Akingbe and Adeniyi, "'Reconfiguring Others': Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*", p. 51.
[52] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 3.

The America Ifemelu dreamt of in Lagos is not the America she finds on arrival in Philadelphia. In Lagos, when applying for student visa, Ifemelu, like her friends, dreams of America as a country of joy and economic abundance:

> It is better for me to finish my first degree and then come to America for graduate school. International students can get funding and financial aid for graduate school…. And so she began to dream. She saw herself in a house from the Cosby Show, in a school with students holding notebooks miraculously free of wear and crease.[53]

The America of Ifemelu's dream is far different from that of her later experience. What Adichie tries to construct here is the mental psyche of African teenagers who opt for migration as a palliative for the inadequacies of home. The postcolonial novel has a perspective focused on the ebbs and webs of postcolonial entanglement. Adichie shows the vision of third world youth who see only a life of bliss under the Western skies, without thinking of the challenges they will face. Adichie creates a discrepancy between Philadelphia as a dream and Philadelphia as a reality – insalubrious and stinking of urine – so the reader may reconsider Africa – despite its problems – not only as a place of hospitality but also of sanitation and a healthy environment. Compared to Lagos, Philadelphia appears to be a larger place, a busy town where many people from different races and ethnic groups interact on a daily basis. Yet they have difficulties socializing, standing on the same footing, and sharing equal partnership.

Ifemelu comes to Philadelphia young – at seventeen or eighteen - to further her studies. Her first problem as an immigrant of African origin is the linguistic adaptation to American English, which apart from the specific accent is also the vehicle of American culture, with new terminologies drawn from food, eating habits, clothes, sports, landscape, fauna and flora, education and schooling, religion and romance, to name but a few. Confronted with linguistic adaptability, Ifemelu must read fast, acquire the maximum vocabulary to communicate, follow lectures, interact with other students, and especially apply for jobs. Ifemelu's efforts to achieve linguistic immersion aid in remodelling her mindset and worldview in certain ways, so that after a short time, she adopts new values, reclassifies her priorities and redefines her ideals.

> At first, Ifemelu forgot that *she was someone else*. In an apartment in South Philadelphia, a tired-faced woman opened the door and led her into a strong stench of urine. The living room was dark, unaired, and she imagined the whole building steeped in months, even years, of accumulated urine, and herself working every day in this urine cloud. From inside the apartment a man was groaning, deep and eerie sounds; they were the groans of a person for whom groaning was the only choice left, and they frightened her.[54]

Racism as Adichie lets it appear in *Americanah* is the classification and categorization of races leading to their hierarchization as inferior or superior. Ideological racism and the doctrine of racial categorization was the root cause of the American slave trade and European colonialism, both of which preached the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of black one.

[53] Adichie, *Americanah*, pp. 121-122.
[54] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 159.

As argued earlier, Ifemelu and Obinze, who have respectively migrated in the United States of America and England, have become culturally speaking ambivalent. Ambivalence is a key word in postcolonial literary discourses and theories, as explained by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.[55] Ambivalence was first used in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and desiring its opposite. It also refers to what Carl Gustave Jung refers to as a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person, or action.[56] In *Americanah,* the United States is both an object of admiration with regard to the opportunities it offers for education and employment, and an object of repulsion due to its advanced manifestations of capitalism and racism. Homi K. Bhabha brought ambivalence into colonial discourse theory to describe the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In *Half of a Yellow Sun,* Adichie narrated the effects of colonialism of the African subject. Here, she unveils the racism as a twin of colonialism. What Africans live and feel in the US when confronted with racial hatred or discrimination is like what Africans experienced during colonialism:

> But there is an oppression Olympics going on. American racial minorities – blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews – all get shit from white folks, different kinds of shit but shit still. Each secretly believes that it gets the worst shit. So, no, there is no United League of the Oppressed. However, the others think they are better than blacks because, well they are not black.[57]

Race here is compared to oppression and colonialism. One of the manifestations of colonialism is that it creates ambivalent subjects. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and fully opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are 'complicit' and some 'resistant', ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject. Ambivalence also characterizes the way in which colonial discourse relates to the colonized subject, for it may be both exploitative and nurturing, or represent itself as nurturing, at the same time.

Most importantly for Bhabha's theory, as the reader can discover in Adichie's novels, ambivalence disrupts the clear-cut authority of colonial domination because it disturbs the simple relationship between colonizer and colonized. For instance, characters like Ifemelu and Obinze display multiple ambivalent attitudes in their daily choices, their interpersonal conversations and their socio-political outlooks in general. This couple, though they aspire to live together, are not legally married. They are in-between the African marriage system and the westernized romantic relation. Also, although they are from Christian families, Adichie reveals in their beliefs instances of superstition, myth, and magic. Ambivalence is therefore an unwelcome aspect of colonial discourse for the colonizer. The problem for colonial discourse is that it wants to produce compliant subjects who reproduce its assumptions, habits, and values; that is, that 'mimic' the colonizer. Instead, it produces ambivalent subjects whose

[55] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 10-11.
[56] Carl Gustave Jung, "The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," in *Collected Works,* vol. 9, Part 1, eds Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 678.
[57] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 253.

mimicry is never very far from mockery. Ambivalence describes this fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery, an ambivalence that is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance. In this respect, it is not necessarily disempowering for the colonial subject; but rather can be seen to be *ambivalent* or 'two-powered'. The effect of this ambivalence (the simultaneous attraction and repulsion) is to produce a profound disturbance of the authority of colonial discourse. Ambivalence therefore gives rise to a controversial proposition in Bhabha's theory, that because the colonial relationship is always ambivalent, it generates the seeds of its own destruction. This is controversial because it implies that the colonial relationship is going to be disrupted, regardless of any resistance or rebellion on the part of the colonized.

Bhabha shows that both colonizing and colonized subjects are implicated in the ambivalence of colonial discourse. The concept is related to hybridity because, just as ambivalence 'decentres' authority from its position of power, so that authority may also become hybridized when placed in a colonial context in which it finds itself dealing with, and often inflected by, other cultures. In this respect, the very engagement of colonial discourse with those colonized cultures over which it has domination, inevitably leads to an ambivalence that disables its monolithic dominance.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's scholarship[58] on race notes colonialism as a remote cause of the problem of racial categorization and classification in the context of postcolonial space. Race thinking and colonialism are imbued with the same impetus to draw a binary distinction between 'civilized' and 'primitive' and reflect the necessity for the hierarchization of human types. By translating the fact of colonial oppression into a theoretical stance, however spurious, European racism initiated a hierarchy of humanity that has been hard to dislodge. Although race is not specifically an invention of imperialism, it quickly became one of imperialism's most supportive ideas, because the idea of superiority that generated the emergence of race as a concept adapted easily to both impulses of the imperial mission: dominance and enlightenment.[59] In this respect, 'racism' is not so much a product of the concept of race as the very reason for its existence. Without the underlying desire for hierarchical categorization implicit in racism, 'race' would not exist. Racism can be defined as: a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between 'superior' and 'inferior' racial groups. Physical differences did not always represent an inferiority of culture or even a radical difference in shared human characteristics.

Adichie constructs the racial hierarchies in *Americanah* laying emphasis on repulsive forms. She especially points out the fact that non-American immigrants once in America need to be aware of the presence of racism, its manifestations, and its scope. So, adjusting to its realities will be helpful for them, so as not to be disappointed:

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't black in your country? You are in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of former Negroes. Mine was in a class in

[58] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: Key* Concepts, pp. 180-186.
[59] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vantage Books, 1994).

> undergrad when I was asked to give a black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up.[60]

Ifemelu is confronted for the first time by the problem of race as a student in undergraduate class. She finds it strange to be asked to give a black perspective on the subject the lecturer is developing. She is asked to speak not as every student but as a student of African origin. Race in this context brings back to memory the Africans' experience of slave trade. That issue, of connecting Africans to their enslaved ancestors, problematizes their identity and worth as citizens in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

This article has discussed identity fluctuations among the characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah.* Two key ideas emerge from the study. Firstly, identities (names, actions, behaviours, and skills) are fluid and change depending on time and context. Secondly, identities fluctuate from one geographical space to another as characters adapt to survive. Most Africans who arrive in America or Europe work with illicit work permits, and others develop resistance skills (against patriarchal structures and racism) to be able to survive. Female immigrants adopt local sexual standards to survive, and children are educated differently in America and Europe than in Africa. Some women when they migrate to the West are empowered by divorce and other sexual and romantic choices. The novelist's discourse on postcolonial identity is at odds with the mainstream postcolonial discourses that African identities are African-cantered. Adichie shows that identities can be American centered, or European-centred for African characters when such identity shifts benefit them.

[60] Adichie, *Americanah*, p. 273.