

## **Exploring Diasporic Identity in Adichie's *Americanah*** Kifayatullah\*, Syed Hanif Rasool†

### **Abstract**

*Taking Bhabha's concept of hybridity as an analytical tool, the present study aims to explore the process and problems of diasporic identity, its process, and problems through the protagonists' diasporic experiences in Chimamanda's Americanah through inductive approach by using textual analysis. The newness and attractiveness of a host land and the rootedness of a homeland problematize life for Ifemelu, the protagonist. She struggles hard to cope with the diasporic situation; however, the dominant narrative of identity and belonging of a host country does not assimilate her who live in an "in-between" space. As a result, she is torn between two cultures without any stable base for her genuine identity and is in continuous struggle for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing her genuine identity.*

***Keywords:** diasporic identity; hybridity; mimicry; ambivalence; unhomeliness; Homi K. Bhabha; Americanah*

### **Introduction**

Diaspora, in present time, is mostly a private matter of individuals' choice. Diasporic people are confronted by the newness of culture, society, and atmosphere of the host-country. They face difficulties and are confused between carrying on their indigenous culture and the new culture of host country parallel. Mostly, the dominant narratives of identity and belonging and different culture of host country do not assimilate the migrants who live "inbetween space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). They are not treated properly and justly. Out of ill-treatment, they face the problems namely identity crisis, cultural clashes, alienation, and unhomeliness, in the host land. As a host-land offers a dissimilar code of life, immigrants, to cope with the situation, start constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their identities to get acceptance in a host country. In the process, they get hybridized identities.

This study presents findings from qualitative research that was conducted through textual analysis of diasporic experiences of protagonists in the selected novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It highlights the ways in which the protagonist in the selected novel experiences diasporic situation and how diasporic experience

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problematizes their identity. Through the experience of the protagonist, the present study tries to explore, how far the selected novel reflects a life like experience of immigrants in a diasporic situation.

#### *Statement of the Research Problem*

Diasporic African fiction exhibits that the dominant narratives of identity and belonging cannot assimilate the migrants who live “in-between”. The diasporic individuals and communities are in continuous struggle to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their genuine identities.

#### *Research Questions*

Following are the questions that guide and define the study:

1. How do the selected novel depict African diasporic experiences, especially assimilation and mimicry and how these experiences problematize diasporic identity?
2. Why and how far the selected diasporic African fiction does resist the dominant discourses of identity and belonging through ambivalence?
3. How do the protagonist counters conflicts such as identity crises, alienation, and unhomeliness, and inbetweenness?

#### *Objective of the Study*

This study examines the different challenges that Nigerians in diaspora experience in their host countries and how these problems are depicted in Adichie's *Americanah*. In this context, the objectives of the study are to show:

1. The depiction of African diasporic experiences in the United States
2. The resistance and ambivalence of diasporic African fiction against the dominant culture of a host country
3. The resilience of the protagonist by dealing with the conflicts such as identity crises, alienation, and unhomeliness, and inbetweenness

#### **Research Methodology**

The research uses a qualitative research method. The primary source includes Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). The secondary sources include books, journals, articles, library materials, and internet sources.

Using inductive approach, the study is a critical, qualitative investigation of the postcolonial matter of diasporic identity in the selected

work of Chimamanda. This study is focused to investigate the process of diasporic identity in new colonial culture set up, the tyranny of cultural dislocation and the quest for home and self of the protagonist of Chimamanda. Further, keeping in mind the relevancy of the topic with postcolonialism, the study uses postcolonial approach to pinpoint the hegemony and impact of the dominant culture on the major characters of the selected novel.

### Review of Related Studies

The term 'hybridity' is used in the "postcolonial theory" referring to "a Third Space that gives birth to new signs of identity through a negotiation of differences" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 25). Three key concepts that fall under the umbrella of hybridity are ambivalence, mimicry, and unhomeliness.

"Mimicry" is derived from "the word 'mimesis', which is the Greek word for imitation. It was first used by Aristotle (384-322 BC) in the *Poetics*". In 1978, Jacques Lacan, a well-known psychoanalyst, wrote "*The Line and Light*" in which he underlines the association between "mimicry and camouflage" (pp. 91-104). The essay deeply inspired H. K. Bhabha's conception of mimicry. Colonial mimicry, for Bhabha is the need for "a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 91-104). Bhabha declares that "mimicry does not only refer to imitation, nor just an assimilation to the dominant culture but it is also an exaggeration of imitating the ideas, language, manners, and culture of the dominant culture that differentiates it from only imitation: it is repetition with difference" (1994). Bhabha calls this kind of mimicry a "sly civility" which he believes as a "sense of mockery to mimicry that is based on ambivalence" (1994, p. 86).

Immigrants imitate host society with a hope of getting acceptance; however, in most of the cases, they do not get their desired acceptance. As a result, they feel a sense of guilt by ignoring their own culture and imitating Whites. They feel a kind of irritation by not getting acceptance by host society even after their mimicry. These two feelings make them ambivalent; they develop feelings of liking and disliking at the same time for their masters. They are faced with "constant fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 80)

Critics praised *Americanah*, particularly observing its variety through various societies and expression of overall conflicts. Writing for “*The New York Times*”, Peed stated that, “*Americanah* examines blackness in America, Nigeria and Britain, but it’s also a steady-handed dissection of the universal human experience—a platitude made fresh by the accuracy of Adichie’s observations” (June 7, 2013). Evaluating *Americanah* for “*The Washington Post*”, Raboteau called Ngozi “a hawk-eyed observer of manners and distinctions in class,” and said Ngozi brings a “ruthless honesty about the ugly and beautiful sides of both the United States and Nigeria” (10 June 2013).

A further researcher Patrycja Kozieł’s “Narrative Strategy in Adichie’s *Americanah*: The Manifestation of Migrant Identity”, examines the features of “narrative strategy used by Nigerian writer Adichie in her novel, *Americanah* with special reference to Igbo language” (2015, p. 49). Johnson Nte’ne’s “Children’s Voices in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” is a dialogic assessment of Adichie’s *Americanah*. The paper studies “voices in the novel, arguing that the novel has been consciously or unconsciously written to exclude the voices of children” (September 5th – 8th, 2016).

Moreover, Patrycja Austin in her article, “Searching for Oneself at the Crossroads of the Cosmopolitan World: Determining the Importance of Roots for Those Who Travel through Diversities in Adichie’s *Americanah*” attempts to analyze “the response to migration depicted in Adichie’s *Americanah*”. The paper employs “the structure of the classical *katabasis*” (2015).

This work, on the other hand, taking Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, explores that how the dominant narratives of identity and belonging cannot assimilate the migrants who live “in-between”. The diasporic individuals and communities are in continuous struggle for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their genuine identities. This situation happens when people leave their places to make their homes in a new land, away from their homelands. A shift in their places problematizes their identities. Relph (1976) and Tuan (1974) used the terms “insiderness” and “outsiderness” to describe people’s feelings of being part of a place. Immigrants’ “sense of place” and “rootedness,” are replaced by sense of “unhomeliness” and “placelessness” due to unequal cultural relationship in a host land that results into a diasporic identity (Tuan, 1977). The paper aim is to explore the process and problematics of African immigrants in the selected novel through inductive approach by using textual analysis.

### Analysis and Discussion

Adichie's *Americanah* offers the opportunity to be discussed through the lens of diaspora and to analyze those elements, which problematize diasporic identity and what and how strategies are used by Ifemelu to cope with diasporic situation. Further, it is tried to find out the elements of hybridity to see whether they exist in Ifemelu and if they do, what impact they have on construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of her diasporic identity.

#### *Mimicry in Americanah*

In *Americanah* the characters have difficulties to find a place in the society during or after the social changes. They have to pick between accepting and resisting Western cultures. Accepting the "reformed, noticeable *Other*, the *Other*" must imitate the masters, which is called as the "act of mimicry".

At the beginning, for Ifemelu, "the world was wrapped in gauze; she could see the shapes of things but not clearly enough, never enough", it makes her little bit worried. Her Nigerian identity problematizes her living in America (Adichie, 2013, p. 99). For the first time in her life, she is made realized that she is black. So ironically speaking, she becomes black in America. However, she keeps on discovering and understanding America:

"She hungered to understand everything about America, to wear a new, knowing skin right away: to support a team at the Super Bowl, understand what a Twinkle was and what sports lockouts meant, measure in ounces and square feet, order a muffin without thinking that it really was a cake, and say I scored a deal without feeling silly. (Adichie, 2013, p. 102)"

She feels compelled firstly to give up her Nigerian identity and secondly starting to learn to adapt the dominant identity of the host society, especially looks and language.

Though she had spoken English all her life, she should not have coward and shrunk, but Cristina made her feel so as soon as she masters the *other* language, hence possessing "the world expressed and implied by that language" (Fanon, 2007). Ifemelu is portrayed as being spurned because of her non-American accent, which shows her as having an inadequate identity that could not fit neatly into the standardized trends of the American culture. This shows Adichie attempts at comparing Nigeria, which is the *Other* to America, the *Centre*. Thus, as the *Other*, Ifemelu

must do away with her native and fluent English for a superior model from the Centre, based on having an accent. Thus, Cristina Tomas, as a representative of imperialist politics seeks to intimidate Ifemelu into submission, as noted in her comments, "I bet you [speak English] 'but I don't know how well'" (Adichie, 2013, p. 101). Due to invisible and inevitable pressure to get acceptance in the host society, Ifemelu "the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, began to practice an American accent" (Adichie, 2013, p. 101). The adaptation to American English can be considered Ifemelu's Fanonian mask of conformity, mimicry.

In *Americanah*, not only accent is a part of identity but also word choice. Ifemelu, in America acquires the understanding that she needs to add some modification to her vocabulary to communicate effectively. She learns that "fat" is used in a negative meaning in America while in Nigeria it is used in a positive sense. "Thin" instead has a positive connotation in America but certainly not used as an admiring comment in Nigeria. "Boning" in America, means to have sex while in Nigeria, it means to snub or to carrying face (Adichie, 2013, p. 93). Just as "at home when somebody tells you that you lost weight, it means something bad but [in America,] ... you say thank you" (Adichie, 2013, p. 93). Thus, the word "half caste" is considered an offense in America, while it is simply a way of describing someone in Nigeria. Ifemelu, sensing the sensitivity of Americans, starts learning how to use "biracial" instead of using the word "half-caste". The illustrations clearly confirm Ifemelu's mimicry not only in her accent, but also in word choices to get accepted in the community she lives in.

For further acceptance, Ifemelu had to allow the erasure of her native culture for producing "reformed, noticeable *Other*" (Bhabha, 1994). Her friendship with wealthy American, Curt, is her first act of mimicry. With Curt, she becomes a woman "free of knots and care", a woman "running in the rain with the taste of the sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth" (Adichie, 2013, p. 146). A drink becomes "part of the architecture of her life", she starts going for hiking with him. All these things she "would never have imagined herself doing before", however, now she is doing them to be more Americanized. Ifemelu "laughed more because he [Curt] laughed so much" (Adichie, 2013, p. 146). She gets everything easy because of her mimic connection with Curt.

The standard of beauty in America and Nigeria are different and Ifemelu must mimic it to blend in. She feels the oppressive weight of changing her appearance to achieve an American ideal. The hairdresser

rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu's head bent downwards against a plastic sink, "needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head" as she was imitating something against her nature (Adichie, 2013, p. 150). Her scalp was burning due to unnatural twist of her hair. All this she was doing to be more Americanized, make her Otherness acceptable, and to get the job. At the end the hairdresser says "Wow, girl, you've got the white girl swing!" (Adichie, 2013, p. 150). This white girl swing was got by making her hair down rather than "standing up" which was the natural one.<sup>33</sup> Now, her hair "was straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a bulb at her chin. The verve was gone" (Adichie, 2013, p. 151). She got so much changed that she herself failed to recognize herself. Even Curt looked uncertain when he saw her. Bhabha calls this sort of mimicry a "sly civility" which Bhabha thinks as an exaggerated imitation. He considers it as "a sense of mockery to mimicry that is based on ambivalence" (1994).

#### *Ambivalence in Americanah*

"Non-white" people are generally feeling a sense of achievement when their struggle of imitating is acknowledged and praised in a white society. Ifemelu feels this acceptance when a person tells her that she "sounds so American". Sounding American is the result of her mimicry and hybridity, but, after thanking him, she feels confused. Something happens in her mind, a tug of war between resisting and accepting American culture. She wins, however, "she begins to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her", for thanking him, for crafting his words "You sound American" into a "garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American" (Adichie, 2013, p. 131). These ambivalent feelings are well depicted in the following passage:

"They were talking about American politics once when she said, 'I like America. It is really the only place else where I could live apart from here. But one day a bunch of Blaine's friends and I were talking about kids, and I realized that if I ever have children, I don't want them to have American childhoods. I don't want them to say 'Hi' to adults, I want them to say, 'Good morning' and 'Good afternoon'." (Adichie, 2013, p. 131)

Though, Ifemelu mimics the Western culture, she has ambivalent attitudes towards it. Essentially, Adichie describes Ifemelu's feeling to

fully being American, but she “wants to be black as well”. Since she cannot fully feel like both at the same time, “she feels not whole”.

Ifemelu’s action of “mimicry and hybridity result ambivalent feeling” inside her. She wants to be accepted in her new community, she imitates the masters, but she also feels the urge to resist it and keep her indigenous culture. Because Ifemelu in the white culture identifies with an immigrant identity, she moves “in-between the boundaries of heritage and white culture without aligning herself with any of them”. Due to the ambivalence that comes with inhabiting the “third space”, she has a thorough insight into both groups and their relation to the culturally dominant one.

She, long after her adaptation:

“...decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July, the same day she met Blaine. It was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of *r*, the sentence starting with *so*, and sliding response of *oh really*, but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lips, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce these sounds”. (Adichie, 2013, p. 130)

In this way, ambivalence plays significant role in shaping Ifemelu’s life and enables her to return to her homeland, Nigeria.

#### *Unhomeliness in Americanah*

Ifemelu, at the start of the story, does not disclose any sense of belonging for her homeland, Nigeria, rather she leaves it with an expectation to “prosper in America” (Adichie, 2013, p. 176). However, after dislocation, the circumstances change and she, against her expectations, totally finds a different way of life in the host country. She is treated not only differently, in some cases even discriminately against her expectation, in America. She out of nostalgia and discrimination decides to return home, Nigeria, no one could understand the reason behind her unexpected return. Unlike Obinze, who enters and lives in England illegally, Ifemelu, with a protected scholarship, has a legal permission to live in America. Ifemelu, based on her given profile, stands out among migrant women, who does not need the least to return her poorer homeland permanently. However, she decides to return because diaspora people “believe that they are not and perhaps cannot be fully



accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated {unhomeliness} and insulated from it” which means that people in diaspora always live with a sense of alienation in a host society (Sfran, 1991, pp. 83-99). She starts feeling nostalgic, and passionately wants to return home:

“It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desire brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness”. (Adichie, 2013, p. 10)

Her concept of home and homeland changes with a change in locality. Ifemelu’s distance and absence from her home, transforms her perception of the home. She idealizes her life back in her homeland, Nigeria, much like she idealized her life in the host land, America, to defend her rejection of what she attained in America. Ifemelu’s life is “both cyclic and dualistic; she exists with her feet in two countries separated not only by geography but also politics” (Nosalek, 2015). In terms of Bhabha, feeling of being caught between two cultures makes Ifemelu’s identity unhomey (1994). This globalized perspective and ability to be nostalgic of her homeland as she sometimes is of America, is a function of her experiential knowledge of both cultures. Thus, her decision to return home was shocking; no one was ready to believe in her decision:

“Everyone she had told she was moving back seemed surprised, expecting an explanation, and when she said she was doing it because she wanted to, puzzled lines would appear on foreheads. You are going back to Lagos and work for a magazine that does ‘t pay well, Auntie Uju has said and then repeated herself, as though to make Ifemelu see the gravity of her own foolishness”. (Adichie, 2013, p. 10)

Home, for Ifemelu, becomes an arena of struggle. After spending fifteen years in America and regarding it her home, unexpectedly, she starts feeling for her homeland, Nigeria. Though apparently, she is well settled in America, however, her decision of return reflects her feelings of unhomeliness in America. No one takes her decision of going back to Nigeria, seriously. One day her aunt asked Ifemelu, “Will you be able to cope? In the same way, her parents believe she may not be able to cope in Nigeria but are consoled by the fact that she can always return to America, since she is an American citizen” (Adichie, 2013, p. 15). Regardless of the

ground reality that her ancestral home is less beautiful and unpromising than her diasporic home, Ifemelu choose to return to Nigeria. Safran (1991) supports Ifemelu's journey home when he asserts that "for diaspora people, their homeland is their ideal home where they or their descendants should eventually return" (p. 84). It indicates that individuals in diaspora hang on emotionally to homeland. Ifemelu's development leads her go back to Nigeria after spending thirteen years in America. For her, Nigeria is the just spot, she feels she belongs to; a place she can deeply sink her roots, her home. This is because Nigeria as her ancestral home is bereft of any racial biasness that to pervade the American society. However, when Ifemelu finally returned, she finds Lagos very different against her fantasies and she feel unhomed in the very homeland:

"Lagos assaulted her; the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards... and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like taunt. Commerce thrummed too defiantly. And the air was dense with exaggeration, conversations full of over-protestations. One morning, a man's body lay on Awolowo Road. Another morning, The Island flooded, and cars became gasping boats. Here, she felt, anything could happen; a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. Therefore, she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence". (Adichie, 2013, p. 227)

Besides the disordered condition of the countryside, several other sides of her native people's lifestyle such as their passions and fashions, habits, work ethics, moral codes etc., appeared very unacquainted and foreign to Ifemelu and as a result, she finds herself unhomely. Like unhomed people she does not "feel at home even in her own home because she does not feel at home in any culture and, therefore, does not feel at home in herself" (Tyson, 2006, p. 421). At her very homeland she is seen by others as 'Americanah', which means neither American nor Nigerian. It further deepens her sense of unhomeliness. Even though Ifemelu seems to "adapt to white norms at first by relaxing her hair and attaining an American accent, thereby mimicking those norms", she realizes, and decides in the end to go against them by returning to her homeland to feel homed. However, the feelings of unhomeliness are so deep rooted in her

that she does not feel at home even in her own homeland; it makes her foreign to herself.

### **Findings**

Through evaluating the interconnectedness amid the theories and the novel, this study found that the significance is of allowing all the interconnecting elements which provide the basis to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct to be the basis of the process of creating the diasporic identity. In addition, by doing so the underlying reasons behind actions and reactions of characters in host societies could become evident. Ifemelu by her skin colour problematized her identity and as result, she had to straighten her natural kinky hair to be acceptable in American society. Straightening her hair to follow the white culture was a very painful experience that was reflected in her sensitivities towards racism.

### *Conclusion*

Scrutinizing *Americanah* using textual analysis through the lens of Bhabha's notion of hybridity, it is concluded that diasporic experiences problematize Ifemelu's identity and make her hybrid. She leaves Nigeria for America with a dream 'to prosper' and make her home there. However, she finds her land of dreams different, and she faces many problems on host land in getting settled there. The host land injects a sense of displacement and unhomeliness in her. In order to cope with the situation and to be "a reformed, recognizable Other", she starts imitating western culture through her appearances, manners and language. Further, for getting the 'desirable other', she gives up her Nigerian identity and starts learning to adapt the dominant identity of the host society. However, she does not get her desired acceptance by Whites and as a result, she starts feeling irritation by not getting acceptance by them and an inner sense of guilt pricks her by ignoring her own Afro-culture. She feels ambivalence as the result of her mimicry and feels mimicry as "a garland that she hung around her own neck" (p. 131). She feels the urge to imitate western culture to occupy a place in western society but at the same time, she also has the feeling to resist that urge. At the end, she blends both cultures and becomes African American in the United States and American African back in Nigeria. It provides an interesting contrast to have Ifemelu bring her Nigerian heritage to America, then bringing the American culture back to Nigeria.

*Recommendations for Future Studies*

1. The present study could be further expanded by testing and challenging other aspects of diaspora existence in the domains like music, art, politics, and science.
2. The main characters of the novels can be studied through fracturization and fractured identity. Clearly, the questions of who is fractured, how they are fractured, and how they ultimately negotiate the fractures are of paramount importance in analysing the characters.
3. Female writer has written the selected novel and the main character in the novel is also female who struggles to cope with a diasporic situation. Ifemelu, the main character, encounters cultural alienation and assimilation with much more struggle as compared to her male counterparts. Her character can be studied from the feminist point of view.

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