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Migration, Hybridity and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

Rootlessness, displacement and the longing for self are prominent traits of the modern world. Africa having been gouged open by colonialism is not exempted from waves of these vices. In fact, postindependence Africa is overwhelmed by its multitude citizens who have caught the fever of migration and are eager and willing to undergo the arduous task of relocating to the West in order to escape the maze of socio-political and economic pitfalls sinking their home countries. Due to the barrage of these intercontinental movements, the world is shrunk into a global-cultural village, as indigenous cultures are dislocated and made to collide with Western cultures to yield cultural amalgams. Hence, this discourse, by deploying postcolonialism as its framework and critical textual analysis as its method, aims to analyse the postcolonial tenets of migration, hybridity and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. The study unearths that African citizens are constantly migrating to the West to seek better living conditions, and on getting there oftentimes discover, albeit disappointedly, that the grass may not always be greener abroad as they have to settle for menial jobs and are plunged into a host of immigrant insecurities like survival tussles, cultural alienation, identity rift, racial bigotry, et cetera. The essay concludes that Africa's political elite have to awaken from their slumber to develop their continent in order to curb the menace of migration and also Africans must

continue to assert their culture in a world overridden by Westernisation.

Keywords: Migration, Hybridity, Identity, Postcolonialism, African Immigrants, Westernisation

Introduction

The contemporary world is submerged in a staunch wave of rootlessness, displacement, and the longing for self. Everything seems to be evolving, mobile and dynamic, and Africa particularly is not exempted owing to its evisceration by colonialism. This evisceration has left the African continent agape, volatile, and susceptible to migratory tendencies, Westernisation and alienation, especially after the hard-fought independence. In the light of these therefore, the terminus ad quem of this study is the examination of the postcolonial tenets of migration, hybridity and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

For the purpose of this essay, the postcolonial tenets of migration, hybridity and identity will be analysed in close proximity to the phenomenon of cultural globalisation which Kien Nghi Ha observes as the evolution of the world as a system of "globalized localities" that "increasingly characterize the trans-cultural living conditions in the daily life of urban centres", especially in the West whereto multitude Africans migrate (1). Hence, these urban centres are "transnational spaces" where "hybrid cultures are formed… by transcontinental migration movements and cultural circulation, which cross ethnic and national/cultural borders" (1). That is, the world has been shrunk into a global-cultural village due to migration. Migration, therefore, serves as the fundamental root for the offshoots of hybridity and identity crisis in *Americanah*.

The postcolony of Africa continues to grapple with socio-political and economic morasses such as political instability, wars, famine, corruption, insecurity, insurgency, terrorism, unemployment, multidimensional poverty, et cetera. These have disenchanted the

African populace, alienated them, and forced them to seek better opportunities in the West. On getting to the West, these African immigrants are plunged into new realities bordering on survival, culture shocks and disparities, racist confrontations, identity rift, loneliness, and so on. Migration, therefore, is not just mere movement but a dynamic cultural phenomenon that impacts personal and communal outlooks (Zelinsky 43-44). In addition, Omkar Sharan Shrivastava opines that migration is "an instrument of cultural diffusion and social integration" for it may create "communities within the community" (157).

Consequently, African immigrants experience cultural alienation due to their unfamiliarity with the Western culture. In order to adapt, they pick elements from the Western culture and integrate them with elements from their indigenous cultures in a process known as hybridity. Ha defines hybridity as "a composite of mixed origin" (2). That is, hybridity is the meld or coming together of two unique cultures to form a dynamic whole. In this instance, elements of the host culture (West) fuses with elements of the migrant culture (Africa) to yield a composite of both cultures. It is impossible for immigrants to exist in cultural isolation so they imbibe or mimic aspects of the Western culture in order to blend into their new climes and minimise estrangement. Immigrants experience culture shocks and clashes, and so, assimilating and absorbing foreign cultures serve as buffers. Notwithstanding, Western culture is domineering and imposing, and oftentimes, immigrants have no other choice than to succumb.

Furthermore, identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 2). The West, no doubt, impacts the identities of African immigrants. They are thrust into a conundrum of who they are, what they are, how they are treated, and how they respond to this treatment. The African identity or root is eroded by Westernisation or Americanisation. Hence, African immigrants

begin to question their blackness and humanity based on how they are segregated and discriminated against. All these culminate in adulterating and altering the immigrant's personality, character, physical appearance, speech pattern, lifestyle choices, et cetera. Moreso, many immigrants even shy away from identifying with their indigeneity and others even outrightly despise it. The identity of the African immigrant is constantly under threat in a predominantly white environment.

In sum, Africans are trapped in a cocoon of unhomeliness. Their home countries, riddled with socio-political and economic entropy, expel them into maws of the West where they suffer further persecution. They are forced to migrate abroad in order to escape the despicability of their respective polities. In the West, whereto they have trooped to find solace, they suffer endless bouts of stigmatisation and segregation. From racist attacks, to estrangement, cultural alienation, suppression, survival tussles, and so on, the African immigrant is never really settled or at home in the West. This unsettledness warrants some of these immigrants to embark on return migration to their countries when they can no longer withstand the hostilities encountered, only to discover that their home countries have not made any significant progress since their departure, and yet they find it herculean to fit in again as returnees.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonialism is an ideological inclination that preaches the unwavering sensitivity to the "long history of colonial consequences" (Gandhi 3). That is, it affords one the vista to pick at the excesses of colonialism and how it has devastated indigenous communities and impacted the world at large. Postcolonialism has a plethora of tenets but, as earlier stated, this study focuses primarily on migration, hybridity and identity, and draws on Ha's assertion that, "Approaches of postcolonial criticism structurally embed migration questions in a context

linked with complex historical, global, socio-economical, ethnic-national, cultural-religious, and gender specific dynamics of power and inequality" (2).

Migration, a standout signifier of the temperament of African postcolonies, is basis for these "dynamics" that "generate contradicting forms of exclusion and superposition" (Ha 2). Suffice it to say that migration is a contemporary vehicle of cultural globalisation, and based on this, Ha further posits thus:

> The full consequences of today's postcolonial migration of people of colour can only therefore be fully understood when it is oriented in its historical context. Global mass-migrations are – as a specific phenomenon of modern times – often bound to colonial experiences. In these migrations, the interests of control, dispersal, and exploitation take on a colonising form through displacement, conquest, settlement and enslavement." (2)

Migration is a modern-day phenomenon peculiar to postcolonies, most of which have not been able to totally break free from the shadows of colonial incursion. Therefore, due to the influx of Africans into the West, it takes up the status of an intercultural immigration society (Ha 2).

Sten Pultz Moslund insinuates that there is an "ever growing spectacle of international movement and migration" which inadvertently plays a role in "notions of national or ethnic rootedness, homogeneity, essentialism and cultural unity" (29). In postindependence Africa, international movement and migration have been sufficiently nurtured by a dystopic socio-political and economic culture. So, as Africans clamour for Western manna and desert their national borders, their incessant migration "leads to the development of local diaspora cultures, which open transnational spaces" (Ha 1).

Without doubt, postcolonial migration also engenders "objectifying people of colour" as "useful human capital" (Yazdiha 32). African immigrants are automatically lumped into a labour force which often means settling for menial jobs with meagre pays. In the West there is an increasing demand for a vibrant immigrant workforce to meet its ever-expanding economic needs. Hence, the worth—if there is any—of the immigrant is oftentimes tied to their economic viability. Many have proceeded to call it a strand of modern-day slavery.

Hybridisation, according to Ha, is "usually understood simply as a dynamic and continuous mixing of cultures, which enables the existence of a new productive mix-culture" (2). Cultural hybridisation arises from the inherent collision of variant cultural practices – African indigeneity versus Western ideology – resulting in mix-culture. Cultural hybridity involves "mixed elements of different cultures" and deals with the "dynamics" that involve the "harmonizing" of variant cultures (Ha 2). One of such fundamental dynamics is migration which creates a vista for the movement of indigenous cultures from their natural domain to foreign lands. This movement engenders a clash between the indigenous culture and foreign culture leading to culture amalgam.

Haj Yazdiha notes that "the contemporary cultural landscape is an amalgam of cross- cultural influences, blended, patch-worked, and layered upon one another" (31). That is, culture is "unbound", "fluid" and "interstitial", and moves "between spaces of meaning" (Yazdiha 31). The notion of cultural hybridity has been in existence long before it was popularised in postcolonial theory as culture arising out of interactions between colonisers and the colonised. However, in modern times, the reach of Western culture has expanded due to globalisation. This globalisation, which favours the advancement of Western ideologies, "has allowed a process by which the West constantly interacts with the East,

appropriating cultures for its own means and continually shifting its own signifiers of dominant culture" (Yazdiha 31).

Hybridity is evident in all spheres of society receptive to migration. From dressing modes, to meals, to music, even speech patterns, et cetera., cultural hybridity leaves no area untouched. Yazdiha identifies with this notion and asserts thus: "This hybridity is woven into every corner of society, from trendy fusion cuisine to Caribbean rhythms in pop music to the hyphenated identities that signify ethnic Americans, illuminating the lived experience of ties to a dominant culture blending with the cultural codes of a Third World culture" (31). Based on the foregoing, Yazdiha therefore defines hybridity as the "integration of cultural bodies, signs, and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures" (31). Hybridity as postulated by postcolonial theorists arose out of the "culturally internalized interactions" between colonisers and the colonised and the "dichotomous formation of these identities" (Ha 2). Also, Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* argues that colonisers and the colonised are mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture, and that there is a "Third Space of enunciation" in which cultural systems are constructed. According to Bhabha, the main thrust of this postulation is to create a new language and mode of describing the identity of Selves and Others. Bhabha notes that

> It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences – literature, art, music, ritual, life, death – and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation − migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation – makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. (247)

Bhabha deploys words like "diaspora", "displacement", "relocation", to illustrate the dynamism of culture. That is, culture is not static, and as a result, "cannot be defined in and of itself, but rather must be seen within the context of its construction" (Yazdiha 32).

Matter-of-factly, hybridity encompasses not just the cultural but also racial and linguistic divergences. Racial hybridity, according to Yazdiha, is "the integration of two races which are assumed to be distinct and separate entities, [and] can be considered first in terms of the physical body" (32). Historically, the "corporeal hybrid", that is, racial evolution based on physical appearance, was "birthed from two symbolic poles, a bodily representation of colonizer and colonized", for example, the Black-White dichotomy (Yazdiha 32). Racism arises from such interactions where the black race is stigmatised and discriminated against. Western nations are clad in effulgent fabrics of "institutionalized racism" which creates "a perpetual state of ambiguity and placelessness for the hybrid body and preventing cultural inclusion via race" (Memmi 69).

Furthermore, identity is impacted by migration, as immigrants grapple with what it means to be a postcolonial subject navigating the length and breadth of a foreign land. There is a parallel between the displacement and uprootedness of Africans and the destabilisation of their identity in the West. Immigrant identities are prone to alteration and adulteration, as Yazdiha opines that "all identities involve passing to some extent, in that a subject's self can never truly match its image" (33). That is, the immigrant identity is constructed as a function of the "constant movement between spaces" which often border on acclimatisation and survival (Ahmed 102).

Over time, the immigrant's true self does not tally with their projected image. Immigrants have no choice but to trudge through

a maze of constructed identities, some of which include: changing their names, adopting certain speech patterns, imbibing strange mannerisms, et cetera. Hence, the immigrant is burdened by and lives with a hybrid consciousness and their significant power comprises the management of these identities as some sort of performance, the negotiation of each consciousness in different spaces, and the ability to play multiple roles to "pass" in different arenas (Yazdiha 33).

Textual Analysis

This section analyses the tenets of migration, hybridity and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Themes such as migration and the quest for better opportunities, postindependence disillusionment and corruption, dislocation, cultural alienation, racial bigotry, identity rift, and so on, are brought to the fore. Like many African migrant novels, *Americanah* strives to represent the place and prestige of African immigrants in the West. The novel's underlying goal is to give these African immigrants a voice that transcends their struggles and stigmatisations, and also project their cultural identities against the imposition of Western ideologies.

Migration and the Quest for Better Opportunities

Migration is a predominant motif in *Americanah*. The major characters are Africans who desert their countries to sojourn in the West, and while there, experience alien cultures and human interactions, resulting in cultural hybridity, racial tussles, and identity crisis. Ifemelu migrates from Nigeria to America because she longs for an improved life. On getting to America, she realises that being "black" in a predominantly white setting does not work in her favour, and her new milieu births a stage for conflict between her indigeneity and Westernisation. Ifemelu is forced to adopt a new identity in order to fit into her new locality where "she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club; someone adorned with certainty" (13).

She speaks of a certainty that is elusive; a certainty buried beneath the clamour to be someone else in a society that has made her a stranger to herself. Her relocation to America makes her realise for the very first time that she is "black". Hence, her blackness becomes a consciousness, a burden she bears everywhere, a thick shadow that hangs over her being in this new territory.

One certain thing is America changes Ifemelu. As she exists in her new locality, she is shrouded by a sense of unbelonging and yearns to return to her homeland, Nigeria: "Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (17). Many African immigrants are discontented with their lives in the West and some resort to returning to their home countries. This is known as return migration. Ifemelu's discontent propels her to contemplate returning to Nigeria and she begins to plan and to dream and to apply for jobs in Lagos. She experiences immigrant insecurities and wants to return to Nigeria where she initially deserted. This counters the widespread perception of a utopian America as a place brimming with opportunities while Africa is simply a wasteland. Every country has its own peculiar challenges, and the West particularly is often hostile to African immigrants.

Africans migrate with the notion that America "creates opportunities for people to thrive" (238). But those that make it across discover that it is merely an illusion, and so end up doing menial jobs like driving taxis, hairdressing, janitorial services, and so on. Mariama and Halima from Mali and Aisha from Senegal are hairdressers that Ifemelu patronises to make her braids, and their salons are set in the part of the city that has graffiti, dank buildings and no white people. African immigrants are plunged into cycles of strife. Many of them live below the benchmark of the better living opportunities they dreamed of before entering the West. Even when Ifemelu applies for jobs, it ranges from being a waitress, to a hostess, a bartender, a cashier, et cetera. The grass

may not always be greener on the other side, as Obinze has to settle for cleaning toilets all in the name of survival.

Obinze is aware that the only way he can secure a job is to find a National Insurance number, and after about two weeks, Iloba introduces him to Vincent Obi, an Abia man based in England, and they arrange a meeting. They are Nigerian immigrants in the United Kingdom who are struggling to survive by any means possible. Like Ifemelu who has to work with the identity of Ngozi Okonkwo in America, Obinze has to work with the identity of Vincent Obi who demands for forty percent of whatever Obinze earns. Obinze takes up the identity of Vincent all in a bid to survive and is able to get a job as a cleaner in a detergent-packing warehouse. In order for Obinze to stay afloat in these tides of hardship, he opts to marry a lady named Cleotilde. But unfortunately, on the day of Obinze's organised marriage to Cleotilde, he is arrested by immigration officers because his visa is expired.

African immigrants are ushered into alcoves of harsh realities in the West. They travel abroad with the expectance of fulfilment and improved living conditions. But on getting there, they are roped into experiences of hardship that truncate their hopes of a better life, and many are forced to return to their home countries.

Disillusionment and Dislocation

Africans rightly continue to heap blames on the colonialists for their hideous acts perpetrated on African soil. The memories that most Africans bear about colonialism are characterised by anguish, sorrow, and anger towards the colonialists. Fortunately, there was a turn in the fates of many African countries when colonial empires, such as Britain, granted their colonies, like Nigeria, freedom. There was widespread joy, aspiration and renewed belief in the Nigerian dream after it gained independence on 1 October 1960. But after independence, Nigeria's promise of a blissful

reality has been shattered by the tornado of bad leadership. Hence, the Nigerian state wallows in woes such as corruption, political instability, economic recession, unemployment, inflation, civil wars, riots, scarcity of petroleum products, kidnapping, dearth of basic amenities, ethnoreligious fanaticism and extremism, insurgency, militancy, et cetera.

Nigeria has not maximised its potential since it gained independence from the colonialists. The nationalists of the early '60s blamed the colonisers for imperial domination of their landmass and resources, but as of today, Nigeria is still languishing terribly in the hands of a gnomic political elite and neocolonial masquerades who, according to the poet Christopher Okigbo in *Labyrinths*, are "selfish selfseekers" that are "good doing nothing at all" (7). Hence, when Ifemelu hears "Nigeria" and "good" in the same sentence coming from a Senegalese woman, she is astonished. Postindependence disillusionment is not peculiar to only Nigeria but other African countries. Sadly, after colonial departures, many African citizens are yet to reap the fruits of independence. The wind of disillusionment is blowing and citizens are disconnected, dislocated or displaced from their environments. It is safe to say exile does not only occur when citizens leave their countries and travel abroad, but also when they live in alienation in their homelands. Independence has failed in many African countries because it has been seized by selfish politicians who are concerned only with enriching their pockets.

Unemployment is rife in Nigeria, and when Obinze is deported from England due to possession of an expired passport, he seeks a job to no avail. He applies for jobs listed in newspapers but nobody calls him for an interview. Unfortunately, even his friends from school, who are now working at banks and mobile phone companies, begin to avoid him, "worried that he would thrust yet another CV into their hands" (36). Nigeria's wealth dwells in the hands of a few, like Chief who surprisingly decides to help Obinze

without asking for any collateral benefits. Even when Obinze finally has something going for him, Nneoma advises him to recruit the services of an "oyinbo" or white man as General Manager just for show, probably to attract bigger and inflated contracts.

Corruption has seeped into every sphere of the polity, and even the rich are treated differently from the poor, for instance, when Obinze's status is elevated, he is given preferential treatment at the American embassy that had sometime in the past denied him a visa when he was poor (40). Postindependence decadence is pervasive: from pimps who make a lot of money during General Abacha's government by providing young girls for the army officers in return for inflated supply contracts; to schools with half-baked teachers; to Ifemelu's father who is fired for refusing to call his new boss Mummy; and so on. These corrupt practices are listless. Citizens live with a disconnectedness from their country because their aspirations are unmet.

Postcolonial crises force Africans to seek greener pastures in the West. The education sector is in shambles and students as well as lecturers are plunged into the abyss of restlessness. Schools are littered with unpaid tutors, lack basic facilities, and embark on incessant strikes preceded by violent protests by the students (111-119). Due to the rampant, prolonged strikes, many students and lecturers are forced to migrate abroad. This is referred to as brain-drain which is the loss of a country's brightest minds, intellectuals, and academics, to foreign nations because the home-front is not conducive. There is a craze to migrate to the West and Sister Ibinabo starts the Student Visa Miracle Vigil on Fridays for young people who are yearning to travel abroad and are seeking a miracle regarding their visa applications. Even after the strike, Ifemelu still dreams of America. This spurs her to apply for a visa which is granted and that signals the inception of a new life overseas. Furthermore, Ginika's parents resolve that resigning from the

university and starting over in America is the best option because of strikes and unpaid salaries (81). Ginika seems unexcited because she thinks America is strange and lonely. The West affects every immigrant and Ranyinudo says Ginika will return as a serious Americanah, that is, she will become Westernised, such as imbibing odd affectations, pretending not to understand one's dialect again, and adding a slurred r to every English word.

Another sector that suffers neglect is the healthcare sector. Government officials who are supposed to work assiduously to improve the delivery of healthcare by equipping hospitals and motivating professionals are obsessed with travelling abroad for healthcare services that can be rendered at home. Even childbirth is a thing of foreign importance as The General asks Aunty Uju if she would prefer to deliver in America or England. Aunty Uju picks America because she wants her child to have an automatic citizenship (104).

The government's failure to create jobs for citizens like Obinze and his inability to secure a visa lead to his frustration and estrangement. He wonders whether employers could smell his obsession with America on his breath, or sense how he still looks at the websites of American universities. He still lives with his mother, drives her car, browses overnight at Internet cafes with all-night specials, and sometimes spends days in his room reading and avoiding company (270). All these are symptoms of frustration and exile. Obinze's mother admits the fact that his mind is no longer in Nigeria and so when she gets an invitation to an academic conference in London, she includes his name as her research assistant hoping that probably he can get to America from there.

Many Africans are obsessed with the West—they either want to travel abroad or be openly associated with foreign cultural elements like songs, films, clothes, et cetera. Emenike asks Ginika where in America she is going to because he is awed by people

who go abroad. To many of these young Africans, America is an object of their fantasy: "To be here, among people who had gone abroad, was natural for him. He was fluent in the knowledge of foreign things, especially of American things. Everybody watched American films and exchanged faded American magazines, but he knew details about American presidents from a hundred years ago" (84). Even when Obinze ends up in England as opposed to America, the land of his utmost dreams, Ifemelu wonders what he is doing in England. She asks herself what Obinze would make of it. Ifemelu remembers Obinze's chronic obsession with America to the point where he would watch an American film rather than a British film (260). This viral obsession to migrate to the West is fostered by waves of postindependence disillusionment.

Africans are disillusioned by the catastrophic realities in their home countries and are displaced to the West in search of improved living conditions where they also suffer grave dissatisfaction. The illusory images of the West upheld by Africans are washed off when they finally arrive there. Ifemelu is shocked by the heatwaves in America because "all her life she had thought of 'overseas' as a cold place of wool coats and snow, and because America was 'overseas', and her illusions so strong they could not be fended off by reason, she bought the thickest sweater she could find in Tejuosho market for her trip" (124). Africans perceive America as a glorious land bubbling with comfort and happiness but are dazed by the hard-hitting realities of sojourning there: "There was nothing *wrong* with the arrangement – she had, after all, slept on mats when she visited her grandmother in the village – but this was America at last, glorious America at last, and she had not expected to bed on the floor" (127). Ifemelu realises that America is not unblemished as she eases herself into the disappointing newness, from finding cockroaches in the kitchen, to poorly lit and congested streets, and so on (127-128). The desperation of Africans to migrate to the West often fizzles into webs of disappointment.

Cultural Alienation and Hybridised Identities

Africans possess their own unique cultures and traditions. Globalisation has opened these cultures to influences from the West. Hence, African immigrants are whisked into alien cultural realities. Due to the imposing nature of Western ideologies, immigrants become hybrids of their roots and Westernised cultural identities. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's hair is deployed as a symbol to represent her Africanness. Even when she is asked to apply a relaxer in order to blend into her new role, she asserts that she likes her "hair the way God made it" (23). She upholds her braids as totems of her indigeneity and she travels miles to preserve this cultural heritage (13). The Afro-symbolic posturing of Ifemelu's hair is eventually swallowed up by a Eurocentric-induced nudge when she has to take out her braids for a job interview because braids are seen as unprofessional (141-142). When she takes out her braids the hairdresser comments that she has the "white-girl swing". Ifemelu takes out her braids in order to fit in and escape cultural alienation, hence her hair becomes a hybridised representation of her roots and her desire to belong in her new clime.

Also, African immigrants experience linguistic hybridity which is a blend of their dialect and English, some of which might be incoherent. Sometimes, this is due to a lack of fluency, while other times it is as a result of a sheer desire to sound anglicised. For instance, when Ifemelu is conversing with her Guinean braider in Philadelphia, she finds it difficult to comprehend her utterances: "The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half completed. Once a Guinean braider in Philadelphia had told Ifemelu, "Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh". It took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, "I'm like, Oh God, I was so mad" (20). Aunty Uju is also a victim

of linguistic hybridity because she Americanises the pronunciation of her name which is Uju (*oo-joo*) to *you-joo* and also *pooh-reet-back* instead of "put it back" when "she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans". This acrolectal phenomenon is known as linguistic hypercorrection. With her new accent a new persona is born. Aunty Uju even frowns at Ifemelu's idea of speaking Igbo to her son Dike, because she gullibly thinks two languages will confuse him. While some African immigrants become entities of cultural amalgams, others discard their root and shy away from asserting it.

Identity Rift

The milieu where an individual resides affects them in one way or the other. In contemporary times, the West and Africa have been amalgamated by globalisation due to migration. Thus, Africans who travel overseas are affected by their new surroundings. Oftentimes, African immigrants are Westernised or Americanised as a coping mechanism which in turn dents their identities. Ifemelu lets go of her braided hair which is an insignia of her roots, and also, she gets into a relationship with an American allegedly as a buffer against her insecurities. Even Obinze opts to marry a British lady as a survival strategy. Ifemelu observes that Aunty Uju has evolved into a new being who has "left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place" and Obinze says it is "the exaggerated gratitude" that comes with "immigrant insecurity" (142).

African immigrants are trapped in webs of survival that they forget their origins. They crave to fit into their new locality, hence, many of them jettison their former ways of life in their homelands. Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika is more receptive to her new lifestyle and is ready to dance to the tune of assimilation and acclimatisation: "There were codes Ginika knew, ways of being that she had mastered. Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural

cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Tobey Maguire was about, and found double-dipping gross" (147). Some immigrants adapt fast while others embrace the new realities at a much slower pace. Mastering new ways of life may not be an easy task and for some immigrants it comes with a plethora of burdens. Bartholomew, a Nigerian immigrant, displays a rurality that he tries to overshadow with his American affectation: "Bartholomew wore khaki trousers pulled up high on his belly, and spoke with an American accent filled with holes, mangling words until they were impossible to understand. Ifemelu sensed from his demeanour, a deprived rural upbringing that he tried to compensate for with his American affectation, his gonnas and wannas" (137).

They say, when you are in Rome you act like the Romans, likewise, when you are in America you act like the Americans. African immigrants are propelled to imbibe the American spirit which entails acting like an American, and so, their cultural identities are eroded in the process. America absorbs the African immigrant in such a way that they forget their roots and homeland. They misplace their values and become hypocrites living in falsehood. Bartholomew is described as being lost in a country where identity is the crux of social issues: "... since he came to America thirty years ago and his false, overheated moralities. He was one of those people who, in his village back home, would be called 'lost'. *He went to America and got lost*, his people would say. He went to America and refused to come back" (138).

Apparently, the immediate preoccupation of the African immigrant is survival in their new clime, and in America it is difficult to work and earn tangible income without a Social Security card. Because of this, Ifemelu adopts a new identity as Ngozi Okonkwo in order to make ends meet. Also, Amara's cousin adopts Amara's identity to be able to work in Virginia. Aunty Uju opines that it is easy for Ifemelu to adopt Ngozi Okonkwo's identity because to white

people, all black people look alike, which is racist and prejudicial. A prominent identity marker is a person's name and in America, immigrants take on all sorts of names (19). Initially, Ifemelu forgets she is "someone else". In order to get accustomed to her new identity, she repeats "I'm Ngozi Okonkwo" severally in front of the mirror. Ginika makes a satirical statement about the Eurocentric perceptions of Africa and Africans: "You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa" (154).

Furthermore, African immigrants experience unhomeliness which is a sense of unbelonging. Ifemelu is unhomed and this prods her to try to understand the workings of America so she can blend in. She hungers to wear a new, knowing skin. Ifemelu yearns "to support a team at the Super Bowl", understand what a Twinkie is and what sports "lockouts" mean, measure in ounces and square feet, order a "muffin" without thinking that it really is a cake, and say "I 'scored' a deal" without feeling silly (159). These desperate yearnings to belong alter the identity of the African immigrant, as they become "someone else". Many take up multiple personalities and are victims of split identities which are all signposts of trauma. Being "someone else" could range from changing one's speech pattern, to changing one's name, adjusting one's physical appearance as regards dressing, having multiple personalities for different settings and occasions, et cetera. In sum, it is mentally draining to be "someone else" or to live a fake life, as Ifemelu discovers:

> Ifemelu 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 the *r*, the sentences starting with "So", and the sliding response of "Oh really", but the accent creaked with

> consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. (204)

The West impacts the identity of the immigrant so much so that they are strained into becoming "someone else". Suffice it to say that immigrants subject themselves to tedious assimilation in a bid to blend into their new milieu.

Racial Bigotry

The issue of race has been made more pronounced by the migration of Africans to the West. Racism or racial bigotry is a construct of otherness which seeks to project the perceived superiority of the whites over the blacks. Frantz Fanon asserts that a major way through which racial bigotry is foregrounded is Epidermalization which is juxtaposing the white skin against the black skin (14). Hence, the identity of the African immigrant based on their skin colour is a vista for segregation and discrimination by the whites. The nitty-gritties of race are expounded in *Americanah*: "Race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it's about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair" (387). Immediately the African immigrant sets foot in the West, they are profiled based on the physical attribute of their skin colour.

In America racial issues are quite sensitive and Ginika says that one has to pretend not to notice certain things (149). In one of her blogposts, she writes that "there's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America" and that "black is at the bottom of America's race ladder" (255-256). The question of race and identity among Americans is as prickly as a thorn and it pierces beneath the surface, so much so that everyone seems to cower or shy away from addressing the elephant in the room: "... We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like

this, we say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It's true. I speak from experience" (335). The segregation of blacks cuts across all facets of society. Ifemelu observes that black women are hardly featured in cosmopolitan magazines, and the hair products advertised therein systematically excludes black women (340). Even employers shun merit to favour whites over blacks when giving out jobs, even if the blacks are more qualified. To say the least, Americans are most uncomfortable with race, and till date, racism still poses a significant threat to the wellbeing of African immigrants in the West, partly owing to the tragic episodes of slavery in the not-too-distant past: "Don't say, 'Oh, racism is over, slavery was so long ago.' We are talking about problems from the 1960s, not the 1860s" (374). African immigrants continue to be exposed to all manners of racial injustices.

Furthermore, being black in America means being subject to racial profiling which makes one a target for accusations. Aunty Uju's son Dike is accused of hacking into the school's computer network simply because black people are "crime-worthy". It is this pathetic feeling of estrangement suffered by Dike that drives him to the dreaded path of suicide, although he narrowly survives. Aunty Uju tells Ifemelu that she does not want Dike to start behaving like the white kids and think that everything that happens to him is because he is black (432). Ifemelu asserts that Dike's depression is because of his experience—the experience of being black in a racially unbalanced society. Even Barack Obama, the Presidential candidate, is a victim of racist attacks and in a blogpost, a person writes thus: "How can a monkey be president? Somebody do us a favour and put a bullet in this guy. Send him back to the African jungle. A black man will never be in the white house, dude, it's called the white house for a reason" (404). Well, it is safe to say that nobody was able to put a bullet in Obama and he eventually, against all odds, won the election as the 44th President of the United States of America.

Conclusion

Even after independence, Africans continue to pirouette in muddy waters of subjugation meted out by a corrupt and greedy political class who have held the polity hostage. This wanton mismanagement of African postcolonies has plunged the citizenry into disillusionment due to the socio-political and economic woes bedevilling these nation-states. Hence, Africans are forced to flee their home countries to the West in the hope of finding solace. On getting to the West, African immigrants are further disillusioned by the harsh realities which border on securing decent jobs, racist attacks, cultural alienation, identity crisis, and so on. Therefore, *Americanah* centres the lives of African immigrants inhabiting Western cities by mirroring their struggles for survival, the cultural labyrinths they navigate, and the identity rift they experience. The novel beams the light on the experiences of Africans, from Ifemelu, to Obinze, Aunty Uju, Dike, Mariama, Bartholomew, and others, and how they acclimatise in a world shrunk by globalisation due to migration. The study unearths how the West impacts the identity and culture of African immigrants by Westernising or Americanising them, thereby leading to the erosion of their indigeneity and the displacement of their roots. It also shows how blacks in America are segregated and discriminated against, for instance, Dike is accused of a crime in his school because he is black. In addition, African immigrants, such as Ifemelu, who cannot cope abroad undergo return migration to their countries. In the light of these therefore, Africa's political elite must arise from their inherent slumber to develop their countries and make them conducive for their citizens to live and thrive, in order to curb the menace of migration. Also, Africans anywhere in the world must be proud of their cultural heritage and at every given opportunity assert it with neither malice nor apology. In sum, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, through *Americanah*, gives African immigrants a voice that transcends age, history, geography, class, and gender.

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