



Hybridity and Transcultural Identity Crisis in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* **Jenitta S.**

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Abstract

Transcultural identity crisis is a global issue that is mostly caused by the rise of globalisation, migration, and the existence of numerous cultural groups. When people come in contact with persons from different cultural origins; they struggle to balance the influences of the foreign culture with their own conventional cultural identity. Mixing of cultures causes cultural, racial, and linguistic hybridity. Hybridity affects human beings. This paper addresses the challenges faced by immigrants in other nations, revealing their experiences and sufferings. It also purports to highlight the issues with identification, cultural adaptation and assimilation. Hybridity causes transcultural identity crisis when people attempt to reconcile a variety of cultural backgrounds, identities and values. Moreover, this research paper explores how the main characters trace back to their roots to resist marginalisation in the United States of America, indicating a route of resistance and introspection.

Keywords: Hybridity, Assimilation, Marginalisation, Identity crisis, Resistance

Literature is a major art form through which people can exhibit their culture. It is

an ideal medium which encapsulates a mixture of reality and imagination focusing on human nature, culture, language and sensibility of people. It is used as a powerful tool in mirroring major issues and social predicaments of the nation such as identity crisis, cultural, gender and racial differences, slavery and ethnicity. By recording the political, cultural and emotional life of people, literary works have different impact on readers depending on their exposure. By reflecting society and culture and by presenting a realistic picture of human experience, literature enables individuals to relate with the problems described in the works and derive solutions from them.

Nigerian literature emerged with the birth of Nigeria as a separate country. Nigerian literary tradition originated from the oral literary tradition of the Africans. These oral traditions which include myths, folk tales, legends, proverbs and songs were

the primary means of transmitting cultural values and traditions from one generation to another. Nigerian literature addresses a wide range of themes that reflect the country's complex social, political, and economic realities. Some of the prominent themes in Nigerian literature include colonialism, postcolonialism, identity, corruption, gender and social injustice. Some of the most notable contemporary Nigerian writers include Ben Okri, Buchi Emecheta, Teju Cole, Helon Habila, Sefi Atta, Helen Oyeyemi, Taiye Selasi and Adimora Akachi Ezeigbo.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the most representative contemporary Nigerian writer belonging to the third generation women writers of Africa. An eminent writer and a versatile activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on 15th September 1977 in Enugu, South-Eastern Nigeria. Adichie's works have received a lot of critical discussions both in Africa and Western media. Adichie has written three novels. Her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for the Best First Book; her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) won the Orange Broad Band prize for fiction in 2007. Her third and most successful novel *Americanah* published in 2013 has won Chicago Tribune Heart Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award in 2013 and was also shortlisted for Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. Adichie's writing discusses social problems like inequality and questions societal conflict in a manner that raises consciousness and confronts societal norms. Her novels explore racism, identity, class, social inequality and sexism. Adichie's works discuss the inner workings of the African communities of both Nigeria and the United States.

The concept of hybridity and identity has grown more fluid, dynamic and complex in a society that is becoming more and more interconnected. The idea of hybridity is simultaneously challenging and beneficial, as it undermines power structures, challenges conventional knowledge and implies that the coloniser is never entirely in control of the language used in colonial rule. In order to integrate into their host society, the migrants are required to adapt to their new way of life. As a result, they must combine elements of their home culture with the culture of the host nation in order to develop a hybridised identity. They are excluded in both their ancestral and host societies and go through an identity

crisis as the outcome of their fusion.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity draws attention to how dominant cultures and subordinate cultures interact. It focuses on how the dominant civilization shapes the 'other.' Homi K. Bhabha describes hybridity in his book *The Location of Culture* as follows:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities, it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority).

Hybridity

... displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. (159)

Bhabha opines that cultural hybridity creates a kind of identity crisis in an individual. Adichie emphasises the complexities of immigration, identity development and intercultural experiences through the novel *Americanah*. As a consequence of the difficulties in managing numerous identities and the intricate interaction of various cultural influences, hybrid migrants who traverse borders and blend cultures frequently suffer from an identity crisis.

Identity theory emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding personal and collective sense of self in the 20th century. This concept has gained prominence amid global shifts, as diverse groups demand recognition and rights, challenging traditional norms of identity across gender, race, and sexuality. German Psychologist, Erik Erikson introduced the term 'identity crisis' to denote a disruption in personal values and experiences. The academic field of identity studies now intersects with postcolonialism and feminism, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between individual experiences and societal influences.

Cultural familiarity provides a sense of security and identity clarity, but exposure to new environments can trigger identity awareness and evoke personal sentiments during cross-cultural interactions. Diaspora aggravates these challenges, causing psychological

distress and integration struggles. In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Edward Said writes, “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (137). Interactions with other cultures can prompt identity crisis and sparks self-exploration. An exile’s life is no more than efforts taken to overcome the sorrows of estrangement. Psychological stress and cultural disconnection significantly contribute to diasporas’ identity crisis, worsened by cultural disparities, language barriers and economic hurdles. In *Americanah*, Adichie concentrates on the disastrous effects of exile, hybridity and personal identities of the emigrants. These concepts might be understood in relation to transcultural problems of identity. The female protagonist of the novel, Ifemelu grapples with assimilation pressures in mainstream American culture, leading to a personal crisis after compromising her values for financial stability. This mirrors the broader struggle of diaspora individuals facing identity conflicts influenced by dominant ideologies.

Adichie addresses this issue of bicultural conflict and suggests the Africans to create their individual and cultural identities. The manipulation of the white people makes race and identity questionable. Most black people find it difficult to survive as representatives of a minority group in America which has created the issue of identity crisis and racism. By analysing *Americanah* from the perspective of diaspora theory, Edward Said wisely comments: “Exile is a punishment” (Ashcroft et al. 425). In the novel, Ifemelu moves to America in pursuit of her higher education. She faced many problems there like identity crisis, racism, marginalization, discrimination and issues of gender. All these issues arise as a result of migration to such a country as USA, where there is no check and balance for such kind of issues. In America, it is extremely difficult for African people to survive.

The main characters of the novel struggle with their identity as they move from Nigeria to America. For the sake of survival, they are forced to assume other names. Names are associated with one’s own tradition and identity. They are not just sounds but are a very important part of one’s identity construct, especially when they have cultural meanings and

its relativity. Louisa Uchum Egbunike in the chapter “Narrating the Past: Orality, History, and the Production of Knowledge in the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie” in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* says about the significance of the names:

Within Igbo culture, an individual’s name serves as a form of incarnation or prayer which is repeated each time that person is called. The importance of naming is entwined with the belief in the power of the spoken word, as to repeatedly enunciate an intention is to conceivably usher it into being.
(25)

As names are connected with one’s culture and identity, the identity is completely lost in transnational situation. For example, in this novel, Obinze changes his name to Vincent, and Ifemelu to Ngozi Okonkwo, Uju, Ifemelu’s Aunty pronounces her name “yoo-joo” instead of sounding “oo-joo” (104) and Obinze’s companion Duerdinhito is addressed “Dee.” The crisis of identity initiated sociological circumstances leading to the psychological drift in an individual’s proceeding towards an existential depression emerging out as oppressed victims of the society.

Identity crisis in the character of Ifemelu is seen in her way of living a life in two cultures by building a cultural hybridity which not only highlights the white supremacy but also the supremacy of English language. Aunty Uju has learned that she must ‘subdue’ her natural hair in order to be considered respectable and professional as an American doctor. The following quote discusses, the discrimination African women face in the United States because of their hair choices; Aunty Uju says:

“I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn’t wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional.” “So, there are no doctors with braided hair in America?” Ifemelu asked. “I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed.” (119)

Ifemelu’s hairstyle can either make her career in America or destroy her career and identity while living in America. She has to lose her physical appearance at first in the

form of adopting the straight hair style which is different from her curly hairs. She never wanted to have a haircut and this type of hairstyling but she had to do this to save herself from any racial discrimination and for her survival in America.

Identity is a social construction. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” Stuart Hall argued that, “There are at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’. The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Ashcroft et al. 435). The sense of guilt and disgust created by Ifemelu’s collective identity was just because of the dynamics of power politics which shaped the identity of African people as inferior and uncivilised. This notion can be applied to the collective identity of belonging to an African diaspora, for instance, African Americans share a background of slavery or the migrant conflicts of recent immigrants.

The collective history of Africans is full of traumatic memories of slavery since colonial times. Still those colonial attributes haunt them in the modern times. Nonetheless, white masters can rightly be blamed for these disasters of identity crisis not only in African people but all across the world. Ifemelu expresses thus: “To earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America, she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half” (16). This statement shows the struggle of Ifemelu to gain recognition in America by winning a prize. It is a very pathetic situation in which a person must be famous so he or she will feel secure, otherwise, things will go wrong every time. The focus is on the life of immigrants who live a poor life with low worth of self importance and with an unrecognised identity.

Aunty Uju’s modification of her Nigerian identity reflects the broader struggle of diasporic Africans to assimilate into American society, facing racial discrimination despite efforts to blend in. Aunty Uju’s son Dike also grapples with identity ambiguity, highlighting the isolating effect of assimilation pressures on preserving cultural roots. Ifemelu’s interracial relationships with Curt and Blaine further illustrate the complexities

of navigating identity within racial dynamics and societal expectations, portraying the multifaceted nature of diasporic African experiences in Western countries. The integration, driven by education and exposure to mainstream culture, often surpasses their connection to ancestral culture.

However, discrimination persists, exacerbating feelings of alienation, especially among second-generation individuals like Dike. Family dynamics significantly influences these challenges; Uju's preference for English over Igbo, distances Dike from his Nigerian heritage, compounded by racial discrimination. The novel poignantly contrasts the experiences of first-generation immigrants like Uju and Ifemelu with the second generation, born into cultural limbo and facing identity crisis heightened by external discrimination and internal familial choices. This highlights the complex interplay of family, culture and societal influences on diasporic identity across generations.

Obinze is a young Nigerian who seemed calm, perceptive and clever. Raised by his mother, a university professor, he is extremely well-read and has a strong fascination for America. In comparison to Ifemelu's achievements in America, Obinze's journey in London is almost entirely unsuccessful. Obinze's existence in England became ghostly as he does not have a valid identity proof and it develops a sense of constant fear in him, "he lived in London but invisibly, his existence like an erased pencil sketch; each time he saw a policeman, or anyone in a uniform, anyone with the faintest scent of authority, he would fight the urge to run" (257). Obinze had to assume Vincent's citizenship identity to work because of his unauthorised stay in England.

African immigrants who are already living in England with their National Identity number have invented a business by lending their NI number to their fellow Africans. Vincent says: "You can use my NI number and pay me forty percent of what you make". "It's business, innit. If I don't get what we agree on, I will report you" (250). The incapability of giving a raise of forty five percent to Vincent infuriated him and he reports Obinze's fake identity. It was the most humiliating blow to Obinze in England, his identity got revealed and police was on the way to arrest him. His detention of not having valid

papers to stay and work in England followed by the deportation, left Obinze in the state of shame and guilt, “there he was, in handcuffs, being led through the hall of Manchester Airport, and in the coolness and din of that airport, men and women and children, travellers and cleaners and security guards, watched him, wondering what evil he had done” (280). Through this situation, Adichie captures the experience of many Africans who got deported every day from England due to illegal migration.

Dike is a wonderful example of how important it is to embrace one’s root and history. Because of his mother, Auntie Uju, Dike lacks roots during his adolescence and is unable to discover his father’s genuine origins or develop a Nigerian identity. The problem exists because of Auntie Uju’s attraction towards America and her attempts to make her son, Dike a perfect American. Dike’s problem is not with America but his mother Uju, who tries to make him believe that he is an American. The following dialogue between Ifemelu and her Auntie Uju gives a clear picture of Dike’s tension.

“Dike, I *mechago*?” Ifemelu asked.

“Please don’t speak Igbo to him,” Auntie Uju said. “Two languages will confuse him.”

“What are you talking about, Auntie? We spoke two languages growing up.”

“This is America. It’s different.” (109)

This estrangement leads to disorientation because of various identities that are forced upon him by those around him. Since White Americans still hold the same discriminatory presumptions about Black people, Dike still has to bear all of his baggage despite Auntie Uju’s frequent assurances that he is not Black due to the misconceptions connected with African heritage in America.

When Dike was going through identity turmoil, he made a suicide attempt. Auntie Uju receives advice from Ifemelu that Dike should be allowed to return to Nigeria with her. Dike was able to fully recover himself and return to Nigeria after knowing who he really was with Ifemelu’s assistance. It becomes clear with these characters that cultural integration and embracing western values are the reasons of identity uncertainty

and transcultural identity crisis.

The theme of going back to one's roots and examining questions of self-identity and belonging recurs frequently in the book. After residing in America for a while, Ifemelu decides to return to Nigeria in order to strengthen her ties to her own country. Dike's return trip could be interpreted as an attempt to understand this problem, since he is also reaching out to his family and Nigerian heritage. As described in the following lines, "Back to Nigeria, like you were planning to. I'm going to be okay. I promise" (381). Returning to Nigeria symbolises Ifemelu's will to preserve her Nigerian heritage and her disapproval of certain aspects of the Western lifestyle.

Ifemelu's experiences in America have increased her awareness of the complex problems related to the immigrant experience and the fight for identity. Ifemelu is returning to Lagos to learn more about herself since she feels marginalised or finds it challenging to be herself in the Western society. Her decision represents her fight against the homogenising effects of the Western society as well as her wish to reclaim her cultural heritage. As mentioned in the following lines: "Her decision to move back was similar, whenever she felt besieged by doubts, she would think of herself as standing valiantly alone, as almost heroic. So, as to sequester uncertainty" (8). By going back to Nigeria, she confirms her independence to create her own identity and fights the need to conform to Western norms.

Through this novel *Americanah*, Adichie excellently shows how hybridity can lead to identity crisis for individuals, particularly when they are trying to reconcile the various aspects of their personalities and navigate the complex web of multiple cultural identities. The main characters of the novel Ifemelu, Dike, Auntie Uju and Obinze experience crossover cultures and struggle with their identity as they move from Nigeria. As they struggle with many social factors and cultural standards that contradict their perceptions of self, they experience a sense of relocation and loneliness. They struggle with the unsettling loss of self that emerges as a consequence of leaving known cultural contexts. Adichie skillfully demonstrates that the interaction of diverse cultures forms the distinct characteristics of her characters that are used to highlight the tensions and



opportunities that arise from their cross-cultural encounters. The struggle to be Americanised creates a new hybrid culture which is a blend of both the native and coloniser's cultural practices.

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