

Navigating Identities in Flux: Exploring Diasporic Black Identity Issues in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Yajing Li^{1,*}

¹Department of Foreign Languages, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, 100083, China

* Corresponding author: Yajing Li (Email: Jenny01312@163.com)

Abstract: This paper critically explores the concept of identity in diaspora literature through Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, highlighting the identity crises and rebuilding efforts of the African diaspora within a postcolonial context. It examines the challenges faced by these individuals, such as racial discrimination, isolation, and prejudice in Western societies, and how they impact their quest for belonging. Utilizing identity theory, the study analyzes the experiences of characters like Ifemelu, Obinze, Uju, and Dike to understand their struggles with cultural displacement and the search for identity in either their homeland or abroad. Adichie's narrative emphasizes the importance of maintaining cultural identity and self-confidence against the backdrop of global diaspora challenges. The paper concludes by recognizing Adichie's significant impact on altering global views of Africa and her efforts to enhance African cultural pride, positioning her work as a key contribution to the discourse on diaspora and identity. Through *Americanah*, Adichie offers a profound insight into the diasporic experience, promoting a richer, more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity in our interconnected world.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, black diaspora, cultural identity, identity crises, global diasporic challenges.

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* critically explores the identity formation of African expatriates in Western contexts. Through characters like Ifemelu, Obinze, Uju, and Dike, the novel addresses race, identity, and immigrant life across Nigeria, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Adichie delves into post-colonial racial inequities, identity crises, and cultural displacement, offering a vivid portrayal of their struggles against societal pressures.

Subsequent scholarly discourse has extensively engaged with *Americanah*, exploring themes of immigration, race, gender, and the African diaspora through various analytical lenses. Notable contributions include Mona Khaled Alebrahim's (2019) critique of racial misconceptions, Soheila Arabian (2018) and Vida Rahiminezhad's (2018) insights into the diaspora experience and Shane A. McCoy's (2017) analysis using Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "inner outsider." Yet, while these studies illuminate aspects of diaspora and identity, there remains a gap in comprehensively addressing the transition from identity crisis to identity reconstruction among Adichie's characters.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of identity theory in the experiences of first and second-generation diasporic Africans, focusing on both central and peripheral characters to offer a nuanced understanding of their identity challenges and reconstructions. It emphasizes the relevance of *Americanah* in depicting diasporic African's struggles and resilience in their host countries, contributing to cross-cultural and cross-racial discourse. Beginning with definitions of "diaspora" and "identity," the paper explores identity issues in *Americanah* against the backdrop of global interconnectedness. It examines the identity crises faced by diasporans, their struggles with cultural rootlessness, and strategies for reconstructing their identities, including

resistance to assimilation and rediscovery of self through African roots. The paper also discusses broader implications, such as the awakening of diasporic Africans, challenges of cultural inferiority, and the quest for national confidence in a globalized world. The conclusion emphasizes Adichie's significant contributions to literature and the discourse on identity and diaspora.

2. Diaspora and Identity: Synthesis

The concept of "diaspora" derives from the Greek words "dia" (across) and "speiro" (to sow or scatter), initially describing the dispersal of plant seeds. Its earliest recorded use in the Bible referred to the Jewish people's displacement from Palestine, encapsulating their history of exile and dispersal. Western colonialism and globalization catalyzed migration, expanding the term's application beyond the Jewish experience. Historian George Shepperson broadened "African diaspora" to encompass all people living outside their ancestral lands, reflecting post-colonial global movements (Shepperson, 1965). Diaspora now signifies not only geographical displacement but also the cultural and ethnic integration into new societies, posing critical questions about identity in a globalized world (Raja, Nussaibah, et al, 2022).

Identity theory emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding personal and collective sense of self in the 20th century. Identity is inherently linked to self-awareness, questioning "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" (Coulmas, 2019). 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. The academic field of identity studies now intersects with postcolonialism and feminism, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between individual experiences and societal influences.

Western scholarship traces identity to “identitas” and “identite,” implying sameness or oneness. Identity encompasses both group affiliations, such as national or racial identity, and individual uniqueness (Sollberger, 2013). Contemporary identity studies categorize identity into self-identification, individual, collective, and societal identity, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between personal autonomy and social belonging (Hogg, 2014).

Academic discourse identifies three phases of identity research: subject-centered enlightenment identity, society-centered social identity, and postmodern decentralized identity. Starting with Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum,” the focus initially was on the subject’s intrinsic qualities and autonomy. The shift towards understanding identity through societal lenses was influenced by Marx, Weber, and post-WWII theorists, who underscored the role of social structures in shaping identity (Hogg, 2014). Current debates involve essentialist, constructivist, and strategic essentialism approaches, acknowledging identity as both a stable essence and a fluid construction (Baumann, 2013).

3. The Identity Crisis of the African Diaspora in *Americanah*

Erik Erikson introduced the term “identity crisis” to denote a disruption in personal values and experiences (Erikson, 1968). Maurice Stein expanded this to “identity anxiety,” reflecting the strain of disconnecting from socio-cultural traditions (Stein, 1967). 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 exacerbates these challenges, causing psychological distress and integration struggles. Edward Said describes exile as a painful longing for one’s homeland, vividly depicted in diasporic literature (Said, 2000). Novels like *Americanah* illustrate the struggles of African diasporans with identity confusion and the quest for belonging in foreign lands.

Interactions with other cultures can prompt identity crises, sparking self-exploration (Ward and Szabó, 2023). Ifemelu’s story in *Americanah* portrays this struggle as she navigates cultural dislocation and racial perceptions in the U.S. Her resistance to cultural assimilation, struggles with racial ideals, and linguistic challenges highlight the complexities of identity formation amidst cultural displacement. Through Ifemelu’s experiences, Adichie explores themes of cultural difference and linguistic adaptation, shedding light on the intricacies of diasporic identity.

Psychological stress and cultural disconnection significantly contribute to diasporas’ identity crises, worsened by cultural disparities, language barriers, and economic hurdles. In *Americanah*, 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. Foucault’s assertion on societal power’s impact on identity underscores the constraints diaspora individuals face (Foucault, 1977).

Saussure highlights names’ importance to self-identity, evident in Ifemelu’s and Obinze’s experiences of alienation due to false identities (Saussure, 2011). Postcolonial migration dynamics further complicate identity as immigrants

navigate cultural superiority and discrimination in First World societies, often abandoning their cultural identity for assimilation. These narratives reveal identity as fluid, contested, and shaped by external factors rather than solely by personal choice or heritage.

In *Americanah*, 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. 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 Brian further illustrate the complexities of navigating identity within racial dynamics and societal expectations, portraying the multifaceted nature of diasporic African experiences in Western countries.

Berry and colleagues highlight that with each successive generation, descendants of the African diaspora in the West increasingly identify with their host nation, considering it their primary “homeland” (Berry, et al, 2023). This 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 in *Americanah*. Family dynamics significantly influence 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 crises heightened by external discrimination and internal familial choices. This dynamic highlights the complex interplay of family, culture, and societal influences on diasporic identity across generations.

4. Identity Reconstruction of the African Diaspora in *Americanah*

Diasporic individuals navigate complex identity negotiations amid their native and adopted cultures. *Americanah* portrays the African diaspora’s struggle with assimilation, rejection, and identity reconstruction. Fleeing persecution, diasporics confront the task of balancing heritage preservation and adaptation to new cultures. The novel highlights the resilience of characters like Ifemelu, who maintains her Nigerian identity in the face of assimilation pressures and racism in the US. Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria challenges the notion of success tied solely to American society, emphasizing her profound connection to her homeland.

The narrative draws on Ferdinand Tönnies’ differentiation between “community” and “society,” asserting that genuine social identities stem from communal bonds in organic contexts (Tönnies, 2001). Ifemelu’s journey in *Americanah* exemplifies this, as the support of the diasporic black community aids her in rediscovering her identity.

Ifemelu’s blog serves as a platform for navigating racial identity in the US, reflecting shared experiences among African Americans. It underscores the interconnectedness of diasporic blacks and their collective effort to establish a sense of community and identity abroad.

In the novel, Ifemelu reconnects with her African heritage, finding belonging within the diasporic black community. This journey illustrates the role of communal efforts and racial consciousness in strengthening African heritage amidst racial

injustices. Adaptation to American societal expectations, including accent changes, reflects compromises made for survival in a stratified society.

Engagement with Pan-African groups fosters camaraderie for Ifemelu, validating her African identity free from assimilation pressures. Embracing natural hair, influenced by friends and online communities, becomes a symbol of self-affirmation and resistance to conformity.

The narrative incorporates Tao Te Ching and Fei Xiaotong's sociological insights, suggesting that understanding oneself through community and relationships is crucial in navigating identity within multicultural contexts (Fei, et al., 1992). Identity reconstruction for diasporic individuals involves critically engaging with societal norms while reconnecting with cultural roots, leading to self-enlightenment amidst adversity.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's journey from silence to agency mirrors postcolonial theorist Spivak's concept of the "subaltern," where reclaiming language signifies reclaiming power and identity (Spivak, 2000). Her discourse evolves from personal insights to influential public commentary, addressing racial dynamics, identity, and diaspora experiences.

Ifemelu's encounters with Kimberly, her Caucasian employer, reveal the complexities of racial and cultural interactions, highlighting Ifemelu's awakening subjectivity as she challenges racial misconceptions. Her discourse extends to broader issues, critiquing the superficial progress on racial equality and exploring the nuances of interracial relationships.

Despite being labeled an *Americanah*, Ifemelu maintains a strong connection to her Nigerian roots, serving as a spiritual defense against alienation. Through her experiences, she illustrates the resilience of first-generation diasporic Africans and the struggle for cultural preservation amidst oppression and dislocation.

Americanah delves into Ifemelu's identity shifts and her decision to relinquish the "Americanah" identity, reflecting on the complexities of identity within post-colonial legacies and the pursuit of belonging. Her relationships, particularly with Obinze, underscore the challenges of navigating racial and cultural dynamics, ultimately leading to her embrace of her African identity unburdened by cultural constraints experienced abroad (Adichie, 2023). The novel serves as a commentary on the quest for identity within the African diaspora and its intersections with larger historical and cultural forces.

Ifemelu's blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black," offers a unique perspective on American society, aligning with Edward Said's notion of a public intellectual. By confronting racial injustices and cultural biases from an African viewpoint, Ifemelu challenges prevailing narratives and fosters inclusive dialogue (Said, 1996). Her outsider status grants her writing credibility and freedom, avoiding dismissive labeling often faced by African American voices. The blog serves as a critical tool for cultural awareness and identity reconstruction within the black community, empowering individuals to defy stereotypes and express their identities (Said, 1996).

Hommi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" and Stuart Hall's dual perspective on diasporic identity illuminate the complex nature of cultural identities in a globalized world (Bhabha, 1994). Diasporic individuals like Ifemelu and Uju navigate between their heritage and experiences abroad, forming

hybrid identities (Hall, 2019). Ifemelu's journey illustrates partial assimilation into American culture, marked by her relationship with Curt, while Uju's attempt to assimilate reflects a struggle with societal pressures and racial identity. Dike, representing the second generation, faces an identity crisis with limited exposure to his African roots but finds connection during a trip to Nigeria, contributing to his hybrid identity. Through these characters, Adichie explores the nuances of identity formation in the diaspora, emphasizing the negotiation between cultural heritage and multicultural realities.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu, Uju, and Dike grapple with the complexities of cultural identity, straddling the labels of "American-Africans" in Nigeria and "Non-American Blacks" in America, perpetually positioned as "Others" in both societies. This dual existence underscores the ongoing negotiation between their African roots and adopted American culture, resulting in a blended identity that simultaneously resolves and introduces conflicts. Adichie underscores the importance of embracing foundational identity and heritage to craft a cohesive hybrid identity, thereby avoiding disorientation amidst the fluidity of the diaspora experience.

Their experiences illustrate a process of dividing and reinventing identity. Ifemelu consolidates her identity through her blog and connections within the African community, finding belonging upon returning to Nigeria. Uju's journey reflects the challenges of assimilation in a predominantly white society and her eventual self-recognition. Dike's path to self-discovery, spurred by an impromptu trip to Nigeria, showcases the personal evolution possible through embracing heritage. These narratives reveal the dynamic construction of diasporic identities, suggesting that true self-definition stems from authenticity and resilience amid cultural convergence and outsider perceptions.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the lens of identity theory, focusing on the identity crises and reconstructions experienced by diasporic African characters like Ifemelu, Uju, and Dike within neocolonial contexts. It explores their initial aspirations towards the West, their eventual disillusionment, and their journey towards self-awareness amidst challenges of racial discrimination and cultural biases. The narrative not only reflects the struggles and resilience of these characters but also offers insights and practical advice for diasporic communities on navigating identity in the postcolonial era.

Adichie's broader work, from *Purple Hibiscus* to *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, tackles race, class, and gender, challenging the dominance of single stories and advocating for a multifaceted understanding of identity. Despite facing xenophobia and being pigeonholed as an "identity writer"—a label she resents due to its limiting implications—Adichie emphasizes the universal need for belonging and identity. Her TED lecture warns against the dangers of a single narrative, highlighting how power dynamics influence storytelling, character portrayal, and the interpretation of Black identities, particularly in post-colonial Africa.

Americanah specifically addresses the need to reclaim African identity from Western narratives that often overshadow the continent's true essence. Adichie, as a third-generation African writer, plays a crucial role in revitalizing African literature, challenging Western narrative supremacy,

and positioning Africa and its diaspora on the global stage. Her work, alongside that of other African writers like Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah, underscores the growing prominence of African voices in literature, offering new perspectives and reshaping the discourse around African and Black identity in the world.

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