

Nigerian Diaspora and Cultural Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage"

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Abstract

The cultural identity of the diaspora is often in the margins due to the cultural hegemony of the host country. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's works deal with the diasporic experiences of Nigerians. Adichie highlights the different strategies Nigerians adapt in order to fit into mainstream society through her writings. Her works serve as a tool to preserve the cultural identity of Nigeria and its people. She breaks the grand narrative and creates a counter-narrative through her works. This paper analyses Adichie's novel *Americanah* and the short story "The Arrangers of Marriage" from *The Thing Around Your Neck* collection. In this paper, the central characters are analysed regarding their identity and how they have to let go of their cultural identity in a foreign country. The study focuses on displacement and its role in losing cultural identity. Ideas propounded by Franz Fanon and Stuart Hall are used to analyse the experience of the central characters. Concepts such as Americanisation, assimilation, cultural degradation, cultural dislocation and cultural identity are discussed in this study. Different cultural identity markers such as food, language, names, beauty standards are analysed in this paper to depict how the characters undergo a drastic change due to migration. This paper studies the internal and external forces that make the characters assimilate into the dominant society.

Keywords: Assimilation; Cultural amnesia; Identity crisis; Liminality; Migration.

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging and connection to a particular culture or group based on shared beliefs, values, customs and traditions. It encompasses a specific cultural group's unique characteristics, including language, music, art, food, dress and the historical, so-

cial, and political contexts that shape one's identity. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer, writes about the lives of Nigerians. Adichie's writings revolve around the politics, gender, race and culture of the Nigerians. Through her writings, Adichie breaks away from the master narratives and creates a counter-narrative that deals with migration and racial struggle. She upholds the importance of multiple narratives and says, "Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity" (00:17:37-48). The two works selected for this study, *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage", depict the migration of Nigerians to America and their attendant complexities.

The texts selected for this study talk about displacement and identity markers. This paper analyses cultural identity markers such as food, language, name and hair in both works. These cultural markers are selected for study as they are closely associated with the lives of the Nigerian diaspora. Though studies have been conducted about search for identity and identity crisis in Adichie's works, using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of chronotope, a textual analysis of cultural identity markers in Adichie's works is little seen. This paper examines cultural identity in Adichie's novel *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage" and how displacement leads to cultural identity loss by eventually fading away the cultural identity markers. This paper specifically looks at the cultural identity markers in both the works and different strategies the characters adapt to survive in America.

In Adichie's novel *Americanah*, published in the year 2013, most of the characters migrate to either the UK or the US due to political circumstances in Nigeria. The novel's protagonists, Obinze and Ifemelu, migrate to the UK and the US respectively due to political and economic reasons. *Americanah* portrays the struggles Nigerians encounter as expatriates through Ifemelu and Obinze. The novel depicts how the lives of the people change once they migrate. Adichie's short story "The Arrangers of Marriage", from the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, published in the year 2009, talks about the experiences of a newly married couple in America. The short story portrays how the central characters Ofodile and Okafor have to give up their original Nigerian identity and culture to fit into American society. These works highlight the loss of traditional cultural identity and forging new identities.

For Stuart Hall, cultural identity means "to be primordially in touch with

an unchanging essential core, which is timeless, binding future and present to past in an unbroken line" (209). Cultural identity provides individuals with a sense of pride and belonging and a framework to understand and interact with the world around them. However, it can also be a source of conflict and bigotry, especially when different cultural groups have competing interests or one culture is dominant over others. Religion, language, food, customs and practices are significant cultural identity markers.

Food is an essential aspect of culture; the food one consumes signifies social status, religious beliefs, and regional or national identity. Food is an important narrative in the short story "The Arrangers of Marriage". The various ingredients and recipes in the short story indicate that the protagonists, Ofodile and Okafor, are from Nigeria. Rashmi Das, in her article titled "Consumption and the Indian Diaspora: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" states that "when diaspora transgresses its physical and national boundaries, and encounters the rubrics of life in a strange land, consumption or eating acts as one of the most frequent and meaningful exercise" (2). When the story begins, the narrator introduces the readers to "egusi", "onugbu" and "uziza seeds" (Adichie 103), which are distinctive to Nigerian cuisine. Through these ingredients the narrator reveals the Nigerian identity of the couple. The American customs officer seizes Okafor's "uziza seeds" in New York airport as she is afraid Okafor "would grow them on American soil" (Adichie 103). Seeds signify new beginnings. When the customs officer takes away the seeds from Okafor, it symbolises how their identity is forcefully taken away from her. It also foreshadows that life will be different and challenging for the Nigerian couple in America. The customs officer's action reflects the attitude of Americans towards the non-Americans, especially those who are racially different.

Even after migration, Okafor tries to preserve her Nigerian identity by cooking and consuming Nigerian food. Das writes how cooking and eating become "an effective medium through which the diaspora can hold on to their sense of identity" (2). However, in America, her husband, Ofodile, forces her to let go of her Nigerian food habits and attempt to assimilate into American food habits. Ofodile wants her to cook American food and makes her learn American cooking. When he discourages her from cooking pepper soup and coconut rice, it reflects how much he is ashamed of his cultural identity in a country like America. He says, "I don't want us to be known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food" (Adichie 110). This instance from the story shows that the pressure

to assimilate into white culture comes from American society and her husband, Ofodile. Ofodile attempts to eliminate Nigerian food habits in the US, whereas Okafor tries to preserve her cultural identity through her food habits. Thus, Okafor, by clinging onto her Nigerian identity, represents a woman who is proud of her cultural identity, contrary to Ofodile's shame of Nigerian identity. Raisun Mathew and Digvijay Pandya, in their article "'Illusionary Homelands' and In-Between Identities: Liminal Existence of the 'Indian (Non)-Diaspora'" writes how "the peculiar food culture of a specific area is also linked to the memories and identities of a larger community" (6). Throughout the story, Okafor relates every incident around her with places and incidents in Nigeria, including the stench of Ofodile's mouth. This depicts the connection between food culture and memories. Though Nigerian culture is interwoven into her life, Ofodile disapproves of it and wants her to assimilate into American culture culturally.

Language defines a person's cultural identity. In the article "Role of Language in Shaping Cultural Identity", Babita Parajuli writes that "when a speaker communicates a particular language people may speculate about the origin, nationality, culture, religion and ethnicity of the speaker as language reflects embedded cultural identities of people within a language" (112). Stuart Hall states that language represents the shared meanings of a particular culture and culture exchanges the meaning through language with the society members (Parajuli 112). To conceal his Nigerian identity, Ofodile shifts his language style to American English and forces his wife, Okafor, who speaks Nigerian at home, to do the same. When Ofodile forces his wife and himself to speak in English, it shows that the pressure to assimilate is not only from outside but also from themselves. Ifemelu changes her accent through "the blurring of the t, the creamy roll of the r, the sentences starting with 'so' and the sliding response of "oh really" (Adichie 178) to make it more American. Fanon argues that a black man thinks himself to become whiter by utilising the dialect of the white man, by taking upon himself the world of the other (p. 38).

Ifemelu's aunt, Uju, does not encourage her son Dike to speak Igbo. Instead, she raises him as an American boy. This act of Aunt Uju leads to cultural amnesia, where Dike is unaware of his Nigerian culture, identity and language. "Language transmission from one generation to another generation provides a foundation for cultural transmission and modification as mother tongue interaction as mother tongue interaction in a family and society helps to learn all the basic cultural values and traditions which grow as an identity in the future" (Parajuli 114). Thus, cultural identity is intentionally not passed on to the next generation as it obstructs a suc-

successful career. These instances validate that Nigerians try to erase their Nigerian identity as they are ashamed of their Nigerian past and assimilate into the dominant culture. Vivian Hsueh - Hua Chen says cultural identity is “constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs” (1). In both works, the characters try to forsake their Nigerian identity rather than maintain it.

Name is another cultural identity marker. Nigerian names are distinct as they reflect their heritage through names. Felix Chukwuma Aguboshim, in his article titled “An Exploration into the Conceptual, Factual, and Biblical Significance of Names”, writes that

in West Africa and Igbo Nigeria, a name is much more than a simple, functional tag to identify someone and the Igbo culture believes that a name can hold someone’s entire biography: someone’s character, social identity, destiny, present and the future, expectation and attitude of hearers of the name even before they meet the name-bearer (128).

In order to fit into this new location, which is not only geographically different but also different in terms of socio-cultural aspects, Ofodile adopts the name Dave. The willingness to change their name depicts that people who migrate for economic reasons are willing to change their identities to have a better life in America. Franz Fanon says, “In the diaspora situation, identities become multiple” (207). In these two works, Adichie portrays her characters as migrants whose identities constantly change. In *Americanah*, when the characters migrate from Nigeria to America, they either take on a new name that is convenient for the Americans or change its pronunciation to make it more American. Auntie Uju, when she comes to America, pronounces her name as “you-ju” to make it easy for Americans. Ifemelu and Obinze disguise their name in America. The character of Dike, Auntie Uju’s son, portrays the identity crisis the second generation encounters. Though he grows up as an American boy, he does not feel a sense of home in America as he is constantly teased and discriminated against everywhere outside his house. These instances depict how the characters’ identities are in flux and do not remain constant. Therefore, each character has multiple identities in *Americanah* and “The Arrangers of Marriage.”

Hair is another important marker of cultural identity that acts as a symbol of religious, ethnic or national identity. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu, the cen-

tral character, considers her natural Nigerian hairstyle unprofessional and unattractive. She internalises American beauty standards and relaxes her hair. Ifemelu's act of straightening her hair can be seen as a form of gender-specific mimicry that mimics the white female body due to internalised white aesthetic racism. The need to look like Americans is connected to a desire to succeed in a white world. Through the character of Ginika, Adichie depicts how beauty standards vary according to place. Ginika, an ideal beauty of Nigeria, is called a "pig" when she comes to America. Ginika attempts to be a part of American beauty standards by pushing herself to become slim.

There is a higher chance that people who immigrate to foreign countries find themselves struggling with an identity crisis. Due to the big changes they face, these people will try to assimilate to fit in the new society, some succeed and some do not, then they face what is called identity crisis they start questioning who they are, questioning their values and beliefs as well (169).

In *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage", it is the displacement from Nigeria to America that leads the characters to an identity crisis. In order to establish their identity in the foreign land, they try to imbibe the foreign culture by obliterating their native culture. In both works, the characters grapple with issues of identity and belonging. When the story begins, Okafor is confused about which culture she should follow. When she upholds her Nigerian identity, it is not appreciated and accepted, forcing her to assimilate into the dominant culture. She adapts to a culture which does not give her a sense of "mine". Okafor feels out of place in America due to cultural differences and struggles to understand American culture. Ifemelu questions her identity in America as she faces racial discrimination that she has not faced until she arrives in America. But in the case of Dike, he feels at home only when he visits Nigeria. Shuchi and Josephine Ramdinmawii Zote, in their article "Hair in Exile: Manifestations of Displacement, Difference, and Belongingness through Hair in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*", state, "in order to survive in a world where they were involuntarily exiled, deprived of their cultural and ethnic roots, assimilation into the American society seemed like the only possible recourse" (3). Even after attempting to assimilate into American culture, the characters do not feel they truly belong to America and lose their sense of self due to dislocation.

Both *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage" depict how the central characters have to let go of their cultural identity in terms of food

and language to assimilate into white culture. Through Ifemelu, Okafor, Ofodile, Dike and Uju, Adichie shows how actions can lead to cultural degradation. Migration from a third-world to a first-world country exposes the characters to loss of their cultural identity. The characters of both works give much importance to Americanisation. The characters attempt to conceal their Nigerian identity and become new people by assimilating into American culture for survival. Cultural dislocation leads the characters to loss of culture and identity crisis in both works. The study shows how cultural amnesia occurs in first generation and second generation migrants. Assimilation becomes a survival instinct for all the characters in both *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage". The characters do not have a stable identity and have to switch from one to another based on their geographical location. This gives "rise to the liminal existence of being and not being an absolute part of both cultures" (Mathew and Pandya 9). The study reveals the melting pot culture of Americans in which everyone is expected to assimilate culturally and deviance is discouraged. Hegemonic nature of host culture is revealed through the study. Thus, American society predominantly forces the characters to assimilate into their culture by letting go of their Nigerian identity. Hence, the characters in *Americanah* and "The Arrangers of Marriage" become "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless" (Hall 395).

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