



# The Construction of Diasporic Identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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## Abstract

*There have always been polemical debates within feminist circles concerning the identity and perception of a woman, since gender identity is defined differently by different people with different attitudes. In defining identity through the lens of ethnicity and gender, which in turn composes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's homeland identity, the study relies on the fluid nature of identity. As Ifemelu, the protagonist, grows up in two different spheres, she develops her character accordingly based on her homeland identity and her abroad identity. Identities negotiate Ifemelu's external and internal worlds. The color of the skin represents a fundamental notion undergirding humanity's sectionalization. Therefore, the study explores how home country identity and abroad identity are constructed, and how she first constructs herself based on these identities. Through the lens of the African diaspora provided by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. We examine Ifemelu's identification with Obinze, Curt, and Blaine. Using Zeleza's notions of contemporary African diaspora, Ifemelu explores the different kinds of relationships that define character and identity.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Diaspora, Language, Cultural Associations

## Introduction

It was said that a high level of migration took place to the wealthy Western states in the 1980s and 1990s after independence. A number of factors have caused large migrations at different times in our history. A depiction of Ifemelu, the protagonist of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, applying for the U.S. citizenship to pursue a Western education for the benefit of her future is presented in the book. The celebration of *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Adichie is centered around the theme of contemporary immigration to the United States. A transcultural concern of the diaspora characters is defined in Nigerian literature. As the story unfolds, Ifemelu, the protagonist goes to America and becomes a

successful blogger after facing some difficulties. As a Nigerian and an immigrant, Ifemelu's life is defined by her struggles to find her identity. The struggle to find her identity defines Ifemelu's existence as a Nigerian and an immigrant.

The protagonist of this novel, Ifemelu, is described by Adichie as an influential character with certain traits in life. Throughout her life, she had relationships that have impacted her identity and cultural associations that help to develop her independence. In Nigeria and the United States, the protagonist experiences various life events. It had been a struggle for her to identify herself abroad throughout her thirteen years. Defining her identity abroad is just as important as defining her homeland



identity for her. Defining and creating an identity abroad naturally through adaptation. Ifemelu's life undergoes more changes due to her natural ability to adapt. is exposed to foreign cultures. She has a peaceful life in Nigeria, as there is no severe racial criticism surrogating life and identity as in the U.S. The social construction of white people and their view of the black community leads to a greater concern for the black community's identity, according to Frantz Fanon

The Strength of Americanah's narrative is that it explains the diasporic experience and identity negotiation best when analyzed through the lens of Paul Tiyanbe Zeleza's cultural identity theory and the African diaspora, the protagonist in Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Using Adichie's diasporic identity theory, this study analyzed Americanah from the perspective of its female characters as a theoretical framework. An important part of this study focuses on building identities, diaspora, and language. Erikson in his book labelled identity as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image" (1994). Those who are diasporic are usually those who have emigrated to another country either voluntarily or forcibly. Sapir defines language as "a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" Sapir (2004).

### **Nigeria from an Early Age**

Despite not being rich, Ifemelu is a member of a middle-class family. A lot of her friends visit the United Kingdom or United States often. Before moving to the United States, her life and identity completely belonged to Nigeria. She frequently visits her family members who are even distant relatives, showing that her family still practice the traditions of Nigerian people, and she has a very strong connection with her family members. She left the US and returned to Nigeria because of her close bond with her family.

Before going to US, her identity was true Nigerian/African because of her heritage and her love for her mother's hair. This was evident even in her childhood

when she always had a crush on her mother's hair. It used to be a common question among people that her mother had thick, black, and thick hair "Is it your real hair?" (Adichie, 2014) Consequently, Ifemelu too seeks out such unusual black hair which is very characteristic of African people. When she wears her hair, it symbolizes her confidence and sense of identity, as well as the true Africanness in her. In the case of Ifemelu, her curly hair symbolized the inherited sense of racism that runs through American culture. Ifemelu feels her identity being lost as her natural curls are suppressed." Just a little burn", the hair dressers said, "but look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing"(Adichie, 2014). Additionally, her father always tries to make her hear Standard English as a child. However, she is not interested in it and even her father chides her for it. However, she is never in love with that foreign language. She won't change her attitude despite his scolding. She isn't going to handle her true nature and identity. He scolds her for being a disobedient, stubborn, and mutinous kid.

Throughout the book, she becomes increasingly disgusted with such mannered English as it is used in the novel. "But his mannered English bothered her as she got older,"(Adichie, 2014). Since she prefers the Nigerian language, which she learned from her father, to the mannered English, she speaks Igbo with her father. Also, When Ifemelu was in the US and spoke English with her family, she spoke Igbo with her father.

While Ifemelu does belong to a wealthy family, and where she often visits both the UK and the US, and where she has dreams about the two countries, she is not like those friends of hers. There is no reason for her not visiting the UK or USA because she is poorer than all her friends, but because she is never inspired by these countries. Although, in Nigeria, Obinze is obsessed with the US and calls them the future, she hasn't developed a liking for the country. Whenever she decides to apply for a student visa to go to the US, she will have everything she needs. It is a consequence of the political state of Nigeria at the time of Ifemelu's migration, and the country is in a state of war, and all of the educational institutions shut down because of strikes. It is at this time that Ifemelu decided to go to the United States to save her educational career.



### **The American Identity**

An escaped Nigerian girl, Ifemelu, develops an identity crisis as a result of escaping from her homeland. Migrating to America has led her to believe that she has lost her identity. In order to find a job, she must change her name on her ID card. Despite the difficulty of her new name, she forgets it during an interview and feels embarrassed. Her new name is Ngozi Okonkwo, which is of course a difficult one. She explains this to her friend who says “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” Adichie (2014). She has now been restored to her real identity after receiving her card with her real name on it. At first, Ifemelu joins the American accent craze like all other immigrants, but after meeting Cristina Tomas Ifemelu realizes that she really does not sound like an American. “she was speaking like that because of her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling” Adichie (2014). So she decides not to give fake representation through her speaking and because of this she regains her lost identity “decided to stop faking an American accent” Adichie (2013).

“She looked at the photographs of these men and women and felt a dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” Adichie (2013). Her identity is being lost here in America, where she feels as though she is losing herself. The heart of this stranger does not feel at ease. She becomes depersonalized as a result of her immigration to the United States. In an emotional conversation with her African friend Ginika, she describes what it is like to lose one’s identity “I do not understand how anybody will believe I’m Okonkwo” Adichie (2013).

It is a cultural as well as an individual identity that Ifemelu adopts. The moment she realised that her American accent did not suit her, she switched back to her Nigerian accent and this reflected as a speaker. Ifemelu strives to hold on to more than one identity throughout the novel. It is Ifemelu’s responsibility to learn the English language even

though she speaks it fluently. Word Fat in America possess bad connotation and her friend Ginika also informs her that “fat in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like stupid or bastard, and not a mere description like short or tall. So she had banished fat from her vocabulary” Adichie (2014). Additionally, in America, half-castes are considered as insults whereas in Africa, the term is used as a description. Since Ifemelu knows that someone may be offended by using the term half-caste, she plans to use “biracial” instead.

The controversial word nigger also comes up during the discussion in the classroom of Ifemelu. “nigger is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out” Adichie (2014). In the examples above, it can be seen that Ifemelu is forced to adopt American accents and learn an American vocabulary which is unnecessary to learn, which works against the authenticity of her own culture. The identity of a person can be discerned from their name. The name is always central and primary to the person’s identity. Additionally, Ifemelu believes that her name is her identity, and it is only her right to disclose it to whoever she wishes. Oftentimes, names are also linked to specific backgrounds and have special meanings. Thus, in her story Ifemelu describes how the identity of a person is lost under the guise of assimilating and surviving in a new country.

In her childhood, Ifemelu remembers the love and respect her aunt has for her and how she was surprised when she learned that her aunt’s name was changed by her American colleagues “America had subdued her” at this point Ifemelu thinks that her identity as well as her aunt’s is not secure here and things will certainly affect her identity. Language shapes her identity to a great extent, especially abroad, because language is a bridge or even a barrier between people. When she uses different words and phrases to communicate with people, she forms new relationships with them. Her new identity is also formed through this.

### **In the Aftermath of the US**

Ifemelu’s pure African identity after returning from the United States has changed. Ranyinudo tells her



that “But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah” (Adichie). In a sense, it appears that the US’s strong cultural influence on her has distorted her true identity before going to the US. The change in manners and complaints about a variety of things can be seen in Ranyinudo’s behavior.

After living in America for years, when she returns to Nigeria, her friends can see the dramatic change she has undergone in her personality, thinking, and values. She has become very Americanized and is still known as “Americanah” by her friends. The teasing of Ranyinudoby saying, “You’ve got American eyes” Adichie (2014) was frequent. Whenever she watches TV, she doesn’t like even a single channel, but rather criticizes government for being foolish, since they can’t even make good propaganda news. She tells her friend that she would prefer CNN and BBC news if she had a choice.

Moreover, when she tells her friend about a house that “it is an ugly house”, her friend gets surprised on her opinion as “Ugly kwa? What are you talking about? The house is beautiful!” For Zeleza” own connections and commitments to Africa, its own memories and imaginations of Africa, and its own conceptions of the diasporic condition and identity” Zeleza (31-58) shape life and perspectives of how to perceive and recognize discernment instilled by various diasporic conditions. An instance of how she looks at things differently can rightly be referred to the scene where she is with Obinze. The waiter looked offended. “It is the imported frozen ones.” As the waiter walked away, Ifemelu said, “Those frozen things taste horrible.” “He can’t believe you’re actually asking for real potatoes,” Obenize said drily. “Real potatoes are backward for him. Remember this is our newly middle-class world. We haven’t completed the first cycle of prosperity, before going back to the beginning again, to drink milk from the cow’s udder” Adichie (2014).

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she eats with Obinze in a local restaurant. The reason for their mixed feelings about their homeland is due to the change in their cultural identity at this stage of their lives. To succeed in their new Western surroundings, both of these change their true identities in America. However, they maintain Nigerian values, being able to understand what the waiter is trying to say.

This, however, makes one question their identity as they prefer imported potatoes to fresh. Clearly, this illustrates the modern view of Nigerian people and things from Ifemelu’s perspective. It has changed her perspective, so she now is receiving Western perspectives that make her question her identity as well.

Developing American tastes has not been the whole truth of her life. In a corner of her heart, she still cherishes her African heritage. Her participation in the club created by returnees from the US and UK demonstrates this. Nigeropolitan Club is the name of the club. Although she joins the club later, she doesn’t like it. As a result, most of the members of this club are Westerners who view Nigerian life as terribly inferior. This attitude of returnees does not sit well with her. During her blog, she criticizes their elitist Western attitudes.

## Conclusion

According to the study, Americanah tells an overwhelmingly compelling tale of her life adventures of the protagonist Ifemelu. As Ifemelu represents the stereotypical identity crisis experienced by women in diaspora, she symbolizes the stereotypical identity crisis made famous by African diaspora figures. It appears that she is constantly fighting to keep her national identity, which also shapes her identity abroad. Diasporas are examined based on their real and perceived ethnic and racial superiority as well as how social constructions based on them limit their opportunities for success. Further, the study examines identity formation and the role of homeland identity in offering the protagonist something that she owns and considers indispensable.

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