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### Transcending Boundaries: Theme of Transnationalism in Adichie's *Americanah*

#### Abstract

Utilizing the conceptual framework of transnationalism, the paper attempts to gain insights into the transnational lives of African migrants through the novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The paper, specifically, seeks to throw light on the issue of identity construction upon migration and also upon return to the home country. It contends that the identity of transnational migrants is fluid and it is constantly in a state of flux given the sustained, cross-border ties the migrants have with their homeland.

**Keywords:** Belonging, Identity, Migration, Transnationalism

Migration is an integral aspect of human civilization. Availability of food and water – the primary resources needed for survival, natural disasters, epidemics and genocides have engendered relocation of small groups or even entire populations from one territory to another. While the thirst for adventure and the desire to explore unknown territories were the primary reasons to emigrate in certain epochs, the desire for better economic opportunities and higher standards of living drove migration in others. The reasons for migration could be varied but it has undeniably been a recurrent feature of human lives.

Tracing the history of human migration, Nayan Chanda, expert on globalization, notes that Africans were the first human race to migrate, stamping their genetic imprint on modern human population. Initial relocation of Africans may have been voluntary, motivated by their search for resources and better climatic conditions, but later, the mercantile needs of European powers led to forcible dispersal and transplantation of Africans all over the world. Commenting on the vital

role played by Africans in oiling the engine of the New World economy, noted historian Frederick C. Knight observes that

For every European who crossed the Atlantic from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, four times as many Africans made the journey. This mass, forced migration of people from Africa shaped the historical development of the New World in profound ways (1).

While the earliest generations of African migrants could not maintain any tangible links with their country of origin due to various reasons, the later generations of migrants have managed to maintain close social ties with their home countries due, in large measure, to advancements in transportation and communications technologies. Utilizing the conceptual framework of transnationalism, this paper seeks to analyze Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, to gain insights into the transnational lives of African migrants who maintain sustained, cross-border ties with their home countries. It attempts to throw light on the issue of identity construction upon migration and also reconstruction of those identities upon return to their home countries.

Transnationalism is a relatively new concept which has gained currency since the 1990s. It refers to the sustained, continuous, cross border ties and linkages that exist among people and institutions. Sociologist Thomas Faist points out that migrants are the primary point of focus in transnational studies as they are crucial, even if not the sole agents of transnational activity. Before proceeding further, it is essential to understand the distinction between transnationalism and diaspora as the two terms reflect "different intellectual genealogies" (Faist 9) even if there is some overlap between them. Faist observes that while diaspora is an old concept, transnationalism as an idea has gained currency only in recent decades. While both focus on collective identity and mobility, they differ in their emphasis. While diaspora focusses on issues of identity due to voluntary or forced dispersal, the emphasis on mobility is the point of departure for transnationalism. Another major difference between them is that while diaspora adopts a *longue duree* approach, concentrating on tracing the multigenerational patterns of the migrants, transnationalism focuses on current migratory flows; examination of generational issues is rare and limited.

*Americanah* by Adichie is a layered novel. Ostensibly a love story revolving around the lives of the central characters Ifemelu and Obinze, spanning three continents, a deeper examination makes apparent the issues of race and identity in the transnational lives of migrants.

Ifemelu migrates to America to pursue higher education, as the environment back home where colleges are frequently shut due to strikes is not conducive for intellectual development. Spurred by her aunt Uju's advice and helped by her friend Ginika, a resident of America herself who applies to several colleges in America on her behalf, Ifemelu embarks for America. Ginika is a case in point that migrants enable further migration.

Her initial stay in America is marked by a sense of expectation as she attempts to become familiar with the American way of life and tries to adapt to it. She forms a strong bond with her cousin Dike, a young elementary school goer. She moves from Brooklyn to Philadelphia to pursue her higher education. She is warmly welcomed by her friend Ginika who still maintains contacts with her friends back in Nigeria over the years after her emigration to America. She talks to Ifemelu in a dated Nigerian English to make her feel at home. But the dated Nigerian English Ginika speaks is a link to her former self. Her Nigerian identity is a palimpsest on which her current American identity is embossed. The construction of the new identity, however, has not been easy for Ginika as she, like other migrants, has had her share of trials and tribulations in the quest to carve out an American identity. Ginika shares her experiences with Ifemelu that make it evident to Ifemelu that accommodation and sacrifice are an intrinsic part of transnational lives. Ginika confides to Ifemelu that she had almost become an anorexic to lose weight to avoid being teased for being fat. She offers her *gyaan* on the kind of language that is considered acceptable in America. In contrast to Ginika who adapts well to the American way of life, Ifemelu's aunt Uju struggles to do so, an indication of the relative ease with which younger migrants adapt to the culture of the foreign land than do their older counterparts.

Ifemelu's arrival in America makes her conscious of her race. She is constantly reminded of her color. A beautician refuses to shape her eyebrows and relents only after being threatened by her white boyfriend Curt. Humiliated and jolted by the way the receptionist at her college speaks to her in English in a slow and halted manner as she is a black woman, Ifemelu's initiation into American society starts with her practicing to speak English with an American accent. Besides, she acquires knowledge about American culture from the books that Obinze, her boyfriend at school in Nigeria, asks her to read. Members of the 'African Students Association',

a body comprising of diasporic African students, also help her get familiar with the American way of life. Her aunt Uju reminds her that she is “in a country that is not your own” (119) and that she would have to “do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (119). Accordingly, in order to get a job, like her aunt Uju, Ifemelu too goes through the painful process of relaxing her naturally kinky hair to seem less of an outsider. The attempt badly damages it and she is forced to cut her hair to save it from further damage. This makes her feel very diffident and unsure of her looks. Upon the advice of her friend Wambui, she visits the blog ‘*HappilyKinkyNappy.com*’ (209) which helps her embrace her natural hair again and she stops relaxing her hair.

Ifemelu becomes an active contributor to the blog which helps her in anchoring her transnational identity. Identification and engagement with people through blogging helps her. Her constant interaction with the black community in America through the blog enables her to accept her true self without the pressure of having to change the way she looks to fit into the American society. In addition, she decides to speak in English without the American accent. She experiences a sense of joy after the recovery of her original self. “This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake” (175). Ifemelu’s experience highlights the fact that the presence of a local community of migrants, that seeks to bind with its cultural roots from its homeland to feel at peace with its identity in a foreign land, can go a long way in making it easier for newer migrants to adapt to the foreign country. The presence and moral support of one’s own countrymen provides a cushion for newer migrants when faced with the challenges of interacting with the citizens of the adopted country and adapting to cultural differences. The contrast between these support groups and Ginika who adapts to America well and counsels Ifemelu also to attempt the same is interesting. While Ginika accommodates to adapt, Ifemelu stands her ground and refuses to do so.

Encouraged by her friend Wambui, Ifemelu becomes an agent of change in her own small way when she starts an anonymous blog in America initially called “*Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America*” (296). Her act of blogging can be considered a form of ‘documentation’ (Burns 365). Through blogging, Ifemelu shares her thoughts and views on various issues pertinent to African migrants in

America and provides a voice to the historically marginalized people. The blog helps her in constructing an identity for herself - as an anonymous African immigrant trying to make sense of various issues faced by her community, specifically the question of race. It empowers her both psychologically and financially. She uses her blog to support Obama's candidature. Ifemelu starts delivering lectures on cultural diversity. She realizes the difference between her blog readers and the audiences that attend her seminars. Her blog readers appreciate her frank and critical views on race but her seminar audiences don't seem to do so as they are predominantly white. She decides to return to Nigeria as she is overcome by a sense of restlessness and ennui in America. "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"(6). Despite her parents' and her aunt Uju's skepticism about her ability to adjust to life back home after her long stay in America, Ifemelu goes ahead and travels back to Nigeria. The doors to America, however, are not permanently shut on her, as she is an American citizen and hence she always has the option of returning to America.

Ifemelu's new self is based on a Nigerian ethos but influenced by her stay in America. She is, initially, rattled by Nigeria. She finds the place dirty, noisy and she depends on her friend Ranyinudo's for help with even day to day chores. She is a 'hidden immigrant'(Ruth E. Van Reken 38) as, after a prolonged stay in America, she finds her homeland completely alien. While she is a Nigerian, her stay overseas leaves its imprint on her - a reverse case of her personality being a palimpsest of an American world view underpinned by Nigerian roots. She thus realizes the positive influence of her progressive American experience on her personality and also realizes why it is good for her to maintain both identities. She realizes that for her to be at peace, she would have to set her life up in such a way that both her identities complemented each other. When in America, she keeps in touch with her parents over phone and emails and sends them money from time to time. Similarly, she maintains contact with her aunt and her son even after her return to Nigeria. Thus, in contrast to the diaspora of the previous century that had to constantly take effort to preserve the memory of the home country due to the difficulties in travelling back and the lack of means to maintain contact, it is hardly a challenge in transnationalism. This explains the greater emphasis placed by transnationalism on mobility rather than on memory. The challenge in transnationalism, on the other hand, is to evolve an

identity in both the host and in the home country that one is comfortable with. The greater the comfort level with the dual identity, the easier it is straddling both worlds.

Ifemelu slowly adjusts and adapts herself back to her home country. “Now she awoke to the sound of the peacocks, and got out of bed, with the shape of her day familiar and her routines unthinking”(411). She resumes her blogging in Nigeria which she calls it ‘*The Small Redemptions of Lagos*’ (421) akin to her anonymous blog called ‘*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*’ (4) during her stay in America. Back in Nigeria her focus is shifted to issues faced by Nigerians ranging from corruption to poor maintenance of roads. This is where her identity as an American helps. Her first-hand experience of how a developed country elevates the standard of living of its citizens helps her open her own people back home up to similar possibilities. Ifemelu’s blogs are a good example of how technology aids rapid flow of ideas that facilitates transnationalism.

While Ifemelu’s migration is voluntary, her aunt Uju’s is forced. Soon after the completion of her medical degree, Uju dreams of starting a private clinic in Nigeria. Her dream is shattered after the sudden demise of the General with whom she is in a relationship. She is forced to leave for America to save herself and her child Dike from any harm from the General’s relatives. Uju’s migration is more painful than Ifemelu’s as it is forced and causes displacement and financial insecurity. She takes up three jobs, prepares for the qualifying exam which is necessary to practice medicine in America in addition to taking care of her toddler son. She is overworked, tired and unsure of her future. She has to quickly adapt; even if it calls for complete severance from her roots as her very survival depends on it. As Ifemelu observes, “Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place” (119). Unlike Ifemelu, returning to Nigeria was not an option for her and that explains her desperation. As do other migrants, Uju also makes changes to her language, attire and looks to blend into America. She learns to speak English with a put on American accent and pronounces her name the American way ‘*you-joo*’ instead of ‘*oo-joo*’ (104). She forbids Ifemelu from speaking to her son Dike in Igbo, reasoning that it might confuse her son, despite being a bilingual herself. Uju straightens her hair to fit into her professional world. Despite doing everything she can to blend in, Uju does not experience a sense of belonging as, though she has

severed contact with her roots, she realizes it is not possible to completely erase the influence it has had on her personality. On the other hand, in her adopted land, her race and migrant status stands as a barrier to being accepted completely. Even after qualifying in the medical exam, Uju is resented by her patients due to her color. Yet Uju persists with her efforts to re-create a home in America and she partially succeeds in gaining a sense of security and belonging after she falls in love with a Haitian doctor based in America with whom she has a stable relationship. Even in the case of Uju, Adichie seems to indicate that it is her relationship with the Haitian doctor, who is from the same race as she is, that provides her the much needed stability in life.

Unlike Uju who gets acculturated, her son Dike is caught in a limbo. He experiences a sense of fragmentation as he is not accepted by the American society due to his race, and he is unable to connect with the idea of being a Nigerian as he has never been to Nigeria since his migration. He is culturally homeless as he can neither call America nor Nigeria his home. Due to this ambivalence, he struggles to develop a sense of identity. While his mother Uju and aunt Ifemelu both manage to negotiate problems associated with racism, Dike fails in his endeavor. His character illustrates the difficulties faced by very young migrants. Young migrants who spend their adolescent days in their home country and migrate to a different country for better opportunities seem to find it easiest to adapt as Ginika's case illustrates. Older migrants find it more difficult while it is children that find it most difficult to deal with the effects of a fractured identity on their personality. Victimization due to racism and the consequent sense of alienation puts Dike under pressure and he attempts suicide. After he survives his suicide bid, he goes to Nigeria to spend some time with his cousin Ifemelu. Despite his being unfamiliar with the language and with the ways of his homeland, he likes Nigeria and expresses his desire to stay in the country. He does not feel like an outsider as his race, which is a barrier back in America, is a non-issue in Nigeria. After a brief stay, he goes back to America with fond memories. His stay in his home country has a cathartic effect on him and it nourishes and enriches him psychologically. Through his character, Adichie seems to emphasize that contact with his roots is important for a migrant to be at peace with his dual identity.

While Ifemelu migrates to America to pursue higher education, it has always been her boyfriend Obinze's dream to emigrate to that country. He speaks American English and reads books by American writers. But it remains a dream as his visa application is rejected post

terrorist attacks in America. Helped by his mother, he manages to go to London on a short term visa. He takes up odd jobs and after the expiry of his visa he leads the insecure life of an illegal immigrant. He lives in constant fear of deportation. His desperate effort to legalize his stay by marrying a European is stopped when he is deported to his country. Obinze's experiences illustrate the difficulties associated with even becoming able to emigrate. Luckily after his return to Nigeria things work in his favor and he becomes a successful businessman.

In conclusion, through this novel, Adichie presents transnationalism as a possible solution to problems associated with migration. The enhanced mobility conferring on migrants the ability to straddle the twin worlds of the home country and of the adopted country helps them construct dual identities that complement each other. She highlights the struggles migrants need to undergo and the adjustments – many significant – that they need to make to evolve the dual identity. The novel illustrates that these transnational identities are dynamic and shaped by the milieu at both ends. It becomes clear that migration is not just a physical movement from one location to another but concomitantly it is about encounter between two cultures. While technological advancements have conquered space and compressed time, boundaries of culture and race have always been erected and maintained by people and it is negotiating these boundaries that pose the biggest challenge to migrants. Of all migrants in the novel, Ifemelu resolves her issues of identity the best by constructing a dual, transnational identity. She constructs two distinct identities and manages them in such a way that they address different needs of hers. Her American identity provides her with the knowledge and progressive perspectives required to help her own people back home. The positive contribution she is able to make boosts her sense of self-worth. Her Nigerian identity buttresses her emotional needs and provides her with the confidence in her own self. This harmony between identities confers on her the sense of stability and peace she craves for.

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