

# Identity Process and the Challenges of Immigration in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)

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## Abstract

Identity is a complex notion that entails negotiations between different spaces: the person and his inner self, the person and his social group, and the person and the global politics. Not only is the individual affected by his inner characteristics, but he is also affected by the way he is categorized and perceived by others and by the macro global power relations that define his status in the globe. Third world subjects face different social changes in the new millennium that could threaten their identity process; at the top of these social changes is immigration whether voluntary or involuntary. This paper aims at exploring the threats that obstruct the identity process of African subjects who immigrated to metropolitan spaces as presented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). The paper is an attempt to read and interpret Adichie's novel through the lens of Glynis Breakwell's identity process theory, a social psychological theory that examines the dynamics of individuals' identities towards social change. Thus, the paper explores the challenges African immigrants face and the coping strategies they adopt to cope with such challenges.

**Keywords:** immigration, aversive racism, identity process theory, identity threats, coping strategies, *Americanah*.

## Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is concerned with different social changes of the new millennium, and she shows how they could affect the identity process of individuals. At the top of the current social changes is immigration whether

voluntary or involuntary. She tackles the global issue of immigration in her novel, *Americanah* (2013), highlighting that the biggest challenge that faces immigrants is the world's division into two main social categories as suggested by Peter Nyers:

[U]s—Westerners, Europeans, humanitarians etc.—who are the cosmopolitans, the champions of justice, human rights and world order and them—the Third Worlders, the global poor, the ‘wretched of the earth’—the abject, the societies and subjects in crisis, the failed states in need of intervention. (1073)

Adichie shows how such a macro division of humans has its repercussions on Third World immigrants in Western Metropolitan spaces whether explicitly or implicitly. Such division brings about social discrimination that prevents Third World immigrants from full integration in the host countries. Thus, *Americanah* deconstructs the utopian image of western spaces showing instead the fallacy of the post-racial era of the US. In addition, the novel examines the micro-level dimension of immigration by tracing the identity process of individuals, different identity threats they face and different coping strategies they adopt. The paper aims to explore how the macro division of humans could affect the identity process of individuals by reading Adichie's novel through the lens of Breakwell's identity process theory.

### **Breakwell's Identity Process Theory (IPT)**

Identity Process Theory (IPT) was first established, in 1986, by Glynis Breakwell, in her book *Coping with Threatened Identities*, and then it was extended by other social psychologists including Rusi Jaspal, Vivian Vignoles, and Marco Cinnirella. According to IPT, identity is defined as an ever-changing product that is prone to development because of the interaction of “the individual's capacities for memory, consciousness and organized construal with the physical and societal structures and influence processes in their environment” (Breakwell “Identity Resilience” 575). Thus, the theory aims at examining the complex dynamic relationship between the individual's inner traits and the outside societal structures. Accordingly, any change in the social matrix or any surrounding threat is echoed in the identity process of individuals.

According to Breakwell, the structure of identity has two facets: content and value. The content dimension consists of the features of existence that differentiate one person from another. It encompasses both the personal aspects of the self, including behavioral attitudes, feelings, emotions, values, thoughts and goals, and the social aspect that is associated with social roles, social interaction and group membership (Breakwell *Coping* 18). The second facet of identity structure is the value dimension that evaluates the elements of the content dimension. Breakwell clarifies that each component in the content dimension has a positive or negative value depending on the changing interaction between social value systems and personal value codes. These evaluations change from time to time and from one context to another (Breakwell "identity process" 252). Accordingly, there is no constant value appended to any of the content components. Eventually, identity structure is not fixed, but it is rather "fluid, dynamic and responsive to its social context" (Breakwell *Coping* 19).

The theory postulates that there are two processes that regulate the structure of identity: the assimilation–accommodation process and the evaluation process. These processes interact to respond to any change in the social context. Assimilation is the incorporation of new elements into the identity structure, and accommodation is the "adjustment" that occurs in the structure of identity to find a place for the new element (Breakwell "identity process" 253). The evaluation process is to give value and meaning to identity components both old and new. It may entail a process of comparison to attach a meaning to new identity elements. If any new element is evaluated positively, identity process is enhanced, but if it is evaluated negatively, identity process is obstructed.

The two processes that determine the extent the person absorbs and adjusts new components into his identity structure are operated to satisfy identity principles. Breakwell's model proposes four identity motivational principles that an individual strives to achieve: continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Breakwell "identity process" 254). *Continuity* is the desire to preserve a sense of consistency "across time and situation" (Breakwell *Coping* 24), a congruence between past, present and future identities despite the presence of both social and individual change. For example, new immigrants' sense of continuity is threatened since they are exposed to new lifestyles, traditions, customs and places that differ from the ones they got accustomed to in the past. In this case, new immigrants need to employ coping strategies to assimilate and

accommodate new elements into their identity structure to restore a sense of continuity (De la Sablonniere and Osborne 209). *Distinctiveness* is the desire to maintain a sense of uniqueness and differentiation from others (Breakwell coping 24). There is a strong relationship between distinctiveness and the psychological well-being of individuals as people strive to be distinctive, having their own imprint. *Self-esteem* plays an essential role in all the dynamics of identity process. People are keen on having “personal worth” (Breakwell and Rowett 41) and seek to maintain self-esteem on both the personal and the public levels. Not only are people keen on enhancing a positive conception of themselves, but they are also keen on making other people perceive them positively (Leary and Baumeister 5). *Self-efficacy* is the desire to maintain “an identity structure which is characterized by competence and control” (Breakwell “social representations” 8). Individuals seek to view themselves as capable of influencing their surrounding environment. It is a subjective feeling that is measured by the person’s view of himself, not by others’ perceptions or any other objective measure.

Whenever the processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation are “unable to comply with” any of the above-mentioned motivational principles, identity is threatened, and one or more coping strategies are adopted (Breakwell Coping 46). Breakwell defines a coping strategy as “any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity” (Breakwell, *Coping* 78). Breakwell classifies coping strategies into three domains: intra-psychic, interpersonal and intergroup strategies. As for the Intra-psychic coping strategies, they occur inwardly and work “at the level of cognition and emotions” including the strategy of denial, fantasy, and Transient depersonalization among others (Breakwell “strategies” 198). While intra-psychic strategies are concerned with the inward behavioral and cognitive dynamics adopted against threat, interpersonal strategies depend on changing the way an individual interacts with others to alleviate threat and to defend the integrity of identity, including tactics like isolation and negativism (Breakwell Coping 109). As for intergroup strategies, they are more effective than other coping strategies since they work on changing the social conditions or changing undesired social representations (Jaspel 109). Breakwell identifies three ways through which intergroup strategies operate. People alleviate threats by having multiple group memberships, seeking group support, or being involved in group action (“Strategies” 199). The choice of coping strategies differs from one context to another and from one culture to another. It is determined by some factors

including identity resilience, the type of threat, the social context and the identity structure that defines the individual's characteristics and properties.

### **Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013):**

The novel follows the diasporic journey of Ifemelu and Obinze, a Nigerian upper-middle class couple, who immigrated to the US and Britain respectively in search of a better life. The novel opens when Ifemelu is heading from Princeton to Trenton in order to get her hair braided before returning home because there is no salon that braids Afro hair in Trenton. In the hair salon, the narrative goes back and forth alternating between the past and the present as Ifemelu goes through flashbacks of her past life in Nigeria, her love story with Obinze, the moment she gets a student visa to study in the US with the aid of her aunt, Auntie Uji, and her life in the US. The novel weaves Ifemelu and Obinze's trajectories in a non-linear way as the narrative point of view shifts from Ifemelu to Obinze simultaneously. Failing to gain a visa to the US because of 9/11, Obinze gets a six-month visa to Britain when he accompanies his mother, a university professor, in an academic conference. However, he could not get his papers after the expiration of his visa, and he suffers from the hurdles of his illegal position. The novel follows the couple's journey of identity constructions in metropolitan spaces. Like other Nigerian adolescents, Ifemelu and Obinze used to glorify the western life, believing that their identity principles would be boosted if they manage to immigrate. However, during their stay in the metropolitan spaces, they come to realize that the single story of the metropolitan spaces that depicts them as heaven on earth is not true. The couple faces different types of hardships that threaten their identity principles. At the end, their journey ends up in reverse immigration as they decide to return home where they find their true selves. Before embarking on the analysis of the novel, it is important to briefly present the nature of racism in the US to better understand the factors that affect the identity process of immigrants.

### **Aversive racism in the post-racial era:**

The US society witnessed a shift in the paradigm of racial prejudice against the black race. After the civil rights movement of the 1960s, segregation was almost abandoned, and black people started to gradually gain some of their social and political rights culminating in the election of Barak Obama in 2008. Recently,

the old explicit racism has been replaced by new covert forms of racism (Okonofua 2). The outward statements that explicitly stress the innate inferiority of the black race no longer exist but are replaced by a new form of racism called aversive racism. In "Aversive Racism: Bias without Intention", Samuel L. Gaertner et al show that aversive racists are aware that discrimination and prejudice are wrong and may even support racial equality; however, they cognitively carry negative feelings about blacks in their unconscious mind (378). Thus, aversive racists only show their negative behaviors when they can justify their acts on any factor other than race. For example, a black person could be unaccepted by aversive racists in a job interview on the basis that he or she is not qualified enough for the job not because he or she is black. However, in situations in which negative response could be attributed to racial bias, aversive racists are alert and they do not discriminate. Thus, aversive racists may cause significant harm to blacks but "in ways that allow Whites to maintain their self-image as non-prejudiced and that insulate them from recognizing that their behavior is not color blind" (380).

Thus, Adichie, throughout the novel, draws the reader's attention to the seriousness of such type of racism because of its elusive nature. She deconstructs the idea that the US has become a color-blind society in the post-racial era undermining the myth of pluralism. She ridicules these claims through showing the sufferings of her characters who immigrated to the US and through the blog entries written by the protagonist. The reader witnesses Ifemelu's struggle to find a job when she first arrived in the US to study. She does many interviews applying for jobs, but nobody calls her back. The fact that she is denied many job opportunities because of her black color is not directly mentioned, but it is very obvious when she applies for a nurse job. In her interview with the woman who posted an ad to search for a health aid, Ifemelu notices the miserable conditions of the house and the patient:

The living room was dark, unaired, and she imagined the whole building steeped in months, even years, of accumulated urine ... From inside the apartment, a man was groaning, deep and eerie sound; they were the groans of a person for whom groaning was the only choice left, and they frightened her. (130)

The above detailed description denotes the dire need of the woman to find a nurse. When Ifemelu assures her that she is “strong enough to do the job” (130), instead of asking Ifemelu about her qualifications, the woman asks her about her racial background. At the end of the interview, she says to Ifemelu, “you are a pretty sight. Look, I’ve two more people to interview and I’ll get back to you” (131). However, Ifemelu is rejected, and the woman chooses someone else. Adichie hints that the interview has failed because of her race through Ifemelu’s stream of consciousness. Standing in front of the mirror, Ifemelu keeps repeating her name, “I’m Ngozi Okonkwo” for future interviews; and in a moment of reflection, she “wondered if that was why she did not get the job” (131). Ifemelu’s miserable situation shows how aversive racism, though subtle, causes harm to black immigrants in a significant way.

Adichie reiterates that although racism is officially discouraged, aversive racism exists and matters. Deconstructing the idea that racism is an outdated topic in the post-racial era, Ifemelu speaks very frankly at a dinner party after Obama has become the candidate of the Democratic Party for the presidency. There are some speculations maintained by a white man in the party that, “Obama will end racism in this country” (290) and a Haitian poet nods her head agreeing with that opinion. At that moment, Ifemelu firmly interrupts saying, “it is a lie” (290). She proceeds to show how racism is rooted in this country while a state of denial is rather maintained by saying “the only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black, and I only became black when I came to America” (290).

Ifemelu confronts the American society with its denied faults showing that racial categorization still exists, and its denial is misleading and cuts the prospects for a better future. Obama’s success in the election will never guarantee the end of racism as long as its existence is denied. Thus, the reader witnesses how Ifemelu, upon her arrival to the US, adjusts her identity to face such kind of racism.

## **Immigration and Identity process:**

According to Breakwell's identity process theory, the structure of identity is not fixed; it is rather malleable and responsive to changes. Changes in the social context necessitate changes in the identity structure depending on how far the person is affected by the new social change. What regulates the dynamic of identity is the processes of assimilation/accommodation and evaluation according to which the person can incorporate new elements into his identity and adjust this change. In the context of immigration, the immigrant faces new culture and traditions that could be partially or totally assimilated into his/her identity to gain social acceptance.

Upon her arrival to America, Ifemelu has gradually got accustomed to the linguistic codes of America that might differ from what she had learned in Nigeria. For example, she "had banished [the word] 'fat' from her vocabulary" during the years she has lived in America because the word has negative connotations, so she replaces it by words like "curvy" or "big" (Adichie *Americanah* 6). Some words that have a negative connotation in Nigeria were used positively in America such as the word "thin". Ginika informs Ifemelu that in America "'thin' is a good word" (125), clarifying that while in Nigeria a phrase like "you lost weight" means something negative, the same phrase is considered as a compliment in America.

Ifemelu, also, gets accustomed to the indecisive language used by Americans when they express ideas. For example, Americans instead of saying phrases like "I don't know" or "Ask somebody upstairs" when giving instructions, they would rather say "I am not sure" or "you might want to ask somebody upstairs" respectively. In addition, they overuse some words like "excited" (Adichie *Americanah* 134). Accordingly, Ifemelu assimilates and accommodates these vocabularies and starts using them spontaneously. In one of her phone calls to Obinze, Obinze notices how Ifemelu absorbs the American vocabulary although she initially mocked people who do that. Teasing her, Obinze draws Ifemelu's attention that she uses the word 'excited' as Americans do, "You know you said 'excited'". Ifemelu is surprised at Obinze's observation saying, "I did?" (136), but she could not deny the impact of the American language that she hears all the time.

Moreover, Ifemelu has to assimilate the American accent to gain social acceptance and to avoid being seen as an outsider. What motivates her to assimilate the American accent is the moment when she felt insulted because of her Nigerian English accent when she goes to the administration office to register for her class at the University of Philadelphia. Ifemelu notices that the registrar, Christina Tomas, speaks very slowly because of Ifemelu's foreign accent. Tomas tells Ifemelu the instructions in fragments, "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out" (134). At that moment, Ifemelu feels offended; she felt "like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (134). When Ifemelu clarifies that she speaks English, that registrar says that she knows that Ifemelu can speak English, but she does not know "how well". At that moment, Ifemelu "shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life...And in the following weeks...she began to practice an American accent" (134-5). The registrar's down-estimation of Ifemelu's language skills leads her to hide her Nigerian accent and assimilate the American accent into her identity structure. In "Language, Race, and Identity in Adichie's *Americanah* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*", Jack Taylor argues that "language is a marker of difference signifying one's outsider status, and changes in one's language are indicative of changes to oneself" (74). Thus, changes of one's language refer to transformations of one's identity structure.

Likewise, Auntie Uju assimilates the American accent to comply with the American norms and gain social acceptance. Her character transformation is witnessed by Ifemelu in more than one situation. In the grocery store, when Dike takes a candy from the shelf, Auntie Uju adopts a purely American accent when she tells him, "put it back". Ifemelu notices that Auntie Uju says the phrase, "with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she speaks to white Americans...*Pooh-reet-back*" (108). At that time, Ifemelu notices the transformation of Auntie Uju's identity, "and with the accent emerged a new persona" (108). In fact, Auntie Uju tries hard to hide her African identity while conforming to the American social norms in an attempt to gain social acceptance and to avoid stigmatization. She even changes the pronunciation of her name to make it a little bit familiar to the American way of pronouncing it. When Auntie Uju answers a phone call, she says, "'yes, this is Uju'. She pronounced it *you-joo* instead of *oo-joo*" (104). When Ifemelu exclaims why she changes the way she pronounces her name, Auntie Uju reveals that it is the way Americans call her and she is conforming to their expectation. Moreover, she tries to cut her son from his African roots to

sound fully American. When Ifemelu speaks to Dike in Igbo, Auntie Uju warns her, claiming that, “two languages will confuse him” (109). Ifemelu is surprised how Auntie Uju has changed; at that time, Auntie Uju tells Ifemelu the hardships she is going through: she failed in the medical exam that would enable her to work as a physician and she is studying and working three different jobs simultaneously. Perhaps, the time Auntie Uju spends in America teaches her that assimilating American norms is essential to succeed and gain social acceptance.

Moreover, Auntie Uju attempts to assimilate the American beauty standard of hair styling to get accepted in job interviews. In her article, "Hair Politics in the Blogosphere: Safe Spaces and the Politics of Self-Representation in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*", Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez points out that the good/bad hair dichotomy, according to which the former is associated with the relaxed hair of the white western females while the latter is associated with the natural Afro hair, is reinforced in the American mainstream culture. While the Afro natural hair is ridiculed, straight hair is considered the ‘quintessence of femininity’ (66). It is revealed in the novel that Afro braided hair is correlated with unprofessionalism and is considered to be fitting only unprofessional jobs like jazz singers. Therefore, When Auntie Uju passed the medical licensing examination in the second attempt, she tells Ifemelu that she is going to relax her hair to get accepted in the job interview “I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair...If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional...You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (119).

Hence, Auntie Uju assimilates the change in her physical appearance to comply with the American norms, thereby getting the job. Although Ifemelu mocks Auntie Uju’s decision to change the way she looks, she herself, later on, relaxes her hair before going to an interview for a position in public relations. Noticing how enthusiastic Ifemelu is about the interview, Ifemelu’s friend advises her to relax her hair, “My only advice? Lose your braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job” (202). Responding to the surrounding pressure, Ifemelu is convinced to relax her hair to look professional. Hence, Adichie shows how hair styling is an integral component of the female identity; it signifies her personality and self-image. Although the hairdresser celebrates her new look, “Wow, girl, you’ve got the

white-girl swing!” (203), the novel captures her inner feelings towards this change:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (203)

The above quotation shows the significance of hair to female identity. Upon relaxing her hair, Ifemelu feels as if she were someone else, thereby grieving her loss.

After assimilating and accommodating the American cultural codes into her identity structure, Ifemelu starts to evaluate this new content, assessing its value and meaning. According to identity process theory, the contents of identity are revised “on the basis of social beliefs and values in interaction with previously established personal value codes” (Breakwell *Coping* 19). Accordingly, the individual may abandon or keep the new component based on the negative or positive value the new component may have. The question that goes through Ifemelu’s mind is, does the assimilation of the American cultural codes ensure that she will not be treated as an outsider? And does changing the way she speaks and the way she looks add new value to her character?

Reflecting on her diasporic position, Ifemelu learns that the new content integrated into her identity does not add a positive value to her identity structure. Thus, she decides to revert to her Nigerian accent and to her natural hair, and she stops mimicking others’ traits that do not belong to her. The moment of this transition is witnessed during a phone conversation with an American telemarketer who praises her American accent as a kind of compliment, “wow. Cool. You sound totally American” (175). Spontaneously, Ifemelu immediately expresses her happiness by thanking him. In a moment of reflection, she wonders why she thanked him for mastering the American accents; “she begins to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him...Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?” (175). She realizes that the way she lives is not authentic or genuine; thus, she decides to “stop faking

the American accent". Reverting to her Nigerian accent and stopping rolling the *r*, Ifemelu feels that "this was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from deep sleep during an earthquake" (175). Indeed, reverting to her Nigerian accent is a turning point in Ifemelu's "diasporan evolution" (Okolocha 157).

Evaluating hair relaxation, Ifemelu also decides to stop relaxing her hair and to return to her natural hair. Ifemelu redeems her hair after having it relaxed as several scabs appeared on her scalp and her hair started to fall, a matter that forced her to cut her hair. Hence, she tells her friend how she hates her new look that does not relate to her, "I look so ugly"; she felt that at best, she looks like "a boy; at worst, like an insect" (208). Adichie's portrayal of Ifemelu's feelings accentuates the correlation between hair and the female self. The association between hair and the female identity construction is a focal point stressed by Adichie as the salons of braiding hair are a key setting in the novel. The novel opens as Ifemelu heads to Trenton to get her hair braided before leaving America and returning to Nigeria. It is in the salon where Ifemelu recalls her days in America and the reader gets to know her experience. Ifemelu's identity transformation is apparent when the hairdresser asks Ifemelu why she does not relax her hair. Revealing the degree of her self-acceptance, Ifemelu says, "I like my hair the way God made it" (12). Thus, Ifemelu's transition from relaxed hair to natural hair has become "a transformative journey of self-knowledge" (Cruz-Gutiérrez 76).

### **Immigration and identity principles:**

According to Breakwell's identity theory, there are four identity principles, continuity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and distinctiveness, that regulate the two processes of assimilation/accommodation and evaluation (Breakwell "Identity Process" 254). In any social context, as long as the aforementioned principles are enhanced, the identity process is operating. However, once any of these identity principles is obstructed, identity is threatened and hence coping strategies have to be adopted. Adichie's novel shows how the experience of immigration affects the identity principles of diasporic subjects.

Ifemelu's immigration to the US boosts some of her identity principles, yet it obstructs other principles. Ifemelu's self-efficacy principle is enhanced in the

US. Although she suffers at the beginning to find a job, she has managed to take a fellowship in Princeton and has become a famous successful blogger at the end. The advancement in her career boosts her self-efficacy as she can control her life successfully. Indeed, her relationship with Curt, Kimberly's cousin, helps her to progress in the US. Belonging to a White rich family, Curt improves Ifemelu's economic and social status. With the aid of the acquaintance of his father, he gets a job for Ifemelu in the public relations when her student visa is about to expire thereby ensuring that she can gain a work visa and a green card (Adichie *Americanah* 202). His love for Ifemelu provides her not only with security but also with happiness, "A sense of contentment overwhelmed her. That is what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease" (Adichie *Americanah* 200).

Although Ifemelu's romantic relationship enhances her self-efficacy, her self-esteem principle is threatened by the same love relation. Although Curt's love for Ifemelu is genuine, Ifemelu could not escape the looks of their surroundings that make her always feel inferior and incompatible for a white rich handsome man like Curt. Whenever Curt introduces her to his friends, "they looked at her with surprise, a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not, and in their expression was the question 'why her?'" (Adichie *Americanah* 292). Ifemelu comes to understand the rhetoric of the racial categorization in America through her relationship with Curt. They wonder how a white rich handsome man would be attracted to a black woman even if she is pretty:

It was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete's body, the sunny charm, and the smell, around him, of money. If he were fat, older, poor, plain, eccentric, or dreadlocked, then it would be less remarkable...And it did not help that although she might be pretty black girl, she was not the kind of black that they could imagine him with: she was not light-skinned, she was not biracial. (292-3)

Although every now and then Curt tries to assure her and to prove that his love transcends the society's racial categorization, Ifemelu always feels inferior in any social gathering and she could neither endure the insulting looks of his friends nor Curt's protection, "the looks had begun to pierce her skin. She was

tired even of Curt's protection, tired of needing protection" (Adichie *Americanah* 293).

Sometimes Curt is unaware of how racial attitudes threaten her self-esteem. When both of them enter a restaurant, the host speaks only to Curt. Ignoring Ifemelu's presence completely, the host asked, "table for one?" (294) as if Curt were entering the restaurant alone. Feeling offended by the host's attitude, Ifemelu asks Curt why the white host ignores her as if she were invisible. However, Curt tells Ifemelu that the host's act is not discriminatory and assures that she "does not mean it 'like that'" (294). In a like manner, skimming the *Essence* Magazine which features black women, Curt tells Ifemelu that this magazine is "racially skewed". Ifemelu is astonished at Curt's remark and drives him immediately to a bookstore taking down almost all women's magazines from the shelf. She shows him how all the magazines represent only white women. Amid piles of magazines, they can only see three biracial women featured. Ifemelu's rage underscores how black women are discriminated against by being excluded from magazines. She tells Curt the pain she feels:

So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women's magazines and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous ... Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can't get clues for make-up from these magazines ... Now let's talk about what is racially skewed. Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* even exists? (295)

Since Ifemelu's self-esteem principle is shattered due to the American norms that obstruct love between blacks and whites, Ifemelu is no longer able to accommodate Curt's love into her identity structure. When their relationship comes to an end, Ifemelu reflects on the endless status of racism in the US. She writes:

The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved. (296)

Ifemelu's self-esteem is continuously threatened in everyday life during her stay in America. Every now and then, she feels that white people look down on her, and such scornfulness obstructs her identity process. She is not expected to live in luxury because she is black. When she works as a babysitter and opens the door for the carpet cleaner, Ifemelu notices that his mind cannot accept the idea that a black woman could be the owner of this luxurious house, "he stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility" (Adichie *Americanah* 166). When he later realizes that she is the babysitter not the owner of the house, he is relieved, "it was like the conjurer's trick, the swift disappearance of hostility...The universe is once again arranged as it should be" (168). This feeling of inferiority is new to Ifemelu as she did not use to be down looked in her home country. She could have never imagined that her color would obstruct a salient principle in her identity: self-esteem.

In Britain, Obinze, like Ifemelu, encounters multiple hardships that threaten his identity. What contributes to the success of *Americanah* is its wide scope that depicts the experience of African transnational immigrants in different geo-political spaces (Sackeyfio 221). As an illegal immigrant in London, Obinze's identity is more threatened than Ifemelu's as he becomes entangled in a series of unfortunate incidents. After he fails to gain a visa to the US due to immigration restrictions imposed after 9/11, his mother manages to get him a six-month visa to Britain as a research assistant when she is invited to participate in an academic conference in London. Failing to get his papers after the expiration of the six-month visa, Obinze goes through severe hurdles for being considered an illegal immigrant. Using a fake ID, he finds no way except working menial jobs. Unlike Ifemelu whose self-efficacy is boosted in the US as she manages at the end to pursue a successful career and optimize her skills, Obinze fails to meet his needs losing the ability to control his life; therefore, his self-efficacy principle is threatened. The reader witnesses the dramatic transformation in his character from a well-nourished caliber, as he is the only son of an academic professor, to a desperate man "cleaning toilets, wearing rubber gloves and carrying a pail" (236). In addition, he lives in a state of horror in fear of being arrested, "each time he saw a policeman, or anyone in a uniform...he would fight the urge to run" (257).

Although Obinze's identity process is obstructed, he tries by every means to legalize his stay in London to overcome any obstacle. Getting married to a

European citizen is his last choice to get legal papers. Arranging for a sham marriage, Obinze pays two Angolan immigrants two thousand pounds to complete the procedure of this fake marriage. However, on the day of his marriage, he is arrested, driven to the police station and deported later to Nigeria. His self-esteem is threatened when the policeman “clamped handcuffs around his wrist” (278). The moments of his arrest and detention are well portrayed in the novel revealing how he loses not only his self-esteem but also his self-respect. He feels dehumanized when the lawyer is about to tick the word “removed” on the form at his hands when Obinze approves to be deported to Nigeria. The word “Removed” “made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing” (Adichie *Americanah* 279). What increases his feeling of inferiority is the days he is detained till the moment of his deportation, “in detention, he feels raw, skinned, the outer layer of himself is stripped off” (281). He has never imagined that his fate in London would be so humiliating like this. His miserable conditions in London contrast with the positive image he has been holding for years for western spaces. Thus, both Ifemelu and Obinze’s identity structure is obstructed at some point in the metropolitan spaces for different reasons. Although Ifemelu’s return is voluntary while Obinze’s is mandatory, they both end up in reverse migration that “fashion their response to the new reality in Nigeria or the homeland” (Jick and Toh 23). Their experience enables them to view and assess their country from a new perspective from their new position.

### **Coping strategies**

Breakwell’s identity theory postulates that whenever the identity process fails to satisfy and comply with the principles, identity is threatened. Therefore, to alleviate the source of threat, the individual develops one or more coping strategies, “any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity” (*Coping* 78). In *Americanah*, the characters’ identity process is threatened at some point during their stay in the metropolitan space. Thus, the novel shows how the characters adopt different coping strategies to remove or alleviate the source of threat.

During his arrest, Obinze adopts ‘transient depersonalization’, an intrapsychic coping strategy that entails “the fleeting momentary experience of feeling estranged from oneself” (Breakwell *Coping* 86) to alleviate the intensity

of the threat he is facing. Refusing to adjust his identity structure to assimilate the humiliation he faces during his arrest, Obinze is momentarily detached from himself as if the scene of arrest were happening to someone else. The 'transient depersonalization' strategy that Obinze involuntarily adopts is well portrayed in the novel as follows:

A policeman clamped handcuffs around his wrists. He felt himself watching the scene from far away, watching himself walk to the police car outside, and sink into the too-soft seat in the back. There had been so many times in the past when he had feared that this would happen, so many moments that had become one single blur of panic, and now it felt like the dull echo of an aftermath. (278)

While Obinze adopts an intrapsychic strategy, Ifemelu tends to adopt intergroup coping strategies. She seeks group support to establish connections, restore a sense of continuity and share experiences. Breakwell shows that people who face similar threats usually create or join a group to share their concerns to gain support. These kinds of groups provide a sort of consolidation, satisfaction and relief (*Coping* 130-1). Upon her arrival in the US, Ifemelu's sense of continuity is threatened as she is uprooted from her home country, missing her family, friends and daily routine. To overcome this sense of loss and to boost her continuity principle, she joins the African Students Association (ASA) at her university. It is considered an active channel where African students meet and communicate. Joining the ASA, Ifemelu finds solace in socializing with African immigrants who have similar experience:

Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, one Congolese, one Guinean sat around eating, talking, fueling spirits, and their different accents formed meshes of solacing sounds. They mimicked what Americans told them. And they themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock... Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself. (Adichie *Americanah* 139)

The collective feeling of shared African background restores her sense of continuity, reduces her feeling of loneliness and gives her a sense of renewal. The

ASA is considered a space to “restore wellbeing, recover the self, and cultivate a home” (Landry 14).

Moreover, Ifemelu seeks group support through virtual communities. The damaging consequences of relaxing her hair, including scabs on her scalp and excessive hair loss cause Ifemelu great psychological pain. Having seen Ifemelu in a desperate state, Wambui, her friend in ASA, advises her to find a solution online, “Go online. HappilyKinkyNappy.com. It’s this natural community. You will find inspiration” (209). It is an online community initiated by black females who advocate natural hair by giving tips and sharing experiences on how to take care of kinky hair. Indeed, such a website empowers transnational black females establishing “a counter discourse” that resists the mainstream western beauty standards (Bhandari 43).

Interacting with other black females who have similar concerns gives Ifemelu a sense of connection that boosts her psychological well-being. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez shows that the online community offers a modern “safe space” where black females voice their concerns and support each other (74). The sense of engagement and interaction practiced on the website is well described in the novel:

HAPPILYKINKYNAPPY.COM had a bright yellow background, message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big, Afros, twist, braids, massive raucous curls and coils ... They complimented each other’s photo and ended comments with ‘hugs’...And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude. (212)

Following the tips posted on the website, Ifemelu manages to treat her hair, thereby loving her natural hair. In fact, Adichie shows how social networking and virtual communities, which flourished in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, play an important role in expressing thoughts and gaining social support. Seeking group support via virtual communities enables Ifemelu to “embrace critical thinking and to overcome shame” (Cruz-Gutiérrez 73).

Her online experience motivates her to initiate her own blog which gives her the opportunity to discuss the nature of racial categorization in the US.

Ifemelu's blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" is another active strategy that enables Ifemelu not only to cope with threats but also to voice her experience. The act of writing has a therapeutic effect as it gives her the power to reflect and comment on racial issues in the US allowing the opportunity for others to share their similar experience.

Thus, Adichie's incorporation of blog entries reflects her realist style in writing. Intertwining an up-to-date form of writing—blogs—with her narrative enables her not only to engage her readers but also to counter the single story that depicts America as a color-blind society. Adichie illustrates that she integrates blogs into her narrative because she wants the novel to be "social commentary" but in a different form from fiction. Thus, blogs are considered a channel through which "social realities" can be discussed objectively (Guarracino 2). Thus, through blog entries, Adichie can illustrate the implications of racial categorization in a direct way that could not be fully explained in the course of events. They boost the reader's epistemological journey of the nature of racism in the US and the threats faced by black immigrants. Addressing white Americans, Ifemelu, in her entry entitled "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness", denounces Americans' denial of racism reminding them of unforgettable historic events like slavery and Jim Crow system that contribute in the up-to-date underestimation of the blacks:

Dear Non-American Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. ...Don't be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. Don't say "Oh, it's not really race...Don't say "we're tired of talking about race"...American Black, too, are tired of talking about race. ... America's assets and America's debts, and Jim Crow is a big-ass debt... Don't say "Oh Racism is over, slavery was so long ago." We are talking about the problem from the 1960s not the 1860s...So after this list of don't, what's the do? I'm not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is ... Sometimes people just want to feel

heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding. (325-7)

The above blog entry deconstructs the myth of the colorblindness of the US society, negating the fallacious claims said by Americans to camouflage their hidden racist attitude. Ifemelu pinpoints that such a state of denial will end up in a vicious circle of racist practices because the initial step in addressing any problem is to first acknowledge its existence to be able to solve it. Therefore, Ifemelu calls the white Americans to listen to the concerns of American Blacks because listening not only has therapeutic effects on the speaker but also raises the listener's awareness of the issue.

Sometimes, Ifemelu addresses black immigrants to raise their awareness of some social realities in the US. In her blog entry entitled, "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby", she asks them to be realistic and to stop distinguishing themselves from African Americans because at the end the American society has prejudiced perceptions of blacks whether they are African immigrants or African Americans. They have to know that when they decide to come to the US, they will be black, a fact that could never be denied and whose threat could not be alleviated.

Through 17 blog entries, Ifemelu reflects on the politics of race in the US tackling different aspects including skin hierarchies, aversive racism, the historical roots of racial prejudice, the myth of the post racial era, the politics of hair, the privileges gained by whites and the politics of love and race (Androne 236). Thus, the blog is a good channel through which Adichie comments on the macro socio-political aspect of the politics of race that goes simultaneously with the primary literary text that reflects the micro-level analysis of racism and how it affects the identity process of immigrants. Hence, the blog complements the novel's course of events as it widens the scope of the novel. In this respect, Mahmoud Radwan in his article, "Countering Cultural Deracination: An Analytical Reading of Adichie's *Americanah*", notes that blogs are meta-narratives that add depth and insight to the novel "in their meta-critical and insightful ruminations on both the social and political spectrums" (97).

Writing blogs is an active coping strategy that enables Ifemelu to voice her experience and achieve success in her career. The more people interact with her blogs, the more she feels satisfied. Although writing blogs alleviates the threat Ifemelu faces in the US, it does not stop it completely. Therefore, despite the success she achieves in the US, she voluntarily decides to return to Nigeria to escape the source of threat. Her longing for her home country is described in the novel as follows:

Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine ... and yet *there was cement in her soul*. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness...*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. And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself ... She began to plan and to dream, to apply for jobs in Lagos. (6 *emphasis added*)

The above quotation shows that Ifemelu's identity process is obstructed at some point in spite of the success she achieves in the US because her identity processes of assimilation/accommodation and evaluation could not comply with or boost her identity principles anymore. The lexical expressions “cement in her soul”, “fatigue”, “bleakness” and “dull ache of loss” reflect her homesickness and the inhospitality of the metropolitan spaces as well. Ifemelu’s diasporic experience leads her to reevaluate her home country, seeing it with a more mature perspective. She has become more objective and less subjective. She comes to recognize that America is “wonderful but it’s not heaven” (Adichie *Americanah* 119) and that Nigeria is her right place where she can find herself; it is “where she was supposed to be” (6).

Upon returning to Nigeria, Ifemelu feels a sense of completeness and connection that boosts her identity principles. She realizes that she is attached to Nigeria, a matter that enhances her sense of belonging. Leaving the US for

Nigeria, Ifemelu feels that she escapes the source of threat, "I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (476). She is no longer perceived as inferior or different, thereby maintaining her self-esteem principle. Therefore, her decision to return to her home country is considered an active permanent coping strategy because it eradicates the source of threat. Although she finds difficulty at the beginning to readapt in Nigeria, she quickly conforms and manages to reintegrate smoothly.

Having absorbed the value of work and commitment from her stay in the US, Ifemelu could easily obtain a job as a writer in *Zoe* magazine. Admiring Ifemelu's enthusiasm for work and her innovative ideas, the owner of the magazine tells her, "You are a real American! Ready to get to work, a no-nonsense person!" (392). Later, Ifemelu succeeds in launching her new blog called *The New Redemptions of Lagos* in which she critiques the attitude of returnees who constantly complain about the life in Lagos comparing it with the lifestyle in New York asserting that Lagos has a different kind of beauty, "Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York...Lagos has always been indisputably itself" (421).

Not only does Ifemelu's return to home enhance her career, but more importantly it nourishes her romantic life. Happiness has opened its gates to Ifemelu the moment she is reunited with Obinze, who is currently a great real estate businessman in Nigeria. It is only with Obinze that Ifemelu finds the true meaning of happiness. In her article, "'To Be from the Country of People Who Gave': National Allegory and the United States of Adichie's *Americanah*", Katherine Hallemeier reads the reunion of Ifemelu and Obinze as a symbol of future potentials in Nigeria (241). Thus, the novel celebrates the idea of returning home so that returnees could change and develop their mother countries.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Americanah* presents the diasporic experience of Ifemelu and Obinze who feel unsettled in metropolitan spaces. The novel shows how immigration may boost or threaten African immigrants' identity principles—continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, self-efficacy. Although immigration boosts Ifemelu's self-efficacy principle as she becomes a successful blogger, it threatens the rest of her identity principles. Upon their arrival to western spaces,

both Ifemelu and Obinze struggle to assimilate/accommodate the new codes and norms of the host countries into their identity. Facing versatile threats, their identity processes are obstructed at a certain point. In spite of Ifemelu's and Obinze' several attempts to integrate into the host country, what hinders them from being accepted is the prevalence of aversive racism, a new paradigm of racial prejudice against the black race that replaces the old explicit form of racism by a new covert one. Their constant feeling that they are inferior shatters their self-esteem and deprives them of full integration into the host country. Therefore, Ifemelu and Obinze decide to return to their home country where they not only escape the source of threats but also boost their identity principles achieving economic and social success.

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## مسار تشكيل الهوية وتحديات الهجرة: قراءة لرواية أمريكانا للكاتبة تشيماماندا نجوزي أداتشي

### مستخلص

يعتبر مفهوم الهوية من المفاهيم المعقدة التي تتضمن دراسة أبعاد عدة مختلفة: علاقة الفرد وذاته الداخلية علاقة الفرد ودائرته الإجتماعية وعلاقة الفرد بالسياسة العالمية. فيتأثر الإنسان ليس فقط بسماته الشخصية الداخلية ولكن يتأثر بالطريقة يصنف بها وبالطريقة التي ينظر بها الآخرون إليه ويتأثر أيضاً بالقوي العالمية والهيمنة السياسية التي تحدد وضعه في العالم. يواجه رعايا العالم الثالث تغيرات اجتماعية مختلفة في الألفية الجديدة والتي يمكن أن تهدد عملية هويتهم؛ تأتي الهجرة على رأس هذه التغيرات الاجتماعية سواء كانت طوعية أو غير طوعية. يهدف البحث الي أسقاط الضوء علي التهديدات التي تعيق مسار تشكيل هوية الأفارقة المهاجرين الي البلدان المتحضرة كما تقدمها رواية أمريكانا للكاتبة تشيماماندا نجوزي اداتشي. ويعتبر البحث محاولة لقراءة الرواية من منظور نظرية مسار تشكيل الهوية لجلنيز بركويل وهي نظرية من مجال علم النفس الإجتماعي تدرس التغيرات التي تطرأ علي مسار الهوية حيال التغيرات الإجتماعية. ويستهدف البحث دراسة التحديات التي تواجه المهاجرين الأفارقة وكيفية التأقلم مع تلك التحديات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الهجرة -العنصرية المقنعة- نظرية مسار تشكيل الهوية-تهديدات الهوية-استراتيجيات التكيف-رواية أمريكانا.