

Transgressive body in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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In a society where colour is a major reason for social stratification, the black identity is burdened with the perceived negativities generated by its colour. This reality becomes conspicuous in a space defined by racial superiority and migrant status. In *Americanah*, unlike her other novels, Adichie migration concerns are more profound to reflect the perception and intense consequences of racial identity for African migrants and black people in the West. Through a close reading of this text from a postcolonial view, this article contends that the migrant status and blackness of African subjects, represented in physical attributes, expose their bearer to racial prejudice. This article further argues that to be integrated and access racial privileges, African migrants must suppress or eliminate the racial burdens attached to blackness by transforming or modifying their identity. Such modification evoked by a transgression is accompanied by a loss of identity.

Contribution: The most outstanding feature of this article is the exploration of the interface between transgression, body and space in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2013) *Americanah*. This article contributes to the growing discourse on transgression, racism and African migrants' realities and examine the concerns of black people regarding colour politics through intercontinental migration. This article further seeks to address significant questions about the way race influences the cultural attitude of minority groups and how black immigrants react to racial Othering.

Keywords: Transgression; migration; Otherness; modifying identity; blackness.

Introduction

Theories such as critical race theory (CRT) and postcolonial theory deal with the issues of race and resistance to oppression. Critical race theory focuses on constructed racial identities where whiteness constructs itself as supreme and Others blackness. On the other hand, postcolonial theory investigates the impacts and implications of colonialism on the colonised. The theory also dwells on the counter-narratives of colonial negativities through rewriting cultural history and objecting to every form of discrimination (Siraj 2018).

As emigrants of African descent situate themselves in the Western diaspora, they become subjected to racism and various forms of discrimination because of their colour and racial identity. Inequality of social-political power is particularly evident where radical imbalances of privilege, affluence and possession segregate marginal groups from dominant ones. People of colour are discriminated against in a racialised culture where the social-political power structure strengthens the false belief that the white race is more advantageous or privileged. For example, white people may often define commercial merit in terms of characteristics they see themselves as possessing. They will then frequently apply those standards in a way which appears even-handed yet maintains racial exclusion (Bornman 2006; Picca & Feagin 2020). This fits perfectly with Fanon's (2008:104–140) submission that black¹ people only become aware of their blackness in white society. The visibility of their 'difference', as noted by Fanon, creates a kind of negative image.

Similarly, Du Bois' (1961) concept of 'double consciousness' resonates with this, as it investigates how the black body is (re)presented as a minority group within a majority group or culture; in other words, the concept of 'double consciousness' questions what it means to be black and the long-lasting implications of being black. According to Michael (2015:5), this situation as it

1. Homogenous grouping of non-Caucasians of African ancestry (from the Atlantic slave trade) and indigenous dark-skinned people of the African continent. It simultaneously means racial identity by the Western world for people of colour.

affects a person of African descent is termed 'Afrophobia' – bigotry targeted at a particular group of people to deny their humanity and sense of dignity. Michael (2015) elucidates the term further as:

[T]he hostility, antipathy, contempt and aversion expressed directly and through institutional and legal means, towards people with a background in sub-Saharan Africa or who belong to the African diaspora. It manifests itself for example as verbal abuse, spatial segregation and physical attacks as well as systematic racial discrimination within areas such as employment and housing. (p. 5)

Furthermore, Ikuenobe (2010) opines that racism is the erroneous belief of the superiority of a particular race over others. This reinforces the attitude of people to racial discrimination and also validates their racist beliefs. Thus, black people and African migrants are bearers of identity susceptible to discrimination, and embodying transgression (for racial equity) in this identity is conceptualised as the transgressive body (Anderson 2015:13).

Although global scholarship exists on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2013) *Americanah* (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2019; Phiri 2017; Dobrota 2018), there is a paucity of studies exploring the interface between transgression, body and space. This article will bridge this scholarship gap and further contribute to the growing discourse on transgression, racism and African migrants' realities. It will also examine the concerns of black people regarding colour politics through intercontinental migration, thereby giving insight into their existing challenges as subalterns in the (Western) diaspora. How does race influence the cultural attitude of minority groups? How do the black immigrants react to racial Othering? These are some significant questions the article seeks to address. The concept of Otherness that is constructed around CRT and the concept of transgression that emanates from the postcolonial theory will illuminate our reading and analysis of this literary text.

Theoretical consideration of Otherness and transgression

The concept of 'Other' is derived from the impression whereby a certain group of persons are considered different from the rest in terms of colour, physical and cultural attributes (Civila, Romero Rodríguez & Aguaded 2020). It is constructed on a binary categorisation between 'the others' or 'them' and 'ourselves' or 'us'. Nyongesa, Gaita and Makokha (2021) argue that the marked differences suggest superiority while the other group could be subordinated and marginalised in society.

In a related sense, the term 'Othering' is central to constructing and maintaining alterity. Othering refers to some dynamic norms of the dominant group that trigger marginalisation because of the differences of the 'subordinate' group. These differences could be religion, race, gender, class and disabilities, depending on the way they are categorised. Only the dominant group is capable of subjecting the minority

group to and enforcing its values and norms (Clayton 2005; Uda & Singh 2019).

Postcolonial theorists of Otherness Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Edward Said share the view that Otherness was designed to originally attack and destroy the self-worth of the non-Europeans, thereby internalising inferiority in their minds. Said justifies this through his concept of Orientalism, which describes the Othering of the Orient by the West. The Orient is the 'inferior race', seen as barbarians and savages by the West. As stated by Said (1995:5), 'the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of denomination, varying degree of complex hegemony'. The West casts an antagonistic identity on the Orient and 'sold' them liberation via civilisation. Consequently, dominating the Orient was perpetuated.

Furthermore, Fanon (1968[2008]:57) states that 'to be the Other is to always feel in an uncomfortable position, to be on one's guard, to be prepared to be rejected'. In the same vein, Bhabha (1994) maintains that the colonial environment incites racial imbalances of privileges and power. They explain that Otherness ignites emotional and psychological problems for the colonised. The result is a generational fear and low self-esteem in relation to, white people. Fanon and Bhabha both hold the view that in a bid to eliminate racial trauma, the colonised populace is compelled to adopt the practices of the colonisers. Bhabha (1994:15) foregrounds this in his concept of hybridity and mimicry, wherein the colonised 'mimics' or imitates the 'superior'.

Having considered the concept of *Otherness*, it is equally important to examine *transgression* as the theoretical base for this article. Transgression, beyond its literal definition as the crossing of boundaries or limits, has generated diverse meanings in various scholarships. Bown (2012) states that transgression is 'a momentary response from the constraints of taboos'. It is a deliberate but temporary desire to escape prejudice suffered by 'deviants' who violate some sociocultural codes. He further notes that transgression reminds the individual of identity inadequacies entrenched in some conventional stereotyping. In *Transgression in Contemporary Media Culture*, Hermes and Hills (2020) also maintain that transgression reveals self-denial within the victim and the outside world, which is initiated by displacement and followed by transformation. Bataille (1957), the prominent philosopher and theorist of transgressing identity, contends that transgression is a deliberate desire or compulsion to break free from modern subjectivity. For Bataille, individual identity was constituted through the divisions between ethical, social, religious, moral, economic and linguistic encoding. It is through the trespassing of any one of these encoded boundaries that the individual becomes aware of the limit. In a transgressing phase, a person's identity is broken as he or she transcends the limits that embody his or her peculiarity. This enables the loss of internal selfhood. Premised on Georges Bataille's work, Foucault's (1977) 'A Preface to Transgression' views the concept of transgression

from a philosophical perspective rather than a social one. Foucault defines transgression as the transition of human beings beyond ontological limits, primarily in the experience of sexuality. Foucault's notion of transgression is the emergence of a displaced subject from the continuous crossing of limits, a process of 'deconstructing' and 'constructing' identity. Oftentimes, the motivating condition for transgression is the 'self-other dichotomy', where separation of the self from the 'other' is hierarchised. Hence, transgression has a symbiotic connection with limits or boundaries. That is, limits only exist relative to transgression.

Drawing on the concepts of *Otherness* and *transgression*, it is therefore possible to argue that transgression is premised on Otherness. The struggle to dismantle the imposed denials and contradictions explains the transposing of the 'Other' to 'self'. In *Americanah*, the traditional notion of status-race entrenched in Otherness comes to play where race remains a maker or divider of social status. For instance, with their awareness of colour, Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, Dike, Obinze and Eminike are burdened with invisibility or loss of individuality, doubts about competence, inferiority and other traumatic racial issues. Faced with the burden of being black, transgression of identity becomes mandatory for Adichie's African immigrant characters to be well integrated in spaces coded white. These measures of transgression are in form of denying or giving up their real identity through hair, accent, identity theft, body size and deceptive marriage or scam for immigration papers, which will be explored later in the article.

Americanah: Background and contextualisation

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu (whose persona represents the novel title), who migrates to the United States of America (USA) to study. On arrival, she experiences racism, which is not an issue in her country. Ifemelu's skin colour is a stumbling block that evolves into significant challenges – acclimatising to her new home, thriving in her relationship, becoming a renowned blogger and living comfortably in her identity. On the other hand, Obinze, her childhood lover, deviously travels on his mother's visa to the United Kingdom (UK), where he resides as an undocumented migrant and also experiences racism. Obinze is later arrested and deported to Nigeria. After 13 years of sojourn in the USA, Ifemelu returns to Lagos and reunites with Obinze. The love between her and Obinze is rekindled, owing to Obinze's marital unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

The novel explores Nigerian, British and American culture and society, exposing how prejudicial forces affect the survival of border-crossers in new environments (Amonyeye 2017). With a narrative that challenges the negative perception of Africa and its migrants, Adichie provides an interesting analysis and intersection of spatial zones, race and identity in contemporary Western societies. Against the theoretical backdrop of CRT (which accentuates the direct and indirect implications of race on the people of colour), the black

identity is problematic for its bearer, as evinced in Adichie's African border-crosser characters, making them feel uncomfortable or unhomey in a racialised society. Thus, in *Americanah*, the writer probes global concerns about colour incurred through transnational mobility.

Also, as literature mirrors reality and the works of African writers are imaginative responses to societal issues, it is glaring that the literary production of postcolonial and contemporary African migrant writers such as Cole's *Open City* (2011), Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) and Adichie's *Americanah* engage the thematisation of migration, displacement, identity crisis, Othering and racial issues. Adichie, in *Americanah*, vividly illustrates the negative perception of Africa and how its immigrants are stereotyped by a system that privileges whiteness, thereby portraying them as discriminated bodies. While racial Otherings are often represented in a white versus black colour dichotomy, where whiteness is perceived as superior or privileged, still it may be argued that even white Africans are excluded from colour privileges, considering their roots. As seen in Huchu's second novel *The Maestro, the Magistrate and the Mathematician* (2014), the Maestro, a white Zimbabwean migrant, equally suffers identity displacement and alienation in the United Kingdom like his black counterparts. The severity of the Maestro's alienation from himself and the new environment eventually leads to his untimely death. This illustration shows that colour (whiteness) does not spare people of African descent from racial backlash, but black Africans are the prominent recipients. In addition, Adichie's focus in *Americanah* is not only on the exclusion of the black body from the mainstream of American and British culture, but she also examines the intramarginalisation of black Africans by Africans in the diaspora. This makes her work multi-engaging in diverse postcolonial discourse.

Racial implications of Africans' identity markers

In this section, we attempt to lay bare how colour, hair, accent and other physical identity markers expose black people to Otherness and inferiority within an interracial context. From the conceptual engagement on Otherness, the marked differences suggest inferiority and consequently make its bearers vulnerable to subordination and marginalisation in a racialised society.

Race or colour

In contemporary society, there are various reasons for migration across national and transnational borders. While diasporic mobility is geared towards foreign appeals or a better standard of living, nondiasporic mobility is often influenced by metropolitan attractions. However, the primary factor responsible for migration in the 21st century is the quest for economic survival (Flahaux & De Haas 2016). Owing to Africa's socio-economic crisis, Adichie captures Africans' perception of Western countries as the ideal space for fulfilling dreams, propelling Africans to a Western dream. In addition, Adichie offers significant insight into the existing

stereotyping of black migrants as subalterns in the USA, a place of racial convergence. Here in this article, the subalterns are black people and African economic migrants located racially, socially and economically outside the mainstream power blocs. The literary work *Americanah* vividly illustrates the negative perception of Africa and how its migrants are excluded from the mainstream by a socio-economic system that privileges whiteness. This issue is related to Puwar's contention in *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (2004) about the nonacceptance of the black identity in institutional somatic norms. Puwar (2004:8) further contends that 'certain types of bodies' ... are tacitly designated as being the "natural" occupants of particular spaces, with others marked out as "trespassers". This explicates the perception that black people are 'space invaders' in a racist environment defined by whiteness. Because of this, the black 'invisible bodies' do not feel at home, based on how they are being marginalised in spatial zones or institutions predominantly occupied by 'visible' white people. This is exemplified in the realities of Adichie's black characters in the West, whose lives are deeply troubled by racism.

When Ifemelu arrives in the USA, she is appalled at how her American dreams do not match her reality. She had felt that the USA would offer her the economic chances lacking in Nigeria. On the contrary, Ifemelu becomes aware of her blackness, racial profiling and marginalisation outside her country. In the USA, her unconcealable Africanness consequently exposes her to discrimination. From the foregoing, there is a striking difference in the perception of race at home and in the diaspora. The issue of race is a more pervasive part of life in the USA and the UK. However, it is not a reality in Nigeria; what exists in the Nigerian context is a subtle colour preference for a light-skinned complexion (Amodu et al. 2018). For instance, social attention is bestowed on a biracial or mixed race person, as exemplified in the characters of Ginika and Kosi. Ginika was the cynosure of beauty in high school, and Kosi enjoys the attention she gets because of her light complexion, as she is sometimes mistaken for biracial.

Adichie projects how disparity in complexion directly bars African transnational migrants from accessing social privileges. An instance where the politics of colour play out is the relegation of Auntie Uju in her medical profession. She recounts her experience to Ifemelu of how a patient displayed racial contempt during a consultation. Auntie Uju's white patient feels racially superior to her and as a result avoids her service. She cannot stand being managed by an African doctor whom she considers inferior and, by extension, incompetent. This signifies that the Othering of black immigrants constantly challenges their good living, societally and career-wise. For someone such as Auntie Uju, her professional status does not spare her from racial blows. Her patients evaluate her based on her colour rather than her expertise.

On the other hand, Ifemelu, a liminal migrant, experiences downward mobility, as her three years of university education in Nigeria are of no value in America. In fact,

Mwombeki advises her not to include her previous education in her résumé because 'American employers did not like lower-level employees to be too educated' (p. 139). This again portrays how career advancement for black people is marred by colour. Because the racialised environment favours the dominant colour as 'natural occupants' of some professional sectors, nonwhite people found in the same environment are presumably occupying an undesirable space. Consequently, blackness challenges their visibility and competence, which they constantly need to prove. Another scenario of Otherness in Auntie Uju's diasporic experiences occurs when she visits the public library and forgets to show the security guard the unreturned book in her handbag. The guard tells her, 'You people never do anything right' (p. 182). From this context, one may infer the generalised negative labelling meted out to Africans. The guard not only sees Auntie Uju as the offender but also profiles her entire race by deploying the subject 'you people'. Likewise, Eminike was once deprived of transportation service owing to his colour:

[...H]e had hailed one night, on Upper Street; from afar the cab light was on but as the cab approached him, the light went off, and he assumed the driver was not on duty. After the cab passed him by, he looked back idly and saw the cab light was back on and that, a little way up the street, it stopped for two white women. (Adichie 2013:275)

The narrator well describes Eminike's state of mind in the following lines: 'he was shaking, ... his hands trembling for a long time, a little frightened of his own feelings' (p. 275) because an unknown man had deprived him of his rights because of his blackness. His expression is one of overwhelming resentment and the feeling of colour consciousness. Another situation of negative stereotyping of Africans is when Elena, Ifemelu's roommate, warns her not to kill her dog with voodoo because it had eaten her bacon. Here, Adichie exposes the prevailing misrepresentation of Africa and Africans as a place or people with a deep obsession for fetish practices. From these instances in the novel, Adichie foregrounds that stereotypical portrayal of the black body. Racist hosts in the characters' community utilise seclusion, negative labelling and discrimination to weaken the social comfort of the black subjects, thereby reducing their self-esteem, values and cultural traditions as inferior (Mcman 2017).

Another glaring instance of Otherness is seen when Kimberly, Ifemelu's employer, requests a carpet cleaning service. When Ifemelu answers the door, the white cleaner is surprised to find a black woman as the homeowner. His reaction is that of confusion and hostility. The moment he realises Ifemelu is the nanny, he becomes comfortable and friendly. Ifemelu is astonished and hurt at the same time by this reaction. The cleaner does not expect a nonwhite migrant like Ifemelu to own a property. Ifemelu might be quite rich to own a property, but being nonwhite is enough to oppose her financial status. This incident paints a misconception that black people are a wretched race.

Similarly, Laura reinforces the depiction of Africa as a continent ravaged by diseases, poverty and starvation. She

links Ifemelu's relocation to hunger and poverty as she rhetorically questions, '... if she was eating all of this wonderful organic food in Nigeria, why would she come to the U.S.?' (p. 147). She further buttresses her stereotypical representation of Africans by displaying a beauty magazine with a white lady surrounded by malnourished black children. Here, depicting Africa as inferior may not necessarily be pertinent to historical differences; rather, the problem is how the difference is perceived and acted on, as shown in the above instances.

Moreover, Adichie encapsulates how racial inequality, boundaries and social criticism affect one's personal life: career, education, identity, relationships and marriage. Ifemelu's relationship with Curt is received by society and Curt's family as a defiant arrangement. Ifemelu could sense the social dissatisfaction first when she meets Curt's mother and later when she attends a party with Curt. In Ifemelu's opinion, an interracial relationship in a racialised society strains romantic connections. While both partners are good together in private, their relationship in public is continually met with sundry disapproval. Ifemelu sometimes conceals her emotions from Curt so that any altercation is not envisaged with a racial undertone. From this narrative, Adichie explicitly shows that racism and alienation affect even the most seemingly private human affairs, as Ifemelu sums up her observations on the relationship as it affects the subaltern.

Accent

The phenomenon of linguistic racism refers to discrimination and inequality based on an individual's use of language dialect, repertoire and speech (McKenny et al. 2006). While explicating the notion of 'linguistic racism', Dovchin (2020), in her article 'The psychological damages of linguistic racism and international students in Australia', identifies the dual traits of linguistic racism: ethnic accent bullying and linguistic stereotyping. Dovchin asserts that 'Linguistic stereotyping describes a situation where some certain persons from different ethnicity, nationality or race are prejudiced by accent'. This form of stereotyping captures Ifemelu's experience on her first day in the university. In Africa, a person's nationality is sometimes indicated through his accent, whereas in the USA, the accent is a major identity marker aside from skin tone. Inevitably, it becomes a major transgressing factor in Africans who have newly immigrated. According to Shuck (2004:196), there is a strong differentiation between native and non-native English speakers, especially in America, where non-native English speakers are often victims to 'Othering'. Shuck further states that Americans usually complain about the incomprehensible accents of immigrants and are indignant at their imperfect English. These assertions of both authors validate the impression of Ifemelu, judging from her experience on arrival in the USA. The first of numerous racial labels she experiences is based on her accent. On her first day at the University of Philadelphia, her encounter with Cristina, the white

receptionist, diminishes her confidence and leaves her humiliated:

She realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling.

'I speak English,' she said.

'I bet you do,' Cristina Tomas said. 'I just don't know how well.' (Adichie 2013:133)

Initially, she thinks Cristina suffers speech difficulty, perhaps her manner of communicating slowly. However, Ifemelu realises Cristina intentionally talks to her very slowly because she doubts or judges her fluency in English by her colour. Such non-native English speakers like Ifemelu 'are often "heard," "seen," or "imagined" speaking "bad" or "low proficient" English irrespective of their actual high-level in English', as Dovchin submits. The receptionist's use of the adjective 'well' in her response above justifies this. One may argue that Adichie utilises Cristina's characterisation to depict the notion of accent prestige, where native English speakers are rated higher, more competent and advantaged because of their impeccable accents. It acts as a cover for stereotypical judgement. Possibly, the receptionist could not have demeaned Ifemelu if her nationality were not accentuated with her 'foreign accent'. She consciously judges Ifemelu's proficiency as flawed and unconsciously 'inferioritises' her because she is African. Cristina's reaction results in low self-esteem for Ifemelu. She is no longer comfortable in her African accent that she had confidently used before she relocated.

Also, Halima's child encounters a similar situation in school as he is bullied by other black children who are already 'Americanised' through their accents. Like Ifemelu, Halima's son is sold out by his African accent and discriminated against by his peers. However, he is no longer victimised when his intonation sounds American. Moreover, the experience introduces these characters to the profound racism from the dominant culture and marks the premise for modifying their identity. For Ifemelu, she begins to practise an American accent immediately. In the light of these instances, Adichie gives prominence to how Otherness is traumatic for its victims. She underscores that linguistic racism or accent-based discrimination (arguably, a trait of Otherness) is a subtle way of hierarchising social groups. It often instigates inferiority complexes, leading to social withdrawal, a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, fear and anxiety.

Hair

The politics of African hair in the USA have been criticised by various scholars, including Cooper (1971:181), who emphasises how hair in American society is an 'easily controlled variable that can denote status, set fashion, or serve as a badge'. Cooper further remarks that 'hair is additionally one of the most important physical features in racial classification, further proving its political (and often racist) implications'. Hair is not only a significant motif in the

novel but symbolic in the way Adichie depicts the Othering of the black body and unravels the politics of colour. The fact that *Americanah* opens with the protagonist's intention to braid her hair outside of Preston points out that the hair issue is beyond the surface of the story. The narrator describes how the protagonist could not get her hair braided in Preston but the suburban part of Trenton. This shows segregation in the residential area dominated by white people. The Preston community apparently presents salon services unfriendly to nonwhite people. Hence, Ifemelu needs to travel to Trenton to have her hair braided.

Back in Nigeria, Ifemelu's Afro is never a concern for her. On the contrary, it becomes a significant symbol of discrimination for her as employment is concerned. In Adichie's USA, hair becomes a professional standard for hiring and a yardstick for success. It appears as though a norm is established which gives an edge to women with straightened hair over the ones with braids or kinky hair. Aunty Uju and Ruth are already aware of the politics surrounding hair and the American labour market, and they do not hesitate to inform Ifemelu in preparing her for her job interview. Choicelessly, Ifemelu straightens her hair, but she later re-embraces her kinky hair before she returns to Nigeria, thus putting an end to the beauty standard imposed on her by Western society. The transition of black women from a relaxed or straight hairstyle to the embrace of their natural hair texture is an act of shedding Eurocentric values and moving towards the centring of an Afrocentric identity with hair as a defining feature (Asante 2003).

From the analysis in this section, some other members of minority groups in Adichie's *Americanah* do also experience racial discrimination; however, they do not experience it as much as black people (p. 205).

Transgressing the *Othered* identity

With a view to understanding how African migrants respond to the pressures of racism and scale hurdles of other migration-related crises, we examine in this section the transforming or transgressing of the identity perceived as the 'Othered', which is a significant stride for integration.

As African transnational migrants become conscious of their colour outside the continent, they begin to recognise themselves in new ways through the eyes of each society. For this reason, adapting and conforming to Western standards become essential to thrive in a racialised environment. This idea of identity transformation resonates with Puwar's argument that an Othered identity (in this case, the transgressive body) is forced to de-Africanise his or her identity, 'whitewashing' his or her 'bodily gestures, social interests and value systems' (Puwar 2004:150) in order to integrate and progress, precisely as Bhabha (1994) posits in his concepts of hybridity and mimicry. According to Bhabha (1994), we as humans:

[F]ind ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of differences and Identity,

past and present, side and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direct in the beyond. (p. 1)

We interpret this to mean that when an émigré, a nonwhite person, traverses an unaccustomed spatial or cultural border, colour consciousness and displacement are inevitable. He or she undergoes a process of compromise and decision, merging and blending the existing culture and identity with that of the host community. This summarises Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity', which is the creation of a new transcultural identity within the new society in the diaspora. Based on the racial discrimination that Ifemelu and other Adichie's diasporic characters experience, the writer echoes transgressing or managing multiple shifts of identity as a requisite for African black people to access equal economic opportunities to white people. This is realised through the straightening of hair, change in accent, body size, identity theft, impersonation and deceptive marriage.

Accent switch and hair modification

Ifemelu's encounter with Cristina, the college receptionist, propels her to switch her accent. She feels humiliated that Cristina Tomas, who thinks her English is not good enough, subdues her identity. Faced with this, she immediately picks up an American accent to avoid a future reoccurrence of the incident (p. 134). This situation demonstrates how people are compelled to give up their identity through accent. Later in the salon, Ifemelu receives a compliment on her intonation, which gives her a double-edged feeling of social satisfaction and betrayal. She feels her American accent has elevated her status but does not complement her African roots. Likewise, Aunty Uju adapts her name to suit American diction in a phone call: 'Yes, this is Uju'. She pronounces it you-joo instead of oo-joo (p. 104). When she goes to the store with her son, Dike, she again switches her accent as she tells him to put back an item she is not willing to pay for:

'Dike, put it back', Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. Pooh-reet-back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. (Adichie 2013:108)

As cited by Baratta (2016), Foulkes and Docherty note that the deliberate modification of accent is for individuals to 'fit in'. Aunty Uju is intentional not only about feigning her intonation as a means of complying with foreignness but thriving in an accent-prejudiced society. She unapologetically switches accents in the presence of white people to earn respect and acceptance and reduce the Otherness elicited by her race. The creation of her new persona is influenced by the racial injustice she experiences. It is initially surprising to her cousin Ifemelu how she effortlessly subdues her authentic self in the face of racism.

In the same way, Aunty Uju also feels an acquired accent will at least give her son a social resemblance to American

children. Even though he looks different, speaking like them will buy him integration. Hence, she makes sure Dike speaks with an American accent. This is further seen in how she rebukes Ifemelu for communicating with Dike in Igbo (p. 109). Through this deliberate act, Auntie Uju denies Dike his African heritage. The overwhelming situation consequently results in Dike attempting murder because he is faced with a complicated identity, lost between 'unknown Africa' and (unwanted in) America.

Also, Ifemelu beautifully digs at how the African braiders switch accents in trying their best to succeed in the USA (p. 9). Through them, she presents a group of immigrants who are not educated enough to converse fluently in English but try to imitate an American intonation just to enjoy the visibility or favoured attention it brings. From the foregoing, one may infer that black people, particularly Africans, are intentional about Americanising their speech pattern for acceptance in a marginalised society because a sound American accent unbars social limits.

As stated earlier, hair contributes to the racial Othering of the black female migrant characters in *Americanah*. Ifemelu, Ruth and Auntie Uju alter the appearance of their natural hair in response to discrimination towards black people's hair. As seen in conversations between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu and Ruth too, hair is a standard for employability in America. Auntie Uju tells Ifemelu; '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' (p. 119). In another instance where Ifemelu is presented with a job opportunity, Ruth reiterates the same advice; 'Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get this job' (p. 202). With pain from a burnt scalp, Ifemelu, like her aunt Uju, involuntarily conforms to the public's aesthetic standard by relaxing her kinky hair, straightening it to look like white hair. She needs to break free from the obstacle depriving her of being employed, which is her natural hair:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek ... 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. (Adichie 2013:203)

Ifemelu suddenly becomes aware of the consequences of her action. Not only does she feel sad about complying with a standard of beauty that centres on whiteness, but she also perceives that a sense of her identity is gone with it, which is a price she had to pay to gain social inclusion. The hairstylist tries to reassure her and make her comfortable in her new look when she equates her hair to white people's (p. 203). The woman indirectly associates straightened hair like Caucasians' with the elegance to which every woman must aspire, to mirror the misleading perception of some black women, just as Byrd and Tharps (2014) opine that black women with long and straight hair

received social elevation for possessing 'good hair'. This is because having a Eurocentric look increases a person's social acceptance in a society that elevates 'whiteness' and conceptualises 'blackness' as inferior and wrong (see Dasi 2019). Relating to the perspective of Byrd and Tharps, Ifemelu and the other women are pressured into assimilating Western standards of beauty, as the look and texture of their hair separate them from others. For these characters, their hair put them at risk of not getting a job despite being qualified.

Body size

Besides hair, body sizing is another beauty standard in America, to which Ifemelu is compelled to transform. When she meets Ginika, her childhood friend, in Philadelphia, she is surprised at how much weight she has lost. Ginika sees the chance to enlighten her on the conception of body size in Nigeria in contrast to the USA. Ginika tells Ifemelu:

'Americans say "thin." Here "thin" is a good word.' In Nigeria, if 'you lost weight it means something bad, but here somebody tells you that you lost weight and you say thank you ... Do you know I started losing weight almost as soon as I came? I was even close to anorexia'. (Adichie 2013:124)

From this, one may deduce that Ginika's body transformation to satisfy the American concept of body size is deliberately achieved by becoming anorexic. In African culture, fatness connotes comfortable living, whereas, in Western culture, it is the opposite. 'Thin' is the desirable body size that translates to 'sexy' in Americans' beauty milieu. From this awareness, Ifemelu ensures resizing her body to achieve the desirable American body.

Impersonation

Further to the tactics for adaptation and sustenance for a transgressive body is impersonation. Adichie explores impersonation or identity theft as a desperate means of sustenance for transnational migrants through characters such as Ifemelu, Obinze, Iloba and Vincent. Starting with the protagonist, her experience with the coach signifies the juncture for giving up her African identity to which she has been clinging. For her to circumvent a racialised society, she needs to modify her identity. Firstly, Auntie Uju introduces Ifemelu to identity theft to secure a job, as her visa restricts her employability. Secondly, she provides Ifemelu with a social security card and driver's licence owned by Ngozi Okonkwo (p. 148). Through this, Ifemelu's identity becomes faded and altered as she pretends to be someone else. This impersonation costs her social visibility and self-worth as she constantly struggles to maintain her switched identity. During a job interview, she forgets to answer as Ngozi, which raises suspicion, thus intensifying a reclaiming of her identity. Hence, when she gets her credit card embossed in her name, she becomes excited. Her name on the card is synonymous with regaining her identity, which generates a sense of satisfaction (p. 162).

Obinze faces the same predicament in England. Getting a job as a means of sustenance is the most crucial thing for a migrant. Sadly, despite Obinze's education and skills, it is difficult for him to secure a job. To deal with this problem and work as a legal migrant, he impersonates Vincent and agrees to pay him monthly while working with his social security card. Obinze considers his fraudulent act a means to survive; meanwhile, Vincent sees it as normal business and a way to exploit people who have no choice, like Obinze. With Vincent's documents, Obinze finds employment. Though some jobs are humiliating, Obinze is not bothered because he can pay his bills. In describing this experience, the narrative voice again emphasises a partial loss of identity and social invisibility. Moreover, there is a kind of enslavement where an undocumented migrant is being held to ransom by the person he is impersonating. Vincent demands a pay increase, and when Obinze declines, he threatens to sell him out to his employer. Obinze declines Vincent's request because he feels his economic right is being abused. The next day, Roy, Obinze's boss, receives an anonymous call, prompting him to question Obinze's migrant status and identity. He requests Obinze's documents to verify the truth, and Obinze promises to present these. However, he resigns from his job the next day for fear of being exposed. Again, Obinze becomes jobless and returns to finding a permanent solution to become legal. This leads to his next move of getting married to a British citizen to legalise his stay. From these situations, Adichie again accentuates the plights of undocumented black migrants as individuals who constantly live in fear and face instability, both physically and emotionally.

Deceptive marriage

In a related manner, Adichie reveals that the 'de-Otherising' and stability of African immigrants in the West are likely ensured through a 'sham' or deceptive marriage. Adichie captures marital fraud stemming from migration in her major characters such as Ifemelu and Obinze and minor characters such as Nicholas, Emenike, Okoli Okafor and Aisha. At some point, each character mentioned engages in a deceitful relationship or marital affair where they marry or attempt to marry a British or American citizen to gain a permanent residency permit. The permanent residency is portrayed as a tool to 'de-Otherise' themselves and their migrancy through an upgrade to citizenship. To begin with, Aisha, the Senegalese hair braider, simultaneously dates two Nigerian men with green cards in the hope that her marriage to either of them will help her gain permanent residency. Hence, she pleads with Ifemelu to persuade one of her boyfriends, Chijioke, to marry her. She believes the tribal bond as Igbos will strengthen Chijioke's conviction and help her achieve her desire. Even though Ifemelu can relate to this situation or reality, she withstands Aisha's persuasion and equates it with craziness.

Similarly, Ifemelu's relationship with Curt is premised on accessing privileges through his status. At their first meeting

in Kimberly's house, the narrative voice describes Curt as "'a rich white guy from Potomac" with a mother also rich, privileged, and white American' (p. 192), an attractive description that entices Ifemelu. Ifemelu is aware of their racial incompatibility, ingrained by a racialised society, yet she pretends to be in love so as to leverage the relationship that caters to her needs. The narrative voice echoes Ifemelu's thoughts thus:

With Curt, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth ... She went hiking with him, kayaking, camping near his family's vacation home, all things she would never have imagined herself doing before. She was lighter and leaner; she was Curt's Girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favourite, flattering dress. (Adichie 2013:196)

The narrator uses a simile to describe Ifemelu's hypocrisy in her relationship. For Ifemelu, being Curt's girlfriend is a performance that earns her a good job, American citizenship, Preston fellowship and an overall transformation in social status. Hence, it is less surprising that after Ifemelu has achieved her set targets, she cheats on Curt and easily ends the relationship.

Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze is not lucky enough to have a rosy process of legal documentation. When his visa expires, he recalls that Nicholas, his university friend who migrated to England, once told him:

[I]f you come to England with a visa that does not allow you to work ... the first thing to look for is not food or water, it is an NI [*National Insurance*] number so you can work ... Marry an EU [*European Union*] citizen and get your papers. (Adichie 2013:239)

This prompts him and Iloba to contact some Angolans in the business of sham marriages, who assure him a means of legal residency through it (p. 228). After making a payment of £2 000, Obinze is introduced to his supposed fiancée, Cleotide, a British citizen. On the wedding day, while awaiting his marriage to Cleotide, Obinze is regrettably apprehended for visa expiration and deported to Nigeria. Before his arrest at the venue, Obinze notices the name of his classmate, Okoli Okafor, on the notice board for intended marriages. He instantly comprehends Okoli's marriage as 'a marriage for papers' (p. 232). He can relate to this as he identifies with the intention behind marriage based on deception.

Obinze's description of Emenike's marriage also matches this reality. In the context of African morality, if a man marries a woman who is 'old enough to be his mother' (p. 248), his marriage could be unacceptable, and he could be suspected of ulterior motives. This reality is mirrored in Emenike, married to a white American lady who 'is old enough to be his mother and doesn't talk to ordinary people anymore' (p. 248). From Obinze's observation, the age disparity between Emenike and his wife is proof that he married basically for spousal immigration benefits. The effect of

Emenike's marital choice is a subdued persona. 'In the harsh glare of life abroad', he becomes withdrawn from his old associates, whom he now sees as 'ordinary' in a ridiculous attempt to preserve his acquired status. There is an interesting link between the sham marriage pattern of the three characters: Ifemelu, Obinze and Emenike. Why are they deliberate in choosing white partners to achieve their permanent residency dream? Nonetheless, their transgressing to visibility lies in their American and British citizenship. It is the common denominator between them: 'the Othered' and the dominant group. It helps them to still subtly access white privileges, as later demonstrated in Ifemelu and Emenike's career success.

Moreover, Obinze and Ifemelu's employment experiences clarify the migration tussles both documented and undocumented African diasporic subjects experience while securing covering in racist zones. In the process, they become socially silenced, conflicted in identity, subjected to choiceless exploitation and humiliating jobs. All these characters who are unable to obtain regular permits desperately resort to illegal solutions to make ends meet. For instance, Aisha's desperation to marry Chijioke is well understood when it is explained that she could not attend her father's burial because she had no 'papers'. It describes a scenario where the diasporic subject cannot voluntarily return to her homeland for critical purposes because she has breached immigration rules, thereby stranding herself. Here, we see how these instances explain the transformation of the discriminated body into a transgressive body through the modification of identity.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that impersonation is responsible for identity conflict in both characters (Ifemelu and Obinze). Both characters often struggle to manage their real identities alongside their fake identities. The moment they let go of the fake names, their individuality is restored. In addition, Adichie's characters are the window through which she examines cultural integration and the plight of documented and undocumented immigrants in diverse Western spaces that seem to be racially encompassing but are the opposite in reality. It is ironic for black people to live in a free state such as the USA yet be confined by the shackles of racism dictated by their blackness.

Conclusion

Adichie foregrounds the imagining of black people and African transnational immigrants as transgressive bodies in the West, as well as their concerns regarding their colour. The negative perception of their identity, marked by their physical attributes and migrant status, undoubtedly challenges their existence. Therefore, given that blackness often constitutes a setback, this article reveals that if one wishes to be fully integrated into a racialised society, it is often difficult to retain one's original identity as black without a level of compromise. This article therefore highlights the significance of renegotiating and transforming identity through transgression and cultural hybridity. In

the light of this, there is an intersection between Otherness, transgression and hybridity, which provides more insights into engaging racial issues. In the process of modifying the 'Othered' identity for integration, the real identity becomes altered or perhaps silenced, as evinced in Adichie's diasporic characters.

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