



Epitome : International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN : 2395-6968

Diasporic Dialogues and Migration in the 21st Century in Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Americanah*



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ABSTRACT

*The 21st century has witnessed an upcurve in migration. Castle Hein De Haas and Mark J. Miller astutely describe the situation in this phrase as "The Age of Migration." The latter has heightened as a result of trends in social networks of family and friends and fluidity in communication technology. This paper seeks to examine the discourses of migrants from Nigeria to Britain and America in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. How they navigate and integrate the western society and still maintain links with their family members and friends at home is the core of this paper. With special emphasis on migration theory especially the concept of network, this paper will depict how Nigerians*

migrate to western countries and how it is beneficial to them. The financial and social capital they acquire positively affect them and their countries of origin. However, it has also turned out to be a reconfiguration of their cultural identities. This paper will inform readers and scholars on diasporic dialogues in the 21st century through what the characters say and do in their migrant spaces, and how they communicate with their countries of origin. The paper concludes that in as much as migration is advantageous to the immigrants, it causes some migrants to alter some of their cultural aspects in a bid to alleviate hardship.

KEYWORDS

Diasporic Dialogues, migration, cultural identity, hardship, network

RESEARCH PAPER

Limited opportunities in the social and economic domains in most African countries have led to the upsurge in migration of Africans in general and especially Nigerians to Europe and America as portrayed by Adichie in *Americanah*. Witamalarata in “International Migration and Migration Theories upholds that “There is a global tendency for people of developing countries to move to developed countries in search of comfortable lives” (2017:15) The quest to assuage migrants’ economic and social want have spurred them to change their cultural identities in Europe and America while maintaining ties with their families in their countries of origin. It is against this backdrop that the discourses of migrants in western spaces in the 21st century will be examined in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In order to better understand how diasporic dialogues inform migration in this text, it will be expedient to define terms like *diasporic dialogues*, *migration*, *cultural identity*, *network* and *hardship*.

According to the *online encyclopaedia*, the word diaspora (noun) means a “scattered or dispersed population whose origin lies in separate geographic locale.” The term was used to describe the forced displacement of certain people but “diaspora is now generally used to describe those who identify with homeland but live outside it. The second meaning is most appropriate in this paper since it will examine the conversation of migrants in Europe and American in the 21st century and how they relate to their countries of origin. The African Union’s definition is more specific. It defines “diaspora” as “peoples of African descent and heritage living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship, and who remain committed to contribute to the development of the continent.” Diasporic is the adjective from “diaspora” and it describes the noun dialogue. *The Meriam Webster Dictionary* defines dialogue as “a written composition in which two or more characters are represented as conversing. It can also mean a conversation between two or more persons”. In this work, diasporic dialogue will simply mean the conversation of immigrants and attitudes in their migrant spaces and how they communicate economically, socially with the countries of birth as portrayed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah*.

The International Organisation for Migration defines “Migration” as “the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a state.” This paper is concerned with Africans especially Nigerians who move to Europe and American but still have links through remittances, phone calls and emails with their loved ones. Even though they do everything within their means to maintain these links, they agonise as they try to deal with constant hardship. Hardship means difficulty, trouble or hard times. As this paper depicts, most immigrants face a lot of hardship to integrate the western society socially and economically. It is usually in their endeavour to overcome hardship that they relegate their cultural identity- the feeling of belonging to a group (-Africa, Nigeria) to the background. In a different vein, the network of family and friends usually help these immigrants to alleviate their hardships.

From the theoretical perspective, the theory of migration will be utilized to reveal how migration has become rampant in the 21st century. The theory of migration is not unified as it deals with varied migration processes. It is in this perspective that Rusell King in “Theories and Typologies of Migration” argues that “despite the relatively long tradition of research on migration, there is no single theory that captures the full complexity of migration, and nor will there ever be. (2015:24) Migration is diverse and its processes are changing and expecting a unified theory sooner or later is far-fetched.

Migration has a social undertone which is anchored on social networks. In as much as African yearn to change their social and economic status, not all of them can do so as a result of lack of network of family members and friends in the diaspora. The latter is an important

factor in triggering mass migration. Joaquin Arango in “Explaining Migration: a Critical View” states that migration network is a “set of interpersonal ties that connects migrants with relatives, friends or fellow countrymen at home who convey information, provide financial backups, and facilitate employment opportunities and accommodation in various ways.” (2000:283) Network plays an essential part in movement across international borders. David Scott Fitzgerald in “The Sociology of International Migration” pays credence to the above view as he upholds that “Social networks allow someone living in a village thousands of kilometers from the destination to be transplanted within a matter of days to find lodging, employment, information about how to navigate in a new country.” (2015:121) These networks lessen the burden prospective emigrants and immigrants would have had without the assistance of them.

Joaquin Arango who is a migration scholar and who is critical of the fragmented nature of migration theory however upholds the importance of network. He avers in *Theories of International Migration* that “The importance of networks for migration can hardly be overstated [...] they rank amongst the most important explanatory factors for migration.” (2004:28) In the same vein, Charles Tilly avers that what orchestrates movement of people is not just the people themselves but their networks. He puts it in these words “It is not people who migrate but networks.” (1990: 79) Network plays a key role as I reveal in this work. Social network is vital in spurring prospective migrants to leave their hellish environment to travel to western countries to look for better paying jobs, to join their family members and to study. Massey et al. in *World in Motion* pays credence to the essential role social network plays in migration. They point that:

Migrant networks are a set of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, non-migrants and former migrants in webs of kinship, friendship and shared origin. They can be considered as a form of social capital stretched across migrant space, and therefore facilitate the likelihood of international movement because they provide information which lowers cost and risks of migration. (1998:42-43)

Migration networks are essential not only in providing vital information to prospective emigrants, but they also help in reducing the travel related expenses for the aspiring emigrants and even when they successfully reach the host countries. While the immigrants are in the host countries, as I indicate, these networks still help the immigrants to have at least temporary accommodation upon arrival and job opportunities. These networks are in an ascending order especially nowadays as a result of the globalized nature of the globe. The world has become a ‘global village’ through technological development, and this explains why the world is witnessing an unprecedented upsurge in this mobility making its impact to be greatly felt by all and sundry. This idea is corroborated by Carmen Gebhard in an article published in *International Relation* titled “One World, Many Actors” in which he states that “International aviation and the rapid spread of information technologies has further increased the mobility and the rate at which interactions occur across and beyond borders.” (2017:44) Information technologies and facilitated means of travelling have not only propelled movement of people and making a great impact in the lives of many societies but it has changed the subtleties even in the affairs relating to migration. Although technological advancement in information and communication are building blocks for these social networks since they provide information and sometimes job opportunities to prospective emigrants still in their countries of origin and in the migrant spaces, they can sometime turn out to be sources of disappointment and exploitation. Even though networks are impactful, they have become what Samers in *Migration* calls “dark side” (2010:87-93).

Adichie presents a society in *Americanah* crushed by the socio-economic and political dilemma. The youths and adults are uncertain about their future. In this regard, they adopt survival strategies to overcome the socio-economic and political mash in which their societies are submerged in. Socially, the situation is so appalling that children who are normally supposed to be schooling are on the streets begging for bread. Those who are a bit fortunate get involved in child labour. Hawking on the streets becomes a way out to their financial want. Adichie portrays a society in *Americanah* that is badly hit socially and economically given that children whose parents can afford to send them to school cannot be educated due to numerous strikes in the university. Chioma, one of the characters in this novel is at home because of several frequent strikes which she testifies that lecturers “are on strike yet again.” (2013:26) No university lecturer can enjoy working on an empty stomach. The frequent strikes are ways of telling the government authorities that the lecturers are hungry. However, the government has given a deaf ear to their plea thus deteriorating the educational sector. A country that neglects the education of its citizens is a country that is preparing a bleak future for them. Citizens in such a country are full of uncertainties. Even those of the affluent class are not exempted from this economic and social insecurity. Chief humorously sustains this idea while singing “No one knows tomorrow! To-morrow! No one knows tomorrow!” (2013:30) Though Chief is a wealthy man, he knows that because half of the country’s future is bleak even those of the elite class are not free from this financial and social insecurity. The rich like Chief in their dazzlingly glory are not spared from life’s insecurity especially in a country like Nigeria where almost nothing works. Chief goes further to sustain his view by giving an illustration of some big bankers who in Abacha’s reign thought they will be rich forever, but their business crumbled and all became paupers. The message in Chief’s song is a warning to all and even the elite class is not spared from this caution. He continues to sustain this fact when he says, “Everybody is hungry in this country, even the rich men are hungry but nobody is honest.” (2013:31) Where uncertainties and hunger reign, honesty is a luxury because the hungry devise all types of unorthodox strategies to have their daily bread. The unpredictable condition in this African country has become a breeding ground for dishonest citizens and emigration. The constant strikes and poverty spur many youths to leave African countries. This situation has led to the upsurge in this trend. This idea tallies with that of Eunice Ngongkum in “Interrogating Transnationalism, Home and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around your Neck*, an article published in *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences* in which she states that “In Africa [...] the popular conviction is that the continent has very little to offer in terms of economic social and intellectual benefits and so many of its citizens increasingly migrate to seek better livelihoods abroad in Europe and the United States of America.” (2017: 52) In this regard, many of those who migrate to western countries are economic migrants since their primary objective is to have better lives abroad.

An epitome of an economic migrant is Emenike in Adichie’s *Americanah*. He is one of such migrants who left Nigeria to seek for wellbeing in Europe. He used to lie of having come from a rich family background. His classmates only discovered the truth when his father came one day to school “his body bowed in humility that poverty had forced on him. All the boys laughed after they discovered that he was really Emenike’s father.” (305) Humiliation is a detrimental feeling and when is not well handled it can either break or make the victim. Emenike in Nigeria understands the impact of growing up in a family limited in material wellbeing and living in a country whose future is bleak. Having understood this fact and determined to succeed, migration becomes the solution to these hurdles. Though from a humble background, Emenike emigrates to London and becomes successful. As soon as he goes to London he sends “news only of progress: his postgraduate work completed, his job at the housing authority, his marriage to an Englishwoman who was a solicitor in the city.”

(306) Migration changes some people's lives positively. Emenike's progress and success in England is a demonstration that people who legally travel to the western world are likely to succeed than those who stay back in their countries of origin.

In the same vein, Philip Martin in "Economic Aspects of Migration" avers that "Many immigrants especially those with low level of education struggle to achieve higher earnings in the (western) labor market. They are better off in the US than they would have been if they had stayed in their countries of origin, and their children may have more opportunities in the US." (2015:105) Emenike's success story is an indication that migration positively alters the lives of immigrants given that his status has ameliorated. His success story is an encouragement and a lesson to African youths who want to travel to Europe by all cost. Legally travelling to the west can be beneficial to them and their families back home. Those who live in Europe without papers live in fear and this condition can lead to other health issues like depression. The Emenike in England and the one in Nigeria are two varied persons. It is also an indication that one can come out from their dire condition if one works hard and legally travels to the west, a land of tremendous opportunities.

In the same vein, Maximilian Feldner in *Narrating the New African Diaspora* avers that "[...] the United States (has) the reputation of being a land of opportunity [...] which is bolstered by the American Dream, its rags-to riches narratives and everybody-can -make-it-here beliefs" (2019:110). Going to Europe or America is the best choice for most Africans especially those from moderate backgrounds like Emenike. He has left poverty to wealth and this alteration of status is equally facilitated by his union with his white woman. Having a white lady as a wife shows that he is fully integrated socially and economically in Europe and he can now enjoy the proceeds of such a union. Martin in the "Economic Aspects of Migration" notes that "Migration means change. Migrants who move, change residence, jobs and often outlooks." (2015: 110) It is no surprise that Emenike "has become posh" given that he is successful as a result of migrating. The proceeds of migration have enabled him to completed his studies, to have a white wife and a productive job.

One of the factors that is fuelling migration in the 21st century is the nexus of friends and family members as I earlier mentioned. Aunty Uju and Ginika, characters in Adichie's novel encourage Ifemelu, the protagonist of this novel to migrate. "Ginika, who had just graduated from college, applied to schools on her behalf, calling to say, "I just wanted you to know I'm focusing on the Philadelphia area because I went here." (122) One realises that the will to move out of one's country is sometimes encouraged by friends.

For instance, Ifemelu's scholarship application and the state she will live in are facilitated through her ties in America. Since she is not versed with the different states, we are told that to her "America was America." This signifies that without this network, she would have gone through stress and she might not have succeeded in travelling legally to the US. Having networks is therefore a prerequisite for successfully emigrating. This idea tallies with what Massey et al. in "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal" when they note that "networks can become self-perpetrating to migration because each act of migration itself creates the social structure needed to sustain it. Every new migrant reduces the costs of subsequent migration for a set of friends and relatives, and some of these people are thereby induced to migrate which further expands the set of people abroad." (1993:449) As this quote illustrates, these social networks facilitate emigration given that immigrants can always encourage their loved ones to leave their countries of origin to Europe or America. Such ties continue to encourage the influx of people in the west and most of them like Ifemelu just want to leave their home countries to the western world and they do not bother about the country abroad because the conditions laid down in their countries give little or no room to excel socially and economically.

Obinze, like Aunt Uju and Ginika equally inspires Ifemelu to leave for America. His encouragement is about studies. Because in Nigeria, she had been studying a field she does not like but she wants to finish with it before leaving for America. So, going to America means she will choose the field of studies she desires and that is why Obinze tells her “Ifem, no, you should go. Besides, you don’t even like geology. You can study something else in America.” (123) She would have loved to study another field in America but she cannot because “the scholarship is partial” and she will be unable to finish the payment. To lay emphasis on the importance why she has to go to America, Obinze tells her “You can do work-study at school. You’ll find a way. Seventy-five percent off your tuition is a big deal.” (123) America gives legal immigrants the possibility to work and study. This means that America is a place of tremendous opportunities and family members and friends can only encourage their loved ones to leave their countries where they are little or almost no job opportunities for certified graduates. That is why even seasoned intellectuals in Nigeria do encourage African creative force to leave for the west.

One of such professors is Obinze’s mother who acknowledges that “Nigeria is chasing away its best resources.” (123) A statement coming from such a woman of her calibre goes a long way to show that the country is pushing its best brains out of the country because she does not have the means to absorb them into the public service. For this reason, these citizens should be allowed to look for greener pastures in the west. In the latter, they are sure of having jobs and operating their businesses even though at times it is difficult. This is sustained by Kelsey, a white woman in Joy Saloon who tells Mariama “But you couldn’t even have this business back in your country, right? Isn’t it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and now your kids can have a better life?” (232) Mariama’s life in Africa and her present life in America are completely different. She had no business opportunity in Africa and by implication her life and that of her children was bleak. Coming to America has transformed her life and her children have a possibility of bright future. Thus, immigrants like her, have no right to complain because they were in dire conditions in their home countries. To this American white lady, immigrants doing businesses in the US should rather be grateful of being given that opportunity to do them in America.

Although migration is profitable to immigrants and their families and friends back home, it derogatively alters their cultural identity as they struggle to overcome hardship. Aunt Uju is obliged to take off her braids and relax her hair before her interview. Aunt Uju says “Kemi told me I shouldn’t take braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional” Ifemelu is stunned again with her changed views and she replies “I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do in order to succeed.” (146) Structural assimilation is one of the building blocks of social and economic integration. For Aunt Uju to boast of economic security, she has to dance to the tune of American cultural demands. One of them is taking off her nappy hair. Nonetheless, Ifem sees this change of demeanour as weakness and feels that the economic hardship has distorted Aunt Uju’s mind in America. She has become feeble so much that even the things she used to value have become less essential. The deprivation has almost turned her to a slave and has made Ifemelu to think that Aunt Uju “had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. (147)

From Aunt Uju’s attitude, one deduces that she is almost venerating America given that she follows everything she has been told about being and succeeding in the U.S. A up to the point of relegating her own identity to the background. Aunt Uju’s character has changed considerably and unfavourably. She is now shabby and underlooks things. Ifem says “There was something different about her.” The alteration in her ways is so heightened that the pronunciation of her name has equally changed. She now pronounces her name “you-joo instead of oo-joo.” (128) The saying that “when in Rome do like the Romans” is vividly

portrayed in Auntie Uju's actions and attitude. But this alteration of behaviour affects immigrants' identity like Auntie Uju who to some extent is forced to discard certain specificity of themselves to suit the requirements of the new environment.

Auntie Uju does not want this change to remain within her but she also teaches her son to sound American to impress whites. The fact that she uses even the American accent to her son is an indication that she wants her son to adopt the superior culture and not the African inferior one. She tells Dike "Pooh-reet back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing." (133) Africans in America denigrate their culture which is their identity so as to behave like whites. Their effort to look and sound like whites is what Homi Bhabha calls in the *Location of Culture* "almost but never the same." Refusing to allow Ifemelu speak Igbo to her son in America, Auntie Uju is indirectly saying my son is not African thus he should not be taught an inferior culture. For instance, she says "Please don't speak Igbo to him [...] This is America. It is different." (134) It is pathetic to realise that many parents have denied inculcating their cultural norms in their children. They have become aliens to their own cultural practices. She represents most immigrants who could not in their wildest dream imagine that they will reach the western world. Having reached the land where milk and honey is supposed to naturally flow, they are stricken with this hard reality-hardship.

Ifemelu, the heroine in Adichie's *Americanah* thought she could maintain her cultural identity in America, but she, too soon discovers that what she condemned in her aunt is exactly the attitude she is forced to adopt in order to have a job. Ruth, who is an old immigrant, advises Ifem to "lose her braids and straighten her hair" before going for a job interview. She is forced to follow Ruth's advice. However, by accepting to lose her identity for a strange one, she implicitly acknowledges a foreign culture. After relaxing her hair, the hairdresser says "Just a little burn, the hairdresser said. But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (251) For centuries Africans were schooled to believe in white supremacy and this belief has deformed their mindsets so much such that adopting the white culture is synonymous to beauty. Nevertheless, by trying to adopt foreign identities most Africans go through a lot of burns and pains. Ifemelu is flabbergasted to take on a new self that is unfamiliar to her. We are told that her "verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the saloon 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." (251) By using 'burning' to describe the process of relaxing hair and 'organic' is not erroneous on the part of the writer but it is an indication that destroying our true identities to take on foreign ones is dangerous. Keeping one's 'organic' self is preserving not only one's psychological being but one's physical health. The fact that Ifemelu feels a sense of loss after having relaxed her hair is because she knows deep within her that she has lost something precious and gorgeous. Her boyfriend who is white is even more surprised why somebody will get rid of their 'organic' self to adopt an artificial one. He is horrified by such behaviour and exclaims "Oh my God" [...] "Oh my God" [...] "Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided. When you took out the braids the last time and just kind of let it be? It was even more gorgeous, so full and cool [...] It's fucking *wrong* that you have to do this." (252) Curt is one of the few whites who accepts Africans the way they are. Today, immigrants want to be accepted by whites because they do not want to be insulted and they wish to be employed. The fact that they are vulnerable and need to overcome this vulnerability, they are compelled to dance to the master's tune. It is an issue if a black immigrant refuses to adopt white's behaviour, but it is natural for a white not to bow to the African culture. This is sustained by Auntie Uju's remark. She says "If they are shabby, it's not a problem, but if we are, it is another thing." (267)

Not only has Ifemelu relaxed her hair, but she has also equally changed her manner of cladding. Ifemelu's dressing has changed up to the point where an Ethiopian taxi driver tells her "You don't look African at all [...] Because your blouse is too tight" and he later advises her to be careful. "I thought you were from Trinidad or one of those places [...] You have to be very careful, or America will corrupt you." (255) Upon arrival, several immigrants try to keep their African identity but sooner or later, they realize it is an uphill task to be African all round. In their difficulty to adapt and make ends meet, they find themselves being contaminated by western lifestyles. At the beginning, Ifemelu had been quick in criticising Auntie Uju but she has equally discovered that life in America is not easy.

Children too, are affected by this brutal cultural change. Halima says her son is mercilessly beaten in school because of his African accent. She says "When I came here with my son they beat him in school because of African accent. In Newark. If you see my son's face? Purple like onion. They beat, beat, beat him [...] Now accent go and no problems." (230) Being in America is synonymous to losing one's identity. The fact that Halima's child is beaten for his accent to be changed shows that the obliteration of blacks' identity starts when they are young.

Life is not easy abroad as most African feel and think. It changes people's character and way of perceiving things. Nicholas who used to be lively and much admired by other girls in Nsukka –Nigeria has become restrained because of the difficult life in Britain. His wife, Ojiugo sustains this when she says "But this country is not easy" she goes further to say that "I got my papers because I did postgraduate school here [...]" (297) The "harsh glare of life abroad" makes friends and "relatives to become unreliable, even hostile versions of their former selves" (307)

Even though, the social conditions in Britain are not easy for all the immigrants some still endeavour to maintain African solidarity by creating a cultural space in the migrant space. Iloba lives in a small house and houses two of his cousins in London. Even though he cannot lodge Obinze because of limited space in his house, he has not forgotten about his African hospitality. He can still afford to offer Obinze "a small plate of fried chin chin and a bottle of beer". His attitude has helped in awakening the "ritual of hospitality" in Obinze. (309) This positive cultural aspect through eating of chin chin, has helped in keeping links with home.

Although living in the diaspora is an uphill task as depicted by the immigrants in their migrant spaces, they equally maintain links with their family members through remittances. Mariama, one of the workers in Joy saloon in Adichie's *Americanah* sends money to her family in her country of origin through "western union." (13)

Laura, a white woman and Kimberly's sister, has done some research about Nigeria and she has found out that Nigerians in America send a lot of money "back home every year." (201) The purpose for doing this is to beef up their economy and ameliorate the standard of living in their countries of origin. Through their productive employment abroad, most immigrants have revamped their families' lives by aspiring to build skyscrapers for their parents and actually building them. Ifemelu has maintained links with her family in her country of birth by sending more money to her parents. We are told that "She saved money, sent more home. She wanted her parents to move to a new flat [...] Something bigger in a better neighbourhood." (247) This practice has improved her family members' standard of living and will equally enable them to leave their slum-like structures as seen in the quote above. By so doing, these immigrants like Ifemelu have become home developers through the better paying jobs they have in America or abroad and are determined to see the emergence of their home society. In this perspective, the diaspora plays a pivotal role in fostering development in their countries of origin as seen from what Ifemelu does to her family while

in America. This means that Africans living in western settings can cause economic, political and social change in their countries of origin.

Conclusion

My analysis shows that limited opportunities in the social and economic domains in most African countries have led to the upsurge in migration of Africans in general and especially Nigerians to Europe and America as portrayed by Adichie in *Americanah*. Social network and fluidity in communication have helped in fostering migration in the 21st century. Through immigrants' dialogues and experiences and their endeavour to alleviate hardship in Europe and America, these diasporic population has altered their cultural identities while maintaining links with their countries of origin through remittances.

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