

# **Wanderers between Two Worlds and Cultures: Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah***

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Bachelor's Thesis  
2022



**Tomas Bata University in Zlín**  
Faculty of Humanities

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Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně  
Fakulta humanitních studií  
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Akademický rok: 2021/2022

## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

Jméno a příjmení: Adam Daniš  
Osobní číslo: H190209  
Studijní program: B7310 Filologie  
Studijní obor: Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi  
Forma studia: Prezenční  
Téma práce: Půtníci mezi dvěma světmi a kulturami: román *Americanah* Ngozi Adichieovej

### Zásady pro vypracování

Zhromáždění sekundárních materiálů k historickému kontextu románu  
Našludování primárního díla  
Formulace cílů práce na základě informací získaných ze sekundárních zdrojů  
Analýza zvoleného primárního díla  
Vyvedení a formulace závěrů

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**  
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**


Seznam doporučené literatury:

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.  
Dervin, Fred, and Karen Risager. *Researching Identity and Interculturality*. New York: Routledge, 2015.  
Emenyonu, Ernest. *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2017.  
Feng, Pin-chia. *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading*. New York: P. Lang, 1999.  
Irele, Abiola. *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.


Vedoucí bakalářské práce: **Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Ewald Mengel**  
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **8. listopadu 2021**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **9. května 2022**

  
Mgr. Libor Marek, Ph.D.  
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Ve Zlíně dne 28. února 2022

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Táto bakalárska práca sa zaoberá dielom *Americanah* od Chimamandy Ngozi Adichie s cieľom zanalyzovať tento roman z hľadiska charakteristických vlastností žánru Bildungsroman a následne poukázať na kultúrne a transkultúrne prvky, ktoré špecifickým spôsobom prispievajú k rozoberanej téme formovania identity. Cieľom analýzy je skúmanie zmien identít podmienené zmenou prostredia a ich dopad na kvalitu života ľudí, ktorí sa ocitnú v podobných podmienkach. Práca je uzavretá analýzou cieľov a dopadu daného románu.

Kľúčová slova: Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, *Americanah*, Bildungsroman, Kultúra, Transkulturalita, Imigrácia, Identita.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's novel *Americanah* with the goal to showcase its Bildungsroman-like features and further discuss the cultural and transcultural elements in the novel. The main focus of the analysis is to showcase how changes in the main characters' identity are a product of the new environment and how these changes impact the quality of life of people who find themselves in similar circumstances. Finally, a conclusion and implications for the reader are discussed.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, *Americanah*, Bildungsroman, Culture, Transculturality, Immigration, Identity.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would first and foremost like to thank professor Mengel for his guidance and patience. Furthermore, I really appreciate the comradery my classmates showed not only throughout the last semester. And last but not least my family and friends, who kept me distracted and my mind healthy.

I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's/Master's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

After the success of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the author was able to approach her next project with much more freedom, not needing to think about the critical reception of the novel or the number of sales.<sup>1</sup> She chose to insert a part of herself into the 2013 novel *Americanah*, treating the reader to a bold and brave story, where the traditional, subtle addressing of race issues in a novel are swept under the rug in favour of Chimamanda's unfiltered thoughts.

*Americanah* is not only the story of the main character Ifemelu but a parallel to the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's life as well. Just like Ifemelu, Chimamanda went to America to pursue academic goals and experience the freedom this country could offer. And just like Ifemelu, the author discovered race there, a concept she was not aware of back home in Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> Though the novel is narrated in the third person, it still manages to immerse the reader in a strange way through a window which shines light straight onto the main characters thoughts. The world of fiction is blending with the real experience of a writer, making it all the more impactful and resonant. The novel traces the life of Ifemelu almost autobiographically; she departs for the US in search of a life with more freedom and opportunity and also seeking a higher education in the form of university, just like Chimamanda did after reaching her 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, and begins the involuntary journey of becoming an Americanah– a person seen by Nigerians as Americanized.

In this thesis I will focus on the defining elements of this novel, which are the coming of age and reason of Ifemelu and her simultaneous exploration of the worlds she is thrown into: the world of love, world of race and racism and the world of America.

There is no better literary genre to encompass personal growth, identity formation and exploration of not only the world itself but also the knowledge which it holds than the Bildungsroman. "A definition of the Bildungsroman, drawing on a wide range of works from this century and last, should encompass novels that follow chronologically and with attention to verimilitude the growth of a single, youthful protagonist."<sup>3</sup>

With Ifemelu's migration to the USA comes a significant change in culture which she is surrounded by. Without warning, she is thrown into the transcultural melting pot of the

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<sup>1</sup> Stefanie Reuter. *Becoming a Subject: Developing a Critical Consciousness and Coming to Voice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah* (2015), Anja Oed (Hg.): *Reviewing the Past, Negotiating the Future: The African Bildungsroman* (2015), Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2808396>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> David Mickelsen. "The Bildungsroman in Africa: The Case of Mission Terminée," *The French Review* 59, no. 3 (1986): 418. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/392670>.

American society. The novel builds extensively on her struggles to integrate new meanings into her existing perception of the world and in turn how her existing representations of things not always apply in the new environment.

The bridges between cultures, whether those conjoin the worlds of Africa and America or the reader and the author through the senses of Ifemelu, are what coincidentally binds the novel together. The flux is felt throughout the whole book. The narrative structuring is cleverly organized to support this feeling with bits of hindsight internal monologues and shifting of time and location without warning, forming sort of a mosaic feeling about the novel as a whole. Furthermore, this style of narrative could serve as a keyhole to peek through into the main characters mind and how she handles the shifting environment(s). Both in America and in Africa, she struggles to get a grasp on the full picture with all its contexts and changes, on the cultural habits and everyday operations. In the theme of the Bildungsroman, she gradually gathers bits of experience in how to deal with the strange familiar and how to handle the new environment, yet she never fully forms an identity which wouldn't conflict her sense of self in either of the countries, she rather forms a mosaic portfolio of "what to do's". Due to the metaphoric nature of Chimamanda's storytelling I would argue that the narrative structure of *Americanah* is nothing short of a parallel to Ifemelu's grasp on her world(s).

## **I. THEORY**

## 1 BILDUNGSROMAN

In the case of *Americanah* and its main protagonist Ifemelu, self-growth is a prominent theme. However, the novel deviates from a traditional coming-of-age script, seen across a multitude of Western works. Ifemelu is a migrant, thousands of miles away from home, and her growth is not only the outcome of the typical means of the bildungsroman but, perhaps even more so, by feelings of alienation and exile.<sup>4</sup>

Originating in Germany, the term Bildungsroman was coined by Karl Morgenstern in the early 1820s with the intended meaning of portraying the formation (Bildung) of the main character from his or her very beginning to a stage of certain completeness.<sup>5</sup> The word itself can be divided into two parts: ‘bildungs’ meaning formation, and ‘roman’ meaning novel.<sup>6</sup> Opinions on which novels should be considered under the genre Bildungsroman vary amongst German critics, nevertheless, they agree on two near relations. First one being the Erziehungsroman, translating to a novel of education whose purpose is explicitly educational or pedagogical. The second one Entwicklungsroman or a novel of personal development. The Bildungsroman lives in between these two. “Not as narrowly pedagogic as the one—being about general acculturation or, as Martin Swales says, “the clustering of values by which a man lives”—and not so merely transitional as the other—being about the early childhood-to-young-adulthood stages of life.”<sup>7</sup>

The adolescent hero of the typical “apprentice” novel sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work effectively....Needless to say, the variations of it are endless.<sup>8</sup>

As the excerpt suggests, the essential and central element is the process of identity formation of its main character however, ways of achieving said goal differ. Modern approaches include methods of focusing on one’s experience through the lens of personal, spiritual, subjective, emotional – psychological growth, even to the extent of

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<sup>4</sup> Ernest Emenyonu. *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* (Woodbridge: James Currey, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2020), chapter 16.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffers, T.L. *The Idea of Bildung and the Bildungsroman*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 49.

<sup>6</sup> David Galens. *Study Guide for ‘Bildungsroman’* (Detroit: Cengage Learning - Gale, 2016), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffers, *Bildungsroman*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffers, *Bildungsroman*, 49.

overshadowing the social impact on one's development. On the other side of the spectrum there is the emphasis focused particularly on interaction with other people, with family and on socializing. Nevertheless, in every approach to the Bildung novel, the formation process shines spotlight on the subjectivity, identity, the "self" of an individual.<sup>9</sup>

Certain plot elements are common in the genre of Bildungsroman. A curious child grows up in a place where his hunger for education can not flourish, often hindered by peers, neighbours or even family and thus he or she seeks to pursue knowledge, most often away from home. The hero leaves for such place where education is available and embarks on a transformative journey. He or she encounters love, usually both the good and bad kind, which help (or force) to reinvent life values. The hero learns to fit into the "new world" and after some time perhaps returns home to show his/her progress to old acquaintances. Covering a wide range of works, not every Bildungsroman will follow this exact pattern, but Buckley argues that at least two or three elements will be present in each novel.<sup>10</sup> With the central focus so heavily shifted towards the personal experience of the protagonist, authors more often than not opt for a first-person style narration with minimal or no hindsight instances, allowing the reader not only to accompany the hero along his or her journey.<sup>11</sup> This comes off as a rather obvious observation but the idea is, in many cases, much deeper than that.

Following up on a previous part of this thesis, Chimamanda said herself that even though she is not interested in dissecting political issues, they play an important role in the stories she tells; the struggle which such conditions produce. The Bildungsroman, especially novels with a female lead character, have become fertile ground for criticism. The genre oftentimes links subjective problems to the bigger scheme of things – social and political structures. Combining that with the said narration style, the Bildungsroman gives the reader, in the words of Lazzaro-Weis, a perfect chance to swallow up and forget those ideas on a page, only to be reborn as thoughts in the mind of the reader.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Petru Golban. *A History of the Bildungsroman: From Ancient Beginnings to Romanticism* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffers, *Bildungsroman*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> David Mickelsen. "The Bildungsroman in Africa: The Case of Mission Terminée," *The French Review* 59, no. 3 (1986): 418. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/392670>.

<sup>12</sup> Carol Lazzaro-Weis. "The Female 'Bildungsroman': Calling It into Question," *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 1 (1990): 26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4315991>.

## 1.1 Adiche's Bildungs Moments

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – a Nigerian born author has been incorporating much of her own life experience into her novels. Born mid-September in 1977, she came into an Igbo family, scarred by the preceding civil war in Nigeria. Nonetheless, she describes her childhood as very happy, full of laughter and love and surrounded by a very close-knit family. She was brought up in the city of Nsukka, close to the University of Nigeria, by highly educated parents, both of which had close ties to the mentioned university – her father James Nwoye Adichie has been working as a professor and later received a promotion to the position of vice-chancellor and her mother Ifeoma Adichie was the universities first female registrar.<sup>13</sup>

From an early age Chimamanda showed interest in reading foreign, namely British and American books and later displayed an equal amount of passion towards writing. The Nigerian author says that her very first impression of literature was, that it was stories of foreigners, which would later manifest itself, whether consciously or otherwise, in her 2013 internationally acclaimed novel *Americanah*. Naturally, she later discovered African literature too. Works of Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye are mentioned amongst her most influential when it came to her perception of literature, though the concept of foreignism has definitely indented itself inside her memory. Chimamanda later chose to follow in her parents' footsteps and enrolled at the same university as them, studying medicine and pharmacy.<sup>14</sup> Even before leaving for the US, she engaged in professional writing – editing the university magazine 'Compass'.<sup>15</sup>

After a year and a half, she left Nigeria to go study at the Drexler University in Philadelphia, US. It is here where for the first time she confronts the idea of identity on a cultural level.

When the 19-year-old Chimamanda stumbled into the American perception of African life for the first time, she started to realized how skewed from reality it really is. The newfound cultural awareness is later explored in a TED talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story", which Chimamanda delivered in 2009. She goes to great lengths to debunk the myths about life in Africa. As the title of the talk suggests, she uses stories, especially those based off of

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<sup>13</sup> "Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," Spring 2006.  
<http://www.percontra.net/archive/2adichie.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda N. "The Danger of a Single Story," filmed July 2009 at TEDGlobal, video 18:33,  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

<sup>15</sup> TheFamousPeople Editors. "Who Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie? Everything You Need to Know," Facts, Childhood, Family & Achievements of Nigerian Writer, Accessed March 29, 2022.  
<https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-11007.php>.

personal experiences. She speaks of her ambitious friends, who opened businesses – a hairdressing salon, a publishing house – just as any ordinary people in the US do. She also mentions Nollywood and the consumerism of national product and contemporary Nigerian music, which is drawing influence from American musicians and blending the two cultures together.<sup>16</sup> Not only the nature of these stories but also the purpose with which she delivers them allude to her transcultural epiphany. Culmination of cultural (un)awareness compiled in the mentioned TED talk can also be seen as a building block for her next project – the third novel *Americanah*.

Following up on her academic premiere in the US, Chimamanda continued to pursue high education and later attended the Eastern Connecticut State University, completing a degree in communication and political science. Apart from graduating with summa cum laude, Latin for with highest praise and awarded to the very best students, she also continued her interest in writing, publishing multiple articles in the university's journal 'Campus Lantern'. She discloses that her transfer to Connecticut was influenced by the fact her sister lived there, running a medical practice close to the university.<sup>17</sup> It was during her senior year at the university that she started working on her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), a coming-of-age story discussing topics of economic struggles in a politically unstable Nigeria. In a later interview, she describes herself not as a political writer, but rather a portrayer of realistic fiction. The political undertone to her works is handled in an oblique way.

The author says: "I think it is how it affects the life of ordinary people. I am not interested in the grand schemes of politics, I am interested in how government corruption trickles down to mean that old men die away slowly because they are not paid their pensions and how petrol is so expensive that people cancel trips to their ancestral hometowns, and how women decide to marry men they dislike because they cannot find jobs and how our values are being shaped and changed by our economy."<sup>18</sup>

Though *Purple Hibiscus* falls beyond the scope of this thesis, all of the mentioned genre characteristics and writing 'values' will appear in a refurbished manner in her later novel *Americanah* (2013) and will become the focus of the analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda N. "The Danger of a Single Story," filmed July 2009 at TEDGlobal, video 18:33, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

<sup>17</sup> TheFamousPeople Editors. "Who Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie? Everything You Need to Know," Facts, Childhood, Family & Achievements of Nigerian Writer, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-11007.php>.

<sup>18</sup> "Per Contra Interviews: Miriam N. Kotzin with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," Spring 2006. <http://www.percontra.net/archive/2adichie.htm>.

After finishing and publishing her first novel to very positive international acclaim, Chimamanda returned to her kinship towards education, cultivated her passion for writing and interest in her native culture by completing a Master's degree in Creative Writing at the John Hopkins University in 2003 and a Master of Arts in African Studies at the Yale University a year before delivering her famous TED talk.<sup>19</sup>

In an interview with The Guardian, she addresses her experiences connected to exploring one's identity, which later become prominent in the upcoming novel *Americanah*, alongside with all the previous points discussed up till now.

"I think you travel to search and come back home to find yourself there. In many ways travel becomes the process of finding. Travel is not the end point, it is the process. I'm not sure I would have this strong sense of being Nigerian if I had not left Nigeria."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> TheFamousPeople Editors. "Who Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie? Everything You Need to Know," Facts, Childhood, Family & Achievements of Nigerian Writer, accessed March 29, 2022, <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-11007.php>.

<sup>20</sup> Wilkinson, Carl. "I left home to find home," interview by Carl Wilkinson, The Guardian, March 6, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2005/mar/06/observerescapesection3>.



## 2 CULTURE

Culture is an evasive concept, it can not be artificially constructed, it may only be observed. When observation becomes the main scientific tool, researchers will supply the rest of us with facts but rather with interpretations. This chapter will focus on exploring relevant interpretations and forming a general definition of the term with regard to its anthropological implications. Definitions focusing on the meaning of culture in the sense of artistic endeavours or primitive to “cultured” hierarchies are purposely omitted, as they are clearly not in the scope of this thesis.

Edward Taylor has defined the term as early as in 1870, emphasizing the fact that all people in all social groups possess certain qualities, which make up their specific culture. He addresses these qualities as such: “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Later, at the brink of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Franz Boas formulated the theory of cultural relativism, stating that culture is not a universal thing, encompassing all the people of the world, but rather a unique strain of “the complex whole”, specific to a group of peoples or societies. After a hundred years of anthropological development, evolution and countless new views on the definition of culture, Geert Hofstede enunciated a modern, simple yet easily understandable rendition: “[Culture] is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.”<sup>21</sup>

It is quite clear that culture is tightly knit with society, stemming from it, but is it just a by-product of our intelligent co-existence or is this “relationship” much more mutual? As was mentioned before, Taylor took the idea of culture into the sociological sphere of understanding, differentiating from the previous interpretations of culture, which talked about it as a set of things – paintings, works of literature, musical compositions, etc. This differentiation, nowadays called the 'cultural turn', understands culture as a set of practices, most notably “the production and exchange of meanings – 'the giving and taking of meaning' between the members of a society or group.”<sup>22</sup> And so it is not only that a certain group of people or a society form a culture together, but rather that these members of a social group interpret and understand the world around them in a certain, similarly organized fashion and from this interpretation then stems the culture. Moreover, these shared interpretations lead

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<sup>21</sup> Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012). “What is culture? A compilation of quotations.” GlobalPAD Core Concepts. Accessed April 9, 2022. <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/interculturalskills/>

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009), 2.

to shared practices, not only artistic but also organizational e.g., how a particular society chooses to govern itself. And at the core of this whole operation are the “things”, the objects and the practices, which in and of themselves do not possess any special meaning. For example, a tree, which could simply represent a tree, but also a waypoint, an artifact left by the forefathers or a symbol for the bloom of life. The meaning does not stem from the physical form of a “thing” but rather from the representation, the associations we connect with it. The process of interpretation is not in essence a product of biological programming but a product of our social endeavours. It is what separates the human from the primal.<sup>23</sup>

This raises the question: where does meaning come from?

Meaning is tightly associated with language, it can be realized through other means of communication than just the spoken form, such as for example gestures or pictures. Hence language can be referred to as a propeller of meaning, is a tool to communicate meaning and induce understanding in the recipient.<sup>24</sup> “It is the shared cultural “space” in which the production of meaning – that is, representation – takes place.”<sup>25</sup> This understanding or in other words meaningful representation is the absolutely crucial pillar of effective circulation of meaning withing a culture. Without shared knowledge, values, etc. withing a culture, successful decoding of intended meaning would be borderline impossible. And thus, culture may be understood as a circle where one (meaning) could not exist without the other (shared knowledge, values, etc.).

Furthermore, the representation not only encompasses the intended meaning of a speaker, but also the representation of the speaker’s identity. Meaning is a form of expression and expression is the realization of identity.<sup>26</sup> Identity in the sense of belonging to a group, in which an individual both shares common values and knowledge with its members as well as possesses specific traits, differentiating him or herself, owning an identity and being an individual, a piece of a puzzle called culture.<sup>27</sup>

Identity, just as culture, is a concept subjected to many ambiguities. The word itself originates from the Latin *idem*, with the meaning of being “the same”. However, in the modern understanding, and as has been briefly brought up in the previous paragraph, identity

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<sup>23</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Grandy and Richard Warner, *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 211.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Howarth, *Representations, identity and resistance in communication*, in: Hook, Derek and Franks, Bradley and Bauer, Martin W., (eds.) *The social psychology of communication*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

refers to both similarity and difference. Take for example an ID card – it will contain a compilation of information which is unique to a person – with the purpose of distinguishing a member of society.<sup>28</sup> Forming an identity, the central focus of the Bildungsroman, is growing as a person, acquiring knowledge and skills, forming values – the creation of an individual who can think and make decisions on their own. An individual who is capable of subjective expression, capable of producing opinions uniquely shaped by his or her journey through life. But on the other hand, identity could not be formed, could not exist, if the individual was not a part of a culture as culture is the source of representation. As was previously discussed, shared knowledge and values are what allows for representation, understanding these things is what allows us to become a part of the circulation of meanings within a culture and coming to this understanding is in essence the formation of identity itself. Thus, identity can be understood not only as the compilation of unique traits an individual possesses, but also those things that he or she shares with the culture, which allowed the formation of these traits in the first place.

The progression of society, the rising interconnectedness of the world, globalization is also giving rise to new issues connected with identity formation. The increasing options for social mobility, gradual dissolution of the welfare state, increased competitiveness on the job market and more – all of these things contribute to uncertainty and fragmentation, especially among younger people, those in the vital stages of the identity formation process. In his 1968 publication *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erik Erikson argues that in adolescence, which is where the story of *Americanah* starts, the formation of identity is closely associated with the search for a virtue, which allows the adolescent to mature into a young adult and form intimate relationships. He sees this development stage as a critical period where one becomes “more self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and become more confident in their own unique qualities.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the process of identity formation, especially the search for uniqueness, is something the individual tackles internally, but it must be acknowledged and validated by others. The group validation is inevitably connected to the so called identity politics – the questions of identity produced by factors of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality. What was once stigmatized is in the modern age “celebrated” and answering these “questions” is a vital part of the formation process.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> David Buckingham, “Introducing Identity.” *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Edited by David Buckingham. (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 1. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262524834.001

<sup>29</sup> Buckingham, *Introducing identity*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-9

Going into extensive detail of identity formation might prove counterproductive and with consideration of the scope of this thesis useless, as there are countless opinions on the topic, however, specific and detailed examples will be discussed in the upcoming analytical part.

## **2.1 From local to global concepts and the philosophy of transculturality**

So far, the point of argument was, that culture is something specific to a single group of people and while this understanding might have been true a couple of decades ago, in the modern world of infinite options when it comes to connecting with other people, on the other side of the world if one would wish to, are becoming available to nearly everybody. Furthermore, cultures are mixing uncontrollably as countries open their borders to foreigners seeking job opportunities, asylum seekers or explorers on the hunt for new experiences and many more. Culture and personality formation are quietly adapting and changing alongside these modern developments. The last chapter will focus on the concepts of transculturality and the impact culture has on young adults.

First and foremost, modern societies in and of themselves are no longer the unified “whole” that they once were. In today’s day and age, the majority of societies, especially those not shying away from progressive ways of thinking, are multicultural – supporting a wide range of different ways of living and lifestyles. Concepts of Interculturality and Multiculturality argue, that under the understanding of culture as a sphere of influence over a specific society, these societies inadvertently and inevitably collide. These trends then try to propose solutions to how such collisions be handled. Interculturality is attempting to find ways of understanding and recognizing one another. Multiculturality is very similar in its approach, also proposing tolerance and understanding – coexistence of different cultures within one single society. However, both of these approaches are built on the basis of the impossibility of blending or in other words, they see culture and society as an “island” and the meeting of cultures as a clash.

Perhaps societies could have been separated into “islands” in the past but the fact of the present day is, that cultures are interconnected. This entanglement has been building up through economic dependencies, waves of migration and even the inconspicuous things such as the global availability of internet and options of communication. All these things are propellers of representation exchange. The cultural blend is not only encompassing the fact that representatives of different societies have found themselves living among each other, its rather and perhaps even more importantly, the fact that meanings are jumping cultures and finding a new home in a “new home”. Problems of for example ecological footprint, human

rights or debates about feminism, race or even sports for that matter, are finding its way into cultures where such concepts were once unheard of.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, as was discussed previously in this chapter, shared knowledge is one of the fundamental bases of a culture. In today's world, information is becoming available to everybody, just see the bizarre example of uncensoredlibrary.com. Even countries with objectively oppressive systems of government, are finding their way to uncensored knowledge. Knowledge has surpassed its cultural origin and in the theme of a circular perception of culture – knowledge is not only available to the world, but the whole world is able to contribute to and enrich the available information. Not to underplay the importance of the fact that, indeed in most countries of the world, especially in the more developed ones, live members of all the other nations of the world. Henceforward, nothing is truly foreign anymore; knowledge, meaning and even values are at the global citizen's fingertips. On the other hand, distinctive features of cultures are slowly fading into the background. What was once considered a way of life is now folklore. There still undoubtedly exists a region-bound culture, but its function is becoming somewhat aesthetic.<sup>32</sup>

Given all these points, the concept of transculturality aims to achieve inclusion of all the people in this evolving new understanding of culture. Transculturality does not refer to various societies as islands on a collision trajectory, but rather as “life forms” maturing into a state of symbiosis where the merging creates an opportunity to bridge the differences.<sup>33</sup> It is of paramount importance to acknowledge the fact, that the concept of transculturality does not intend to achieve any kind of uniformization, quite on the contrary, the fundamental goal is to promote diversity. It is true that “diversity, as traditionally provided in the form of single cultures, does indeed disappear increasingly. Instead, however, a new type of diversity takes shape: the diversity of different cultures and life-forms, each arising from transcultural permeations.”<sup>34</sup> Diversity is no longer a product of regional, geographical or national preconditions. Within the scope of transculturality, diversity is produced in the very heart of culture – in the hearth fuelled by the circulation of meanings. It can even be argued that conditions stripped of “geographical expectations” give the individual a greater opportunity of choice and may result in a purer form of diversity.<sup>35</sup> To sum up the message which

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<sup>31</sup> Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,” in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999), 194-198.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 202.

transculturality is trying to promote in everyday words could go as follows: “we are all in it together.”<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the concept of transculturality does not only refer to the macro, the global, scale on which culture is affected, but also on the micro scale – how these changes affect the individual. The formation of identity is becoming somewhat of a linking process. The individual does not draw from just one culture but he or she sews multiple cultures together.<sup>37</sup>

In connection with the individual, it is important to mention that the philosophy of transculturality does not, perhaps yet, apply to everyone. There are plenty of people, especially those coming from poor and uneducated backgrounds, who despite the changes the modern world brings, have not been changed in any significant way regarding their values, knowledge, interests, customs, etc.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kai Horsthemke, “Transmission and Transformation in Higher Education: Indigenisation, Internationalisation and Transculturality,” *Transformation in Higher Education* vol.2 (2017), 8. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v2i0.12>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>38</sup> Horsthemke, “Transmission”, 7.

## **II. ANALYSIS**



### 3 WHO IS AN AMERICANAH?

The term is, apart from the title, used countless times throughout the novel. Ifemelu “earns” this name for herself after returning back to Nigeria after her 5 year long stay. The term invokes mixed connotation – both positive and negative, as it refers to someone, who during their time abroad (in the case of the novel in question America) changes to fit in with the new culture. These changes may include adjusting one’s accent, changing the visual image, habits and traditions; which goes hand in hand with “forgetting” or in other words abandoning his or her original culture. An Americanah is viewed both positively and negatively, as many people in Nigeria idolize the Western world, considering it a golden ticket to a better life and for someone to “conquer” it means to make it in life.<sup>39</sup>

“Ifem, you know you’ll have any kind of dress you want in America and next time we see you, you will be a serious Americanah.”<sup>40</sup>

This statement, presented by Ifemelu’s friend, demonstrates how Nigerians attribute a certain respect with the term.

“Americanah!” Ranyinudo teased her often. “You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!”<sup>41</sup>

However, being an Americanah also comes with expectations from the society.

On the other hand, and as will be demonstrated throughout the analysis, becoming and maintaining the Americanah personality takes its toll on the experiencer.

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<sup>39</sup>Maria Victória, Dias Silva, and Josane Daniela Freitas Pinto, "Racism and identity: a critical discourse analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah," *REVELL: Revista de Estudos Literários da UEMS* vol. 3, no. 23 (2019): 241.

<sup>40</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, *Americanah* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House Inc., 2014), 104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

#### 4 EXPERIENCE WITH (THE MEN OF) AMERICA

Ifemelu's encounters with men seem to reflect a deeper idea than just exploring and coming to terms with one's sexual identity. At her lowest point, unable to find a job and barely able to afford basic necessities, she engages in a one time; all time low encounter with the tennis coach, who offers her money in exchange for her intimacy. This can be understood as the subjugation and consequential taking advantage of the unprepared, ordinary migrant with no other options left. The identity of the trainer is not explored extensively as it is not too important. The paramount fact is, that he represents the wealthy and powerful America, which can obtain anything it pleases. The thing Auntie Uju as well as many other Nigerians imagine when the word America is spoken, is in fact not meant for them. It is not a quick and easy way of obtaining comfort in life. Or perhaps it is, but not for the migrants.

After experiencing what this power can do, even Ifemelu falls into the pit of temptation, which is represented in the character of Curt. He is the prototypical American optimist and he is in fact rather kind to her, though his generosity is often calculated and somewhat narcissistic. Thanks to Curt, Ifemelu obtains a green card and also gets access to a respectable job, demonstrating the power of white privilege, which will never apply to Ifemelu. Curt also represents her absorption of American identity. As was discussed previously, she changes the way she wears her hair and her accent during her time with him but he also introduces her to a social circle of what could be described as very American people. All things combined, Ifemelu comes almost indistinguishingly close to being really American and it is only fitting that a golden haired white man facilitates this change.

Blaine is something Ifemelu could become, if she decided to continue developing her Americanah personality. He is a man of a very respectable background with a job at the university. Furthermore, during the period in which she is with him, the presidential election and subsequent victory of Barack Obama is taking place. In the little things, such as pronouncing a janitor's name "the Spanish way: Hor-hay"<sup>42</sup> it can be observed that he understands the many discriminatory practices that white Americans indulge in. In some ways, Blaine could be compared to Obama and to what The President was called in the book: "the Magic Negro"<sup>43</sup> – liberally thinking, obsessed with the greater good and certainly the best match for Ifemelu so far. In her thoughts she even describes him as: "a person made not

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 317.

of flesh but of little crystals of perfection, the American man she would never have.”<sup>44</sup> Said description was thought of when they met way before, when she was not yet a fully realized Americanah and now, very much assimilated, she could actually have him, she could have the perfect African American experience. He was the type of man she would bring back home, as she would often tease later, in order to show off how much of an Americanah she is. But not even in Blaine could she find what she was looking for. “He was too sinewy with goodness.”<sup>45</sup> And not only that. Ifemelu’s blog represents her return to a more authentic African identity and Blaine would constantly comment on her ways of writing it.

“She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said. Then she began to resent it. Her posts sounded too academic, too much like him.”<sup>46</sup>

Too much like him. There were other things Blaine tried to impose on Ifemelu, American things such as flossing. At this point in her life, she no longer wanted to be the perfect Americanah.

In the book, this whole chapter is fittingly summarized by a quote from Ifemelu: “The thing about cross-cultural relationships is that you spend so much time explaining. My ex-boyfriends and I spent a lot of time explaining. I sometimes wondered whether we would even have anything at all to say to each other if we were from the same place...”<sup>47</sup>

Lastly, it shall not be understated that Adiche used a very subtle method of introducing each one of them in a flash-forward foreshadowing fashion before Ifemelu actually gets together with them, which signifies the lack of anticipation in each of these men. Furthermore, this is strategy is not present in the narrative including Obinze, which not only differentiates their relationship from the other ones, but also builds tension in the novel and sparks curiosity in the reader.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 433.

## 5 THE MIGRANT REALITY

The perception of America in not only Ifemelu's, but also the eyes of many other Nigerians before visiting is that of a place of glory, dreams and glamour. Ifemelu was also under the impression, that the place would be much colder. On her arrival, both of these presumptions were challenged. The weather was as hot as back home, if not worse and the “things covered in high-shine gloss”<sup>48</sup> were not so glossy after all. The first impression she was greeted with was a boy urinating in public, she sat in Auntie Uju's old and rusty Toyota and slept on the floor in a rather shabby apartment with a cockroach to keep her company. This greeting, in many ways, reflected the life America provides for immigrants, after all it is not like she was left on a street somewhere, Auntie Uju has taken her under her wing and what Ifemelu was seeing was the life that Auntie Uju was living. Furthermore, it is not like Auntie Uju was not trying hard enough. She mentions working three jobs as well as trying to get into a medical school. Even though she had completed a degree in Nigeria, the diploma is not valid in the US. The very explicit migrant experience is poetically described in the book: “You are now in America: do not expect to have hot food for lunch.”<sup>49</sup> Later, Ifemelu herself experiences the struggles of finding work, getting VISA as well as dealing with countless instances with the blissfully uneducated Americans, who maintain the image of a tribal, voodoo filled wild Africa. From this prejudice stems the general resentment of African migrants, which then in turn propels many of the injustices which these migrants have to face. Of course, a major part in this discrimination is caused by the presence of racism in America. Be that as it may, racism is outside the scope of this thesis.

The bottom line of immigration is, that moving to another country is possible, also shown in the character of Emenike, a friend of Obinze who manages to fully assimilate, but assimilation is the main issue. In order to become a successful migrant, one has to conform into the new society's standards, in the process giving up on a significant part of his or her original self.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 142.

## 5.1 Obinze

Unlike many of the Nigerian characters depicted in the novel, he is very self-conscious and open minded. From a young age he displays a deep kinship for truth. It is the thing that draws him to Ifemelu so much. As soon as in their first encounter, which is coincidentally on a set up date with another girl, he appreciates her telling him things as they are, even though she puts them a little bluntly. From a young age, Obinze is fascinated by America, reading large amounts of novels from American authors.

“I read American books because America is the future ...”<sup>50</sup>

“Obinze suggested she read American books, novels and histories and biographies. In his first e-mail to her—a cybercafé had just opened in Nsukka—he gave her a list of books. The Fire Next Time was the first.”<sup>51</sup>

His passion continues until he is confronted with the “Western reality”. He does not get an American VISA and in his pursuit of this Western culture, he settles for working in England. There, he faces similar immigrant struggles as Ifemelu does at the beginning of her stay in America. He works under a fake identity and struggles to obtain a VISA for a prolonged stay, going as far as to set up a fake marriage in order to acquire them. The whole sham goes bust and Obinze ends up in handcuffs. Just before his deportation, he spends some time at the back of a police car and in the police station - arrested. This experience in Obinze's life is purposefully described not only in detail but as a part of a separate chapter from the story of Ifemelu (in contrast to being discussed through emails between characters or via retrospective), to examine in detail the very negative effects immigration may bring to an individual. Firstly, this “special” treatment he receives establishes a feeling of “otherness” or “non-belonging” and secondly, committing a crime is in a sense the most drastic kind of infringement of his truth and integrity driven values. The longing for foreignness, for the golden ticket to success, the equivalent of the American dream, has turned out to be nothing short of a violation of his identity. Naturally he does not seek to return anymore. As he and Ifemelu cut communications for more than 10 years, a large chunk of his life is a mystery. It is only after Ifemelu returns back to Nigeria, we get to meet Obinze again. Now a self-made rich and powerful man, settled in Nigeria, he addresses his relationship with the Western world and especially with America: “I realized I could buy America, and it lost its shine. When all I had was my passion for America, they didn’t give me a visa, but with my new

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 138.

bank account, getting a visa was very easy.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore we find him in a struggling marriage – a marriage with a Nigerian woman Kosi, who is the pinnacle of Nigerian conservative mindset. A church goer who always agrees with both sides in an argument to not spark conflict and lacking opinions of her own. Perhaps the easiest way of describing this woman would with the words she spoke only minutes after giving birth to their firstborn: “Darling, we’ll have a boy next time.”<sup>53</sup> After reuniting with Ifemelu, he starts cheating on his wife but this is not at all just an act of pleasure – he falls in love with Ifemelu again. This cheating, especially coming from such a truth driven individual, comes off as very metaphorical. Firstly, he is cheating – the very opposite of what truth should be like – in order to connect with the truth – which is portrayed in Ifemelu's truthful nature. And secondly, he is cheating on Nigeria itself, more specifically on the traditional and old-fashioned ways of Nigeria. In the end, he divorces his wife Kosi in order to be with Ifemelu. Throughout the novel, he mentions multiple times chasing her and with the symbolic “catch” at the end, he also finally achieves what he has been chasing his whole life. A truthful and authentic life, finalizing his growth.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 444.

## 5.2 Ifemelu

She did not want to leave Dike—the mere thought brought a sense of treasure already lost—and yet she wanted to leave Aunt Uju’s apartment, and begin a life in which she alone determined the margins.

Perhaps the most essential character trait of Ifemelu is her go getter attitude towards life. In contrast to her aunt, who settles for comfort and for the familiar, Ifemelu is not afraid to take her life into her own hands. Throughout the novel, this characteristic is the focal point of her growth as well the main reason of her success in America.

In a hair salon, Ifemelu gets asked in a casual conversation if she talks Igbo – a language of the ethnic group of Nigerians under which she belongs. She responds with “Of course I speak Igbo,” and only seconds later adds “Take it easy!”<sup>54</sup> – an expression so American it is only natural that this dialogue was, under the surface, an introduction to one of the many symbols prevalent throughout the novel. In the chronological beginning of the novel, there are naturally no phrases as such spoken by Ifemelu and as the story progresses, she goes through a process of discovering the 'American way of speaking'. First, when she arrives in America, Aunt Uju uses the term 'heat wave' and says sentences such as “There's cornered beef so you can make sandwiches for lunch.”<sup>55</sup> Ifemelu did not ask for clarification, though it was clear she did not quite understand what Aunt Uju was talking about.

When it comes to meaning, it wasn't only words she did not understand at first. During her first summer in America, Ifemelu spent most of her time babysitting Dike for whom she tried cooking hot dogs the traditional Nigerian way – frying them in oil. She had mistaken the hot dogs for sausages and expectantly, the result was inedible. These novelties made her feel a bit like an alien. In a conversation with Aunt Uju concerning the 'hot dog incident', she literally compares herself to one: “Would a visitor from space know the difference?”<sup>56</sup>

When she first gets to interact with the other university kids, amongst which is also the already assimilated Ginika, the feeling of alienation is still strong with her. While the girls drink the very American craft beer, Ifemelu is described to sit in a lone armchair at the end of the room, drinking orange juice, listening to them talk and wondering when to laugh and what to laugh at.<sup>57</sup> Orange juice is something closely connected to her Nigerian life, she used to drink juice before she left for America and also after she returned. Spending time

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 128.

with the university girls and among them Ginika, she slowly started to, as she describes it, claw through a milky web, still being half blinded to the world around her, still only partially understanding their jokes, but she was slowly adapting.

Concerning her experience as a migrant trying to fit in with the society and finding a job, America did not treat her kindly. As opposed to Auntie Uju, Ifemelu had a small head start in the form of a fake social security ID, given to her by Auntie Uju. The card belonged to a different Nigerian woman though as was explained to her and later proven, the Americans were not able to distinguish her from the woman in the picture. She applied for multiple jobs but got none, often wondering if some small detail in the interview squandered her chances, though with unsuccessful attempts piling up, it was becoming rather clear that more than anything, her country of origin and the proof of that – her accent – were the real deal breakers. A contrast to this can be observed in the assimilated character of Ginika, who does not have trouble landing a job or finding internships. The obtaining of a different identity is the start of a process of altering who she is in order to get access to the “American things”. After a rather degrading and awkward interaction with the university’s international student’s office, where due to her accent, which sparked stigma about her level of English (even though English is the official language in Nigeria), Ifemelu decides to start practicing an American accent. Alongside these changes comes also the first signs of adaptation. On her first day of school an American phrase “You’re all set!”<sup>58</sup> is spoken to her. Though she still has to take a mental step back to decipher the message, she does eventually understand, proving she is not completely clueless and alien to the American lingo anymore. Furthermore, after starting to attend the university, she discovered a hunger for knowledge inside her, especially for the things typically American. In the university’s library she had gotten access to countless books and sank her attention deep into literature about American mythology, ideology and race. It could be considered that at this stage, the Americanah emerged out of the womb and shortly after said her first word - “excited”. This new American identity is further built upon as she dates what some would call a “privileged” American. This period is briefly discussed in the forthcoming chapter. During this period, she perfects new American accent and even starts wearing her hair differently, more “America friendly”. Throughout the novel, hair is a prevalent symbol, representing one’s identity, what culture a certain person identifies with and so this image change shall not be underplayed. Furthermore, wearing her hair in a less kinky way is suggester to her multiple

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 137.



times in connection with landing a respectable job – which she finally does, but only after changing – straightening - her hairstyle to appeal to the American way of wearing it. Not only is such process unpleasant at the very least, the procedure also symbolizes her giving up a part of her Nigerian identity, replacing it with the American one. For a while, she exhibits proudness in this achievement, though she slowly starts to realize how much she had to sacrifice in order to do be successful in America. Her doubts are metaphorically depicted in her act of cheating on Curt – on the picture-perfect American – signifying she is shifting away from the American persona, cheating on being a true Americanah. She stops using the American accent and a blog she has been working on starts receiving a lot of attention. In this blog she goes about observing racial issues in America and giving her blunt and honest opinion. At this time, she also gets together with a black American academic by the name of Blaine. This relationship and its implications are discussed in a previous chapter.

“Really?” Shan paused. “I guess it’s your exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing.”<sup>59</sup>

“You know why Ifemelu can write that blog, by the way?” Shan said. “Because she’s African. She’s writing from the outside.”<sup>60</sup>

The second Ifemelu embraces her Nigerian side a little bit, she is confronted by her new boyfriend’s extremely successful sister, whose skin colour is the same of Ifemelu’s. It would seem that nowhere in America could she really be herself, as that always produces some sort of alienation, the imposing of otherness on her.

Ifemelu decides to move back to Nigeria, where she must tackle a new challenge – find herself again in the strange familiar. On her return home, Ifemelu experiences a similar emotion to that of seeing America for the first time.

“At first, Lagos assaulted her [...] she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? When she left home, only the wealthy had cell phones [...] Now, her hair braider had a cell phone, the plantain seller tending a blackened grill had a cell phone. She had grown up knowing all the bus stops and the side streets, understanding the cryptic codes of conductors and the body language of street hawkers. Now, she struggled to grasp the unspoken. [...] She was no longer sure what was new in Lagos and what was new in herself.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 373-375.

In the next months, her Americanness will be challenged. This gradual shift away from her American identity is first signified in her lies about still being with Blaine. As was demonstrated before, he represents the perfect role model of what Ifemelu could have become in America, yet she leaves this behind. To explore where her values lay, the author uses a cleverly written dispute between Doris – a true Americanah returnee and Zemaye – “homemade, born and bred”<sup>62</sup> to see who Ifemelu will agree with. She leans towards Zemaye’s side, though immediately after agrees to a compromise – showing she hones the Nigerian way of living in her heart but still fights the feeling of being stuck between two worlds inside.

“Don’t you just hate it how people say ‘I’m pressed’ or ‘I want to ease myself’ when they want to go to the bathroom?” Doris asked. Ifemelu laughed. “I know!” “I guess ‘bathroom’ is very American. But there’s ‘toilet,’ ‘restroom,’ ‘the ladies.’ ”<sup>63</sup>

It is quite clear she still shares a lot of meanings with Americans or Americanahs, a similar showing to that when she first arrived to America and was introduced to all the new language nuances. Later she attends a Nigeropolitan meeting – a get together of many returnees, where most of them, but not Ifemelu, try to show off how much of an American they became. They engage in a meticulous exchange of meanings and use American accents and vocabulary. The symbol of hair is seen again, as many of these returnees are seen wearing it the American way. There was one thing – the American cuisine – even Ifemelu said she missed.

“They have the kinds of things we can eat. An unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here, and she wished she were not.”<sup>64</sup>

An American style restaurant with fresh salads and steamed vegetables interested her, though she also mentions dearly missing the things she used to eat before leaving for America. A pattern is starting to form, indicating her inner interconnectedness of both these worlds. With a declination of a date offer from a fellow returnee Fred, Ifemelu is no longer interested in the prototypical persona of an Americanah.

“The speedboat was gliding on foaming water, past beaches of ivory sand, and trees a bursting, well-fed green. Ifemelu was laughing. [...] She thought: I’m really home. I’m home. She no longer sent Ranyinudo texts about what to do— [...] her day

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 397.

familiar and her routines unthinking. [...] after work she preferred to meet her friends ...”<sup>65</sup>

After meeting with fellow returnees, Ifemelu realizes that even though they still share meanings, they no longer share values. In this description of Nigeria, we get to finally see the glamour she once imagined would greet her in America. Moreover, on her first day at Lagos, she notices how pothole riddled the roads were, how some of the buildings were in a near decomposing state. And now she sees the beauty in the country, the implication here being that there is no place in the world which will bring immediate success and happiness and most of all it will not be a place where one does not feel home. This feeling can only be found by first finding one's self and then planting it in a garden where it belongs. Yet this flower is not completely homogenous to the surrounding flora. A young girl tells her with a child-like honesty that her hair is *jaga-jaga* – a Nigerian slang for out of place. In a dramatic conclusion to the book, Ifemelu and Obinze perform what could be described as a passionate mating dance. In the end, the two souls find a way to connect – both of them finding what they have been seeking since the beginning of the novel. Ifemelu finds a man with whom she shares the same meanings, history, passion and can be fully authentic around while Obinze finds a truthful life with a spark of foreignness. Ifemelu is what could be described as a “best of both worlds Americanah”.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 399.

### 5.3 Auntie Uju

Auntie Uju represents the typical Nigerian woman/wife. Before leaving for America, she strikes a relationship with a powerful man, though his values are questionable. Finding a rich and successful husband seems to be the number one priority for most of the traditionally thinking Nigerian women. She is drawn to power as well as to a certain comfortable standard of living. More importantly, she prefers to achieve these needs via another person and does not consider working her way up to success. During her time as a mistress to The General, she devotes all her time to keeping his attention. Later she gives birth to their son, however, this life of comfort comes to an end abruptly after The General tragically dies in a plane crash. She is left alone to fetch for her infant son and knowing that another powerful man will most likely not have interest in her now that she is a mother and her years are starting to add up, she ventures on a new journey after a comfortable life and departs for America. We later get to see how she is doing after Ifemelu arrives in America as well. Working three jobs, she still only makes enough money to get by. America did not prove to be the quick and easy ticket to comfort she was hoping for. With hair being a significant symbol in the novel, it is rather fitting for Ifemelu to then describe it as “roughly braided”. She later thinks to herself “the old Auntie Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids.”<sup>66</sup> This description of Auntie Uju's hair signifies how beaten down and subdued she was. Moreover, Ifemelu observes that she has also started pronouncing her name “the American way” and even picks up an American accent, while developing an aversion towards her native Igbo language.<sup>67</sup> Auntie Uju represents the negative aspects of becoming an Americanah. Auntie Uju's chase after comfort, realizing she would not find it simply by moving to America, continued as she started seeing a fellow Nigerian immigrant Bartholomew. She was far too good for the man, yet she ended up settling for him, saying: “He’s not bad. He has a good job.”<sup>68</sup> – settling for comfort and for the feeling of something familiar. In a later glimpse into Auntie Uju's life, we get to see that Bartholomew turned out to be the opposite of what she wanted. He does not show any interest in Dike, does not treat her well and even seeks to take control over her salary. Seeing he is not able to provide the comfort she so longs, she breaks up with him. Later she gets together with a Kenyan divorced doctor.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>67</sup> Maria Victória, Dias Silva, and Josane Daniela Freitas Pinto, "Racism and identity: a critical discourse analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah," *REVELL: Revista de Estudos Literários da UEMS* vol. 3, no. 23 (2019): 242.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 122.

“He treats me like a princess. Just like Curt treated you.”<sup>69</sup>

In a statement Aunty Uju makes, she yet again emphasizes her chase for comfort and for the familiar feelings of what used to be with The General.

She is often seen lamenting about the lack of traditional values in America, such as when her son at the age of 7 was reported to have been engaging in curiosity about private parts in kindergarten with a girl classmate. And on the other hand, rejoicing in cooking, cleaning and generally being a house wife for a man, furthering her representational function of the older generation of Nigerian women.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 296.

## 5.4 Dike

Dike is the son of Aunty Uju and Ifemelu's cousin. Though he has a Nigerian father, he spent his life from infancy in the USA, representing the 'second wave' of immigrants. His mother withdraws access to his roots, refusing to tell him about his father and she does not speak the native language of Igbo to him, even going as far as to forbid Ifemelu to speak the language around him, arguing it would “confuse him”.<sup>70</sup> What ends up happening is, that this denial of culture and roots confuses him even more. From a young age he has been presented with a negative image of Nigeria, in a conversation, where Ifemelu tries to present him with a Nigerian tradition, he very bluntly says: “I don’t think I like Nigeria, Coz.”<sup>71</sup> He acquires the American way of speaking and living. After all, that is what his mother has been trying to achieve, even saying the words: “This is how children like to misbehave in this country.”<sup>72</sup> in front of him, clearly projecting the idea of being 'one of them'. Furthermore, whenever she would scold him, she would accompany the speech with some Igbo phrases, building the connection between punishment and Nigeria.

When he comes to an elevated state of consciousness in his teenage years, he starts feeling like there is a missing piece to his existence. He asks about the origin of his name, about his father yet his mother is reluctant to provide such information. Furthermore, he is receiving “special” kind of treatment at school, being only one of the two black kids in the whole facility.

“Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said ‘we black folk’ and you told him ‘you are not black?’”<sup>73</sup>

His mother is well aware of this discrimination he is facing, which is the reason why she tries to stray him away from things Nigerian in order to not further fuel his differences. The effect of this, however, is that he gets stuck “between a rock and a hard place” – not really belonging anywhere. This cultural confusion contributes to or perhaps fully causes the 'American disease' or in other words of a Nigerian “Foreign behaviour”<sup>74</sup> – depression, which culminates in a suicide attempt. The character of Dike embodies the second generation of immigrants, who do not struggle with assimilation and do not have to go through the difficult process of adjusting one’s identity to fit in with the society, yet one element of

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 413.

immigration is strong with them, perhaps even stronger than with the first wave – the feeling of otherness. A sense of belonging to a group and some kind of connection with one’s “roots” is an inseparable part of one’s identity.

“You told him what he wasn’t but you didn’t tell him what he was.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 370.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND OVERARCHING THEMES

“The ethnosizer is the concept that consists of four distinct combinations of commitments and identifications: assimilation, integration, marginalization, separation with respect to five key elements of ethnic identity: language, visible cultural elements, ethnic self-identification, ethnic networks and future citizenship plans.”<sup>76</sup>

This concept was implemented by Adiche both when writing about America as well as Nigeria. Ifemelu’s first contact with America involves overcoming a language and meaning barrier, then the reader is presented with issues concerning her hair and accent, all the while building up racial discrimination narratives and in the relationship with Blaine a new circle of acquaintances and finally the decision to not stay in America and the fact Ifemelu comes to a conclusion that she does not want her children to have American childhoods. And later, on her return to Nigeria, she again starts off by commenting on the differences between the American and Nigerian English, accents, hair and clothing and in the final chapters of the novel the acquisition of what Ifemelu calls friends and most importantly plans to build a life with Obinze. Thus, it could be argued that Ifemelu developed two identities through the course of the novel with the main conflict being the choosing between which she wants to carry into the future.

The novel as a whole belongs under the genre of a bildungsroman, thoroughly exploring the growth and exploration of identities of its main characters under the unique light of alienation. As opposed to first person narration, which is common in most Bildungsroman novels, *Americanah* is written in third person. The reader is not presented with the narrative through the protagonist's eyes, but rather her thoughts. Internal monologues are rather generously sparkled across the whole book. Despite this deviation from tradition, Chimamanda did not fail at opening the door to Ifemelu's mind to the reader. The whole novel does not have the feel of an omniscient eye retelling the experiences of its characters but rather that of a transcription of thoughts, allowing for an even deeper understanding of Ifemelu, arguably impossible to achieve through “sensory” means.

As was discussed in the theory portion of this thesis, a recurring feature of the Bildungsroman is education, which may not only be mirrored in the learning of the characters, but also in the work as a whole. The book, even before the story starts, greets the

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<sup>76</sup> Patrycja Koziół, "Narrative strategy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel „Americanah”: the manifestation of migrant identity," *Studies in African Languages and Cultures* vol. 49 (2015): 100. Retrieved from <https://salc.uw.edu.pl/index.php/SALC/article/view/121>



reader with the words: “This book is for our next generation, *ndi na-abia n'iru*”<sup>77</sup>. The novel subtly provides advice to its target audience listeners – those who identify with the characters – subtly woven into the narrative:

“Try and make friends with our African-American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective.”<sup>78</sup>

“Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Tobey Maguire was about, and found *doubledipping* gross.”<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, the main characters of the novel are constructed in such a way to reflect all the sides of immigration and ultimately promote the idea of healthy transculturality – on one side presenting the reader with risks, rewards and expectations of immigration and on the other side commenting on, just like Ifemelu observes and comments on the issues she writes in her blog, the issues and stigma that both Nigerians and Americans associate with immigration with the ultimate goal to spark a debate and boost the awareness of such issues in hopes to leave behind a friendlier climate for the future generation.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., before the table of contents.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 128.

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