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Otherness and belonging- a study of transnational female experience in Americanah

Dr. Ramdinthari

The term “Transnational” denotes a study of nations and cultures in a global context. Transnational literatures are works of migrant or exiled writers. Transnationalism as a concept has nourished postcolonial and cultural studies. The term offers a context questioning the belongingness and identity for migrants in the globalized world. The experience becomes the daily existence for people who live outside their home country. This experience formulates the way migrants think about themselves, their family and their country. The term ‘Transnational’ was first used by Randolph Bourne in his 1916 article “Trans- National America” where he defined it as a strong cultural movement bringing with them, “their national and racial characters” (86) Paul Jay’s seminal text *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010) provides an extensive study of how the theoretical and critical issues in transnational drive becomes a significant study in literary studies and how these issues have come to dominate contemporary global fiction. Bill Ashcroft et.al., in *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*

Second Edition deduces, "Postcolonial literatures emerge from a history of colonization and diasporic literatures emerge from a fundamental absence of the homeland... Transnational literatures, however, emphasize cross-cultural literary writing, and, in general, it refers to writings from people who have immigrated or travelled from a homeland, to writings written in a second language, or to writings with a cross-cultural theme."(214)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is a powerful book exploring the personal and collective female identities through the transnational experiences. Like other post-colonial female writers, Adichie brings up the issue of transnational engagements of femaleness through her creative works and her works are deeply shaped by her transnational experiences. Through the complexity of her characters, Adichie brings to light the representation of African subjects and the cultural struggles and issues they have to confront. The book narrates Ifemelu's experiences in Nigeria and America. Voicing Ifemelu, Adichie unveils layers of racism and the immigrant's experience. When Ifemelu first arrives in America, she hides her identity, fakes an American accent and even relaxes her hair so as to assimilate herself in her new homeland. Her experience in America is what Homi K.Bhaba terms as "unhomeliness", moving from Nigeria to America (thanks to a university scholarship) she seeks belongingness in her new home.

One of the major features of postcolonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement and this led to the formation of identity crisis. A vibrant Ifemelu almost lost her active sense of self because of her transnational experience. This experience is denoted in *The Empire Writes Back* as

"Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in English."
(Ashcroft, et.al.9)

Black writing is central and influential within postcolonial discourse. Adichie's work takes post-colonial issues further by addressing the migrant experiences of racism, estrangement and exile. Using Ifemelu as her mouthpiece, she raises the issue of racism and how America can never dissolve this issue as she expresses in her blog "the problem of race in America will never be solved" (Adichie 296). Finding her new-self in a new culture, the book reveals her struggle to stabilize herself financially and at the same time, tries to make sense of her newfound racial identity through a blog revealing the immigrant's quest of self-invention.

Adichie's concern with hair is stressed in the novel. Much of *Americanah* takes place as Ifemelu sits in the salon getting her hair braided. For Ifemelu and other women like

her, hair symbolizes confidence, an identity formation and a very sensitive topic since it hints a form of discrimination. In America, African women are often denied opportunities because of the colour and texture of their hair. The concept of hair politics is first denoted when Auntie Uju insists that she will take out her braids and relax her hair for a job interview at a doctor's office: "Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional." (Adichie 119) As Ifemelu is new to America and ignorant to the unwritten rules of adhering oneself according to the American standard of beauty, she questions, "So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" (Adichie 119) Later on when Ifemelu has to attend an interview for a job, she seeks advice from her African American colleague, who advises: "Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters, we want you to get that job" (Adichie 202). Ifemelu has been braiding her hair with long extensions ever since she came to America. As she relaxes her hair for the first time, her hairdresser exclaimed, "Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (Adichie 203) The concept of 'white standard of beauty' becomes something to aspire for. Hailing from a background where race is not an "issue" to a place where race "matters" Ifemelu's words tumbled out,

"We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say that race

doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It's true. I speak from experience." (Adichie 291)

She did not see herself as black and realizes her blackness only after she arrives in America. Ifemelu has to find ways of dealing with these differences especially when she finds out that her natural dark kinky hair is not beautiful and not professional. However, Ifemelu is not happy in embracing her new identity in America and the factors that oppressed her true self. Ultimately, she decided to reclaim her African identity. She decided to stop faking American accent and the reclamation of her true identity makes her feel: "She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air... because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers... This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake." (Adichie 175) After Ifemelu relaxes her hair, she regrets it instantly because "her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek...she did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully...the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss" (Adichie 203). It becomes clear that Ifemelu's hair is a reflection of her identity and since that is lost, she felt a sense of loss. A reclamation of her African identity is manifested when she decides to chut

her relax hair and starts growing her natural kinky hair. The politics of hair is mentioned often in the book as this is the way Ifemelu confronts Western hegemony, provoking her to ask herself why coarse hair is considered ugly or exotic. In one of her blog's posts titled "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor" Ifemelu talks about the hair of the First Lady and how it could affect the campaign of Obama for presidency:

Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky or curly) in the ugly "before" picture, and in the pretty "after" picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight?... Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls...She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (Adichie 297).

What Adichie means is that Michelle Obama represents black respectability, but then again, the irony is that Obama would not have won the presidency if Michelle Obama wears her natural hair since this will harm her husband's image. This happens because in Western culture the concept of being black is an issue and the acceptance of natural hair is connected to the acceptance of black identity, and this is seen as subversive in relation to western standards.

With the description of Princeton at the beginning of the book, Ifemelu seems to be part of an elite American club. However, when she needs to braid her hair, she has to go somewhere else and although Ifemelu assimilates well to Princeton environment, the place is not suited for her. The nuances of race issue are presented here and Ifemelu argues that she only becomes black when she moves to the United States: "In America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you" (Adichie 337-8). Her character brings an honest perspective on the discussion of race and the treatment of minorities in the United States. Ifemelu struggles for assimilation and at the same time, staying true to her identity. Back in Nigeria, she enjoys being a lower middle-class and attends college at Nsukka although it is frequently disrupted by strikes. Her movement to America changes everything about her. She suddenly finds herself in the under-privileged group because of her skin color, hair and most of all because of her race. Through the experience of her character, Adichie reflects on why becoming 'more American' is encouraged so as to blend themselves in American society. It is true that dominant cultures impose subordination as Frantz Fanon writes:

"The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority... It is the racist who creates his inferior" (Fanon and Markmann 69).

It is well known that people with dark complexion experience racism very often. Ifemelu having experience all these treatments decided to embrace her black identity. Being 'boldly black' in America have a deeper meaning in America and she blurted out:

“The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie... When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters...” (Adichie 290).

The narrative follows Ifemelu’s adaptation to her life in America, where she stays for thirteen years. She has experiences financial problems, found it hard to integrate into academic life and was turned down many times at job interviews. Ifemelu then fiercely begins to write a blog called “Raceteenth, or Various Observations about American Blacks (those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” to share her perspectives of American society. The blog is written from Ifemelu’s points of view and filled with bold statements. She writes about different issues including the concept of how to fit in - or rather if she should fit in at all - or the effort to integrate and how these whole ideas are connected to the idea of conforming. Ifemelu’s blog explicitly narrates transnational female

experiences and makes the Americans aware what it feels like to be a cultural outsider and find people with which she can sympathize. When she first arrives in America she struggles for belongingness. The art of her blogging makes her able to examine her situation ways in which she is treated and how the other African Americans are treated. It is through her writing that she gains an understanding of her place in society. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha articulates on the concept of mimicry as:

“the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power”. (12)

This stresses the mutual dependence and it reflects on how the colonizers encourage the colonized to adopt their culture, habits and beliefs since the colonizer deemed theirs to be superior than the colonized.

Art is intrinsic to empowerment for transnational women. It is able to transform experiences into a coherent narrative. The art of blogging becomes an oppositional voicing for Ifemelu. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin mentions how race-based literature is a model of post-colonial literatures;

“Another grouping which traverses several of the literatures from post-colonial societies is “Black Writing”. This proceeds from the idea of

race as a major feature of economic and political discrimination and draws together writers in the African diasporas whatever their nationality – African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and writers from African nations.” (19)

The above statement is a differentiation between texts written by “a Black minority in a rich and powerful White country and those produced by the Black majority population of an independent nation” (Ashcroft et.al.,19). While the former group stigmatizes the Black with deteriorating stereotypes, the latter also writes back to show how racist the former groups are. Adichie, as a diasporic writer is telling the Americans how racist they are in the eyes, and voices this statement. Language becomes a tool for her to express herself and voice the racial discrimination faced by people like her. The art of blogging becomes instrumental in sharing her racial self- awareness and people starts reading her blog as cultural commentary. Adichie exposes the ever-pervading racism and the racial hierarchy in America in *Americanah*. Ifemelu is an outsider in America: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 290). Ifemelu awakes to the realization of what it means to be black in America and reflects her thoughts in her anonymous blog. In her blogpost “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America You are Black

Baby,” Ifemelu writes how the Americans automatically racialize people into racial categories – most notably ‘black’ and ‘white’. The concern with skin colors and prejudices is again reflected in another blogpost, “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism,” in which Ifemelu explains how class (rich versus poor), ideology (liberal versus conservative) and race constitute America’s culture. Ifemelu, furthermore, rightfully notes in “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To?” where she talks about the white privilege. Being white is associated with opportunities and being black is associated with disadvantage and, this is the reason why many blacks aspire to the privileges of whiteness.

In the story, one can notice the development in Ifemelu’s identity through different stages. The first stage is the immigration and assimilation in America and finally the return to her homeland - Nigeria. With her immigration and subsequent assimilation in America, she achieves an independence enabling her to forge a culturally hybrid identity - of Nigerian and American influences. Ifemelu’s American experiences taught her that Africans and African-Americans have different racial experiences and these shapes their identities which highlight the interconnectedness between identity and race. With her return to Nigeria, Ifemelu achieves an interdependence enabling her to construct her

transnational identity and experiences. As she reconnects with her Nigerian roots, she understands and celebrates her belongingness and what it means to be 'an African'. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha introduced new concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and Third Space to postcolonial studies. The concepts describe the development of new cultural identities as well and also signify ways in which the colonized resisted their colonizers. As Ifemelu stops adhering to the expectations placed on her by others, she is able to live her true self and is able to explore spaces for the self. Her decision to stop faking American accent makes her realize her true belonging. This is what Bhabha reflects as ;

“The threatened ‘loss’ of meaningfulness in cross-cultural interpretation, which is as much a problem of the structure of the signifier as it is a question of cultural codes...then becomes a hermeneutic project for the restoration of cultural ‘essence’ or authenticity.”⁶

Ifemelu decides to end her blog, as it makes her feel “like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use” (Adichie 5) and also because it makes her feel “naked and false” (Adichie 5). Ifemelu also decides to return to Nigeria – where she believes she can actually be her true self: “Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots

in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil.” (Adichie 6) Upon arrival in Nigeria, however, it becomes evident that Ifemelu has changed: “Had buildings in Lagos always had this patina of decay? ... Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence?” (Adichie 385). Ifemelu has to adjust herself in Lagos because the city has changed, what is apparent here is that due to her immigrant experience and her life in America has transformed her identity and she is not tied to one nation or culture anymore. This concept is reinforced by Ranyinundo when she teases her: “Americanah! ... 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.” (Adichie 385) Ifemelu has not been assimilated with Nigerian culture for a very long time but this does not mean that she is has lost a sense of her national identity. This means that her identity is in the process of becoming transnational. She is able to reconnect with Nigerian culture soon after and more importantly, she reconnects with her high school sweetheart, Obinze, Ifemelu’s transnational experience, transcends a postcolonial identity of resistance and it is important to view her return to her once colonial homeland from a transnational perspective rather than a post-colonial experience as it reveals and highlights the clashes between national cultures which are inherent in Ifemelu’s transnational identity. In Nigeria, Ifemelu is able to tie herself to Nigerian culture, but

after her migration to the US, Ifemelu enters a Third Space, that allows her to incorporate American and, later, Nigerian culture into a hybrid identity. She is finally able to achieve a multicultural perspective when she returns to Nigeria.

Americanah becomes an instrument of artistic expression and a means of restoring cultural authenticity for the minorities. By centering the experience and perspectives of transnational female character, Adichie is able to explore the intricate connections between individual identities and larger global politics and patriarchy, and ultimately with her unique transnational personality, becomes the voice of conscience speaking back and forth across the borders. 'Americanah' exemplifies the African migratory experience and the concept of transnational experience is linked with postcolonial issues of power disjunction.

End Notes:

1. Ashcroft, Bill, et al., "Introduction." *The Empire Writes Back*. Routledge, 1989. pp. 9.
2. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. HarperCollins, 2013. Pp. 296.
3. Ibid. pp. 203.
4. Ibid. pp. 291.
5. Ashcroft, Bill, et al., "Cutting The Ground." *The Empire Writes Back*. Routledge, 1989. pp. 19.

6. Bhabha, Homi K., "Articulating The Archaic: Cultural Difference and Colonial Nonsense." *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2012. pp. 179.

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