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Racial Identity Construction and Self-Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah

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Abstract

The contemporary Nigerian diaspora writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel Americanah explores racial and immigration issues in American society from the perspective of literature. Informed by Frantz Fanon's theory of racialization and the production of subject, this essay explores the construction of racial identity and self-identity. Through the protagonist's experience of cultural integration and conflict abroad, and her eventual return to Nigeria, the novel illustrates how racial meaning is produced and imposed through everyday social interactions, identity perception, and cultural categorization. The protagonist's evolving self-awareness in turn foregrounds the tension between imposed racial identity and the ongoing project of personal self-definition.

Keywords

Americannah; racial identity; self-identity; racialization; diaspora.

1. Introduction

Born in Nigeria, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been reputed as "Nigeria's Tolstoy" and is widely regarded as one of the most promising candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature among post-1970s writers[1]. She is also a leading figure in transnational African literature and postcolonial writing. Her works are mostly classified within the postcolonial literature and diasporic writing, consistently focusing on identity politics in postcolonial context, with particular attention to how race, gender, and migratory experience shape individual subjectivity. *Americanah*[4], one of her most significant novels, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2014.

The novel mainly tells the story of two young Nigerians, Ifemelu and Obinze, tracing their transatlantic migration experiences across the USA and UK, and presenting the process of reconstructing identity within the context of globalization. The essay argues that racial identity is not an inherent or stable attribute, but a socially constructed category shaped through spatial and institutional forms of racial perception. At the same time, self-identity emerges as a dynamic process continuously negotiated across different cultural and geographic contexts.

The study draws primarily on Frantz Fanon's analysis of racialization and subject formation. Fanon emphasizes that racial identity is produced through external structures of perception, bodily inscription and internalized hierarchies of value. Within his framework, subjectivity is not autonomous but constructed through social and historical relations of power that determine both how individuals are perceived and how they come to perceive themselves.

Based on this perspective, the paper adopts a spatial narrative structure and analyzes the novel in two stages: Ifemelu's migration from Nigeria to the United States, where racial identity is imposed and experienced, and her return to Nigeria, where self-identity is re-evaluated and reconstructed. Through this spatial movement, Americanah reveals how racialization operates

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as a process tied to specific social spaces, while self-identity remains fluid and contingent upon mobility and reflection.

Based on this perspective, this paper adopts spatial narrative structure to analyze this novel of two stages. From Nigeria to America, Ifemelu's ethnic identity is strengthened and experienced at this period. Her returning to the homeland, Ifemelu's self-identity is re-evaluated and reconstructed. Through this spatial movement, Americanah reveals how racialization operates as a process tied to specific social spaces, while self-identity remains its fluidity and contingency upon mobility and reflection.

2. From Nigeria to America- Becoming "Black" in the Migration

Migration, language, and identity are central themes in contemporary literature, reflecting the complex experiences of individuals navigating transnational spaces[2]. These phenomena are also written in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah. The experience of migration functions not merely as a geographical transition, but as a process through which racial identity is actively produced and imposed. The protagonist Ifemelu's relocation from Nigeria to the United States marks a profound epistemological shift: a move from a social context in which race is not a primary organizing category to one in which racial classification becomes a dominant framework of interpretation. This chapter argues that Ifemelu's experience demonstrates how racial identity is socially constructed through perception, institutional categorization, and embodied social interaction, rather than existing as an inherent or biological essence.

Frantz Fanon's theory of racialization provides a useful framework for understanding this process. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon argues that the Black subject in a racialized society is not simply an individual with a pre-existing identity, but a subject produced through external structures of perception and power[3]. He emphasizes the role of the "white gaze" in objectifying Black individuals, positioning them as visible bodies rather than autonomous subjects. Identity, in this sense, is not self-generated but imposed through social relations that precede the individual's awareness of self.

Adichie famously writes, "I didn't think of myself as Black and I only became Black when I came to America"[4], highlighting the socially constructed nature of racial identity.Upon arriving in the United States, Ifemelu experiences a similar process of external racial categorization. In Nigeria, her identity is shaped by ethnic, national, and class distinctions rather than racial hierarchy. However, in the American context, she is immediately positioned within a rigid racial taxonomy. As Fanon[3] suggests, this moment reflects the transformation of the subject into an object of racial meaning, where identity is not negotiated but assigned through external perception. Ifemelu's realization that she is now perceived as "Black" in America marks the beginning of her racialized subject formation. Her relationship with her white boyfriend Curt further reveals how intimacy in the U.S. is still structured through racial perception, as she becomes acutely conscious of being positioned as "Black" within the relationship.

A key mechanism through which racial identity is constructed in the novel is the operation of what Fanon identifies as the racial gaze. Ifemelu repeatedly encounters moments in which her body becomes the site of interpretation by others, particularly in relation to her accent, hair, and cultural difference. These encounters illustrate how visibility itself becomes racialized: to be seen is already to be classified. Fanon[3] describes this condition as one in which the Black subject exists "not as a person, but as a thing," suggesting that racialization operates through processes of objectification embedded in everyday social interactions.

One of the most significant examples of this embodied racialization is the politics of hair. Ifemelu's decision to wear her natural hair in the United States becomes a site of social negotiation and symbolic resistance. However, this resistance is itself structured by a dominant

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aesthetic regime that defines Black hair as unprofessional or deviant. As scholars of race and embodiment have noted, the body functions as a site where social meaning is inscribed and reproduced[5]. In this sense, Ifemelu's hair is not merely personal style, but a socially legible marker through which racial identity is regulated and interpreted. In the first chapter of the novel, her experience in a barbershop is depicted. When Ifemelu talks with her Nigerian hairdressers, she tells them she intends to renounce her American citizenship and move back to Nigeria. This subtly shows that Nigerians in America weighed and valued the nationalities and cultural identities of the two countries.

What is more important is that Ifemelu's developing awareness of race does not simply result in passive assimilation into this structure. Instead, it produces a critical consciousness that allows her to reflect on the constructed nature of racial categories. Her blog writing later becomes a medium through which she articulates and critiques the contradictions of racial life in America. This transition from lived experience to reflective discourse demonstrates that racial identity is not only imposed but also interpreted and renegotiated by the subject. In conclusion, Americanah illustrates how racial identity in the United States is constructed through the interaction of perception, embodiment, and institutional categorization. Drawing on Fanon's theory of racialization, this chapter has shown that the protagonist's experience is shaped by external structures that define and delimit subjectivity. Ifemelu's transformation from an un-racialized subject in Nigeria to a racialized subject in America underscores Fanon's claim that identity is produced within systems of power rather than existing independently of them. The novel thus reveals race not as a natural category, but as a socially and historically constructed form of human differentiation.

3. Returning from America to Nigeria- the Reconstruction of Self- Identity

Ifemelu's eventual return to Nigeria in *Americanah* marks a crucial turning point in her process of identity formation. While her migration to the United States exposes her to the production of racial identity through structural categorization and social perception, her return complicates and reconfigures this experience by placing her previously acquired racial consciousness into a different sociocultural context. This chapter argues that self-identity in *Americanah* is not a stable or internally coherent essence, but a dynamic process shaped through movement between geographical and epistemological spaces.

The concept of diaspora identity is useful in understanding this return process. As diaspora scholars emphasize, identity in migratory contexts is not fixed but continuously rearticulated through shifting relations between homeland and host society[6,7]. Within this framework, return migration does not signify a simple restoration of origin, but rather a re-engagement with a transformed sense of self. Ifemelu's return to Nigeria thus does not erase her racialized experience in the United States; instead, it produces a hybrid consciousness shaped by both belonging and displacement.

In Nigeria, Ifemelu finds herself negotiating a changed social position. Having lived through the racialization process in the United States, she now perceives her Nigerian environment through a transformed lens. This shift illustrates what Stuart Hall[8] describes as cultural identity as "a matter of becoming as well as being," suggesting that identity is always in process rather than fixed. Ifemelu's self-awareness is therefore not a return to an original self, but the continuation of an ongoing negotiation between different positions shaped by migration.

What's more, her return also exposes the limits of racial categorization as a stable identity framework. While race operates as a dominant organizing principle in the United States, its salience is recontextualized in Nigeria, where other forms of social differentiation—such as class, gender, and professional status—become more prominent. This does not negate her racialized experience in America; rather, it highlights the contextual dependency of racial

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meaning. As Fanon argues, racial identity is not an intrinsic essence but a relational construct produced within specific structures of power[3]. Ifemelu's shifting position demonstrates this relational nature of identity, as her self-perception changes depending on the social environment in which she is situated.

Furthermore, Ifemelu's reflective voice, particularly through her blog writing, plays a key role in articulating this reconstructed identity. The blog functions as a discursive space in which she processes her American experiences and translates them into critical commentary on race and migration. Scholars of diasporic narrative suggest that such forms of self-expression are central to identity formation in transnational contexts, as they allow individuals to narrate fragmented experiences into coherent meaning[9]. In this sense, Ifemelu's writing becomes a site where self-identity is actively produced rather than passively recovered.

The tension between belonging and estrangement is further evident in her interpersonal relationships upon return. While she is socially reintegrated into Nigerian society, her internalized awareness of race creates a subtle sense of distance. This reflects Avtar Brah's[6] notion of "diaspora space," in which home and displacement coexist simultaneously, producing complex and sometimes contradictory forms of belonging. Ifemelu's identity is thus neither fully Nigerian nor fully American, but positioned within an in-between space shaped by her migratory trajectory.

First-generation migrants tend to maintain strong identification with their home culture, whereas second- and later-generation migrants are more likely to be shaped by the sociocultural environment in which they grow up[10]. Therefore, for those first-generation descendants of African diasporic subjects who were born or raised in the West, the host country can, to some extent, be regarded as the first "homeland" they truly encounter upon attaining self-awareness. Unlike the first generation diasporic subjects, second-generation of diasporic subjects are more likely to be afflicted with identity crisis in terms of cultural identification and acceptance, identity reconstruction, and psychological belonging. They often grow up with a sense of homelessness and displacement, and the process of overcoming this condition proves considerably more difficult.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's cousin Dike serves as a typical figure of the second-generation Black diasporic subject. Driven by Uju's aspiration for America, she gave birth to Dike in the United States, thereby securing his automatic American citizenship. After her lover was executed following a failed military coup in Nigeria, she chose to bring Dike to live in America. She deliberately refrained from disclosing their original nationality to her son and forbade those around her from speaking Igbo with him, believing that speaking two languages in America was abnormal. "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture."[11].

Language carries the historical development of a nation and serves as the most direct embodiment of its culture. Yet Aunt Uju did not wish for her descendant to use his native language, distancing him from Nigeria in order to better assimilate into American social life. However, Dike suffered from bullying at school due to his race and skin color. During a summer camping activity, the group leader distributed sunscreen to all participants except Dike, merely because the leader subjectively assumed that Black people did not need sun protection. This left him in a prolonged state of ambiguous "rootlessness," which ultimately led to depression and a suicide attempt. Among the various manifestations of identity anxiety, self-abandonment represents the most extreme form[12,p.57]. Dike sought to end the pain of identity crisis through an extreme means. Unlike Ifemelu, Dike was raised in the United States and later relocated to Nigeria, occupying an unstable position in which neither national belonging nor cultural identification could be fully established. His experience reveals the limitations of return as a strategy for resolving identity. Consequently, he is unable to fully integrate into either Nigerian or American social environments, demonstrating that diaspora is not merely a spatial

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condition but a structural mode of subject formation that extends across generations. This corroborates a broader argument in transnational studies that migrant subjectivity is increasingly characterized by "suspended belonging" rather than stable incorporation[13]. Dike's experience extends Fanon's account of racialized subject formation by demonstrating that the effects of racialization persist beyond the immediate encounter with structural categorization, becoming embedded in long-term psychological and cultural dislocation. In this way, the novel suggests that diaspora operates not only as lived experience but also as an inherited condition.

Ifemelu's return to Nigeria in *Americanah* demonstrates that self-identity is not resolved through return, but continuously reconfigured through mobility and reflection. Her experience reveals that racial identity acquired in the United States does not disappear upon return, but becomes part of a broader diasporic consciousness that reshapes how she understands both self and home. Through this process, the novel illustrates that identity is not a fixed endpoint, but an ongoing negotiation across shifting cultural and spatial contexts. The inclusion of inter-generational displacement, as exemplified by Dike, further complicates this process by demonstrating that diaspora is not merely a spatial trajectory but a structural condition of subject formation across time.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the construction of racial identity and the formation of self-identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the migratory trajectory of the protagonist Ifemelu. Adichie employs rich literary imagination to construct an expansive textual space, which enables the protagonist to engage with different ethnic groups within transnational mobility[14].

Responding to the research question posed in the introduction—how racial identity is produced and how self-identity is reconfigured in diasporic experience—the study has demonstrated that identity in the novel is not an inherent or stable essence, but a socially constructed process shaped through spatial, institutional, and perceptual structures. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's theory of racialization and subject formation, the analysis of Ifemelu's experience in the United States shows that racial identity is produced through external mechanisms such as the racial gaze, bodily inscription, and institutional categorization. These mechanisms define subjectivity in relational terms, positioning individuals within hierarchies of visibility and value. In this sense, the novel illustrates Fanon's argument that identity is not self-originating, but constructed through systems of power that precede the individual. At the same time, Ifemelu's return to Nigeria highlights the contextual and unstable nature of racial meaning. Her re-encounter with her homeland does not negate her racialized experience in the United States, but instead reconfigures it into a reflective awareness of identity as a shifting process. The inclusion of inter-generational diaspora through Dike further extends this argument by demonstrating that the effects of racialization persist beyond individual migration, shaping subjectivity across generations. Overall, the novel suggests that racial identity and self-identity are not separate categories, but interdependent processes produced through mobility and social structure. Migration functions as the mechanism through which racial identity is constructed, while return enables its re-evaluation and transformation. However, this study is limited in its focus on a single literary text and primarily relies on Fanon's theoretical framework. Future research could further explore comparative diasporic narratives or incorporate additional theoretical perspectives on transnational identity formation to provide a more diversified understanding of racial subjectivity in contemporary literature.

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