
**NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN AN AGE GREATLY INFLUENCED BY SOCIAL
MEDIA IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH***

BY

NGWABA IJEOMA ANN (NEE IBEKU)

Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State

+2348037641779

annbeks@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examines the concept of identity in an age greatly influenced by social media. It analyses the concept of identity in an era where the characters drift apart and reconciled in a world where communication plays a vital role through the social media. The issue of identity prevails despite the fact that an individual's identity plays a vital role in shaping his personality. This also, is dependent on the individual's acceptance of himself. This essay demonstrates that identity as depicted in the novel goes beyond the usual misconceptions attached to the black skin but touches its tentacles on how it affects the individuals. Adichie engaged identity issues in her novel, much of which could be understood through the effects it has on the individuals and how self-acceptance can help in curbing this menace. It concludes that an individual's perception of his personality determines how the issue of his identity affects him either positively or negatively. This paper attempts to fill this lacuna by bringing to the fore, the effects of a wrong notion on the identity of an individual and how it is influenced by globalization.

Keywords: Negotiating, Identity, Globalization, Misconceptions and Social Medi

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has distinguished herself as one of the best new generation Nigerian female writer. She has won lots of prestigious awards and some of her novels have been translated to other languages. Adichie focuses her attention on women and what they go through in life; their love for the family, respect for their husbands and their tradition. *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie is published in 2013 where she examines the life of the protagonist –Ifemelu who travels to United States of America to pursue her university education.

Americanah is a compelling story of Ifemelu's quest for better education and it revolves around racism and how it affects the lives of black immigrants in a contemporary American society, especially on the females. It offers a great insight into how an identity of an individual could become a burden; what it means to be a black female in America and the numerous challenges they face; for being black and for being female. Ifemelu represents the female immigrant in America. Her problem ranges from racism, identity crisis, relationships, romance and separation. In all these, she stands out as she finds a way around them, it is never a smooth sailing ground for her and most female characters but in all, they were able to pull through these challenges.

The title of the novel is very significant and it is used for those who travelled to the Western world and comes back to Nigeria with their fake American accent, good cars, clothes and lots of money as the case may be. They often make those at home believe they have made it in life by traveling abroad. They tend to hide their ugly experiences of being in a foreign land and also being black. This novel exposes the bitter experiences of these 'Americanas' with the sole aim of exposing them and to tell those who have not traveled that it is not always a bed of roses.

Identity, Globalization and their challenges

An individual identity is an important aspect in his overall wellbeing and therefore should be treated like a delicate issue. The female identity has become a common trend in most postcolonial studies, cultural studies, feminist discourse and sociological theories. The identity of an individual is an important aspect of his life as it explains a lot about his cultural background. Homi Bhabha is of the view that cultural identity is an epistemological object, that is, culture as

an object of empirical knowledge. It goes therefore to say that the identity of a person is in line with his cultural background.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and *New Webster's Dictionary* of the English language, Identity is generally defined as "the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that distinguish people from others", the fact of being the same in all respects; who a person is or what a thing is; a statement of equality...which is true under all conditions". From the above definitions, it could be deduced that women are primarily identified by their physiological composition which is different from men. Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie has argued that the woman's biology is an important aspect of her; it may become the basis for limiting her. But this assertion seems faulty in this era as the woman's biology does not limit her in any way; most recent novels examines their major contribution in the society as they showcase their relevance which is not limited in any way.

Martin Heidegger defines identity as "the relation of belonging together"; therefore the female identity belongs together as they were initially believed to be dehumanized, abused, segregated, relegated to the background and rejected" (Heidegger, 12). This study is not interested in presenting the female identity in such manner but rather an identity that has been magnified as could be seen from the novels of these female writers.

Globalization on the other hand, has made a great impact in our world of literature. It has become a tool that helps in reaching out to a wider audience despite the location of the individuals involved. Globalization, according to the Oxford Learners Dictionary is defined as "the fact that different cultures and economic systems around the world are becoming connected and similar to each other because of the influence of large multinational companies and improved communications". Social media is as a result of globalization which is an improved way of doing something. No doubt, there has been a great improvement in human relations as a result of improved methods of communications. Writers are able to reach a wider audience through this means, also the happenings in an environment is made known to others of different nationalities. Literature has benefitted a lot from globalization as a Nigerian can read about the culture and traditions of others in a distant land and vice versa.

A person's individuality comes under threat when choosing to exist as a member of a group where personal identity is easily hidden and overlooked by the community. Women play significant roles in the shaping as well as destructions of their identities. Abena Busia has noted that the writings of black women concentrate on "an exploration of a sense of self through both personal and group history to the final end of articulating a narrative of the self with a clear sense one's place among one's people in an accepted location" (Abenia, 3). Katherine Leake pointed out the two kinds of journey that exemplify Busia's argument: "Voluntary journey by which the characters seek to place and define themselves and involuntary journey, by which the characters are displaced and thus stripped of their identities" (Leake, 120). When human beings are forced to see themselves as animals or inferior creatures and when their own names, language and culture are taken away, there is great danger of losing one's self.

The pioneer African writers, mirrored patriarchy in their works as Oriaku, rightly observed in text that 'the man is made the subject of the narrative; he is significant and dominates other people. Because he is invariably the central character, the lives of the other characters- the other male characters who serve as his foils or the women and children whose significance lies in their dependence on him are much less fully realized. In their work, therefore, the woman is the object the 'other' (Oriaku, 72). Sheila opines that 'otherness' especially in existentialist means 'a social/moral as well as personal/psychological assignment of woman to the role of a less than primary, less than completely human being. In this case, 'otherness' defines woman as the 'other half' of humanity (Sheila, 4).

In Ogundipe's opinion, the African woman whose consciousness has been aroused set out to search for justice. It doesn't necessarily mean that women are just interested only about sexual freedom but in all ramification of life. According to Ogundipe's argument, the African woman's quest for identity becomes a continuous process since they are traditionally reduced to

housewives and relegated to the background which we earlier stated that it is obsolete. These women are not limited in any way; they are now subjects to be reckoned with (Ogundipe, 135).

Henderson emphasize that black women must speak to be heard by different groups so as to share her identity. She believes that black women “chart their female protagonist's development from voicelessness to voice, silence to tongues” (Henderson, 124). The female writer believes that black women have the right to speak. She further notes:

Black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women... It is the complexity of these simultaneous, homogenous and heterogeneous social and discursive domains out of which black women write and construct themselves...that enables black women writers authoritatively to speak to and engage both hegemonic and ambiguously (non) hegemonic discourse (Henderson 121).

Adichie exposes the different problems in a contemporary Nigerian setting which ranges from unemployment, poor educational system, poverty, corruption and the abuse of power. All these contributed to why most Nigerian citizens leave the shores of the country where their identity is being questioned. They are seen as inferior beings and women are the most affected as they are regarded as inferior beings, as such, this poses a big problem to them. Oby Okolocha believes that “Exile, displacement, migration and diasporic experiences are familiar features of 21st century African literature and contemporary depictions of issues that propel the migration of people, displacement and conditions of exile are situated in varied and diversified historical and social contexts...the diversity of immigrant and exilic experience features prominently in the works of African writers in the diaspora” (Okolocha, 103).

Ifemelu relocates abroad in order to get a better education, the higher institutions in Nigeria is always on strike as a result of non-payment of salaries and poor educational facilities. She is opportune to travel as there are many students whose parents cannot afford such luxury. This relocation is an eye opener as she was shocked by the wide gap between the western world and the high rate of racism that exist as a result of her identity.

The opening of the novel vividly describes their serene environment and how beautiful it is, Ifemelu is obviously engrossed by them as Adichie explains:

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Heaven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage...She liked the campus, grave with knowledge, the Gothic buildings with their vibe-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty (Adichie, 2013:13).

Adichie in a way compares most American cities especially those that has some of kind of smell. In essence, it is not usually a paradise as most people who have not traveled abroad believe. There were still some places that has unpleasant smell and unkempt for reasons best known to them. She also states why she likes Princeton because it has no smell and prefers the serene nature of the atmosphere.

Most of the female characters in the novel are different from the ones we find in her first and second novels; they are usually humiliated and denied some certain rights but in this novel, most

of them always stand out and find a way around whatever challenges they face. They accepted who they are; their identity which they believe is not a mistake from their creator. Issues of identity revolve around the female characters in this novel. Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, Ginika and Obinze's mother are examples of such women. Auntie Uju almost made the mistake of depending on a man for her survival but his death is an eye opener which helped her to discover who she really is. Chude-Sokei contends that most African migrant writers, race is not central to their novels but that they rather believe that: "race... may not be the primary source of their identities" (Sokei, 70).

Ifemelu's arrival and adjustment to the western world seems difficult; finding a job became an issue for her. They expect her to accept anything the society offers her but she knows her identity and ready to protect it. She loves her African nature more when compared to Wallace Thurman's protagonist, Emma Lou in his novel, *The Blacker the Berry*... where she rejects the colour of her skin and finds other means of changing it which exposes her to many problems. If she accepts her colour, others will not be able to humiliate and nicknamed her: "Blacker n Me". Ifemelu refuses to accept such even when her hair stylist insists that using relaxer is necessary for all Africans due to the texture of their hair. Aisha who works in a beauty salon tries her best to convince her to change the texture of her hair by using relaxer as the world has gone to another level of changing ones hair texture but she insists that she prefers it that way. Adichie states:

Finally, Aisha finished with her customer and asked what colour Ifemelu wanted for her hair attachment. "Colour four". "Not good colour", Aisha said promptly. "That's what I use". "It looks dirty. You don't want colour one?" "Colour one is too black, it looks fake"... she touched Ifemelu's hair. "Why you don't have relaxer?" "I like my hair the way God made it". "But how you comb it? Hard to comb" Aisha said. Ifemelu brought her own comb. She gently combed her hair, dense, soft and tightly coiled, until it framed her head like a halo. "It's not hard to comb if you moisturize it properly", she said, slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural. Aisha snorted; she clearly could not understand why anybody would choose to suffer through combing natural hair, instead of simply relaxing it (Adichie, 2013:24).

All efforts by Aisha to make sure that Ifemelu start using relaxer which is a modern way of life as a result of globalization proves abortive as she is even convincing her why African women should appreciate their natural hair, the way God made them. She gave her instances and also shows her how to comb the hair which she believes is difficult. For her, her hair is part of her identity. Changing it to look straight will be fake and accepting other people's identity which is inappropriate. She prefers to protect the identity that God gave her and did everything possible not to accept or appreciate the identity of those who do not value hers. This goes a long way to show that one's perception and acceptance of her identity determines how others will treat him.

Auntie Uju is another interesting female character in the novel as she fell in love with a married man which the society and the church considers sinful. Her life has been clouded by the presence of The General as she fondly calls him, provides for all her needs. She seems to be different from the other characters; none depended on men for their sustenance. She is a qualified medical doctor and one wonders why she could do such. "During the week, Auntie Uju hurried home to shower and wait for The General and on weekends, she lounged in her night-dress, reading or cooking or watching television, because The General was in Abuja with his wife and children. She avoids the sun and used creams in elegant bottles, so that her complexion, already naturally light, became lighter, brighter, and took on a sheen" (Adichie, 2013:92). It is such a difficult thing to believe why a single lady prefers to date a married man who goes back to his family on weekends, her life seems normal but it is not. The death of The General is an eye opener for Auntie Uju as well as a true revelation of her identity, it made her realize she has no place in the man's

home and as such, was driven out of her house which is rented by him. She gets lot of suggestion on the way forward; it is obvious The General is wise and bought the house in his name.

Adichie allows Auntie Uju to know how it feels like to be a concubine so that she could appreciate who she is. As suggested, she travels to United States of America with her son, Dike. Life becomes very difficult for her as she finds it very hard to pass her examination to practice as a medical doctor. Despite the challenges, she didn't give up; she keeps on re-writing the examination and working three jobs to make ends meet. It never cross her mind to look for any man to depend on or even remember to repeat her way of life in Nigeria. She became focused and is able to make it. Her identity transformation of being a concubine to a woman pursuing her career in America proves that women can switch easily to who they really are when faced with challenges. She told Ifemelu nice and ugly things about life in America and finally helps her when she relocates to United States of America. She is excited when she passes her medical examination to become a practicing doctor; Ifemelu is the one that received the mail and hands over to her. Adichie states:

FINALLY, Auntie Uju's result came. Ifemelu brought in the envelope from the mailbox, so slight, so ordinary; United States Medical Licensing Examination printed on it in even script, and held it in her hand for a long time, willing it to be good news. She raised it up as soon as Auntie Uju walked indoors. Auntie Uju gasped. "Is it thickə Is it thickə" she asked. "Whatə Giniə" Ifemelu asked. "Is it thickə" Auntie Uju asked again, letting her handbag slip to the floor and moving forward, her hand outstretched, her face savage with hope. She took the envelope and shouted, "I made it!" and opened it to make sure, peering at the thin sheet of paper. "If you fail, they send you a thick envelope so that you can reregister". "Auntie Uju! I knew it! Congratulations! Ifemelu said. Auntie Uju hugged her, both of them leaning into each other, hearing each other's breathing, and it brought to Ifemelu a warm memory of Lagos (Adichie: 2013:141).

Passing her medical examination is like a ticket to good jobs for her, she will quit working three jobs as one in a hospital will be enough to pay their bills. There is a shift in her character from the beginning of the novel; she is not the woman who sits at home with different house maids for different purpose. She can no longer afford that luxury and that is her identity- to stop living a fake life and assuming a fake identity. She is not married to The General but performs all wifely duties which is not who she is. Apparently, Adichie made this shift in her character as a warning to other women. The identity of the African woman is dignified and women should live up to expectation. Auntie Uju's successful examination comes with a price, she asserts: "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional". "So there are no doctors with braided hair in Americaə" Ifemelu asked. "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" ... Sometimes, while having a conversation, it would occur to Ifemelu that Auntie Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place" (Adichie, 2013:141).

Globalization which results to the invention of social media played an important part in her life as it helped her in actualizing her dream of being successful in life. As a result of Ifemelu's experiences, she decides to start a blog that will enable her to share her experiences with others and also, get insights of what an average black man/woman feels about the challenges they face daily. The blog played a major role in her achievement, she utilizes the resources in her global village to make an impact both in her life and the community she resides. S. A McCoy stipulates that "Ifemelu's blog about race in America leads her to a lucrative career, one that includes thousands of readers and even her own PayPal account for her devoted fans to donate monetary support. She often receives the obligatory "you're the real racist email from disgruntled white readers and, of course, invitations to conduct diversity workshops, which are ubiquitous in corporate America" (McCoy, 283). She has a wider audience which made it possible to get lots of

people to review the articles posted in her blog. The responses she gets from her readers, surprises her as she finds out that she is not the only one that is passing through the issue of racism and identity.

Adichie affirms “The blog had unveiled itself and shed its milk teeth; by turns, it surprised her, pleased her, left her behind. Its readers increased, by the thousands from all over the world, so quickly that she resisted checking the stats, reluctant to know how many new people had clicked to read her that day, because it frightened her. And it exhilarated her” (Adichie, 349). She is not only getting a wider audience but at the same time, making a living out of it. “So she put up a link to her PayPal account. Credits appeared many small and one so large that when she saw it; she let out an unfamiliar sound, a blend of a gasp and a scream. It began to appear every month anonymously, as regular as a pay cheque, and each time it did, she felt abashed, as though she had picked up something valuable on the street and kept it for herself” (Adichie, 348).

It is obvious that Ifemelu has overcome the stage of being intimidated, humiliated and dehumanized as a result of her inability to pay her bills through blogging which came as a result of globalization. In essence, globalization helps in the overall realization of her identity. She has reach the stage of selecting the job she prefers. The Coach will never call her line for her services as she is now wiser and a better individual and she, in turn will not stoop so low to degrade herself with such humiliating job. She discovers who she is and can define her identity despite the challenges that comes her way. As a result of its impact on her online readers, she is bold to tell them who she is and “she checked her blog e-mail too often, like a child eagerly tearing open a present she is not sure she wants, and read mail from people asking for a drink, telling her she was a racist, giving her ideas to blog about. A fellow blogger who made hair butters first suggested advertising and, for a token fee, Ifemelu put up the image of a bounteous haired-woman on the top right side of the blog page...Another reader offered more money for a blinking graphic that showed, first, a long-necked model in a tight dress, then the same model in a floppy hat” (Adichie: 348).

She adds advertising to her blog and makes lots of money from it; she also gets an email from the director of multicultural life at a prep school in Connecticut and other numerous invitations to speak to their students. She gets an invitation to give a talk on the title “How to talk about race with colleagues of other races”, she asks for a double of what she is initially paid and it is accepted. All these advancements were made possible through the advent of globalization which enables her to keep up with those who read her blog daily. On that day, she was elated as she saw she will be speaking to mostly whites and told herself that their janitor may be a black man. This shows the level of degradation they all face while there. She starts thus:

I'm no expert so don't quote me”, she started, and they laughed, warm encouraging laughter, and she told herself that this would go well, she need not have worried about talking to a roomful of strangers in the middle of Ohio. (She had read, with mild worry that openly sundown towns still existed here). “The first step to honest communication about race is to realize that you cannot equate all racisms” she said, and then launched into her carefully prepared speech. When, at the end, she said, “Thank you”, pleased with the fluidness of her delivery, the faces around her were frozen... that evening she received an e-mail: YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY. The email written in capital letters was a revelation. The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They had not read her blog but they had heard that she was a “leading blogger” about race (Adichie, 2013:350).

Race has become an issue since inception in the western world; there is discrimination on the colour of the skin of the Africans and African Americans. Most of her audience is whites and one of them felt it is an honour for her to be allowed to their country and does not have the right to tell them about race. S.A McCoy further states that “The novel's attention to the willful ignorance of supposedly liberal white Americans with “good” intentions but who fail to grasp the significance of systemic racism echoes throughout *Americanah* as Adichie carefully crafts characters that

embody the full spectrum of “good-intentioned” white liberalism. The author does this most notably through Ifemelu's wealthy boyfriend, Curt, and a white patron of the African hair braiding salon, Kesley” (Adichie, 284).

The email from one of her participant clearly states how angry they could become which in no way affect how she feels. She is happy that she is no longer the woman that needs to sleep with a man to pay her house rent or do other jobs to survive. As her blog business thrives, “Ifemelu bought a small condominium. She has been startled, when she first saw the listing in the real estate section of the paper, to realize she could afford the down payment in cash. Signing her name above the word “homeowner” had left her with a frightening sense of being grown-up, and also with a small astonishment, that this was possible because of her blog. She converted one of the two bedroom into a study and wrote there, standing often by the window to look down at her new Roland Park neighborhood, the restored old homes shielded by old trees” (Adichie, 351).

Home and Identity

Ifemelu never allowed the serene environment of the western world to influence her decision of coming back to her root. Her stay in a foreign land puts so much pressure on her identity coupled with that fact that globalization played a key role. Different people visits her blog all over the world which shows that this issue of race has been a key factor in most of their cyber bullying and name calling. She believes that with the help of globalization, she will be able to reach out to her audience from her home country. It is a difficult decision to take but she eventually came back home. She believes that her identity will be more appreciated in her home where no one is interested on the skin colour, majorly because everyone has the same colour.

As she settles in, she starts searching for jobs where her impact will be felt. She found a vacancy for an editor in a leading women's monthly magazine and quickly edits her resume where she lies about working in a women's magazine that folded due to bankruptcy. The owner of the magazine is so excited when she hears that she has lived abroad, she feels it will be an edge over her competitor. This shows that the issue of identity plays a major role for those who have spent most of their time in the Western world which is very wrong. The owner of the magazine is excited when she hears that she got her certificate from the United States of America and as such, an advantage to other applicant who probably got their degrees from Nigeria. During their first meeting, Ifemelu noticed that the magazine is not her passion but rather a hobby which is dangerous for any business.

As agreed, she resumes in her new office on Monday as the Features editor, she has other colleagues, one of whom also returns from America like her: Doris, Esther and Zemaye. She loves writing and keeps on bringing new ideas that marvels her madam. She had earlier suspected that Auntie Onenu does not have a passion for the magazine; she is interested with the owner of GLASS magazine and as such, fails to understand Ifemelu's point of view in making a difference in the stories they publish. Doris is more interested in supporting whatever idea their madam brings without being critical about its relevance to the development of the magazine.

As a result of the frequent argument about publishing the right articles rather than what the society wants to hear, she quits her job. She believes that no one can intimidate her into believing in things that are obviously wrong. Quitting her job is the best solution to her problem as her fellow women are not ready to heed to her advice, much more listening to what she has to say. This goes to show that the identity and voice of the woman must be portrayed and defended by her as the case may be. Adichie states: “Auntie Onenu did not seem surprised by her resignation, nor did she try to make her stay. “Come and give me a hug, my dear”, was all she said, smiling vacuously, while Ifemelu's pride soured. But Ifemelu was full of sanguine expectations for *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, with a dreamy photograph of an abandoned colonial house on its masthead” (Adichie, 476). It is obvious that Auntie Onenu knows her worth but due to her awkward nature, she needs to write things that will make her magazine popular, not the truth. Ifemelu on the other hand, is not interested in such fake life and will not be a party to it. She left without a second thought because she has an option; she is not a liability and as such, could easily survive without working for anyone which is an important lesson for all women. Her blog thrives so well and she gets lots of

comments on how to improve. She writes about reality as opposed to the fake lifestyle that Auntie Onenu's magazine portrays.

Conclusion

This essay has been able to examine the concept of negotiating identity in an age greatly influenced by social media using Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. It analyses the concept of identity in an age of globalization where the characters drift apart and are reconciled in a world where communication plays a vital role. The essay demonstrates that identity as depicted in the novel goes beyond the usual misconceptions attached to black skin colour but touches it tentacles on how it affects the individuals involved. It is clear therefore that the identity of an individual plays a major role in their overall wellbeing and development which made Adichie to situate blackness and black identity as Ifemelu relocates from Nigeria to America where her identity begins to matter. Globalization on the other hand, assists in making the identity of all countries to be known through an improved method of communication: the social media. Ifemelu played a major role in promoting the identity of her country as she refuses to be intimidated by anyone. No doubt, the western world is more developed than where she came from but she is not perturbed but accepts any challenge that comes her way through hard work and by carving a niche for herself. It concludes that a person's perception of herself determines how the issue of negotiating identity affects them either negatively or positively. Adichie through this novel exemplifies how people can be proud of their identity while also engaging the entire populace through the use of elements of globalization. We observed that these characters and the various challenges they faced were able to stand firm and maintain who they are. They did not succumb to the problems that could force one to abandon her identity. Globalization on the other hand helped them to close the gap and the erroneous opinions others has on the black race. We held that the blog played an important part in the life of Ifemelu. The blog wouldn't have become a reality and made such impact in her without globalization. She realizes her talent and instead of subjecting herself to some humiliating job, she pays herself with the blog which brings his real identity into limelight.

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