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Identity Transformation among Diasporic Women Characters in Americanah

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ABSTRACT: This article scrutinizes the impact of hybridity, cultural identity, and diaspora on the self-identity of African women immigrants and their interactions with others in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013), and NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names (2013). The overarching argument of this article is that the African women, who immigrate to America, demonstrate self-identity through milieus, such as language, dressing, food, relationships, mannerisms, and physical appearance before and after immigration. The nature of this narrative research is qualitative and employs the post-colonial concepts of Homi Bhabha's hybridity, Stuart Hall's cultural identity, and **William** Safran's diaspora. The African diasporic authors, namely Adichie and Bulawayo portray the women characters who emigrate from Africa to America. Americanah and We Need New Names have been selected due to the existence of the omnipresent peculiarities, such as immigration of the African women characters to America whose movements oscillate between both spaces and their identity transformation. This article tries to fill the existing gap by illuminating how the African women immigrants' identity oscillates between both pre-immigration and post-immigration spaces, Africa and America, respectively. When African women characters engage with settings of the American diaspora, their identities change as a result. The article's findings show that there is a notable difference in how African women characters' self-identities are portrayed before and after they immigrated to America. This difference is primarily due to the fact that adoption or rejection of a new self-identity is influenced by a number of factors. It also shows how African diasporic women's altered sense of self influences how they relate to American society as well as the society of their origin.

KEYWORDS: Hybridity, Immigration, Cultural Identity, Diaspora, Identity Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish diaspora has resulted in Jewish communities established in numerous countries and regions around the world. These communities have maintained their cultural and religious practices, while also assimilating to the local cultures and adapting to their new environments. Diaspora can also refer to the dispersion of other ethnic or cultural groups, such as the African diaspora, which refers to the forced migration of African people during the transatlantic slave trade. This diaspora has resulted in African communities established in various countries across the America, Europe, and other parts of the world. American society has experienced a great influx of immigrants from post-independence African countries in the late 20th century and the current 21st century so far. When new African immigrants are occupied in a new environment whose culture differs from that of their own, they must adapt as soon as possible in order to maintain their survival. Their self-identity is compromised in their endeavor to integrate into the new society.

Chimamanda Adichie is a renowned Nigerian author known for works exploring African and American cultures. As someone born in Africa who later immigrated to America, she portrays this experience in her novel Americanah. The book depicts the identity transformation of African women in the American diaspora. When positioned in a new environment with a different culture, their sense of self undergoes change to adapt. However, this does not necessarily completely replace their original identity, as they may also reject the new identity. Through Americanah, Adichie aims to narrate the dilemma faced by immigrants encountering a new culture and lifestyle. She illustrates how relocating affects how African women communicate with both American society and their homeland. The novel provides insight into navigating shifting identities as a voluntary migrant oscillating between Africa and America.

*** Born in Zimbabwe, NoViolet Bulawayo, the other author of this

study, has experienced both political unrest and immigration to America firsthand. In interviews, she reveals how displacement and identity were central issues addressed in her novel We Need New Names. Like Adichie, Bulawayo divides her time between Africa and the US. Her movements provide insight into how African women construct identities across borders. Although a work of fiction, Bulawayo's novel reflects the real experiences of immigration she and other Zimbabweans faced due to turmoil in their home country. It examines identity transformation African women undergo when migrating to new societies like America.

The nature of this narrative research suits best for the interpretation of texts in the two selected novels in order to achieve the fixed objectives of this study. The qualitative narrative approach involving analysis of the portrayals of experiences of African women immigrants in Adichie's Americanah, and Bulawayo's We Need New Names allows for an in-depth inquiry into how these works examine the impact of immigration on identity. Examining the narratives in these two novels through postcolonial concepts of hybridity, cultural identity, and diaspora helps achieve the objectives of analyzing identity transformation pre and post-immigration, influences on adopting a new identity, and interactions with home and hostlands.

In this article, post-colonial theories, such as hybridity, diaspora, and cultural identity have been employed respectively by Homi Bhabha, William Safran, and Stuart Hall, who embrace post-colonial concepts to address the racial issues related to migration and identity formation. In the introduction section of his book entitled The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, Bill Ashcroft (1995) believes that post-colonial theory involves discussion about various types of racial experiences. These racial experiences include migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe, such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being (p. 2). Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" is significant in a sense that a critic like Oulagambal Ashwiny Kistnareddy (2010), in his thesis entitled Hybridity in the novels of Ananda Devi, opines that hybridity has been a crucial concept in the current postcolonial contexts. He posits, "Hybridity is not only a subject of intellectual inquiry but also a critical tool through which cultures and identities are analyzed" (p. 5). Hence, the concept of "hybridity" is used to examine the self-identity of African women who migrate to America. Bhabha opines that when people move to new locations, they develop new interactions which may require them to transform. The transformations in physical appearance, language, mannerism, dressing, reasoning, character, among other areas are evident in the African women immigrants who interact with America in Americanah as well as We Need New Names. According to Bhabha (1994) in The Location of Culture, identity development occurs in "The Third Space" and is characterized by constant change. He remarks:

Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meaning and the symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (p. 55)

Hybridity in immigrants, such as African women immigrants in America, leads to double consciousness. Their identity is ambiguous and constantly changing. In Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, according to Homi Bhabha (1990), hybridity is "the third space". Bhabha contends that hybridization is a continuous process for all forms of civilization. He looks at the "Third Space of enunciation" and thinks that this erratic and ambiguous space of speech is where cultural assertions and systems are produced. Since self-identity and culture are mutually related, alike culture, self-identity is in a process of hybridity. He further mentions, "This space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (p. 211). This liminal space is a productive space where identity is displaced and alternative concepts of identity are embraced. The production of new identities by the minorities in a society, similar to the African women immigrants in America, does not imply that they undergo assimilation. Bhabha remarks that holistic assimilation is related to the past. The concept of hybridity instead of assimilation indicates the produced identity in the diasporic spaces.

This argument is consistent with the second cultural identity perspective put forth by Stuart Hall. In Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, Hall (1990) argues that cultural identities have a shared history but "they undergo constant transformation" (p. 225). Therefore, the ongoing identity transformations of the African women characters in the chosen works might be attributed to the fluid nature of culture. As Bhabha posits, identity is never a finished product but a complicated process to an image in totality (Hall, 1990, p. 235). With a great number of African countries permitting dual citizenship, a majority of Africans voluntarily immigrate to the West and their itinerant movement is appreciated by multi citizenship. Once abroad, the immigrants establish the African diasporic community in America. In "Diasporas in Modern Society: Myths of Homeland and Return", William Safran (1991) scrutinizes the meaning and the peculiarities of diaspora. He asserts that Africans who immigrated to America during the forceful transfer of the slave trade exchange similar experiences with the Jews who were originally called as "diaspora" (p. 83).

Because of the potential for greater socioeconomic opportunities, emigrants from post-independence African nations are drawn to industrialized nations like those in North America and Europe. A portion of this diaspora population is shaped by the African immigrant women. As a minority group in their new environment, they face a number of particular difficulties. Their interactions with these areas have an impact on how they identify with their own country as well as their host country.

*** The study's goals align with identity transition, which emphasizes topics like African women's immigration to America after enslavement and how their identities have changed. Examined in line with current diasporic discourse, it explores how immigration to America shapes the self-identity of the post-independence African woman and how her changing identity impacts her relationships with others. The novels, Americanah, and We Need New Names depict detailed information on post-independence African women characters who communicate with America whose self-identity is affected by immigration. The novels also indicate detailed information on the African woman's self-identity before and after immigration to America, influences behind adoption or rejection of a new self-identity while in America, and how women immigrants with multi-layered identities associate with both their hostland and homeland. With this background, this research analyzes influences behind adoption or rejection of segments of American identity by the African women immigrants as presented in Adichie's Americanah, and Bulawayo's We Need New Names.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The African women characters portrayed in Americanah undergo a remarkable transformation in their self-identity owing to their frequent interaction with both America and Africa. Their characters, mannerisms, appearances, dressings, hairstyles, and languages are some of the elements affected by their immigration into America. In her article entitled "Of French Fries and Cookies: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Diasporic Short Fiction", Daria Tunca (2010) examines selected Adichie's short stories in The Thing Around

Your Neck, which akin to Americanah, have their setting in Nigeria and America. The African women who immigrate to the West have a tendency of disparaging their traditions and becoming westernized, referred to as "Americanah" (p. 298).

Naturally, in his book review, "Of Race, Reasons and Realities: Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", Adedeji Ajayi (2014) explains Americanah:

is a local parlance for 'returnees' who have lost their identity after a brief stay in America; their tone is different; pronunciations identify their origin; they are neither speaking English, American nor Nigerian. They are floating in-between with crisis of identity. (p. 2)

The American society, to some extent, can be blamed for immigrants' desire to cast off their burdensome pre-immigration self-identity in order to fit in the society. The post-immigration identity depicted by Ajayi affects the way the diasporic subjects interact with the society at home and in America as examined in the aforementioned article.

By the same token, Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira (2013), in his thesis entitled Writing Marginality: History, Authorship and Gender in the Fiction of Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, suggests that pressure from the society is responsible for the transformation that the African women immigrants undergo. The consciousness of: African stereotyped identity, such as blackness "becomes an undesirable and unhomely trait in the pursuit of the American dream" (p. 164). These feelings make it important to look at the particular steps that African immigrant women take to achieve their goals or cope with what they consider desirable in America.

The article, "New Names, Translational Subjectivities: (Dis)location and (Re)naming in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names," provides an insightful analysis of subjectivity and migration in Bulawayo's novel. It draws on postcolonial and translation theory from thinkers such as Du Bois, Sakai, and Benjamin. As the critic states, "This conceptualisation of subjectification as perpetual translation between multiple sites of meaning (affiliation) reconfigures Walter Benjamin's model of transpiration translation – a static original and a transparent translated text / subjectivity" (p. 9). This theoretical framework is used to examine how the text depicts characters' shifting senses of self as they move between cultures.

DISCUSSION

This paper tries to discover the fictional portrayal of the African woman in NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah before immigration and how their self-identity alters once they travel abroad. It is excruciating to witness when an African woman is misunderstood in unfamiliar environments due to her name, accent, hairstyle, attire, and overall laugh, communication, and echoing style—factors that collectively mold her sense of self. For instance, when African women such as Darling in We Need New Names and Ifemulu in Americanah relocate to America, they experience severe embarrassment as they endeavor to socialize within the realm of the new environment.

In "Regimentation or Hybridity? Western Beauty Practices by Black Women in Adichie's Americanah", Dina Yerima (2017) opines that the Internet and other forms of the media play a pivotal role in distributing the Western concepts of beauty, power, truth, freedom, and life in general (p. 645). The notions are regarded as the universal standards of absorbing what is acceptable or not. African women immigrants spend a great portion of time watching TV on weight loss. In harmony with the Western notion of beauty, the thin body that the big women acquire is apparently plausible and reasonable, thereby compelling some African women immigrants to intense exercising and dieting to attain the desired results.

However, the American media is biased against information about the beauty of the neglected Black community in America. In Americanah, Ifemulu remarks that the media is "racially skewed" (p. 292) and provides scanty and insufficient information about how to care for the Black skin color, the kinky hair, and the Black eyes. This is evident through characters like

Aunt Fostalina in We Need New Names, who is highly motivated to lose weight by watching a TV program about how to lose weight in a short period. In the TV program, pictures before and after the weight loss are shown: "Every once in a while Aunt Fostalina glances up from her magazine at the TV, at that woman whose pretty face looks like something is wrong with it, talking about how to lose ten pounds in ten days and telling people to call now and change their lives" (117). When they move into a new culture, they alter their self-identity in order to adapt to the demands of the new environment. In "Who am I? Self-Identity – Building Personal Character", Andrew Dobson (2002) examines the issue of self-identity. He postulates that some situations in the society require flexibility on the side of an individual (p. 11). In these circumstances within the discourse of postcolonialism, self-identity confronts Bhabha's "Third Space" which is intimately related to hybridity.

HOMI K. BHABHA AND HYBRIDITY

Homi K. Bhabha believes, "[the] colonized, the immigrants and other minorities experience the situation of being in the hybrid space" (Ghandeharion and Sheikh-Farshi, 2017, p. 494). The diasporic subject is forced into the "third space," a place of hybridity rather than assimilation, by demands placed on her by American society. The newly established persona in this criminal position is nebulous and unclear. Her identity consists of multiple layers from which she can choose given her own environment.

In Americanah, Ifemulu uses her hair to confirm her African identity and differentiate herself from other girls with whom Curt cheats on her:

Pictures she had seen of his ex-girlfriends goaded her, the slender Japanese with straight hair dyed red, the olive-skinned Venezuelan with corkscrew hair that fell to her shoulders, the white girl with waves and waves of russet hair. And now this woman, whose looks she did not care for, but who had long straight hair. (p. 211)

The essence of her hair gives her the privilege of cultivating it into the favored styles, such as Afro. She accusingly views that Curts's girlfriends have the "long flowing hair" (p. 211). To protest against his heartbreaking behavior, she conceals her hair, then cuts it short, and combs it into an Afro. Her new complexion signifies the strong personality and the political statements to those around her (Chapman, 2007, p. 21). They speculate that her style is either political or gender-oriented. One of her colleagues suspects that her "kinky hair" (p. 213) is related to her resignation from the job, "You think your hair was part of the problem?" (p. 212). This statement suggests that hair, associated with the African descent, can be a component of an African immigrant woman's problems, such as stigmatization and prohibition of accessing an appropriate job (Chapman, 2007, p. 21). Chapman (2007) highlights the three influences that make the Black women straighten their hair. She echoes:

[A]lthough hair straightening is a style choice for Black women in the United States, self-hatred and assimilation are still very much a part of the reason that many Black people [including African women immigrants] straightened their hair in the early 1900's and continue to do so today. (p. 20)

The freedom and confidence that emerge when an African immigrant woman releases herself from the boundaries that suppress her, as seen in Americanah through Ifemulu, who opens a blog to address the sensitive issues of hair and racism in America. After appreciating her natural African hair in a society, in which the straight hair is observed as beautiful and natural as ugly, she acquires enough courage to speak out about the Americans' attitude towards Black women and their hair. She criticizes the media for portraying the African hair as ugly and straight as professional and sophisticated. She further reprimands the bigoted society, in which natural hair is always political. In her blog, she composes, "I just don't want relaxers in my hair—there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is" (p. 295). She informs her readers that growing the natural hair is an individual woman's choice.

***In We Need New Names, Darling observes the intimidation and bullying her classmate Tom endures due to his decision to maintain his natural hair, as he is given the demeaning nickname "freak" (p. 103). This reflects the social pressures described in other texts, where natural hair is more likely to be perceived negatively. Meanwhile, Darling's Aunt Fostalina attempts to conform to narrow beauty standards by straightening her hair, mimicking styles she sees advocated on television programs promising quick weight loss. These culture-shaping media messages influence Fostalina's efforts to reshape her appearance as a means of self-acceptance. Both novels thus explore the social and financial barriers that lead African women immigrants to manipulate their hair, adopting styles they believe will facilitate integration or advancement—reflecting the complex "intimidation experienced in America" around asserting cultural norms through personal appearance.

STUART HALL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

In Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, Stuart Hall (1990) believes that identities are always in the process of transformation; in other words, the identity of a diaspora is not fixed, as it is "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process" (p. 222). In Americanah, Uju twists and pulls her son's ears and menaces to slap him in the presence of Ifemulu, yet away from Americans at a grocery, in which Dike picks food that was not on the shopping list:

Because the cashier was watching, Aunty Uju let Dike keep the cereal, but in the car she grabbed his left ear and twisted it, yanked it. 'I have told you, do not ever take anything in the grocery! Do you hear me? Or do you want me to slap you before you hear?'. She dreads getting into trouble with the American authority, as Jane, her friend, had almost experienced for punishing her daughter and hopes to find approval from her niece, because she apprehends the African manners of instilling discipline into children: Aunty

Uju turned to Ifemelu. 'This is how children like to misbehave in this country. Jane was even telling me that her daughter threatens to call the police when she beats her. Imagine. I don't blame the girl, she has come to America and learned about calling the police'. (p. 112)

Owing to unfulfilled expectations, the African immigrant woman is negatively affected. The depressing life that the African woman experiences in America occasionally transforms her character and makes her cold, indifferent, and ignorant. In Americanah, when Ifemulu initially receives a "hug" (p. 108) from Aunty Uju in America, she nostalgically recollects the warmth and hospitality she received in "Lagos" (p. 109). She is cognizant of the fact that the frustrations in America can make one cold, hostile, and brutal. In this regard, when Ifemulu virtually hit her friend, whose dog had eaten her bacon, Adichie observes that her bitterness originated from the fact that "She was at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her" (p. 155). The conflicts that the African immigrant woman experiences in America makes her indifferent and detached from those around her. As evident, the African immigrant woman alters the way she behaves when she relocates to America. She must adopt the appropriate behavior that identifies her as a member of the American society in order to integrate.

On the one hand, a woman's body shape and complexion are deemed as the pivotal elements when examining her physical appearance. On the other hand, dress is essential in modifying and improving one's appearance. Yet, Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992), in "Dress and Identity", observe, "Dress is less than appearance because it does not include, as appearance does, features of the undressed body, such as its body shape and color as well as expression through gesture and grimace" (p. 3). Thus, the physical appearance is restricted to peculiarities, such as body shape and complexion, as well as objects utilized to enhance features of the undressed body, such as cosmetics and body shape enhancers. Expressions like gestures and grimaces have been proven under mannerism.(p.3)

Furthermore, Stuart Hall (1990), in Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, pivots on the cultural identity by pinpointing the significance of the context, "a particular place and time, from a history and a culture" in which one's enunciations and representations is "positioned" (p. 222). Many of the female characters in Americanah reflect Hall's views on identity development in their lives. As aforementioned, he contends that an individual's identity formation is "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 222). Women's clothing before and after immigration has conveyed a variety of connotations, including age, gender, religion, social class, and school affiliation. In Africa, a woman's attire at home defines her age to others. Dressing, among some African women, defines their religious status. In some religious a circle specific type of dressing is disapproved of and depreciated, as it is at odds with some religious expectations. In Americanah, Sister Ibinabo reprimands one of the young girls in the church for wearing tight trousers. She strictly warns, "Any girl that wears tight trousers wants to commit the sin of temptation. It is best to avoid it" (p. 55). An African woman's religious status can be determined by the way she dresses.

In dressing, there exists a remarkable difference between the pre-immigration and post-immigration African women characters, as portrayed in Americanah. Although both parties are keen on being attractive on specific occasions, post-immigration women characters are more consciously stylish than pre-immigration ones. The former party is furthermore economically empowered and has an access to stores that sell a variety of fashionable dresses. The pre- immigration African woman apparently picks her finest dress from her wardrobe, it may not be necessarily appropriate to wear on special occasions. An African immigrant woman, who has stayed for a long time in America, interacts with society and learns the American anticipations on dressing. In Americanah, Ifemulu is keen on what to wear to arious occasions. In her preparation to attend Shan's salon, "She had agonized about what to wear, tried on and discarded nine outfits before she decided on a teal dress that made her waist look small" (p. 328). Having stayed for several years in America, she gains precious experiences and keenness on the dressing norms.

***In the novel We Need New Names, several scenes portray the complex process of identity transformation that African diasporic women undergo after immigrating to America. As the characters interact with their new environment and attempt to integrate into American society, they experience changes to various elements that embody their sense of self, such as language, dressing, relationships and behaviors. Darling, one of the main characters, notices significant alterations to her use of language and accent over time spent living in America. At first, she struggles with public speaking in English since "the problem with English is this: You usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that" (p. 193). Darling must slow down her speech and carefully arrange words, showing the difficult process of identity change through modifying one's language skills. She also feels a loss of her roots from taking on a new accent, saying it "doesn't even suit you" (p. 175). Friends criticize her changed accent, reflecting conflict in Darling's shifting linguistic identity.

Changes in dressing are also depicted, with Darling noting she no longer wears her Sunday best yellow dress. She has conflicting views on Marina's traditional African outfits, reflecting identity exploration through fashion choices. Aunt Fostalina meanwhile obsessively diets, exercises and worries about her body, engaging in extreme behaviors to conform to American beauty standards through modifications to her physical identity. Friends and family relationships influence characters' behaviors and mannerisms as they encounter new cultural norms. Darling adopts smiling more from observing Aunt Fostalina, demonstrating adaptation through social learning. However, maintaining connections to her Zimbabwean roots faces rejection, with friend Chipo harshly criticizing Darling for abandoning her country - reflecting conflict between immigrant identities and those of home.

A sense of loss and dislocation from the immigration experience is also portrayed. Darling feels like a "lost ghost" (p. 99) after leaving Zimbabwe, showing the pain of dismantling a prior identity. Language barriers further alienate characters, as they feel they cannot access their "real voices" in America, only using their native tongues among compatriots. Through these examples of struggling linguistic adaptations, changing fashion tastes, mandated physical transformations and feelings of lost cultural grounding, Bulawayo's novel effectively depicts the complexity of constructing a hybrid identity between two cultures for African diasporic women navigating life in America. The work highlights identity as an ongoing, discontinuous process rather than a fixed attribute.

In a society, in which the diasporic subjects are the minority, African women immigrants are confronted with the challenge of conforming to Western dressing. In harmony with this argument, Jones (2013) opines, “Many immigrants who are isolated tend to conform to western dress habits for fear of being harassed because of the way they dress” (p. 34).

In Americanah, Adichie portrays both middle and upper-class African woman who does not encounter challenges with food. There exist a variety of local foods, such as “rice”, “meat”, “coleslaw” (p. 56), “corn” (p. 150), “chicken stew” (p. 376), and “fried plantains” (p. 397) from which she can choose. Consumption of food, particularly in social gatherings, is a bridge through which an individual African woman defines herself in association with those around her. A majority of the African women immigrants in Americanah virtually adopt the American food culture once they relocate to America. They try different kinds of American food and while they appreciate some types, they dislike other ones.

In Americanah, Ifemulu cooks the Nigerian “jollof rice” (p. 369), thereby clinging to her pre-immigration identity. She had initially found the American food plain, yet she gradually likes it. While with her American boyfriend, Blaine, she enjoys eating his meal of “organic vegetables and grains whose names she could not pronounce–bulgur, quinoa” (p. 306). She further receives instructions on “which grains had protein, which vegetables had carotene, [and] which fruits were too sugary” (p. 306). She ought to adapt to his expectations to integrate.

*** Much like Adichie's Americanah portrays, food plays an important role in defining cultural identity and the immigrant experience in We Need New Names. Long church services are described as tiresome for some characters. Darling says she doesn't like attending church because she has to sit in the hot sun for "boring songs and meaningless prayers" (p.17), when she could be doing other things. Food insecurity is also depicted. Darling and her friends resort to stealing guavas from a neighbor's estate to avoid starvation, showing the poverty in Zimbabwe at that time. Darling says, "We just eat a lot of guavas because it's the only way to kill our hunger" (p.14).

During gatherings of African immigrants in America, traditional foods from back home take on significance. At Aunt Fostalina's house, Zimbabwean foods like "ezangaphakathi", "sadza", and "sthwala" are served, making Aunt Fostalina forget her diet (p.100). This reveals how maintaining elements of home culture helps immigrants feel connected to their roots. Food is also tied to economic status. Aunt Fostalina dreads the phone calls asking for money, saying immigrants think she's "married to the Bank of America" due to constant requests (p.125). As the story goes on, Darling encounters conflict with her friend Chipo after returning to Zimbabwe. When Darling says Zimbabwe is her country in her "stupid accent," Chipo criticizes her for abandoning Zimbabwe when things were bad and expecting to claim it now (p.175). These moments show how food and language are indicators of identity for diasporic peoples, and how return causes tensions as immigrants straddle two cultures.

In Americanah, a similar scene is witnessed when Ifemulu wears the same dress for a party to which she is invited by Jackie. She is weird and different from her friends who wear the “slouchy jeans” (p. 131). As evident, the inappropriate outfit for social gatherings makes an individual African immigrant experience frustration, tension, confusion, and alienation from those around her.

Berkhout (2012) postulates that, even though recreational activities, such as sports and parties are informal and relaxed, “This greater informality does not make it necessarily less subject to rules, though” (p. 17). The African immigrant woman’s unwillingness to the recreational dressing makes her cling to her pre-immigration clothes which exhibit her as odd in America.

Ginika gets ready for a dinner party in Americanah, which is being thrown by the attorneys she was interning with. She is cognizant of the fact that the proper dressing would make her accepted and appreciated by those around her. Thus, she splashes out to purchase a “postmodern” dress, which in Ifemulu’s opinion, is “shapeless” and “looked, to her, like a boxy sack on which a bored person had haphazardly stuck sequins” (p. 129). Ifemulu is frustrated that America would alter an immigrant’s taste for dresses and that she would further irrefutably encounter a similar fate in fashion to identify with others in the society. As evident, the African women immigrants ought to pay attention to what they wear. The dress worn for recreational occasions plays a crucial role in the successful interaction between African immigrants and those around them.

As evident, the post-immigration African woman’s self-identity is both fluid and static. She confidently retrieves her pre-immigration dressing through adorning with kitenge, while at times, she totally alters and adopts a new way of dressing. Eschewing traditional dressing and adopting the new dressing are procedures in which the African woman identifies herself as a member of American society.

William Safran and Myths of Homeland and Return

Since the Africans, who moved to America during the slave trade were similar to the Jews and the Armenians, were forced to uproot from their homelands and dispersed and scattered to other zones in which they were dehumanized, they vividly lack some of the characteristics of a “diasporic community”. Notably, the African-Americans neither possess a specific homeland nor a burning desire

to return to their home. They further do not have a "clearly defined African heritage to preserve" (Safran, 1991, p. 90). Besides, the African-Americans are not devoted to retrieving their "original home" for safety and welfare. Moreover, they seldom maintain bonds with home unlike the more recent group of frican immigrants of the late 20th and 21st centuries who irrefutably belong to the diaspora community.

According to William Safran (1991), the term "diaspora" refers to "the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands" (p. 83). Arguably, the definition has undergone dramatic changes with a more particular term "diaspora community" which metaphorically refers to "several categories of people-expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities" (p. 83). Yet, members of a "diasporic community" must have some shared features which Safran takes into consideration. From an originating core to a periphery, such as from Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, or Zimbabwe to America, their ancestors must have been scattered. They must further possess a collective memory or myth of their original homeland, feel isolated in their host society and consider their ancestral home as their ideal home whose children should return to when situations enhance. Furthermore, the members are devoted to retrieving their original home to its safety and prosperity, and thereby maintaining bonds with their homeland.

William Safran (1991) pinpoints that the movement to a new country leads to a feeling of isolation among the immigrants. In order to overcome the sense of isolation and alienation experienced in America, some African women immigrants experience considerable transformation in their self-identity (p. 90). Yet, it is essential to pinpoint that transformation among the diasporic subjects does not imply assimilation into the new society. As Hall (1990) postulates, "The time for 'assimilating' minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has passed" (p. 219). Infusing "thinking about nationality, ethnicity, and politics with poststructuralist theories of identity and indeterminacy", Bhabha contends, "nationalities, ethnicities, and identities are dialogic, indeterminate, and characterized by 'hybridity'" (Leitch, 2001, p. 2377).

In Americanah, Ifemulu realizes how influenced by Blaine she had become. She imitates his attitude and reaction towards things. During a spontaneous meeting among Ifemulu, Blaine, and his American friends, Michael accuses Paula of saying that humans should eat without using cutlery. He tells her, "Why don't you just go on and live in a cave" (pp. 320-1). He embodies other Americans who view eating with hands as uncivilized. Such an attitude from the Americans forces an African immigrant woman to transform her mannerism whenever she is in their presence.

Aunty Uju exhibits similar case when giving instructions on the specific type of food that ought to be eaten in her house, different from the kind of food that would be eaten for lunch before immigration, "there's corned beef so … sandwiches [can be made] for lunch" (p. 111). The African post-immigration woman further adopts the new vocabulary for food found both in Africa and America. In Americanah, what she called as "sausage" at home is referred to as "hotdog" in America (p. 111).

*** Like Adichie's Ifemulu in Americanah, Bulawayo's protagonist Darling in We Need New Names also grapples with adopting aspects of American culture while abroad, from food to language, as she struggles to maintain ties to her cultural identity. Upon immigrating to America, Darling feels immense distress and initially rejects her new identity, saying "I just wanted to die" (p.103). However, over time Darling begins embracing certain American norms, such as mocking traditional African outfits worn by her friend Marina and claiming they are "ugly" and make her look old (p.123), showing adoption of American fashion sensibilities. Yet Darling also rejects some American beauty standards, agreeing with her uncle's criticism of extremely thin bodies as having "nothing African" about them (p. 94). Darling navigates selective adoption, rejection and negotiation of both American and Zimbabwean cultural aspects through her experiences.

Darling's linguistic identity also shifts between retaining African qualities and assimilating American traits. Speaking to her mother on the phone in an exaggerated American accent, Darling is laughed at and told she sounds "white" now (p. 126). However, in texts with friends, Darling uses American slang like "nuthin. trynna study stupid bio" (p.168), showing linguistic assimilation. Upon returning to Zimbabwe, Darling faces issues maintaining her mixed identities. During a video call, Darling's friend Chipo criticizes her for leaving during Zimbabwe's struggles and now claiming the country as her own "in that stupid accent" (p. 175). This shows the difficulties of integrating old and new identities upon return. Through Darling's experiences, Bulawayo shows the complex navigation of identities required when cultures and societies change through immigration and return. Darling selectively adopts, rejects, and negotiates between aspects of her American and Zimbabwean identities over time and location.

Similar to the African accent that betrays the African woman when she relocates to America, the awareness of the choice of food consumed in America betrays her. As evident, there exists a remarkable similarity between the crucial role that food plays in defining the social and economic class of the African woman both at home and in America. The variety and profusion of food consumed in both spaces manifests the social class that one belongs to.

While there is adequate and sufficient food in America, the choices of what to eat are occasionally confined by one's economic status akin to Aunty Uju's case. As aforementioned, the African woman appreciates the American food culture in America, yet she does not disregard or neglect her African food. In this regard, she uses food to define her self-identity, her Africanness, in association with the other Africans. As evident, in Americanah, upon the arrival in America, the inexperienced African woman is received by a mentor who has lived there for a long time and is more familiar with the expectations of the diasporic spaces.

While Ifemulu, in Americanah, is received by "Aunty Uju" (p. 375). The mentors take responsibility for training the mannerisms and requirements from the hostland to the inexperienced immigrants. Yet, after interacting with various people in America and becoming experienced, the African woman exposes different mannerisms to define her self-identity in association with those around her.

*** In We Need New Names, just as in Americanah, an experienced immigrant takes on a mentorship role to help a newcomer adapt to life in America. For Darling, this mentor is her Aunt Fostalina. When Darling first arrives from Zimbabwe, Aunt Fostalina helps her settle in and introduces her to the community of other African immigrants living in America. This provides Darling with social and informational support as she adjusts to her new surroundings. Further, just as with Ifemulu in Americanah, Darling goes on to develop her own way of expressing her identity through her mannerisms after interacting more with American culture and society. As she gains familiarity with American norms and experiences life in the US personally, Darling experiments with different behaviors and ways of carrying herself. This mirrors how Ifemulu's identity presentation also evolves over time spent in America. Both novels therefore show the value that experienced mentors can offer newcomers, as well as how time and interactions allow for continued identity negotiation even after an initial period of adaptation.

In Americanah, Ifemulu receives lessons on mannerism, language, and socialization during an "African Students Association meetings" (p. 143) to which she is invited. She notices that the "American employers did not like lower-level employees to be too educated" (p. 142). She further realizes that one must "smile and follow the American and make sure [she] say[s] [she] like[s] everything" (p. 142) in the house whenever invited to visit an American. More importantly, an African immigrant must adopt an American accent. Yet, she is warned against imitating the Americans' behavior of "indiscriminate touching" (p. 142). In Americanah, Aunty Uju adopts an American accent in the presence of the Americans. Ifemulu suggests that she pronounces her name differently when speaking on the phone. She narrates that she is "you-joo instead of oo-joo" (p. 108), for that is what they call her. At a grocery shop, she instantly uses a nasal sliding American accent when reprimanding her son in the presence of the Americans that shows how simply identity can be switched alongside an accent:

'Dike, put it back,' Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. Pooh-reet-back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. (p. 112)

In Americanah, Ifemulu narrates that the hair braiders speak slangy American English to clients, while among themselves, they speak French, Wolof, or Malinke:

The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half- completed. (p. 16)

***In We Need New Names, language and accent play an important role in the experiences of the immigrant characters. Darling demonstrates an awareness of the challenges of speaking English in America. As she states:

The problem with English is this: You usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that-first you have to think what you have to say. Then you find the words. Then you have to carefully arrange those words in your head. Then you have to say the words quietly to yourself, to make sure you got them okay. And finally, the last step, which is to say the words out loud and have them sound just right. (p. 193)

Darling understands she must conceal her native accent around others. She thinks to herself, "'I have to remember to slow down because when I get excited I start to sound like myself, and my American accent goes away'" (p. 136). During a phone call home, her transformed accent is evident. Her mother laughs and says "'I see that America has taught you to speak English to your mother, and with that accent.'" (p. 126)

Darling's Aunt Fostalina practices her English regularly. The narrator notes, "Aunt Fostalina will be articulate, that English will come alive on her tongue and she will spit it like it's burning her mouth, like it's poison, like it's the only language she has ever known" (p. 122). After struggling on the phone, Aunt Fostalina will be finding mirrors and practicing her English in front of them. Language barriers create difficulties for the characters. When Aunt Fostalina orders a bra over the phone, "the problem with English is this: You usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that-first you have to think what you have to say...carefully arrange those words in your head...say them quietly to yourself...say them out loud and have them sound just right" (pp. 119-120). These statements demonstrate the issues the immigrant characters face with language and accent in America. Their words show an awareness of navigating a new language and culture while maintaining aspects of their identities.

A similar sentiment is echoed in Americanah by the African students with whom Ifemulu interacts. They tell her that adopting an American accent makes communication simple in America. This is confirmed in her conversation with an American telemarketer, who is startled by Ifemulu's American accent:

'May I ask who I'm talking to?' 'My name is Ifemelu.' He repeated her name with exaggerated care. 'Is it a French name?' 'No. Nigerian.' 'That where your family came from?' 'Yes. … I grew up there.' 'Oh, really? How long have you been in the U.S.?' 'Three years.' 'Wow. Cool. You sound totally American.' 'Thank you.' Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words 'You sound American' into a garland that she hung around

her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? … And so she … resolved to stop faking the American accent. (pp. 177-8)

***Speaking with an American accent was an important part of integrating into American society for the African women immigrants in both novels. In We Need New Names, Darling has picked up fluency in American English even before moving to America. During a phone call with a white woman who breaks into their home, Darling exhibits mastery of the language and accent. However, she notes the difficulties of maintaining an American accent once in the US. As an illegal immigrant, blending in was vital for Darling. She says "I have to remember to slow down because when I get excited I start to sound like myself, and my American accent goes away" (p. 147). Darling understands that slipping back into her natural accent could identify her as an outsider.

Like Ifemelu, Darling finds speaking with an American accent helps her interact better with Americans. However, both protagonists recognize the inauthenticity of the put-on accent. Darling says she only feels able to use her "real voice" (p. 147) when alone with other African immigrants. Similarly, Ifemelu resolves to stop "faking" (p. 176) her American accent after realizing how much value American placed on affecting that accent, even thanking someone for calling her American sounding. Both novels show how the African women immigrants strategically opt to take on American accents to facilitate integration. However, they also feel constrained by those accents and long to express themselves authentically through their natural accents amongst each other. The issue of accents demonstrates the complex negotiations of identity that come with navigating a new culture while retaining ties to one's heritage.

In his thesis entitled Ben Okri: Between Reality and Fantasy, Anca-Ioana Maier (2013) states that there is a strong connection between the concepts of home and identity. According to him, homes refer to limits, a sense of rootedness, and a relationship between the ancestors and the descendants. However, this does not apply to those who are immigrants. The lives of the displaced and voluntary immigrants are shaped by the distance between their origin home and the hostland. Maier (2013) views, “To make a home in the diaspora, the immigrant needs to develop a new identity that helps him/her adjust to the demands of the new location” (p. 5). This thesis draws attention to the situations that warrant African women to maintain a new identity in America. Maier’s argument that immigrants occasionally stick to the abandoned homeland necessitates a careful study of the reasons and circumstances that make the immigrants identify themselves with their traditional location and reject a new self-identity. Maier (2013) postulates that when the diasporic subject, like an African immigrant woman, is marginalized or discriminated against in the new space, she is motivated to cling to the abandoned homeland (p. 5). The retention of the African accent is one of the ways through which the women immigrants identify themselves with their ancient location and reject on the transformat of their self-identity. During the iconographic gatherings, the Africans in America solely use their mother tongue. Through such meetings, the women immigrants identify themselves as Africans in America, exposing rejection of a new identity.

Owing to globalization, America has undergone economic turmoil with illegal immigration through its penetrable borders which may partially be reprimanded. As argued by Okonofua (2013), Black African immigrants and African-Americans develop their identity concepts in order to access the restricted resources and available opportunities in America, creating a conflict among them. He remarks, “African immigrants believe that their attachment to some other country, society, community, people, and culture shapes their identity” (p. 6). Attachment to the elements that provide them with an identity as African immigrants distinguishes them from African-Americans, and thus, enables them to access unique opportunities and resources (Koelsch, 2018, pp. 14, 24). Preservation of the African accent is one of the ways through which the African women immigrants differentiate themselves from African-Americans, and as a result, they simply access the restricted resources. The African immigrants’ conservation of their heritage is an origin of their personal strength and pride (Koelsch, 2018, p. 8). By refuting a new accent, the African women immigrants preserve their heritage as Africans which reveals their pride for who they are. In Americanah, Ifemulu “resolve[s] to stop faking the American accent” (p. 178). She returns to her original self-identity. She becomes more determined and courageous, not being afraid of using her African accent anymore. Through this traditional-self, Ifemulu meets Blaine, “an assistant professor at Yale” (p. 180). Her confidence inspires him and then he becomes her boyfriend. With her pre-immigration identity, the African woman immigrant associates with ease and comfort with those around her.

She exhibits pride for who she is as an African woman.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined identity transformation among African women characters portrayed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel Americanah and NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names. Through a qualitative analysis approach employing postcolonial concepts of hybridity, cultural identity, and diaspora, it analyzed how immigration influences the self-identity of African women as well as their interactions between their homeland and host country. The main conclusions show that the ways in which African women characters' self-identities are portrayed before and after their immigration to America varied significantly. Various factors determine whether they adopt elements of a new identity or reject them upon relocating. These include socio-economic status, relationships, language skills, dressing, mannerisms, food culture and physical appearance. While some practices from their homeland are maintained, aspects of the host culture are also integrated through a process of hybridity.

Both novels effectively depict identity as fluid and constantly evolving rather than something fixed. Initially, a sense of dislocation and loss is experienced upon uprooting. Mentorship from other experienced immigrants helps with adaptation. However, continued interactions allow for independent navigation and negotiation of multiple identities over time in different contexts. Rejection or selective adoption of certain American norms reflects complex identity formation. Additionally, returning immigrants face difficulties reconciling prior and current identities, showing the ongoing, non-linear nature of identity. Accent modification emerges as a crucial factor, with conscious effort required to integrate linguistically while preserving roots. Stereotyping, discrimination and beauty standards also influence identity presentation through behaviors like clothing, dieting and mannerisms. Community gatherings maintain connections to heritage through native languages and foods.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated through these postcolonial lenses that immigration profoundly impacts self-identity among African women characters. Their sense of self undergoes hybrid transformation as they straddle cultures and spaces before and after relocating. Multiple, shifting identities are negotiated contextually rather than replaced. Both novels offer vital insights into the compound experiences and continual renegotiations involved for diasporic peoples in maintaining connections across borders while navigating new societies as immigrants.

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