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## Rethinking Post-Independent Nigerian Quagmire in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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### ABSTRACT

The discourse of the wobbly state of the Nigerian nation is aptly captured in literary works. Previous studies on literary texts about the Nigerian state have largely identified bad leadership and the roles played by the masses in aggravating the nation's problems. However, not much attention, in the magnitude intended in this paper, has been paid to Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* using discursive strategies of postmodernism in exploring the myriads of challenges facing the Nigerian state. This paper, therefore, attempts an examination of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, highlighting features of Postmodernism the novel embodies, even as it explores numerous problems plaguing the nation and how they have forced many Nigerians to embrace migration as an escape route. Using the sociological approach and adopting a content analysis method, the paper ascertains that the problems facing the country have their springboard in bad governance and corruption, even as it establishes that Adichie's *Americanah* succinctly links poor educational system, joblessness, economic stagnation, bad governance and corruption, among others, in Nigeria to migration. It, nevertheless, highlights how migration has not completely exonerated Nigerians from the nation's woes. It concludes that although Adichie fails to arrive at any sort of coherent theory of salvation for the postcolonial impasse in the country, the author demonstrates that factors causing underdevelopments and stagnancy are still part of the nation's historical trajectory, and that migration is not panacea for the country's socio-political and economic quagmire.

**Keywords:** Governance, Migration, Nigeria, Postmodernism, Quagmire.

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### 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, Nigeria remains one of the most important nations in the Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in spite of its status as the giant of Africa, Nigeria is yet to experience real developments in many areas; hence, the nation still retains its status as a third world country. A number of writers like Walter Rodney (2009: 436) have attributed the third world status of many African countries to its

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culture of colonisation by Britain. Of course, this is not to suggest that some countries from other continents have not experienced colonialism in one way or the other; however, the intensity with which colonisation thrived in many African states, particularly Nigeria, has greatly affected the socio-political, economic and cultural sustainability of these nations. Understanding the impact of colonisation on the continent is, perhaps, the most important factor in appraising the present deplorable condition of Nigeria. Therefore, a brief review of colonialism is necessary in order to appreciate the degree to which it influenced not only the economic and political development of Africa but also its cultural and psychological aspects.

Tracing the history of colonialism to the slave trade, one thing remains constant. This is the fact that every contact that Europe has had with Nigeria has led to more ruin than good. The aim of the Europeans from the first time they stepped on the African soil was to exploit the land and minds of the people. While their guns created fear in the hearts of the people and caused subordination, their religion further pushed Africa into submission, even as African culture and religion were considered a “deadly adversary and as ... evil that had to be eliminated” (Emeagwali, 2004:1). Unfortunately, Africans were made to believe that fighting back in any way was ungodly; and, as a result, they would rather turn the other cheek (Rodney 2009:108-150). Books like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* relate the story of colonialism in its unflattering position.

The realities of the colonised Africa coupled with the realities of the World War II as a war of freedom led Africans to believe in the possibility of a decolonised Africa, one controlled by its own people. It was this dream that motivated and pushed the founding patriots to fight for independence. Edebor (2013: 34) succinctly captures the pervading mood then when he notes that “During the period of anti-colonial struggle, a lot of Africans had expressed high hopes that an end would soon come to their plights when Africans had access to the corridor of power occupied by the Colonial masters.” Although the Europeans were unwilling to relinquish power and give up their colonies, Nigeria was lucky to finally gain its independence in 1960. The surge of emotions that accompanied the independence was overwhelming. Achebe (2012: 40) sheds more light on this when he states.

The general feeling in the air as independence approached was extraordinary, like the building anticipation of the relief of torrential rain after a season of scorching hot harmattan winds and bush fires. We were all looking forward to feeling the joy... that Ghana must have felt...in 1957. We had no doubt where we were going. We were going to inherit freedom.... The possibilities for us were endless....Nigeria was enveloped by a certain assurance of an unbridled destiny, of an overwhelming excitement about life’s promise....

Regrettably, however, Nigeria became a distorted version of the future that the freedom fighters had envisioned. In place of indirect rule, colonial exploitation and oppression are now bad leadership, a dwindling economy and inequitable salary schemes. Ironically, the oppressors of the masses are no longer foreigners but fellow natives. Ngugi wa Thiong’O (1993:65), therefore, describes independence in the various African states (like Nigeria) as “independence with the ruler holding a begging bowl and the ruled holding a shrinking belly. It was independence with a question mark.”

Despite the change in government, Nigeria has merely succeeded in moving from a primary stage of uncertainty to a secondary stage of contingency. Undoubtedly, some of the myriads of challenges facing the country had their springboard in the nation’s colonial experience, the Nigeria-Biafran Civil War of 1967-1970 and the perennial bad leadership the country has been cursed to have since independence. In fact, the Nigeria-Biafran Civil War remains one of the greatest incidents recorded in the history of Nigeria as it threatened the unity of the country, and, till date, has left disgruntled citizens scattered all over the nation (Achebe 2012). The recent Boko Haram nefarious activities seem to have awakened the consciousness of Nigerians that the nation has been built on a shaky foundation. Even the recent elections in the country are believed to have been based on religious sentiments and cultural ties. All these occurrences have been labelled and popularised by Kwame Nkrumah as *neo-colonialism*, which Obadina (2000:3) defines as “a new form of imperial rule stage managed by the colonial powers to give the colonized the illusion of freedom.”

Today, globalisation seems to have replaced neo-colonialism as the last stage of imperialism. Globalisation as the motherboard of postmodernism is a worldwide phenomenon that has caught up with almost all the countries in the world. It is basically concerned with the diffusion of cultures and communication in such a way that they are eventually fused. It is important to note that the

postmodernist era is plagued with issues of cultural hybridism, globalisation, and migration, among others. This development has, undoubtedly, had a lot of impacts on people and cultures, both positively and negatively. Certainly, globalisation, with its agents of communication and information technologies, has taken over Africa with an even more intense wave than colonialism. The human mind is the focus of this movement and the fact that globalisation deals primarily with the psychological influence from foreign cultures shows that Nigerians are at a risk. Omekwu (2006:15) sums up the effects of globalisation in this manner:

The more dangerous dimensions of the digital revolution include pornography, money laundering, cultism, international terrorism and child abuse, which all constitute a threat to African cultural heritage. It is extremely difficult for African countries with strong Islamic and Christian cultures to tolerate the level of pornographic activities that go on the Internet. In traditional African culture, nudity is still not a virtue. In many African universities and urban centres, nudity has become common and Africa's rich and elegant dress styles are becoming outdated.

Nigerian writers, at different times, have not been oblivious of the incidents happening in the country based on the understanding that: "...any African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of the contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames" (Achebe, Cited in Dasylva 2003: 209). In fact, Kehinde (2010:20) is quick in pointing out that "Art cannot... exist without reference, whether explicit or implicit, to human situations". Nigerian writers have, therefore, continued using their creative works to interrogate pertinent issues plaguing the nation. Aside making conscious efforts through their writings to re-establish an identity sourced from traditional heritage, myths and folklore which had previously been discarded by the colonialists (Phebe, 2014: 59), they have equally examined cultural nationalism (with the main themes being the relationship between tradition and modernity), and neo-colonial reality (Laurea, 2013: 15); recurrent neo-colonial governments and the image of a society invaded by a sense of disillusionment seeking different definitions of nation and identity (with some of them using their writings as a form of protest); and, of course, social and cultural complexities of the nation— ranging from the political activities of the military and civilian governments to diasporic and immigration issues.

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that this paper attempts an examination of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, highlighting features of Postmodernism the novel embodies, even as it serves as a sad and tragic commentary on the Nigerian state which it explores purposely to foreground factors causing underdevelopments and stagnancy in the nation. A thorough analysis of the novel reveals, among other things, that Adichie's fiction is considerably shaped by the discursive strategies of postmodernism which are inextricably linked with the challenges plaguing the nation. This paper will, in section two, analyse Post-modernism as its theoretical framework; section three will examine method of data analysis adopted by the author for the paper; section four will focus on Adichie's exploration of the deplorable state of the Nigerian nation through the prism of Postmodernism. The paper concludes in section five by foregrounding that Adichie's *Americanah* succinctly reflects the endemic instability in Nigeria, and, by extension, the entire African continent, noting how the author opposes migration which she never sees as panacea for the country's socio-political and economic quagmire.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is set after the World War II as it is a product of the effects of the war. Although, a continuation of modernism, postmodernism follows a different path as it goes to the extreme in its deviation from the conventionality of modernism. It is not uncommon to subjects like as sociology, fashion, technology, art, architecture, music, film and literature. In Ogunsanwo's (1995: 43) view, "... postmodernism has succeeded in highlighting the intricate relationship between formal autonomy and the historical/political context in which it is embedded, though only by offering provisionally and contextually determined answers." Postmodernism was introduced to the academic scene in the 1980s. Like modernism, it rejects rigid genre, distinctions and boundaries between high and low forms of art. It, however, emphasises pastiche, parody, irony and playfulness. It also enjoys

reflectivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity, ambiguity, simultaneity and an emphasis on the dehumanised human subject (Bhat, 2010:3)

Postmodernism, deviates from modernism mostly through attitude. For instance, modernism sees fragmentation as tragic, but postmodernism celebrates it. Boehmer (1995: 86) has, in fact, noted that “postmodernism is a signifying interest in the provisional and fragmentary aspects of signification; its concern is said to be with the constructed nature of identity.” Besides, postmodernism does not try to make meaning out of art as modernism does, but enjoys it as it is. Again, while modernism and the era it portrayed dealt with order—the boxing of everything into a socially acceptable palette, such that everything non-white, non-heterosexual, non-hygienic, and non-rational is out of order and has to be dealt with—, postmodernism goes against the norm. Postmodernism rejects grand narratives; instead, it opts for mini narratives which are stories that explain small practices and local events rather than wholesome concepts. They are situational, temporary, contingent and provisional. Knowledge is also seen through different lenses. Unlike modernism that sees learning as a tool for gaining knowledge and becoming educated, postmodernism sees learning for the sake of functionality. In postmodernism, the emphasis is on skills and training. In contemporary times, we see computer technology largely combined with knowledge as a feature of postmodernism (Klages 2006:34).

Although both modernism and postmodernism examine literature, they do so in very different moods. For instance, the modernists examine literature in such a way as to give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature of twentieth-century art and culture, but with great nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact. There is, therefore, usually a tone of lament, pessimism, and despair about the world which finds its appropriate representation in these 'fractured' art forms (Bhat, 2010:5). For the postmodernists, however, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. Simply put, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it (Ihab, 1987:7). Also, Sanchez and Francisco (1997:48) in relating postmodernism to fiction notes, “Postmodernist fiction privileges postmodern playfulness and magic realism, and it can be used for political purpose”.

A major moment in the history of postmodernism is the influential paper, *Modernity— an Incomplete Project*, delivered by the contemporary German theorist, Jiirgen Habermas in 1980. He is today regarded as one of the precursors of postmodernism. Of course, even though, the term 'postmodernism' was used in the 1930s, its current sense and vogue can be said to have begun with Jean-Francois Lyotard's *the Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). One other major theorist of postmodernism is Jean Baudrillard, whose book *Simulations* (1981, translated 1983) marks his entry into this field.

Although, postmodernism had its springboard in the Western world, it has been recreated in Africa through the works of writers like Ben Okri, Kolu Laing and Kofi Loww. Derek Wright (1997), for instance, sees the expression works by Ben Okri and others as a representation of the Western post-modernism adopted to suit the indigenous background. He, in fact, states:

They avail themselves freely, for the expression of these worldviews of fictional modes, figures and devices that over the last three decades have come to be regarded as the hallmarks and staple fare of European and American postmodernist fiction (14).

Certain characteristics are associated with (but not limited to) postmodernism and they form some of the concerns of postmodernist critics: an abandonment of the conventional forms of fiction, which are based on linear plots; well-defined characters; and the use of language that is generally comprehensible to the reader. There is also the relationship between the author and his work such that while examining a text, the reader sees true life elements from the author's life. Sometimes, the work can be read as an autobiography. The stream of consciousness is also important in postmodernism. It is as a result of this technique that readers are often mentally challenged to place the pieces of the story in a chronological order. The uses of other techniques such as flashbacks, and stories within a story are also features of postmodernism. Dreams play an important role here and dreams are regarded not as plain night fillers but as a method of prediction. The aim remains to achieve magic realism.

Although postmodernism typically represents a deviation from the norm, it also acknowledges the fact that no work is created in a vacuum of its own. No matter how an author tries to create a work that will disassociate itself from other works, there are still elements linking various works together.

The importance of intertextuality to this theory (as evident in the use of intertextual elements in literature, such as parody, pastiche, and allusion) is, therefore, to ensure the globalisation of texts and unite the thoughts of authors, no matter the genre or background. With multiculturalism being widely associated with postmodernism, it is not uncommon to see features of code mixing and switching embedded in the concept. Language experimentation generally originates with the presence of many cultures in a community. The concept aims to correct many ideas which it feels are old and need to be rewired. Parody is, thus, an important postmodernist technique with the aim of correcting while illuminating humour which is associated with postmodernism.

Pornography is another element of postmodernism. With the evolving times, literature in its various forms uses it as a tool to highlight other dire issues that need to be attended to. Pastiche and Eclecticism are used for the purpose of self reflection as well as adulterated forms of English used for the purpose of playfulness. Also, there is no sequence except the reader's sequence (Brooker, 1992:227; Kehinde, 2013: 9; Barry, 2005:66).

### **3. Methodology**

Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* has been carefully chosen for our analysis in this paper. This choice of the novel is predicated on the fact that not many scholars, in the magnitude intended in this study, have engaged the text using Post-modernism in exploring the deplorable conditions of the Nigerian state. The paper, therefore, adopts the sociological approach and uses the content analysis method in examining Adichie's engagement with the terrible state of the nation, underscoring factors causing underdevelopments and stagnancy which have forced many Nigerians to embrace migration as a way out of the nation's conundrums.

### **4. Americanah: Exploring the state of the Nigerian nation**

*Americanah* is a story about love, race, migration and the deteriorating condition of the Nigerian state. The story examines the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze, two young lovers who seek a better life outside Nigeria, only to be confronted with the harsh realities of life as Nigerians even after migration. As teenagers in a secondary school, they both fall in love and continue their relationship after gaining admission into the university. At the beginning of the text, Nigeria is under military dictatorship, and the educational system has become so bad that Ifemelu opts to school abroad. She applies for a foreign scholarship and is given as a result of her intelligence. As Ifemelu struggles to fit into the culture of the American society and become successful, Obinze tries his luck in London after a frustrating period of unemployment in Nigeria. After an unsuccessful and humiliating experience in London where Obinze cleans toilets and works at a construction site, he is deported for illegal immigration. On the other hand, Ifemelu becomes a successful blog writer with a black American boyfriend.

After many years of living in America, Ifemelu has achieved residential status but she soon desires to return home. Following her intuition, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria only to find out that Obinze has become a wealthy businessman in a newly democratic Nigeria. The two soon reconnect and fall in love again, even though Obinze is married. Obinze leaves his wife for Ifemelu and together they attempt to chart through the chaotic situation of Nigeria, revealing in the process the myriads of problems plaguing the nation. As evident in the novel, Nigeria is stuck in a compounding state of decadence and other misadventures. The frustration of Nigerians is first portrayed by Ifemelu and her family. Ifemelu tells the story of her life in Nigeria through flashbacks. She undergoes this reflection while sitting in a braiding salon in Trenton, America. Ifemelu's family is a middle-class family that survives on her father's job at the federal agency. They live comfortably with the rent paid on time and Ifemelu attending a good school. Unfortunately, the stability of this family is lost when, after twelve years of meritorious service, her father loses his job due to his refusal to call his boss by the honorific and much-cherished Nigerian title, "Mummy".

The employment scene is, thus, presented as one not characterised by merit, but a person's ability to dance to the tune of their bosses. One has to conform to the society's use of 'connection', nepotism, and tribalism in order to scale the ladder of success. The insecurity faced by an average Nigerian employee is also highlighted. It does not matter how long an employee has been dedicated to his work, s/he can lose the job without a prior notice. The quest for a job is neither easy nor rewarding

as Ifemelu's father goes job hunting daily, only to be rejected serially. He soon loses hope and resorts to staying at home. He quickly becomes a shadow of himself as he becomes gloomy and unkempt. Sadly, the effect of job loss in Nigeria is not often felt by the person concerned only, but the community of people that depends on him/her for sustenance. In Ifemelu's case, the loss of her father's job soon causes tension between her parents. In an outburst of frustration, her mother fumes: "...If you have to call someone Mummy to get your salary, you should have done so" (47). The severity of the situation is underscored when Ifemelu discovers that they owe rent. According to her, "They had never owed rent before. They had lived in this flat all her life; it was cramped, the kitchen walls blackened by kerosene fumes and she was embarrassed when her friends came to visit but they never owed rent" (49).

Nigeria, in this context, holds no hope for the average Nigerian who believes in hard work as the way to success. Rather, the society's dubious standards seem to be the only way an individual can progress in the society. Even the church which is meant to be a citadel of holiness eagerly joins in the hustle for material items. This is evident in Ifemelu's church where politicians who have stolen public funds are constantly celebrated for their fat donations to the church. Ifemelu embraces irony as a postmodernist technique in illuminating the decay of morality in the society generally. If the church which is meant to serve as a model of morality is corrupt, what hope does the society have in being morally sound? It is through the character of Ifemelu that a voice of reason arises. In a moment of spontaneity, while working in the church, she blurts out:

*Why should I make decorations for a thief? ... CHIEF Omenka is a 419 and everybody knows it, this church is full of 419 men. Why should we pretend that this hall was not built with their dirty money? (51).*

Her voice of reason is taken for insubordination, and she is punished by her mother who warns her against speaking boldly. As a child, Ifemelu is, thus, imprinted with the code of silence which many Nigerian citizens have (un)consciously endorsed. Though many Nigerians are aware of the corrupt practices of many leaders occupying various positions of consequence in the land, they have chosen to be mute and oblivious of the corruption of such individuals. Instead, they have often solicited meagre sums from these exploiters of the common man.

Aunty Uju's (Ifemelu's Aunty) relationship with The General also recreates a warped society where, as a female, the hope for survival solely depends on a man. Aunty Uju is a very intelligent woman who hopes to become a doctor someday. However, the unemployment situation in the country left her jobless in spite of her university degree. To keep body and soul together, she accepts The General's offer and becomes his mistress. While elaborating on the reason for her change in status, she encapsulates the process of survival in the country thus:

*You know, we live in an ass-licking economy. The biggest problem in this country is not corruption. The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be because they won't lick anybody's ass or they do not know which ass to lick or they do not even know how to lick an ass (77).*

Aunty Uju also foregrounds the focus of the nation's leaders who are more preoccupied with giving wings to their passion than running the affairs the state. She tells stories about a woman who had sex with a General to get an oil bloc, a military administrator whose children were fathered by somebody else and foreign prostitutes flown in weekly for the Head of State (79). Unfortunately, even for Aunty Uju who has risen from grass to grace, instability creeps up on her when The General suddenly dies and leaves her with no money. She is flung into a world of struggle and insecurity, forcing her to migrate. Drawing a juxtaposition of Aunty Uju with Ifemelu's father, we see two representative images of average Nigerians who have been forced to live on the fringe of life. One has given up morality for survival, while the other holds on to his morality, and, as a result, wallows in penury and untold hardships.

In another use of the flashback technique, Ifemelu recounts her life with Obinze in the university. The two teenagers represent the larger body of youths found in Nigeria. Through their lives, the reader is acquainted with the failure in the Nigerian educational system as the living conditions are filthy. Besides, there is lack of basic social amenities, which eventually leads to students' riots. Ifemelu and Obinze take part in the riots, joining other students to chant "No light! No water!" as they stage a protest against the authorities in the typical students' solidarity known as "Aluta" (91). The riots by

students are further exacerbated by recurrent indefinite strikes embarked upon by lecturers, leaving students in idleness. Sadly, this is a cyclical phenomenon in Nigerian public institutions of higher learning. Ifemelu's father attributes increase in armed robbery to such strikes when he says that the unending strikes make students resort to stealing for survival.

The strikes wear an embarrassing national character of shame as Ifemelu and her friends from various schools are compelled to stay at home by forces beyond them. The students seem to be ordinary pawns in the chess game between their lecturers and the government. The strikes are seen as regular reoccurrences, with lecturers attributing them to the systemic failure of the government to honour agreements signed between them. The lecturers, in fact, believe that the government is nonchalant since their own children school abroad, and are, therefore, immune to the effects of such strikes. Obinze's mother attempts to absolve the lecturers from the blame when she says, "I understand the student's grievances, but we are not the enemy. The military is the enemy. They have not paid our salary in months. How can we teach if we cannot eat?" (91)

By reason of the constant strikes, students soon begin to leave the country for greener pastures. Ifemelu's classmates apply for visas in order to escape the stagnancy the strikes have imposed on their lives. Even Ifemelu's church organises a weekly special prayer service for those who intend to leave the country. The promise of hope overwhelms a young lady in one of these meetings as she testifies that she has been given a visa. For her, the hope lays in the fact that "Even if I have to start from the beginning in America, at least I know when I will graduate" (98).

According to Dustmann and Weiss (2007: 237), lack of economic opportunities and escape from natural disaster/persecution are two main reasons individuals migrate throughout history. In *Americanah*, Adichie makes it evident that migration has served as a source of escape for many Nigerians. An instance is seen in the case of some colleagues of Obinze's mother who embrace migration as an escape route from the terrible working conditions in the country. Unfortunately, the University which is meant to be the breeding ground for intellectuals is characterised by misuse of funds (59), overpopulation in hostel accommodation (89), terrible toilet conditions and devastating labour strikes (91). These factors soon push Ifemelu into seeking a scholarship abroad which she successfully gets. During a goodbye moment, Obinze's mother admits that Nigeria is chasing away its best resources (101). The state of the Nigerian state is so bad that there is a serious problem of brain drain on a large scale.

Ifemelu's life in Nigeria is, thus, succinctly exposed through her multiple flashbacks. The story of the Nigerian imbroglio is retold from her continuous flow of memory. Adichie has employed the technique to establish disorientations in the protagonist's home country. It buttresses the fact that, as a social being, it does not matter where one escapes; the problems that have effected certain decisions in one's life linger in one's memory. It further shows that the chaotic state of the home country continues to plague one, even when living in a new country.

Adichie also uses autobiography to relate experiences of Nigerians who resort to migration, only to be trapped in another world of adversity. Many incidents in the novel make one believe that the author may have lifted occurrences from her life directly. For instance, at the beginning of the text, one sees Ifemelu as a fellow at Princeton University. In reality, Adichie was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University during the 2005/2006 Academic Session. It is also quite noticeable that the nature of Ifemelu is similar to that of Adichie. Curt's friends like Ifemelu because "She was interesting; unusual in the way she bluntly spoke her mind" (207). Adichie is famous for being very bold and outspoken, and these have led her to discuss many controversial issues like hair, race, politics, religion and sexual orientation.

The lives of Ifemelu and Adichie are so entwined that the text can be read as a quasi-biography of the author. What one notices about the two personalities is their dissatisfaction with the educational system in Nigeria. Nigeria, as portrayed in the text, is enmeshed in myriads of challenges which have impeded its development; hence, the belief by Nigerians that substance only arises in a person's ability to migrate to a Western country. At this point, the West serves as the ideal place of habitation. Ifemelu further makes known the experiences of Nigerians in a foreign land through her blog. The blog symbolises the postmodernist technique of a text within a text. It also associates itself with technology as a product of globalization embedded in a postmodernist era. With migration, feelings of displacement and alienation consume the individual and Ifemelu uses her blog to record her experiences as a Black living in America. Ifemelu who has migrated is faced with the task of adapting to

a new country, as well as facing her problems which have evolved. In Nigeria, she was poor in addition to being a female; in America, the label of being black has been added to her status.

In her blogpost, *Why Dark-skinned Black Women Both American and Non-American Love Barack Obama*, Ifemelu attempts a description of how the black minorities in America have come to see their ancestry as a curse and would, therefore, do anything to escape from it. In another post, she examines the lives of migrants who try to separate their experiences from that of the Black American. She notes that it does not matter where a person is from; being black is genetic and the experiences of a Black American automatically becomes the experiences of a migrant. With the use of black humour, which is another postmodernist element, Ifemelu gives tips on how to survive as a Black person in America:

When a crime is reported, pray that it was not committed by a black person, and if it turns out to have been committed by a black person, stay well away from the crime area for weeks or you might be stopped for fitting the profile... When you watch television and hear that ‘racist slur’ used, you must immediately become offended. If you are in an Ivy league, and a young Republican tells you that you only got in because of Affirmative action, do not whip out your perfect grades from high school. Instead gently point out that the biggest beneficiaries of Affirmative action are white women... if you are telling a non-black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you are not bitter. Don’t complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny. Most of all do not be angry. Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. Otherwise you get no sympathy. This only applies for white liberals, by the way. Don’t even bother telling a white conservative about anything racist that happened to you. Because the conservative will tell you that YOU are the real racist and your mouth will hang open in confusion (221).

In another blog post, Ifemelu illuminates the disapproval of racism. Through what she calls the test of white privilege, she asks a number of questions that showcase the negative experience of being black in America:

When you apply for a bank loan, do you worry that, because of your race, you might be seen as financially unreliable? If you swear or dress shabbily, do you think that people might say that this is because of the bad morals or the poverty or the illiteracy of your race? If you criticize the government, do you worry that you might be seen as a cultural outsider? Or that you might be asked to go back to X, X being somewhere not in America? (347)

Perhaps the most important tool of Ifemelu’s adaptation as a migrant lies in her mastery of the American mode of speaking. In this instance, hybridity, which is a unique feature of postmodernism, manifests in *Americanah* in diverse ways. The very fact that the story takes place in Nigeria, America and the United Kingdom is a pointer to this. Ifemelu evolves into a new being after being exposed to multiple cultures. Language equally serves as a strong indicator of multiculturalism in *Americanah*. Though the author’s main medium of writing is the English language, the author considerably fuses English with Igbo language to present two cultures. In her email to Obinze, she opens with “Ceiling Kedu?” (19). Also, Obinze’s wife is known to always begin her calls to him with the words, “kedu ebe I no” (21). There is also the use of vernacular proverbs in a game between Obinze and Ifemelu such as “‘Ama m atu inu’— A frog does not run in the afternoon for nothing; “‘Akota ife ka ubi, e lee oba’— If something bigger than the barn is dug up, the barn is sold”; “‘Acho afu adi ako n’akpa dibia’— The medicine man’s bag has all kinds of things”; “‘E gbou dike n’ogu uno, e luo na ogu agu, e lote ya’” — If you kill a warrior in a local fight, you will remember him when fighting your enemies”.

Pidgin English is also used by the author. The very name of the text, *Americanah*, is the pidgin word for a Nigerian who has been to America. There is also the use of the word ‘abi’ when Emenike asks Ginika about her background: “Your mother is an American, abi? (65). Ginika also uses Nigerian expressions such as ‘Get-together’, ‘shay’, ‘boning’ and ‘half-caste’ (123) in an attempt to convince Ifemelu that she is still very Nigerian. Language has, thus, been employed to foreground multiculturalism.

Post-independent Nigeria is portrayed to be a country caught between two worlds of language as a result of the prominence of English language side-by-side with indigenous languages and other variants. However, through the author’s fusion, a hybrid form has been created to serve as Nigerian English. This is an example of the domestication of Standard English as popularised by Chinua Achebe when he posits that the English language is the tongue with which Africans are to fight back, in an



apparent appropriation of the Master's tool to bring down the Master's edifice. Ifemelu seems to subconsciously agree with Achebe's position when she decides to stop speaking with an American accent in order to affirm and assert her identity as a Nigerian:

Ifemelu decided to stop faking American accent on a sunlit day. ... It was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with "So", and the sliding response of "Oh really", but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds. And so she resolved to stop (173).

The psychological struggle she goes through before she gives up her American accent shows that she is lost and confused in a state of multiculturalism. Her struggle emphasises the fact that in the face of multiculturalism, individuals stand the risk of giving privilege to one culture over the other:

Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won: Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. And so she finished eating her eggs and resolved to stop faking the American sound (175).

As a Nigerian migrant herself, the author points out that it is very important in the event of multiculturalism to always place the indigenous language on a higher pedestal. This is because privileging another culture not only gives it more room to thrive in the home country but also puts indigenous cultures at the risk of extinction. Balance is seen as the key to handling multiculturalism in the author's opinion.

Although the foreign experience is seen from Ifemelu's perspective, Obinze also expresses his own share of frustration and humiliation. He is denied an employment in many companies in spite of his Second Class Upper degree. His travelling to Abuja and Port Harcourt for assessment tests and interviews yields no positive outcome as people with lower qualifications are often preferred and considered. Obinze's ordeal is a recurrent experience in Nigeria as youths decorated with all sorts of qualifications are daily turned down from one office to another. Such frustration only breeds discontent and may reinforce the idea that Nigeria is incapable of efficiency and development. This partly frustrates Obinze into seeking greener pastures in America, a dream that is abandoned after various failed attempts. His desire to go to America is, however, rekindled when his mother makes him a research assistant.

Obinze who sees Europe as a paradise and constantly makes references to the superiority of the West while in school is soon shocked by the reality that the West is not as rosy as he had thought. The moment of irony is greatly emphasised when Obinze who will never consider lowly jobs in Nigeria is forced to first become a cleaner and then a foreman because he does not have a working visa. His cousin, Nicholas, whom he stays with when he first arrives London, speaks with soberness about the foreign experience:

If you come to England with a visa that does not allow you to work, the first thing you look for is not food or water, it is an NI number so you can work. Take all the jobs you can. Spend nothing. Marry an EU citizen and get your papers. Then your life can begin (239).

Obinze takes to Nicholas' advice and seeks a fake marriage contracted by some Angolans so that he can get a resident permit. His salvation, however, comes in the form of Vincent Obi, another Nigerian, who allows him to use his National Identification (NI) number for a thirty-five percent (35%) cut from his salary. Unfortunately, it is this same salvation that serves as his downfall. When Vincent rashly demands for a raise and Obinze is unwilling to oblige him, he reports Obinze to the authorities who immediately deport him. The Nigerian citizen is, thus, seen as one plunged in myriads of problems despite his location. It is not enough to escape the problems at home; one must be prepared for the possible challenges away from home such as the effects of illegal migration, alienation, displacement and racism.

After experiencing the struggles of Nigerians living in the Diaspora, Obinze and Ifemelu soon decide to return to their fatherland. For Obinze, it is a reluctant choice, unlike Ifemelu who consciously

decides to return home. Upon Obinze's return, the country holds a new appeal as he gets a godfather, Chief, who elevates him from the status of poverty to riches. Through Chief's influence, Obinze is given a dubious deal to front which results in millions of naira. The experience leads to Obinze's transformation as a young man who was brought up to believe in the merit of hard work is forced by the perils of his situation to engage in corruption. It seems as though even after seeking respite everywhere, the true salvation of the Nigerian citizen lies in luck and ability to thrive in corrupt activities. Chief, while gloating in the benefits of corruption, tells Obinze:

The corporation was set up in the sixties and it owns property everywhere. The houses are all rotten and termites are eating the roofs. But they are selling them. I'm going to buy seven properties for five million each. You know what the real worth is? Fifty million (26).

Upon Ifemelu's return, we see that Lagos has more modern buildings and there is a democratic government in the country. However, there has been no real transformation as the Nigerian quagmire remains an endless circle. Perpetual degeneration seems to be the pattern of things in the country. More description of Lagos life from Ifemelu's view depicts the utter chaos accompanying daily life in that city:

...Lagos assaulted her; the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards... and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like taunt Commerce thrummed too defiantly. And the air was dense with exaggeration, conversations full of over-protestations. One morning, a man's body lay on Awolowo Road. Another morning, The Island flooded and cars became gasping boats. Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. And so she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? (385)

Ifemelu further exposes the deplorable conditions of her homeland as she takes her first ride through the city of Lagos. During the ride, Ifemelu stares out of the window thinking of Lagos as an ugly sight with the pothole-infested roads and houses springing up unplanned like weeds (386). Ifemelu is not the only one that notices the disintegrating state of the country even in a democratic era. Obinze sums up the state of things in the country through a conversation with his friends:

Look, it's very hard to be a clean public official in this country. Everything is set for you to steal. And the worst part is people want you to steal. The problem is not that they steal, the problem is that, they steal too much. Okwudiba said. They leave their state and come to Lagos and buy up all the land and they will not touch it till they leave office. That is why nobody can afford to buy land these days. It's true. Land speculators are just spoiling prices for everybody and the speculators are guys in government. We have serious problems in this country, Ahmed said (468).

*Americanah*, therefore, highlights in a surreal but sublime manner, the country's situation as a post-independent hellish geo-political space even as it gyrates from military rule to democratic government. It, thus, reveals that despite the different systems of government the country has experienced, its challenges have remained constant like a northern star.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the country's progress since independence. It has identified some of the problems plaguing the nation, including corruption, joblessness, poor educational system and bad governance, leading to the concomitant problems of migration of many Nigerians that would have contributed meaningfully to the nation's developments. These issues have been interrogated, using Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, as a case study.

A careful analysis of the text has revealed that lack of purposeful leadership and corruption serve as the root problems of Nigeria, and that no meaningful social, economic or political development can take place in any nation where these problems continually exist. The effects of such issues have been noted as migration and multiculturalism. Migration has served as an escape route while multiculturalism has naturally served as a form of adaptation. The perception of Nigerian experiences from a dual point of view also resonates closely with the author's personal experience. It is not

surprising then that the author has succinctly captured the issues plaguing Nigerians, both at home and in Diaspora. The novelist has thus shown the need to portray the realities of her society in her fiction.

Some aesthetic practices commonly associated with postmodernism have been used in *Americanah* to aptly express the predicament of a people in a neo-colonial African state. The privileging of postmodernist techniques in the novel is not merely a quest for stylistic experimentation and innovation; rather, it is a by-product of chronic instability and disillusionment in the society. Therefore, it may suffice to safely argue in conclusion that, in *Americanah*, Adichie has been able to reflect the endemic instability in Nigeria, and, by extension, the entire African continent, by bringing to the centre of discourse, the push/pull factors responsible for the postmodernist nomadic condition of many Africans. By implication, Adichie has succeeded, to some degrees, in carrying out what Ojaide (1994:17) believes ideal writers should do with their works:

We must attack with our pens one of two demons: corrupt civilian officials and military dictators. Literature might be devoted to leisure in other cultures, but for us Africans who are experiencing the second half of the twentieth (and now twenty first) century, literature must serve a purpose: to expose, embarrass, and fight corruption and authoritarianism. Literature has to draw attention to the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights.... Housing, food, health, and other basic needs which were taken for granted in the 1950s and early 1960s have become the focus of attention.

It is important to point out that even though Adichie seems to place the blame for the extant African realities on bad governance, she fails to arrive at any sort of coherent theory of salvation for the postcolonial impasse in her nation, and, by extension, her continent. It is, however, to Adichie's credit that she clearly opposes migration, which she does not embrace as the solution to the socio-political and economic quagmire facing many post-colonial African states.

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