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Negotiating Belonging: Manifestations of Alienation and Anxiety in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract: This paper examines the multifaceted manifestations of alienation and anxiety in immigrants' lives as embodied in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This paper argues that alienation and anxiety are orchestrated as adapting and progressing condition shaped by both internal conflicts and external structures like linguistic adaptations, racialization, socio-economic instability, professional instability, cultural dislocation, identity crisis and psychological fragmentation. Characters negotiate belonging, but it eventually results in fragmented identities and a persistent sense of unbelonging both in foreign and native land. It also indicates the psychological aspects of immigrants' lives through anxiety. Through a close examination of lead characters, the study substantiates the experience of an incessant sense of in-betweenness in immigrants' lives, identities that are neither ingrained in their homeland nor assimilated in a foreign land. Moreover, this paper explores how symbols such as language and hair function as both experienced and contested sites of alienation and anxiety. It also underlines the paradox of return, disclosing that the homeland itself becomes uncongenial. Eventually, this paper claims that *Americanah* defines alienation and anxiety as a volatile process that simultaneously reconstructs and disrupts identity; it offers a nuanced view of the elusive nature of belonging. This research paper employs postcolonial theories by Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, W. E. B. Du Bois and Stuart Hall.

Keywords: *Immigrants, Anxiety, Alienation, identity, Belonging*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an eminent Nigerian novelist and essayist. Her works are engaged with the themes of identity, migration, race and gender. She is known globally for her major explorations of these themes. In her novel *Americanah*, she carefully traces the strain of displacement and the unending search for belonging through the lives of her characters. Adichie's narrative spotlights the unremitting feelings of alienation and anxiety that shape and unshape migrant identities.

The objectives of this paper are to examine the manifestations of anxiety and alienation in immigrants' lives, to examine the role of language, race and economic status in producing alienation and anxiety and to examine identity fragmentation as a predominant outcome of societal pressures. This paper highlights that migration results in both physical and psychological unrest.

The sense of belonging is constructed through community and cultural acceptance and social recognition and inclusion. This sense of belonging is often constructed and reconstructed by colonial histories, migration, displacement, race, language and cultural hybridity. Individuals continuously negotiate belonging to navigate community, identity and home. Belonging encompasses the recognition of cultural history, the inclusion within society and emotional connection. However, this sense of belonging is often destroyed by the manifestations of alienation and anxiety. Alienation is a sense of disconnection. Alienation harbours experiences like isolation and exclusion. Anxiety is defined as a state of emotional and psychological uneasiness about an actual or perceived threat. Anxiety intensifies these experiences. It leads to a fractured sense of self and diminishes and destabilizes the sense of belonging.

Language becomes both a bridge, a passage of belonging and a barrier, a threshold of exclusion. For migrants, language works as a thread that stitches identities and also a seam ripper that splits them apart. Migrants often struggle with the language of the foreign land. Simultaneously, losing proficiency in their mother tongue creates aloofness from their own cultural identity. This cumulative loss exacerbates alienation. Ifemelu mindfully embraces the American accent to be recognized but later abandons it because of the sense of inauthenticity to her identity. It shows her struggle between authenticity and assimilation. This repositioning shows her internal conflict. Her awareness of her diminishing sense of self sheds lights on how language can construct alienation even within one's own personal identity.

Language serves as a symbol of belonging. Adopting an American accent indicates her social acceptance, whereas retaining a Nigerian language and accent reflects her cultural rootedness. Adopting a foreign language may open doors to employment, but it creates internal conflict. This ambivalent nature mirrors the anxiety between assimilation and cultural retention. Ifemelu consciously

adapts an American accent for validation, which replicates her psychological strain from linguistic adaptation. In America, mainstream American English is culturally dominant and socially advantaged. At the same time, African accents are often stigmatized or marginalized. Norman Fairclough, in his book *Language and Power*, says, “Language is a form of social practice” (226). Through this statement, he argues that language creates and maintains power relations. Language launches the social hierarchy.

In the Introduction to Robert J. C. Young’s *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Montage says, “... Postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last” (2). Ifemelu adopts the American accent for her employment prospects and to fit into the society. “She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practise an American accent” (Adichie 133-134). Though it doesn’t grant her full acceptance into society. Society continues to treat her as an outsider, still identifies as African and Black. This results in Alienation and Anxiety. Ifemelu wonders about Blaine, her black American boyfriend who doesn’t adopt an American accent; his English is still Wolof and French accented, though he is working as a professor in America. He remains unchanged by the accent. “She liked his accent, his English drenched in Wolof and French” (Adichie 339). Shifting to a foreign language creates a sense of alienation towards native culture. Domination of the colonial language wipes out the cultures embedded in the native language. Using the colonizer’s language can display great pomp and show, especially on intelligence and social prestige, but it splits a person’s identity, being a stranger to her own language that once shaped her. It produces confusion and a sense of not belonging anywhere; the sense of alienation about one’s own self is psychological alienation. This is mainly due to people’s perception that colonial languages are superior and native languages are backwards, which creates internalized oppression and shame.

M.S. Nagarajan, in his book *English Literary Criticism and Theory*, says that “...this colonist ideology created colonial subjects who behaved in the way the colonizer had programmed. They willingly accepted the superiority of the British and their own inferiority. It produced a ‘cultural cringe’ to speak” (187). The colonized people imitate the language, culture and behaviour of the colonizers. This is termed colonial mimicry. Homi K. Bhabha, in his essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, which is taken from his book *The Location of Culture*, says, “... colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of the difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (86). Bhabha argues that the colonizers expect and encourage the

colonized to imitate them, simultaneously ensuring that they remain their subordinate. This statement reflects his concept of colonial mimicry, where they became “almost the same, but not quite” (86).

Ifemelu meets an American girl named Cristina Tomas at the university, who speaks to Ifemelu in an awkward speaking pattern to emphasize that she is not a native American speaker. In the novel *Americanah*, Adichie, through Cristina Tomas, displays how Africans are treated in America regarding language: “Cristina Tomas said, ‘I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand... Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of *her*, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling” (133). In Lagos, Obinze seeks a job and his friend Nneoma tells him that she can offer him a job in her business only if he speaks with a Nigerian accent. “I would have said you should come and help me in my business but no, you are too soft, you speak too much English. I need somebody with *gra-gra*” (Adichie 23). This situation illustrates that using Standard American English, whether in America or Nigeria, doesn’t provide him privilege; it leaves him caught between two identities and eradicates his sense of belonging. Language emerges as a site of identity formation and alienation because it defines and determines social belonging. Ifemelu and Obinze are trapped between the longing for belonging and anxiety over identity loss. It leads the migrants to get caught in sociolinguistic anxiety. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo, in his book *Decolonising the mind*, says, “Language carries culture and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (16). Language plays a pivotal role in forging migrant identity. Thus, language works both as a survival tool and a seed of fear of judgement and anxiety in a foreign land.

The psychological and clinical term for extreme fear of being judged by others is called fear of negative evaluation. This is a social Phobia. People suffer from anxiety that others will watch them; these kinds of people tend to be more self-conscious, anxious and feel insecure about how they are perceived by others. These people try to seek approval from others and they please others to escape the harsh judgement and criticism. This condition falls under social anxiety disorder, which mainly includes fear and anxiety in social situations. Biological and environmental factors are the causes of this disorder. In biological factors, there is an almond-shaped structure located in the brain called amygdala. Its function is to control the fear response. A hyperactive amygdala results in a heightened fear response. This results in heightened anxiety in socializing. In environmental factors, people develop anxiety because of the unpleasant social situation in their past. Humiliation and rejection from society are prone to social anxiety disorder. These anxieties can deeply intrude into an individual’s personal and social lives, leading to self-doubt, low self-esteem and isolation from social relationships. Ifemelu feels insecure about her accent and experiences isolation and anxiety in American society. These experiences of Ifemelu reflect the symptoms of social anxiety disorder.

The coping mechanism for social anxiety disorder is cognitive behavioural theory, which is developed by Aaron T. Beck. It enables the individuals to identify and challenge the negative thoughts and displace them with positive thoughts. For Ifemelu, her internal conflict is shaped by her thoughts and social experience. Negative thinking patterns manifest anxiety and alienation. This cognitive behavioural therapy suppresses the negative thinking patterns and replaces them with positive ones. In one's mother tongue, emotions and feelings flow unbroken and unashamed. People often struggle to express their emotions and feelings in foreign land. The rich articulateness of emotion is suppressed in a foreign language. To suppress anxiety, Ifemelu implements a pivotal action by turning towards her native language for self-acceptance and belonging. Ifemelu resolved to stop speaking with an American accent. She no longer feels shrunk like a small, defeated animal when someone comments on her accent. "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" (Adichie 175). When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she displaces her negative thoughts and social experience by listening an Igbo song with Obinze.

...she sat still and silent as the words filled the car: *This is the feeling that I've never felt... and I'm not gonna let it die*. When the male and female voices sang in Igbo, Obinze sang along with them, glancing away from the road to look at her, as though he was telling her that this was really their conversation, he calling her beautiful, she calling him beautiful, both calling each other their true friends. Nwanyi oma, nwoke oma, *omalicha nwa, ezigbo oyi m o*. (443)

Through the Igbo song she retains her identity and sense of belonging.

Racism is the belief or practice which discriminates against people and makes them superior or inferior based on their skin colour. It is a symbol of identity, flourishing by stereotypes. It is not only an individual prejudice but also a social prejudice. African immigrants experience racism in America through discrimination, exclusion, stereotyping and microaggression. "...but in America, even if the white boy and Black girl grow up in the same neighbourhood, race would be primary" (Adichie 275). Racial alienation is the feeling of emotional, psychological, social and cultural estrangement experienced as a consequence of race. It happens when a person's race becomes a reason for exclusion, discrimination or diminished belonging. Racial alienation is the feeling of being unaccepted and unseen. Internal conflicts about one's own identity, loss of belonging and emotional loneliness are the characteristics of racial alienation.

African immigrants are noticed everywhere but remain unrecognized everywhere. They have two identities: one is that they are African by birth and the other is that they are Black by American classification. Ifemelu isn't aware of race when she is in Lagos, it is America which teaches her that colour speaks louder than character and to read herself through colour. It is her discovery of race. "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as Black and I only became Black when I came to America" (Adichie 290). This realisation leads to racial alienation, like experiencing societal exclusion and questioning herself. She negotiates the tension between preserving Nigerian identity and adopting to American society. Thus, race constructs as well as demolishes one's identity and belonging. At a party, Ifemelu and a Haitian woman, who dated a white man for three years, discuss dating a white man. Haitian woman says, "...race was never an issue for them" (Adichie 290). But Ifemelu objects that the white man considers the race an important factor, as she experienced the racial tension with her boyfriend Curt. Ifemelu says:

When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried, they will say we're overacting, or...too sensitive. (290-291)

African immigrants lose their individual identity, experiences everyday discrimination and social exclusion mainly because of race. Earlier, Ifemelu identifies herself as Nigerian, but as an immigrant in America, she identifies as a Black woman. The immigrants experience difficulty in jobs as well as in finding jobs. Race is an invisible cage. It confines their opportunity; it makes them feel invisible and alienated. They are put under pressure to assimilate, like altering their hairstyle, clothing and behaviour but it doesn't give them a sense of belonging; rather, it treats them as others and worsens their sense of alienation. "Assimilation is posited as an appropriate response to and a requirement for escaping the pain of being "black," which resulted in black subordination that led to anomie and alienation" (Aiyetoro 197). It also results in psychological burden, such as identity conflict, anxiety and insecurity.

Ifemelu sees herself through the lens of American racial hierarchies after her discovery of race. She writes about racism in her blog, which is her only way to process the racial alienation. "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby" (Adichie 220). W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness helps to analyze the internal conflict in Black individuals about dominant white society. Du Bois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, says, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of

measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (9). Before America she perceived that her identity was based on her nationality, language and family and culture, but after arriving in America her identity is confined to her accent, skin colour and hair; it highlights how the body works as a site of alienation. "Lose the braids and straighten your hair...we want you to get that job" (Adichie 202). Therefore, she lives between two identities because of racial prejudice. This double consciousness often leads to racial discrimination. She is no longer in Nigeria and never fully accepted in America; this in-between state reflects racial alienation.

The racial alienation denotes the various ways of racial discrimination. Exclusion from the society foreshadows the denial of equal treatment. Racism secludes the individual from the social activity and treats them as a different being. It often urges and pressures people to assimilate by rejecting their native customs. It even affects access to employment and financial stability. Migrant individuals experience exclusion from society; it results in racial anxiety and low self-esteem. They are hyperaware of their appearance in society. Racial consciousness is the significant manifestation of anxiety. Ifemelu's anxiety stems from being labelled as Black and excluded from the society. Her blog reflects her way of processing the racial alienation and also reflects her struggle to understand the dynamics of race. She repeatedly oversees her appearance and behaviour. This constant monitoring leads to self-consciousness, racial adaptations, fear of judgement and psychological stress.

Racism leads to self-consciousness; instead of freely live their lives as themselves, it paves the way to see themselves through judgements, stereotypes and prejudice imposed by society. The immigrants desire social acceptance, especially in the workplace; adapting is a prominent strategy for belonging. Thus, racism leads to racial adaptations, such as changing the texture of hair or behaviour to fit into the society. The continuous demand to cope with racism presents a mental burden on individuals which affects their physical and mental well-being, self-esteem and identity, causing a fracture in the self and it also shapes the identity. Fanon argues that racism affects the human psyche. He strongly argues that racism not only affects an individual in his social life but also his mental consciousness. Racism is a psychological force of oppression; it operates on the mind, emotions and identity. He claims that racism infuses an inferiority complex in the minds of the colonized; they unconsciously accept the pessimistic stereotypes of their race. Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*, says, "When Negroes approach the white world, there is a certain sensitizing action..., there is a collapse of the self. The Negro ceases to behave as an actional individual. The goal of his action will be Other (in the form of the White), because only Other can value him" (154). Here, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu, under the influence of an inferiority complex, straightened her natural hair and adopted American beauty standards. "Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side...the verve was gone. She did not recognize herself" (Adichie 203). She sees herself

through the lens of colonized; how others perceive her and develop a desire for recognition. This creates a mental strain. Straightening her hair doesn't help her to fit into society. So eventually she plans to keep her natural hair without using any chemicals. "...She looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, ...fell in love with her hair" (Adichie 213). This act of Ifemelu shows that she is retaining her identity and her belonging.

Downward mobility is a change in social status, experiencing a decline in professional status and income, a descent down the social ladder to a lower social and economic position. "Downward mobility refers to a change in social class that involves moving down the social hierarchy. This is a type of vertical mobility..." ("Downward Mobility"). The key characteristics of downward mobility are lack of opportunities and decline in quality of life; its prominent causes are discrimination based on race and gender. "Racial discrimination has placed and continues to place a heavy burden on all Black people in this country. A major function of racial discrimination is to facilitate the exploitation of Black labor, to deny us access to benefits and opportunities that would otherwise be available and to blame all the manifestations of exclusion-bred despair on the asserted inferiority of the victims" (Bell 27). Derrick Bell argues that racial discrimination is the core component for unequal distribution of power and resources. Struggles of Adichie's character mirror Bell's argument that racialized discrimination is rooted in social institutions.

Mostly immigrants are affected by this downward mobility when they move to a foreign land. Even though they possess high qualifications, skills and professional experience, their economic and professional status starts to decline in the foreign land. Their licences and professional degrees are not validated, so doctors, engineers, teachers and lawyers are forced to do a low-paying jobs. Temporary visas and undocumented status also restrict immigrants' opportunities. If they are fortunately employed, they only earn a meagre amount when compared to the native workers with the same qualifications. This results in professional and economic alienation.

Aunt Uju is a qualified doctor in Nigeria. When she moves to America, she has to take a particular examination to work as a doctor in America, which devalues her former qualification. She experiences a rapid decline in her professional and financial status. "I am tired. I am so tired. I thought by now things would be better for me and dike...I just could not believe how quickly money went" (Adichie 109). Because of her race, she lacks opportunity. "She wants to practice dermatology...skin disease looks different on black skin...she wants to go where the patients will be white...it is true my programme is high-ranked, but sometimes job opportunities are better in smaller places" (Adichie 142).

Ifemelu is also highly qualified, but when she moves to America, she struggles a lot to find work according to her qualifications; later she is compelled to accept menial works, under her qualifications, due to race and immigration barriers. “Yet there was no job. Was it her foreign accent? Her lack of experience?” (Adichie 145). Because of financial insecurity, she hesitates to buy clothes for cold weather. “Ifemelu said...if she needed to, she would wear all her clothes at the same time, in layers, until she found a job. She was terrified to spend money” (Adichie 125). It reveals how race and immigrant status shape their social status in America. Obinze also struggles to find a job as an undocumented immigrant in the United Kingdom. This reflects how immigrants are racialized and exploited. He longs to earn money, “...the rich in the presence of very rich; to have money it seemed, was to be consumed by money... but he imagined being like them” (Adichie 25).

The disparity between education and employment leads to distress and alienation from both self and society. Deskilling leads to skill alienation. The downward mobility and low-income lead to economic and professional alienation from their own selves. In America, Ifemelu struggles financially and takes low-paying jobs that belittle her sense of self. She is often disoriented from her career aspiration and she starts to write blog posts. Humiliation from her roommates frustrates and affects her dignity. Her roommate addresses her as a bitch: “I swear to God, bitch just tried to hit me! Ifemelu had wanted to slap her dissolute room-mate...because she was at war with world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her. It terrified her, to be unable to visualize tomorrow” (Adichie 152). Though educated Obinze works precarious illegal jobs in the United Kingdom which diminishes his dignity and shows the disengagement between qualification and opportunity. “Alienation run through him like a shiver” (Adichie 276). This mismatch leads to professional anxiety about future potential; unemployment intensifies anxiety and affect self-esteem.

Their inability to achieve economic security leads to economic anxiety. Ifemelu has undergone numerous job rejections, which leads to financial instability in America. Due to this, she is unable to pay her tuition fee and rent; her roommates demean her. “...the rent was due. Her roommate’s cheques were on the kitchen table...beside the cheque was a note, in jackie’s childish writing: Ifemelu, we’re almost a week late for rent. Writing a cheque would leave her account empty” (Adichie 150-151). Obinze uses another person’s identity to work and fears deportation in America. He is unable to earn stable income, which dismantles his future aspiration.

Later, Ifemelu thrives in Nigeria as she secures a job as a features editor for a women’s lifestyle magazine. This helps her to regain her confidence and secure a professional status in Nigeria. After returning to Nigeria, Obinze flourishes as a successful businessman. For immigrants, economic and professional opportunities are not determined by their ability and education but by their race and

nationality. Both Ifemelu and Obinze try to assimilate in America, especially in economic and professional status, but they remain strangers by their racial identity and immigration status; they are not permitted to belong there. Ifemelu's new blog in Nigeria gives her a sense of belonging, where she is not judged by racialized identity and immigration status. Obinze as a successful man in Nigeria gains a sense of belonging in professional and social status. But eventually both of them are bored and dissatisfied with their life in their native land. "Having this job, now that she was home, made her feel anchored. At first, she had enjoyed doing features, interviewing society women in their homes, observing their lives and relearning old subtleties. But soon she became bored and she would sit through the interviews half listening and half present" (Adichie 411-412). Then once again she resigned from her job and started to write a blog and titled it "*The Small Redemption of Lagos*" (Adichie 418).

Through language and racial adaptation, Adichie's characters learn new culture, like accents and behaviours by suppressing their real identity; it reflects their cultural dislocation. Stuart Hall, in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" says, "Culture identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical. They undergo constant transformation" (394). He states that identity is not static. Characters' hybrid identities result in a sense of alienation. Just living in America gives anxiety to Ifemelu. "To be here, living abroad, not knowing when she could go home again, was to watch love become anxiety" (Adichie 152). Ifemelu clearly articulates the state of returnees in her new blog. "Most of us have come back to make money in Nigeria, to start businesses, to seek government contracts and contacts. Others have come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country, but we spend all our time complaining about Nigeria" (Adichie 421).

However, to negotiate belonging, the characters in *Americanah* reclaim their linguistic identity through their native language, preserve their cultural identity by following their racial and cultural heritage and reclaim their socio-economic status by moving to their country. Yet these strivings don't result in complete belonging; they remain strangers in their native land. Adichie tries to rewrite the belief that migration leads to opportunity and belonging. She suggests that a sense of belonging cannot be gained through personal or economic success; it requires social recognition and inclusion. Ifemelu and Obinze long to return to their home from their foreign land. Eventually, when they return to America, Ifemelu feels that, "She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (Adichie 475). But this personal transformation doesn't come with social acceptance. Ifemelu is still labelled as *Americanah*, as an outsider in her homeland. "Americanah! Ranyinudo teased her often. You looking at things with

American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent, we would tolerate your complaining!” (Adichie 385). Adichie highlights the irony of migration, fully accepted neither in their native land nor in the foreign land. Ifemelu says,

People treat you differently. I don’t just mean strangers. Friends too. Even my cousin Nneoma. Suddenly you’re getting all of this sucking-up from people because they think you expect it, all this exaggerated politeness, exaggerated praise, even exaggerated respect that you haven’t earned at all, and it’s so fake and so garnish, it’s like a bad over-coloured painting, but sometimes you start believing a little bit of it yourself and sometimes you see yourself differently. (431)

Thus, Alienation persists even in their homeland; it denotes that the sense of belonging is altered permanently for immigrants. They do not fully belong anywhere. Although alienation and anxiety reshape and permit them to negotiate belonging, they ultimately result in a persistent quest for social acceptance. thus, this paper states that genuine belonging is in social acceptance. the sense of belonging remains elusive for immigrants in both native and foreign lands. The road to home won’t always lead to belonging. They are always from somewhere else in a foreign land and always return as someone else in their homeland.

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