
Construction of Diasporic Female Identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah

SamiUllah Khan¹, Muhammad Afzaal², Swaleha Bano Naqvi^{3*}

Abstract

As there are different attitudes in formulating gender identity and consequently defining what a woman is, the issue of identity and female perception as one of the major concerns occupying the attention of feminists has always been polemical. As its theoretical framework, the study draws upon the fluid nature of identity as defined through the lens of ethnicity and gender which in turn constitutes homeland identity for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The homeland identity and identity abroad are two different scenarios and worlds which have shaped the habitus of Ifemelu the protagonist and which develop her character accordingly. Identity is always something that negotiates Ifemelu's external and internal worlds. Meanings are wrongly attached to skin color which comprises the basic idea undergirding the sectionalizing of humanity. Therefore, gender is not a steady identity whence various acts proceed. Rather it is an identity constituted through the conventional recurrence of normative gender roles and recitals. The study thus focuses on how homeland identity and identity abroad are constructed and shape her own self as per constructed identity. Ifemelu's identity construction is studied via her intimacy with the characters of Obinze, Curt, and Blaine by adopting the theoretical lens furnished on the African diaspora by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. The different nature of relationships that define character and identity for Ifemelu is examined through Zeleza's notions on the contemporary African diaspora.

Keywords: Americanah; Identity; Diaspora; Language; Cultural Associations

¹MS Scholar, Foundation University Islamabad, (Rawalpindi Campus)

Email: sami.teacher811@gmail.com

²Foundation University Islamabad, (Rawalpindi Campus)

Email: Muhhammad.afzaal1185@gmail.com

³Foundation University Islamabad (Rawalpindi Campus)

Email: swaleha.naqvi@fui.edu.pk

* Corresponding Author

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Introduction

The post-independence era between the years the 1980s and 1990s are referred to have recorded excessive emigration to the prosperous Western states. There have always been certain factors that result in migration at a large scale. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* portrays the life account of its protagonist Ifemelu applied for the U.S visa to acquire Western education for a better future. Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is celebrated for its theme of contemporary emigration that entered into Nigerian literature and defined the transcultural concerns of the diaspora characters. Ifemelu, the protagonist goes to America and after facing certain problems becomes a thriving blogger. Ifemelu's life is defined by the struggles that she has to go through to recognize her identity as a Nigerian and as an immigrant. Cultural or homeland identity plays the most significant role towards identity construction abroad because her cultural or homeland identity helps her to negotiate the internal and external worlds for her.

Adichie has described her protagonist Ifemelu as an influencing character with certain prospects in life. The relationships that she has been through mold mold identity and the cultural associations help her establish her independent character. The story revolves around the life events of the protagonist in Nigeria and the United States. Through all her thirteen years, she had been through the struggle of identifying herself abroad. The concept of identity for her is not limited to homeland identity but it also defines her identity abroad. Her identity abroad has been defined and constituted by her natural aptitude for adaptation. The life of Ifemelu goes through greater changes because she has to withstand the cultural consequences abroad. Comparatively, her life in Nigeria is peaceful as there is no burden of severe racial criticism that surrogates life and its identity like in the U.S. According to Frantz Fanon, the identity of black people is made a point of greater concern by the social construction of white people and with their cultural outlook on the black community.

Americanah as an account of diasporic experiences and identity negotiation can best be studied through the theory of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. Zeleza's theoretical notion on cultural identity and African diaspora best suits to explain the diasporic world of Ifemelu: the protagonist in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. As its theoretical framework, this study relies on Adichie's theory of diasporic identity on the construction of identity in the female characters are adopted for the textual analysis of *Americanah*. The significant focus of analysis remains focused on three key terms as the construction of identity, diaspora, and language. Erikson labeled identity as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image" Erikson (1994). Diaspora mostly refers to those who have migrated to some other land either forcefully or willingly. Sapir defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" Sapir (2004).

Literature Review:

Migration and its related issues have been a dominant theme in contemporary African and particularly Nigerian literature. The most common factor associated with any migration is the issue of identity as how the Diasporas recognize and identify their identity. The most common factor behind identity crises in a foreign land has been the assumptions associated with the skin color. The ethnic and racial discrimination further leads to overshadow all of the expectations which are usually associated with the Western world. Migration with the aspiration to secure a prosperous future is the theme of *Americanah* where Adichie portrays the migrant subjects with the Afropolitan prospects Flodqvist (2018). The deep study of the novel elaborates that Adichie through her protagonist Ifemelu portrays a picture where the struggles of migration are overshadowed by the very basic concept of identity formation. This novel presents a perspective of how Africans receive the Western sense of identity formation Augustine Uka (2017, pp.386-399). Adichie has thus represented her protagonist Ifemelu from a middle class to exhibit the sophistication associated with this class and its quest to get Western education. Thus, the basic theme of identity formation in contemporary African literature is viewed through the lenses of realization and recognition in the backdrop of ethnic, racial and class conscious assumptions.

The racial epiphany becomes obvious in Ifemelu while living in America where she realizes that the assumptions associated with skin colors are not prevailing back in Nigeria; enabling her to recognize her homeland identity and its unprejudiced approach. But America's way of classifying people is dubious and based on false assumptions associated with racial background Alebrahim (2019). Adichie attempts to dramatize and deconstruct the superiority complex that the Western and particularly Americans' have constructed around their social values of acceptance. The complex associated with superiority is even obvious in language use and its influence as perceived and regretted by Ifemelu. Ifemelu regrets the American man appreciation for the good accent that she speaks in; thinking it to be a nonconformist approach towards true identity formation Martin (2015). Ifemelu realizes that speaking like Americans is never a complement nor an accomplishment but an attempt to overshadow the value of true identity.

Identity abroad in comparison to homeland identity is stuck in between the relationships that Ifemelu establishes with certain characters like Curt and Blaine. Ifemelu wishes to construct identity on behalf of these characters where these relations seem a materialistic give and take. These relations further highlights as how Ifemelu struggles towards identity formations and she accepts the fact that identity abroad is viewed through racial justification Hallemeier (2015, pp.231-245). The geographic concerns and the relations between them are very well highlighted by Adichie in *Americanah*. The mobility aspect certainly asserts the comparison between homeland identity and identity abroad for the protagonist Ifemelu Bragg (2008, pp.51-65).

Accordingly, the relations between Ifemelu and Curt or Ifemelu and Blaine replicate the world of white privilege and reflect the basic notion of racism affecting identity for her. The occurrences where certain characters' patent approach towards dominance is directly shown is actually an attempt that Adichie makes to negate the stereotypical approach that overshadows the basic notion of identity formation Hidalgo (2015). The ties established abroad by the protagonist involve a comparative notion of identity that influences the national destinations for the protagonist Ifemelu. Ifemelu's search for identity formation is rooted in the comparative sketch of all those traditions, acceptance, values and practices which have contributed towards the development of Ifemelu as a character de Melo (2019). Ifemelu's arrival in the U.S destroys all the images that she had misconceived about the state and its inhabitants. Her experience in the U.S urges her reflection back on homeland identity; leading to her assimilation and its misconfigured social reception on the part of native people.

Adichie's adaptation of Igbo vocabulary is actually an attempt to value and observe homeland identity through the mindset of communication, feelings, sensations and affections. Adichie's usage of language is an obvious attempt to view identity formation in the backdrop of two different worlds Kozieł and Cultures (2015, pp.97-114). Ifemelu's migration from Nigeria to the United States literally symbolizes her approach towards adaptation of new culture with the hope to identify herself through the general intimacies she develops abroad Ifemelu tries to establish a better perception of her identity abroad just like she relishes her homeland life memories where identity for her symbolizes the very concept of home. Her identity expectations shatter when she perceives the notion of 'others' in America, and she discovers that the racial demonstrations are nothing but the expressions of a racially illiterate society Oosterink (2019).

For Ifemelu identity was not an aspect of social diversification or sectionalization back in Nigeria. Her migration to the United States in the pursuance of higher education makes her aware of the dual human nature with regard to human identity. Adichie through the character of Ifemelu criticizes the false assumption of superiority practiced in white society. The relation between Ifemelu and Curt is inter-racial and this inter-racial relationship is actually a prominent instance of how racism affects identity in America.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to investigate the construction of identity within homeland and diasporic experience. Furthermore, the major objective of this study is to highlight as how baseless assumptions of superiority lead to social fragmentations of humanity. This study further elaborates the struggles which diaspora figures face in their transcultural identifications.

Research Questions:

The study follows the following research questions;

How does Ifemelu shape her identity abroad and in her homeland?

How does Ifemelu's relation with other characters enable her to mold her character?

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it discusses modern contemporary migrations which are mainly caused by political unrests, social chaos and desires for Western education. The central objective behind Ifemelu's migration is indeed her desire of pursuing higher education in United States. This is a point of greater consideration that Ifemelu during her stay in U.S has social engagements with people who are educated, but still believe in the inherited assumptions of social and racial superiority. This study thus encourages scholars to conduct their research on diasporic figures who even during their education are not spared of social and racial injustice. Furthermore, this study urges the scholars to truly comprehend the basic struggles of contemporary diaspora figures who during their pursuance of higher education abroad struggle for self-identification.

Theoretical Framework:

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza argues that diasporic identities are not devoid of cultural associations. Diasporic identities are thus formed through "group consciousness *"which in its turn is "constituted historically through expressive culture, politics, thought and tradition"* Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58). The divide between cultural and social factors is not easy and thus shapes the overall genealogies of diaspora figures. According to Zeleza, diasporas are defined by the *"complex social and cultural communities created out of real and imagined genealogies and geographies[...] of belongings, displacement, and recreation, constructed and conceived at multiple temporal and spatial scales"* Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58).

The diaspora notion is defined through two different classifications: one being the historic diaspora and the other as contemporary diaspora. The first category traces its origin back to the slaves' trade before the emancipation and formation of the African states as independent states; while the contemporary diaspora is the second category that Zeleza attributes the writings of Adichie to. Ifemelu is a part of diasporic identification and her experiences can best be explained through the notion of *"diaspora of structural adjustment"* Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58). Zeleza argues that the category of 'structural adjustment' defines diasporic world of late 20th century. Ifemelu as depicted in *Americanah* identifies the life of diasporic 'group consciousness' where the cultural representation is further made authentic through *"political, social and cultural traditions"* Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58).

The true nature of identity and its negotiation is impacted in African diaspora by the general perception of the self, and the self as perceived by others around. Identities are social constructions which are not static but always in progress and continuous realization. Stuart studies the identity aspect and argues that identity is formulated by something from within and not *"outside representations"* Hall (1990). Cultural or homeland identity is defined by the history that has *"fixed or stable"* historical bases and the affiliation of the people is classified through the factors of *"race and ethnicity"* Boehmer (2005). This connection and how it shapes identity of Ifemelu as African diaspora is central to the fact as how both the homeland identity and foreign identity are constituted for her. Furthermore, the aspects of language and outward appearance are of central importance in identity formulation. Ifemelu use of language and her outward appearance do create a sense of affiliation and correspondence between homeland and foreign identity. Language and physical appearance throughout the plot play their role to help the protagonist accommodate and adapt the basics requisitions of survival.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza thus identifies *Americanah* as a diasporic account that reflects the structural adjustments. The diasporic figures with their affinity to this categorical classification are *"professional elites, traders, refugees and students"* Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58). The basic impetus behind migration is either political instability or the hope of Western education. *Americanah* portrays the life account of the protagonist Ifemelu whose migration is caused by the prospect of Western education to build her future on Kaba (2004, pp.19-30). The aspect of greater diversification molds diasporic relationships in contemporary diaspora. The diversification prospect does count and reflects the obvious factors of *"antagonism, ambivalence, acceptance, adaptation and assimilation"* Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58). There are certain factors of class, gender, religion and age and based on these factors each diasporic community or a group has its own affiliations and what Zeleza identifies its *"own connections and commitments to Africa, its own memories and imaginations of Africa, and its*

own conceptions of the diasporic condition and identity" Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58). The identity of Ifemelu in *Americanah* is thus relatively two fold as how she adapts to the cultural difference and how she values her comfort in her own cultural empathy.

Adichie through her protagonist Ifemelu in *Americanah* elaborates the role of cultural discernment in securing identity. She argues that identity becomes identity issue out in America, being in Nigeria the identity doesn't become a problem and like America no cultural classification is done to sectionalize human race. Thus, homeland identity is the closer affiliation which she shares with her cultural roots; that helps to keep her character spiritually united and she recognizes this homeland identity as an abode of identification beyond her physical existence *Tunca and Beyond* (2010, pp.291-309). The diasporic 'conflict' and 'cooperation' are defined through structural adjustments where the protagonist Ifemelu justifies her diasporic identity through both inner and outer conflicts.

Discussion and Analysis

Early life in Nigeria

Ifemelu belongs to a middle-class family. She is not that much rich and most of her friends often visits UK or US. Her life and her identity before going to US completely belongs to Nigeria. She experiences frequent visits of her relatives, even distant relatives. This shows that her family still practices the traditions of Nigerian people, and she has a very strong bond with her family. This strong bond of Ifemelu with her family is one of the reasons that makes her to leave US and come back to Nigeria.

As mentioned earlier that her life belongs to Nigeria and her identity is true Nigerian/African before going to US. This is evident by the fact that she always has a fancy in her childhood for the hair of her mother. Her mother's hair is very thick and extremely black, and people used to ask her "*Is it your real hair?*" (Adichie, 2014). So Ifemelu also wants such black hair which is very peculiar in African people. For Ifemelu, her hairs symbolically represent her confidence and a sense of identity. This constructs her identity as a true Nigerian, and that her identity is completely an African in its true sense. She feels her identity dying with the natural curl if vanished. The social pressure exerted on Ifemelu to straighten her hair symbolically refers to the inherited sense of racism in American culture. "*Just a little burn*", the hair dressers said, "*but look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing*" (Adichie, 2014). Moreover, when she is a kid, her father tries to speak Standard English with her. However, she does not like it. Though her father even scolds her for not taking really interest in it but she is never in fancy with such foreign language. He always scolds her for being a disobedient, stubborn and mutinous kid, but she never tries to change her attitude. She is not ready to mold her true nature and her true identity.

In fact, she really hates such mannered English more with the passage of time as it is mentioned in the novel "*But his mannered English bothered her as she got older*," (Adichie, 2014). Therefore, instead of the mannered English, she prefers to speak Igbo with her father to speak Igbo, which is the Nigerian language and also Ifemelu's mother tongue. Moreover, when she was in the US, she also tries to teach Dike Igbo language, and she used to communicate with him in Igbo which shows that she wants to maintain her identity of being black.

Ifemelu is not like her friends who belong to wealthy families, and who frequently visit UK and US and who have dreams and fantasies about UK and US. This is not because she is poorer than her friends and that she cannot afford to visit UK or US, but the truth is that she is never inspired from these countries. She has no fantasy for UK, US or Europe. She is born in African, and is African by nature. She does not show any desire to ever visit UK or US. Even back in Nigeria, when her boyfriend Obinze is completely obsessed with US and calls US as the future, she still does not develop any fancy for US. Later on, when she decides to get a student visa and go to US it is all what she needs at that time. Zeleza through his thoughts on conditions "*professional elites, traders, refugees and students*" (Zeleza 2009, pp.31-58) which force migrations and create diaspora figures can best interpret Ifemelu's case. Ifemelu's migration is caused by times when Nigeria is full of chaos and internal conflicts, and the country is in a state of war and the educational institutes were closed because of the strikes, that time she decides to go to US in order to rescue her educational career. Her decision of going to US and her life experiences there are thus characterized by "*the many identities*

[she has] to wear " (Guarracino). This means that before going to US, her identity is of a true Nigerian with an African sense and beauty; but then too, her adaptation of an immigrant identity is not free from the homeland identity and its natural impact.

Identity in US

Ifemelu a Nigerian girl who gets an escape from her homeland puts herself in great trouble in terms of identity crises. She thinks that migration to America entails her loss of identity. It starts from changing of her name on her ID card so that she can find a good job. Her new name is Ngozi Okonkwo which is of course a difficult one and she forgets her new name in an interview and feels so embarrassed. She explains this to her friend who says "You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name, *They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa*" Adichie (2014). So, after getting her card with correct name on it she seems very happy and restored as she finally acknowledges her real identity.

In the start Ifemelu like all other immigrants tries to adopt American accent in speaking but later on after meeting with Cristina Tomas Ifemelu realizes "*she was speaking like that because of her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling*" Adichie (2014). So she decides not to give fake representation through her speaking and because of this she regains her lost identity "*decided to stop faking an American accent*" Adichie (2014).

Zezeza's notion of how a diasporic individual molds its individual identification through 'social consciousness' can best evaluate through Ifemelu's contacts and intimacies; as he explains Diasporic identities are thus formed through "group consciousness *which in its turn is "constituted historically through expressive culture, politics, thought and tradition"* Zezeza (2009, pp.31-58). Accordingly, then, new identity has been given to Ifemelu by her boyfriend Curt. Her life changes suddenly when she meets Curt because he gives him a lot of space to grow in America. Just after she befriends Curt her social interaction with people increases and gets out of her traumatic experiences of her life "*That was what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease. She had slipped out of her old skin*" Adichie (2014). On weekends she used to have party with Curt and her mother "*ornate hotel dining room, full of nicely dressed people, silver-haired couples with their grandchildren, and middle-aged women with brooches pinned on their lapels. The only black person was a stiffly dressed waiter*" Adichie (2014). Intermingling of Ifemelu in Curt's white social circle is another way of creating her identity in Maryland. In the novel it is depicted through these lines "*Her Maryland was a small circumscribed world of Curt's American friends*" Adichie (2014). So her social circle puts an impact on her new developing identity in this foreign land.

"*She looked at the photographs of these men and women and felt a dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil*" Adichie (2014). Here she feels as losing her identity while living in America. Her heart is not at peace in this stranger land. Therefore her migration to America seems traumatic to her which results in depersonalization. She explains how terrible it is to loss one's identity to her African friend Ginika "*I do not understand how anybody will believe I'm Okonkwo*" Adichie (2014).

Her assertion and emphasize on speaking Nigerian accent can rightly be called as Ifemelu "*asserts her identity as a Nigerian*" (Oluwafunlola). That means that Ifemelu adopts her identity both as a cultural and individual identity. After her realization of the fact that the American accent was not something natural to her, she switches back to Nigerian accent and thus reflects her true identity through speech behaviour. This overall shift and tuning from one aspect of accent to another reflects Zezeza's notion of "*diaspora of structural adjustment*" Zezeza (2009, pp.31-58). Her intimacy with Blaine makes her uncomfortable for the same reason that "*He [Blaine] spoke the kind of American English that she had just given up, the kind that made race pollsters on the telephone assume that you were white and educated*" (Adichie, 2014). She feels her identity being lost as it's determined by the accent that she speaks.

Throughout the novel Ifemelu struggles with more than one identity. For instance, Once Ifemelu manages to attend a speech delivered by President of African Students Association of the university in Philadelphia in which he utters "*Very soon you will start to adopt an American accent.*

You will start to admire Africans who have perfect American accents" Adichie (2014). This statement makes Ifemelu think that president is trying to say that African immigrants in America adopt their accent for only short period of time and ask an indirect question about their identity.

Although Ifemelu knows how to speak English language still she learns new American vocabulary items. Word *Fat* in America possess bad connotation and her friend Ginika also informs her that "*fat in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like stupid or bastard, and not a mere description like short or tall. So she had banished fat from her vocabulary*" Adichie (2014). Similarly, another word "*half-caste*" is used as just a description in Africa whereas it is considered as an insult in America. So Ifemelu tries to avoid the use of this word instead she uses "*biracial*" as she knows that if she will use half caste one can be offended.

Nigger a word that is always considered as controversial is also a part of discussion in Ifemelu's class where her teacher says "*nigger is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out*" Adichie (2014). Above examples show that how Ifemelu is force to adapt American accent along with such a vocabulary that is not necessary to learn and all of these things affect her own real identity.

One can relate identity of a person with his or her name. As names are always very important and primary subjects. Ifemelu also thinks that her name is her identity and only she has a right to tell it to anyone whom she wants. Names definitely indicate some kind of identity as many times they have some specific background which has significant meaning. So here Ifemelu through her story tells that how name that is considered as primary and essential aspect of identity may be lost under the guise of assimilation and survival in a new land.

Aunty Uju who is most loved and respected lady of Ifemelu's life accepts change of her name by her American colleagues "*America had subdued her*" which gives great surprise to Ifemelu and she thinks that her identity like her aunt is not secure here and definitely things will affect her identity as well.

Another important aspect that shapes her identity especially abroad is her Language because it is language that connects and divides individuals. She knows that how she forms new relations with people through the use of different words and phrases. Also it helps her in developing her new identity.

After US

When Ifemelu comes back from US, she is no longer that pure African which she was before going to US. She is neither a complete American, not Nigerian. Ranyinudo tells her that "*But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah*"(Adichie). It seems that her true identity before going to US is distorted by the US's strong cultural effects on her. This can be seen perfectly when Ranyinudo feels her manners are a bit changed, and she complains often about a lot of stuff. When she comes back to Nigeria after living for years in America her friends can witness great change in her personality and thinking as she compares everything with American society and that is the reason her they call her "*Americanah*"! Ranyinudo teased her often by saying "*You are looking at things with American eyes*" Adichie (2014). Another example when she tries to watch TV, she does not like even a single channel, but instead criticize government for being foolish, as they cannot even make better propaganda news. She tells her friend that she would prefer watching CNN and BBC. Moreover, when she tells her friend about a house that "*it is an ugly house*", her friend gets surprised on her opinion as "*Ugly kwa? What are you talking about? The house is beautiful!*"

For Zeleza "*own connections and commitments to Africa, its own memories and imaginations of Africa, and its own conceptions of the diasporic condition and identity*" Zeleza (2009, pp.31-58) shape life and perspectives of how to perceive and recognize discernment instilled by various diasporic conditions An instance of how she looks at things differently can rightly be referred to the scene where she is with Obinze. The waiter looked offended. "*It is the imported frozen ones.*" As the waiter walked away, Ifemelu said, "*Those frozen things taste horrible.*" "*He can't believe you're actually asking for real potatoes,*" Obenize said drily. "*Real potatoes are backward for him. Remember this is our newly middle-class world. We haven't completed the first cycle of prosperity, before going back to the beginning again, to drink milk from the cow's udder*" Adichie (2014). This scene happens when Ifemelu returns to her homeland and dinning with Obinze in a local restaurant.

At this stage of their life they have mixed feelings about their home country and it is because of change of their cultural identities. Back in America both of these change their true identity in order to be appropriated for their new Western surroundings. But still, they possess Nigerian values in them as they are able to understand what waiter is trying to convey. Yet it questions their identity as they prefer imported potatoes over fresh ones. This highlights the fact that how Ifemelu looks Nigerian people and things now. Her perspectives have been changed and unintentionally now she has Western point of view that questions her identity as well.

This is not the whole truth that she has developed American taste in her life. She still has her African nature preserved in a corner of her heart. This can be seen when she joins the club made by the returnees of the US and UK. This club is named as Nigeropolitan Club. She also joins the club, but she dislikes it later. The reason for this is that the members of this club are completely western, and look at the life in Nigeria very inferior. She does not like this attitude of returnees. She even criticizes them and their foolish western attitude in her blog.

Conclusion:

The study concludes that *Americanah* stretches an overwhelming account of the life experiences of the protagonist Ifemelu. Ifemelu and her experiences symbolically represent the stereotypical identity crises of diaspora figures, especially woman. There seems a constant struggle in her life to retain her homeland identity which also shapes her identity abroad. The basic theme of identity has been presented to evaluate and judge as how based on ethnic and racial assumptions of superiority social constructions limit life opportunities for Diasporas. Furthermore, this study explains the natural aptitude towards identity formation and examines the role of homeland identity that facilitates the protagonist with something that she owns and regards essential.

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