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Transnationalism, Home and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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Abstract

Using tenets of postcolonial theory, this paper interrogates the different perspectives from which the lives of African women migrants to the United States of America are affected by sustained or unsustained connections with their countries of origin in some of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. It foregrounds transnational practices at the economic, social or political levels as instrumental in the way these migrants position themselves in the multiple spaces they inhabit. It aims at showing that the migrant experience complicates and problematises home, family and identity, leading to a revision in our perception of these categories. It is argued that the migrant subject, in some of the stories, needs to renegotiate her identity in often new and innovative ways, giving rise to what O.M. Nonnini and Aihwa Ong refer to as "new subjectivities in the global arena" (Nonnini and Ong 1997:10).

Résumé

Se basant sur des principes fondamentaux de la théorie postcoloniale, cet article expose les questions sur les différents points de vue présentés dans « *The Thing Around Your Neck* », recueil de nouvelles de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. D'après celles-ci, la vie des migrantes Africaines aux États-Unis est affectée par le maintien et le non-maintien des relations avec leurs pays d'origine. L'article avance les pratiques

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> transnationales au niveau économique, social ou politique comme facteurs contribuant à la façon dont ces migrantes se positionnent dans les multiples endroits qu'elles habitent. Il vise à démontrer que l'expérience des migrants complique et problématise la patrie, la famille et l'identité, ce qui conduit à une révision de notre perception de ces catégories. Dans certains récits, il est soutenu qu'une migrante doit renégocier son identité de façon nouvelle et innovatrice, donnant lieu à ce que O.M. Nonnini et Aihwa Ong appellent «des nouvelles subjectivités dans l'arène mondiale» (Nonnini et Ong 1997:10).

Introduction

It is a fact of history that people have long been travelling, studying and living abroad, leading to the formulation of multiple affiliations and identities (Bhabha 1994, Rushdie in Nasta 2002). This trend has however gained momentum in recent years with the collapse of the material wellbeing of most non-western societies (Basch et al. 1994; Singer 2002; Olutayo & Adebayo 2009). In Africa, which is the focus of our essay, the popular conviction is that the continent has very little to offer in terms of economic, social and intellectual benefits and so many of its citizens increasingly migrate to seek better livelihoods abroad in Europe and the United States of America. While abroad, they continuously maintain relations with their countries of origin thanks to high-speed communication and transport technology.

These migrants, who are now a reality of the African landscape, have become emblematic figures of our postcolonial experience. Their very existence, as transnational subjects, problematises our understanding of concepts such as home and identity. Revathi Krishnaswamy corroborates this when he says that "they represent a removal from old foundations and from previously grounded ways of thinking about identity" (Krishnaswamy 1995: 13).

Contemporary African writers like Fatou Diome (2006) in *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Tayeb Salih (2009) in *Season of Migration to the North*, Buchi Emecheta (1983) in *Second Class Citizen*, Ike Oguine (2000) in *A Squatter's Tale* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, (TAN)[2] offer us varying perspectives on these immigrants, showing how lives lived in more than

[2] TAN will serve as an acronym for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* and will from time to time substitute of the fuller title.

one place, and characterized by movement, constitute the reality for them, a reality they must engage with differing consequences.

This paper uses tenets of postcolonial theory to interrogate transnationalism – a contemporary postcolonial phenomenon- in some of Adichie's stories in TAN. It seeks to examine the different perspectives from which the lives of African women migrants to the United States of America are affected by sustained and/or unsustained connections with their countries of origin. The paper foregrounds transnational practices at the economic, social or political levels as instrumental in the way these migrants position themselves in the multiple spaces they inhabit. It aims at showing that the migrant experience complicates and problematises home, family and identity, leading to a revision in perception of these categories. The paper argues that the migrant subject, in some of the stories, needs to renegotiate her identity in often new and innovative ways, giving rise to what D.M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong refer to as "new subjectivities in the global arena" (Nonini and Ong 1997:10).

Postcolonial theory engages the literature of countries with a history of colonialism. Nigeria, which informs the stories we examine, had once been a colony of Britain. Furthermore, the theory

> takes it for granted that literary form and content are shaped by factors that transcend the idiosyncratic choices of individual writers, acknowledging the fact that the choices the writers make are inevitably informed and, in most cases, limited by factors in context- cultural, political and social- within which they operate, which are in turn determined by their colonial history" (Okunoye, 2007:117).

Adichie's narratives, as we demonstrate in this analysis, are informed by a postcolonial context largely determined by a global environment in which human activities extend across national boundaries, calling for a re-visioning of such activities and communities. At another level, questions of migration and how these inform our understanding of identity and home are crucial to postcolonial theory. This is so because the theory itself, according to Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhaba, is an essentially transnational and global process.[3] Andrew Smith says, to this effect, that "postcolonial theory posits a new relationship between narrative and migration [because] the latter takes on a new and qualitatively different significance in the context and aftermath of colonialism."[4] The new significance

[3] Stuart Hall (1996:242-261) and Homi K. Bhabha (1994)

[4] Andrew Smith (2004:249,242).

that migration assumes, in Smith's observation above, resonates well with the concept of transnationalism which is our concern in this paper and which, according to Riva Kastoryano, "is a global phenomenon principally concerning postcolonial immigrants" (Kastoryano 2002:1). For Sally McWilliams, "postcolonial theory… discusses how subjects are constituted now that the colonial powers no longer have overt, political control." (McWilliams 1991:103). The characters in the narratives, under study, draw from a postcolonial setting and have become transnational subjects maintaining several identities linking them simultaneously to more than one nation, in this case, Nigeria and the United States of America. How they straddle both worlds and redefine themselves in the process is the question we seek to answer in this paper. However, before we proceed, we would like to define the terms used in this paper, namely, transnationalism, home and identity.

Definition of terms

Transnationalism, a relatively new approach to the study of migration, is a concept used to describe new immigrant identities in a globalised world. It refers to a condition in which despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders, certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common, however-virtual-arena of activity. Indeed, as Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (1995: 48) posit,

> contemporary immigrants, unlike earlier ones, forge and sustain simultaneous and multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement [to the extent that] their daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders.

This paper examines women immigrants whose lives, according to Young Jeong Kim, "are still under the influence of their home country as well as the new settings in their host country" (Kim 2009: 25). New technologies, as we noted earlier, are at the centre of these transnational networks, reinforcing pre-existing social networks. How these global-to-local links, whether at the social, economic or political levels, shape the identity of these immigrant women, constitutes the focus of our study.

In the *Poetics of Space*, French phenomenologist, Gaston Bachelard (1994), defines home as the crucial site of one's intimate life acting as a refuge. Bachelard's definition foregrounds attachment, intimacy and belonging as crucial to the concept of home. His definition rests on the assumption that there is a convergence of the self and the home (Said 2003:37). This perspective of home is radically problematised in the context of migration given that, in these spaces, it ceases to be just one place but becomes location and, like Bell Hooks notes,

> it transcends a single location to become that place which enables and promotes varied and ever- changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we are, can become in an order that does not demand forgetting (Hooks 1984: 19).

The above position situates us in a framework which "challenges different kinds of absolutism that would confine culture, [of which home and identity are components] in (racial) ethnic or national essences" (Gilroy 1991: 15). Our study reveals that as the women subjects, in Adichie's narratives, navigate the different locations in which they find themselves, they expand the sense of home to mean both 'here' and 'there.' The sense of home in these contexts is sustained through "encounters and clashes with other histories, other places, and other people" (Chambers 1994: 4).

In *After the Last Sky*, Edward Said notes that "identity is who we are, where we come from, what we are" (Said 1986:16). Such a view of identity has been radically challenged by transnationalism which has called into question issues of identity and belonging for contemporary migrants in the globalised world. C.R. Nagel, for instance, says that

> transnationalism challenges our understanding of identity formation from a perspective that is not bounded by space or time, but that instead appreciates the fluidity and dialectical character of the process of identity formation" (Nagel 2004:8).

Homi Bhabha, on his part, localises identity outside of binarisms and places its construction within a movement (Bhabha 1997:434) which, to Katrin Berndt, "takes place between different cultural positions of cultural belonging and

involves the negotiation of identity layers" (Berndt 2007: 180). The positions above emphasize the part played by migration in reviewing our understanding of identity. This is consonant with postcolonial theoretical premises that view identity as "a construct and not an essence, a pluralized process of negotiation" (Castel 2000:506).

Our paper investigates how movement from Nigeria to the United States of America affects immigrant women's sense of identity. It will be shown that movement and transnational practices transform the way these women position themselves with regard to their home and host countries and, in the process, emphasise the fact that "the renegotiation of identities", as we noted above, "is fundamental to migration"(Boyce Davies1996: 3). How these women struggle to negotiate a sense of identity in a bewildering array of social, cultural and ethnic possibilities, in these multiple spaces, constitutes the next portion of our paper.

"Her New Life?": Constructing Transnational Identities in TAN

The Thing Around Your Neck is a collection of twelve stories investigating the lives of women in contemporary Nigeria and the United States of America. The women in the United States are there for different reasons, among which are, a wife joining her husband after six years of separation, a young woman in an arranged marriage, another who wins a visa lottery, and the wife and children of a wealthy business man enjoying an upper-middle class suburban existence while the husband travels back and forth. All these women struggle to find their identity in unfamiliar settings. Susan Vanzanten observes that the stories in the volume revolve around questions of identity in an era of globalization. For her, the women live in a world

> with hazy geographical boundaries, a world of immigration, diaspora and hybridization. The 'things' hanging around their necks are complicated strands of social, cultural, religious and historical roots that gradually weave into the cord of one's self (Vanzanten 2009:1).

In this regard, plot, setting, character and technique, work together to underscore the above perspective in the stories in question. We begin our analysis with "Imitation."

"Imitation" is about Nkem living in a Philadelphia suburb with her two children. Her husband, a "Big Man" in Nigeria, spends only two months a year

with her and the rest of the time in Lagos. She, herself, equally goes home to Nigeria only during the Christmas holidays.

The story begins in the present when Nkem learns from her friend, Ijemamaka that her husband, Obiora, has a girlfriend in Nigeria who has now moved into her Lagos home. It then oscillates between her first getting the news, her initial response, flashbacks on her life and marriage and the final decision to return with the children to Nigeria and only come to the United States of America during holidays. Through this structure, based on the technique of rememory, which consists of constant movement to and fro between the past and the present, Adichie x-rays the life of a heroine negotiating her identity through a transformative series of cultural and personal encounters.

Nkem's migrant status, her experiences in Nigeria and America all jostle with each other to ultimately define a woman who, for the most part, has been defined by others, and must take her own destiny into her hands when confronted by a threat to the space she calls her own. It is a space characterized by multiple boundaries that culminate in underscoring her transnational status. An examination of how her identity is constructed before the story begins is important to our understanding of the decisive act she enacts when she assumes agency at the end of the story.

Before marriage and eventual movement to the United States, Nkem grows up in an environment where her identity is constructed by social norms informed by gender and class. Her parents are poor farmers on a parched farm who can barely afford meals for the family. Her brothers hawk bread at the motor park. As the first daughter, Nkem is expected to cater for the needs of everyone often to her own detriment. In the Igbo patriarchal setting in Nigeria, an eldest daughter of the home carries numerous burdens, namely, providing for her parents and ensuring the welfare of her siblings. Nkem accepts this world as absolute and seeks only to find her defined place in it. Consequently, she dates married men to have the money to perform the roles that her cultural setting has mapped out for her. She looks forward to the men proposing to her, even if it means being the fourth wife in a marital relationship, but this does not happen. As it were, in the postcolonial capitalist context of Nigerian, the parameters of marriage have been redefined. Most men now prefer university educated girls for wives possibly to further enhance their status. Young girls too look for rich men who would meet their needs and those of their families. In such a context, Nkem has very little chances of success because her beauty notwithstanding, "she had gone to secretarial school, not a university. Because despite her perfect face she still mixed up her English tenses; because she was still, essentially, a Bush Girl" (31).

Consequently before Obiora comes, the heroine sees little or no value in herself. Her life is dictated by society's exigencies, a postcolonial society defined by a patriarchal and materialistic ethos. She does not measure up in her own eyes to "the kind of women who went abroad and bumped into each other while shopping at Harrods" (32). She even wonders why Obiora dates her. This comparison is used to good effect to underscore the acquiescent role she later plays in the marriage because everything revolves around the husband whose tastes, position and desires now define her. She defers to him in everything, for, even when Obiora proposes to her, Nkem finds this superfluous because "she thought how unnecessary it was, his asking, because she would have *been happy simply to be told"* (my emphasis). The phrase, "simply to be told", significantly captures the gendered space of male dominance and female voiceless subservience that Nkem has come to accept as a normal way of life. It further accentuates her transformation when she recovers her voice in her self- defining posture at the end of the story.

Upon marriage to this wealthy man, therefore, Nkem's identity is constructed on his material achievements. We are told that when she first came to America to have her baby, "she had been proudly excited because she had married into the coveted league, The Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives To America to Have Their Babies league" and when their rented house is finally bought, "she liked that she had become part of yet another, the Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America league" (26). Her life, as we noted earlier, is dictated by the husband's likes and dislikes. For instance, she wears her hair long, waxes her pubic hair when he is to come for visits and appreciates the art objects he brings even when she understands very little about them.

In America, the cultural environment that defines her is characterized by a racialist consciousness, egalitarianism and plenty in terms of food and what the writer calls "unreasonable hope." This is in apparent reference to the American dream which all who emigrate to the United States hope to achieve. Through the use of contrast, this space is subtly juxtaposed with Nigeria to capture the tensions inherent in the cultural discourses that determine the heroine's transnational life. We are told that she lives among whites on Cherrywood Lane with neighbours who cannot understand why her husband is not there with the family. Her children attend school where they sit side by side with white children. Her weekly activities include going to Pilates classes[5] with her neighbour and making cookies for her

[5]Pilate is a physical fitness system developed by German born Joseph Pilates and practised in the U.S.A. (The Mayo Clinic 2014)

children's classes. These activities, characteristic of her American experience, indicate in her own words that "America has grown up on her, it has snaked itself under her skin" (37). The metaphor "snaked" aptly captures the "enormous cultural power" (Adichie 2013) America has on Nkem. It is a culture in which children talk to their elders as if they were equals and one in which the madam/housegirl line blurs. Whereas in Nigeria, Amaechi, the housegirl, would know her position, in America, she has become Nkem's confidante with whom the latter even discusses the husband. Nkem herself observes that "It is what America does to you…. It forces egalitarianism on you. You have nobody to talk to….so you turn to your housegirl. And before you know it, she is your friend. Your equal" (29). The cryptic sentences in this quote such as "It forces egalitarianism on you," "Your equal", emphasize Nkem's realization of the extent to which American culture has challenged these facets of her Nigerian identity.

Apart from such transforming cultural encounters above, the green card, which Nkem finally succeeds in having, is a significant indicator of her transnational status. It enables her to enter America "without having to put up with the condescending questions at the American embassy back in Nigeria" (37). It equally indicates her belongingness in her host country and a symbol of her mobility between the twin worlds of her experience. The visa gives her the freedom to navigate both spaces freely. Her reminiscence on its acquisition is eloquent because it further defines her perception of her host country; "she really belonged to this country now, this country of curiosities and crudities, this country where you could drive at night and not fear armed robbers, where restaurants served one person enough food for three" (37). As we noted earlier, these observations of America are based on her experience of Nigeria, corroborating the view that "transnational identities, while fluid and flexible are at the same time grounded in particular places" (Yeoh et al. 2003: 3). For Nkem, that particular place remains Nigeria which she longs for and to which she seeks to return with her children.

While America is now home for the heroine, Nigeria remains her place of birth and cultural moorings in all their diversity. It is where her friends live; a world she now accesses through telephone calls, postcards and magazines. The longing for this space is underscored through binaries when Nkem compares the snow and "the Lagos sun that glares down even when it rains". These binaries continuously highlight the empowering paradox of the transnational subject's life. Her connection in the host country assumes a difference in the country of birth. For Nkem, this position is beautifully summarized by the woman from Delaware

whose husband too lives in Nigeria when she observes that "when you've been here so long, you aren't the same, you aren't like the people" (29).

From the above, we discover that these multiple strands of Nkem's identity have more or less been foisted upon her by society and by marriage. When she realizes that her marriage is in danger because of her migrant status, she takes her life into her hands in a series of significant actions that speak to her determination to "un-learn the art of silence" (Moran in Esturoy 1996).

These determining acts begin when she learns of her husband's infidelity. Even though some of them are rooted in mimicry, they, nevertheless, underscore her desire to have a say in her destiny. Firstly, we are told that she now thinks of her husband "with a fierce possessiveness." This is quite eloquent for someone who had all along drifted with the current of life. Secondly, she cuts her hair and texturises it when she learns that her husband's girlfriend also has short texturised hair. Thirdly, she fails to perform the normal rituals like waxing her pubic hair and showering with Obiora when he comes for the summer holidays. Most significant of all is when she speaks up for the first time regarding her life. She insists that she and the children will return to Nigeria and only come to America for holidays. This takes the husband by surprise. We are told that "Obiora continues to stare at her and she knows that he had never heard her speak up, never heard her take a stand" (41). In this transmigrant space, Nkem finds a voice and henceforth determines the path her life and that of her family will take. Her experience indicates that "the convergence of multiple places and cultures re-negotiate the terms of [migrant African women's] experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities" (Boyce-Davies 1996:3).

Akunna, the heroine of the title story, "The Thing Around your Neck," migrates to America by winning a visa lottery. Nigeria is home from which the protagonist sets off to begin a new and better life in America envisaged as one of luxury and good education. Her experiences in the 'host' country, however, challenge not only her vision of things but radically initiates a re-vision of who she is in the global context in which she finds herself. Her efforts at coming to grips with her subject position in a multicultural/transnational context, continuously foregrounds the instability of identity and the violence sometimes underlying its construction.

The second person narrative point of view, used in the story, is effective in immersing us in the consciousness of the main character navigating the twin worlds of her transnational experience in a bid to construct a valid sense of self. As in "Imitation", Adichie employs the technique of juxtaposition to present the different cultural spaces that shape Akunna's world. This technique, as we saw in

the case of Nkem, enables us to understand how transnational lives "challenge binary modes of thinking about space and time" (Espiritu 2003: 70).

While in Nigeria, Akunna's identity is shaped by the dynamics of class in a country where there is a yawning gap between the haves and the have-nots. Consequently, we are told that "she was used to accepting what life gave, writing down what life dictated" (121). What life has given her is nothing but poverty, misery and destitution. The one room house with unpainted walls and very little furniture the family of six is crammed into is eloquent in this regard. Her father is a junior driver in a construction company where he drives a Peugeot 504 with rust-eaten holes on the roof while the mother is a cleaner in a parastatal "whose salary is barely enough to pay her brothers' fees in a secondary school where teachers gave an A when someone slipped a brown envelope" (118). Her aunts and uncles hawk bread on the streets of Lagos.

The accident episode in which Akunna's father accidentally rams his rickety Peugeot car into a Big Man's car "with golden headlights like the eyes of a leopard" (122) enters the narrative to delineate the relationships between the two groups where the have-nots are preyed upon by the rich and powerful captured in the image of the leopard. The father's posture, where he falls flat on the muddied road begging to be forgiven by the Big Man, shows how the poor and destitute are at the mercy of the man of power. At the national level, the country is characterized by corruption and interminable strike actions which "caused universities to close so often that people added three years to their normal course of studies and lecturers …were still not paid" (121). The realistic description of the heroine's life, in her home setting, emphasizes the significance of winning the visa lottery which assumes symbolic proportions in the construction of self.

The American visa for Akunna and her family is the passport to the good life, of big houses, cars and the capacity to be able to send gifts of shoes, bags and perfumes to her uncles, aunties, friends and cousins. Everyone therefore looks forward to her going to America with the kind of "unreasonable hope" found in "Imitation".

The reality of life in her 'host' country radically challenges these presumptions. Her encounters with her uncle, the college girls, her boyfriend and the American public at her waitress jobsite lead to a revision of her initial positions on life here. Again, the technique of juxtaposition works well in underscoring the dichotomy between previously held beliefs and the reality of things.

The communal ethos that reminds her of home in her uncle's house in Maine is underscored through the Igbo language spoken, the garri[6] eaten for lunch, the children calling Akunna "aunty" and the uncle's wife addressing her as 'sister'. This is radically called into question when the uncle tries to take advantage of her sexually. Here, she comes face to face with the ugly side of American capitalism played out in gendered terms as "America was give-and- take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too" (116). Akunna's rejection of this patriarchal canvass in her definition of self is played out in symbolic terms when she takes the Grey-hound bus to another part of the country where, through effort, she can make life for herself, even though this may mean, in the interim, a lull in her education.

Her encounters with the other characters, mentioned earlier, either reinforce stereotypes about the 'other' or reveal some fresh perspective about her new world. For instance, she discovers the surprising openness of Americans, their continuing stereotyping of Africa and Africans (something which offends Akunna), the freedom and liberty that extends even to naughty children whose parents fear to smack them, the underlying racism that still defines black/white relationships and the abundance of food, among others. She also discovers that, contrary to what she and her family members had thought, Americans did not have big houses.

Akunna engages these twin strands of her transcultural perspective through the relationship she forges with a caring white young man who helps her out of her loneliness and is even ready to accompany the heroine back home on the death of her father. It is a relationship which, as we noted earlier, reveals the racism still obtaining in the country but which also indicates Akunna's ability to forge relations on her own terms no matter how these may be perceived by the wider public. As a waitress, she sends home half of her salary to cater to the needs of her family, participating in what Caroline Bretell calls "transnational activities" which include economic, social or political exchanges across borders (Bretell 2006:1) and which constitutes part of migrant realities. For Thomas Faist, "conceptually African women immigrants view remittances as a moral imperative, a duty and a mutual obligation to the family members back home" (Faist 2002:216). This is consonant with Akunna's position in this story who knows that as first daughter, tradition demands that she be responsible for the welfare of her family. Adichie's realist perspective is continuously reinforced in this regard. As, a transnational subject, therefore, the heroine contributes to the economy of her home country

[6] Also known as *gari*, *garry*, *tapioca*, *garri* is a popular West African food made from cassava tubers.

through the remittances sent home every month. In this wise, she negotiates and assumes the subject position of a breadwinner for her family, something that might not have been feasible in her home country with the general collapse in the level of living.

The heroine in "The Arrangers of Marriage," Chinasa Okafor, is forced into a loveless marriage by her uncle and aunt on the pretext that marrying a doctor from America is akin to winning the American visa lottery itself. All this draws from the foundation that marriage, especially one based on ethnicity, defines the woman (Chinasa's Yoruba boyfriend is rejected on this count). While the protagonist would have loved to pursue university education, this desire is thwarted by a set up defined by compulsory domesticity and the enforcement of specific gendered relations (Hooks 1984: 23).

Chinasa is an orphan raised by an uncle and aunt who, ironically, pride themselves in taking care of her, finding a husband for her, buying her a new pair of shoes every two years. This irony is all the more succinct when we discover that she has been exploited by her relations. We are told that "she had sold more bread in her aunty's bakery than all the other bakeries in Enugu sold, the furniture and floors in the house shone because of her" (170). The reward for all of these is to be married off to a total stranger.

Upon arrival in America, her perceptions of the man and of life in her host country change. Her wish to maintain her cultural identity is challenged by a husband obsessed with social conformism who tries to constrain her to adhere to what he perceives as typical American mores. The plot of the story revolves around how he tries to force Chinasa to adapt to the American way of life. Through Chinasa's responses to his attempts at assimilation, Adichie criticizes certain cultural exigencies that deny the individual the opportunity of redefinition in the framework of globalization. In this context, name, food and relationships work to indicate narrative posture and mood. The journey motif, (where Chinasa's husband takes her round to show her how to do grocery shopping and use the bus) for instance, becomes the weapon to underscore the contrast between Nigerian and American culture. The beef in Key Food supermarket compares poorly with the fresh cut meat slabs in Ogbete Market where you examined them before buying. American favourite foods like pizza with poorly cooked tomatoes and poor eating customs nauseate her even though her husband assures her that she will learn to love these ways. The focus on food stuffs, eating habits and culinary aesthetics, indicate that "food constitutes a central constituent of cultural identity" (Tunca 2010: 302) in this context.

The ground *egusi*, dried *Onugbu* leaves and *uziza* seeds,[7] carried along by the heroine can thus be seen as cultural markers that meet their challenge first at the airport where "the custom officer raked through the suit case to seize the *uziza* seeds for fear that Chinasa will grow them on American soil" (168). This "othering" is relentlessly pursued by her husband who insists on her cooking only American foods, eating hamburgers, speaking like an American and seeing things from an American perspective. This process of assimilation begins with renaming. Chinasa's Christian name, Agatha, which she has never used, becomes the preferred name for her husband who has also changed his names to David Bell from Ofodile Udenwa. His argument is that if "you want to get anywhere…in this country…you have be as mainstream as possible" (172).

James C. Scott has observed that the usual power of dominant elites is to compel performances from others. But while these performances typically generate insults and slights to human dignity, they, in turn, foster a hidden transcript of indignation and revolt (Scott 1990: 18, 7). Compelled by her husband to perform as an American in all facets of life, Chinasa's Nigerian identity is radically challenged. However, as the plot of the story unfolds, we find her quietly registering a hidden transcript of revolt against the husband's efforts to "Americanize" her through acts like speaking Igbo to herself while cooking, teaching Nia, her neighbour and friend, some of it, throwing away "pieces of half-cooked, clammy chicken and starting all over again" (179). Her firm decision to quit the marriage, "find a job, find a place and support herself and start afresh" (186), when she gets her papers, underscores a lack of disposition towards cultural interaction; a major element in her characterization that serves to hold up to ridicule her uni-dimensional husband obsessed with social conformism.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that the stories dealing with immigration in this volume are concerned with the shifting boundaries of self. The women characters, we have examined, create transnational identities through their immigrant experiences and interactions within their new society and continuous contact with their country of

[7] *Egusi* seeds are the fat and protein-rich seeds of certain cucurbitaceous plants. They can be ground and used to thicken soups in West Africa. *Uziza* seeds are the spice derived from the West African variety of *Piper* known as *piper guineense*. *Onugbu* leaves, commonly known as bitterleaves in West Africa, are species of *Vernonia* eaten as leaf vegetables.

origin. Going abroad does not wipe out Nigeria from their consciousness but it diminishes the former's claim as sole source of culture and identity. Nigeria exists in their consciousness as stored memories which shape their responses to the new space. We have shown how these characters are in two worlds— appropriating America but not forgetting Nigeria (Wilson-Tagoe 2006: 99). We equally note that, for these women, the experience outside their home territory makes them rethink their identity in relation to other people, as well as, giving themselves the opportunity to reflect on their own home and identity. As Richard Bjornson has observed, in another context, "when confronted with otherness, people are obliged to reflect on their own identity" (Bjornson 1991:8). The movement to Europe, as our analysis has shown, thrusts these women into just such a reflection.

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