

Searching for One's Self at the Crossroads of the Cosmopolitan World: Determining the Importance of Roots for Those Who Travel through Diversities in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the response to migration depicted in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's novel Americanah. It employs the structure of the classical katabasis in order to identify the stages of assimilation into a foreign culture and the psychological effects of migration. It recognizes the novel as proposing a new form of belonging, stressing one's rootedness in the home culture while remaining open to global influences.

Keywords: migration, roots, cosmopolitanism, home, katabasis

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Lahiri ix)

This epigraph to Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, borrowed from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Custom House*, presents the experience of migration as desirable. Planting in a new soil ensures stronger, healthier fruit, despite or even by virtue of the struggles and difficulties which need to be faced in the new environment. The intensified mobility of people following decolonization and globalization has been widely studied and examined

not only by creative writers, but also by thinkers and scholars who attempt to achieve a better understanding of the manifold effects of leaving one's country of origin, psychological as well as cultural, and to define the figure of the migrant. One of the most common words used to describe the latter is cosmopolitan, a heavily loaded term frequently taken to be obliterating the issue of class, the fact that voluntary migration is more often a privilege rather than the norm. As Bill Ashcroft puts it: "The idea of citizen of the world is a compelling one but who exactly is cosmopolitan? It can be a useful adjective but it's a failure as a noun. The problem I have with the term is one I also encounter in places such as India and Africa: 'cosmopolitan' is often referred to as 'white', polluted by the lingering aura of urbanity sophistication and wealth that surrounds it" (Sarangi and Austin 134). In a similar way, in his essay *Cosmo-Theory* Timothy Brennan warns that the expression of well-intentioned cosmopolitan sentiments everywhere deserves careful intellectual scrutiny. He sees a close link between cosmopolitanism and globalization; he says that the practitioners of "cosmo-theory", in their euphoria and well-meaning, blind themselves to their own corporate instrumentality as carriers of cultural oppression and exploitation (Brennan 686).

In contrast to these views, Edward Said believes in the existence of "a fascinating cosmopolitan space" animated by internationally prominent writers from the Arab and Islamic world as well as the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent, who intervene forcefully not only as novelists but also as commentators and essayists (Said 329). Likewise, Bill Ashcroft and Kwame Anthony Appiah, among others, recognize that many Western-educated elites from the former colonies had a considerable advantage in the fight for local causes, including the struggles for independence.

This divergence of opinions indicates the complexity of the phenomenon. New terms have sprung up, such as rooted, indigenous or vernacular cosmopolitanism, which combine one's belonging to the world at large with attachment to home culture. What we observe here is a double oxymoron: etymologically, in the word cosmopolitan itself, as when it was coined in the fourth century BC it was made up of *politēs* – a citizen belonging to a particular polis to which he or she owed loyalties, and *cosmos*; and in the adjectives that are attached to it today. The term currently seems to be retrieving its original sense of local loyalties.

Indeed, as Edward Said comments on contemporary exile, widely understood as leaving one's home country: it is "predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss" (Said 336). Yet, while Said finds that the gains of migration far exceed the losses, and considers the loss of attachment to a place to be a desirable condition, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in her novel *Americanah* (2013) celebrates the opportunities and possibilities that open up when her characters journey from Nigeria to the West. At the same time the author unrelentingly exposes and mocks the appeal of things Western in place of the more readily available local options. Her position can be summed up as a refusal to choose between the two desperate options that are seemingly offered today; in Sheldon Pollock's words: "between, on the one hand, a national vernacularity dressed in the frayed period costume of violent revanchism and bent on preserving difference at all costs and, on the other, a clear-cutting, strip-mining multinational cosmopolitanism that is bent, at all costs, on eliminating it" (Pollock 17). In

his essay *Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History* Pollock proposes a model for responsible cosmopolitanism in which the choice between the global, or what he calls “American globalization”, and the local, or “ethnonationalism”, may be resolved in transcending the dichotomies. He believes “that the new must be made precisely through attachment to the past, and by recognizing that only such attachment enables one to grasp what can and must be changed” (46).

Americanah is a migration novel which represents this new kind of responsible cosmopolitanism. It moves across three continents: Africa, Europe and North America. Ifemelu, the main protagonist, grows up in the Nigerian city of Lagos, where she meets and falls in love with Obinze. She then travels to America, where she spends thirteen years. The novel begins at the moment when she is about to return to Nigeria. In the non-linear narrative we learn about her life in Nigeria and the ups and downs of her American adventure. But then the narrative progresses to her new life in Nigeria and her reunion with Obinze. This circular as well as forward-oriented movement in the novel suggests the structure of the classical katabasis, the story of a descent into Hell and a return, experienced by a living human being. Virgil, Dante, or Conrad (in an ironic revision of the latter) noticed the potential of this form of narrative to become for the protagonists a quest for selfhood, the passage through hell being central to this process. There are different types of katabatic stories. In some, descending to the lowest level allows the protagonist to ultimately discover his or her true identity. This is what happens in Dante's *Commedia*. In others, the journey entails a series of metamorphoses and ultimately no single identity can be decided upon. It ends with *sparagmos*, or the dismemberment of the katabatic hero – as in the case of Orpheus, who goes to the underworld in search of his beloved Eurydice. After failing to rescue her from Hades, he refuses to look at any other woman, and is eventually killed and torn to pieces by a mob of maenads.

There are several defining moments of a katabatic narrative. First, the protagonist **crosses the threshold** between our world and the underworld and **journeys downward**. At this point he or she experiences the hostility of the underworld and reacts defensively. Then the protagonist arrives at the **zero point**, or epicenter, of the underworld, from where his or her ascent from the underworld begins. Finally, he or she **returns** to our world, altered by the experience. Adichie's novel follows these stages and eventually becomes a type of katabatic story that is compatible with Pollock's vernacular cosmopolitanism. The section that follows will focus on the journey's pressure points in *Americanah*.

Threshold crossing

The crossing of the threshold is the moment at which the protagonist physically crosses the border between his or her natural world and the underworld. This moment of the passage across the actual barrier between our world and the realm beyond also defines his or her strength, as only the strongest characters are able to enter hell and survive the journey. What is more, underworld itself often lies beyond our perception and needs to be accessed by some magical entrance somewhere in our world, which may be in the form of a river, or via a gatekeeper who must be negotiated with before the protagonist is allowed to begin his or her descent.

The gatekeeper in the case of the Nigerians who try to enter America is the immigration officer. To Ifemelu's surprise her visa application is approved without difficulties: "She applied for a visa, convinced that a rude American would reject her application, it was what happened so often, after all, but the grey-haired woman wearing a St Vincent Paul pin on her lapel smiled at her and said, 'Pick up your visa in two days'" (233). A few years later Obinze is less fortunate. Even though since his early years he has set his heart on travelling and he has considered America his ultimate destination, he is refused permission to enter the country. He applied for a visa at the American embassy in Lagos, "bloated with knowledge about America" and heard the blank reply: "Sorry, you don't qualify. Next person!" (233) – a rejection which left him stunned. The tight immigration laws in the US are still a considerable obstacle for lower class travellers. Even though Obinze's mother is a university professor, he will be granted a US visa without difficulty only after he acquires wealth and becomes a member of the Nigerian elite. On his first trip to America, "the immigration officer was chatty and warm, asking him, 'So how much cash you got?'" (27). Yet, being "the kind of Nigerian expected to declare a lot of cash at the airport" was a disorienting experience to Obinze as "his mind had not changed at the same pace as his life, and he felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be" (27). Thus, travelling to the West remains predominantly the privilege of the elite groups; a visa is not granted on the basis of one's mindset, knowledge or ambitions but the contents of one's pockets.

Still, Ifemelu succeeds at this stage of her journey and arrives in America, crossing the threshold while wrapped in the warmest sweater she had been able to find at the market in Lagos. This is the moment when she physically crosses the border from her homeland to an alien territory and metaphysically experiences disorientation. The real America turns out to be at odds with the image of America she has been carrying with her through the passage. On leaving the airport she is struck by the heat: "[A]ll her life she had thought of overseas as a cold place of wool coats and snow" (103). In the "landscape of her imagination" there was also no room for the battered old hatchback in which Auntie Uju arrives to pick her up from the airport, "a patch of rust on its side and peeling fabric on the seats" (104–5) as well as the shabby buildings and billboards and poor people she notices during her first ride. Over the first few weeks in the US, she discovers America, but her perception is filtered through her memory of Nigeria. Rachel Falconer argues that "in the disorientation of crossing the threshold, the migrant protagonist does not seek change, or throw himself bravely and eagerly into the abyss. On the contrary, he seems desperate to retain his grasp on a familiar selfhood, while reality shifts and slides around him" (Falconer 484). The protagonist thus needs to remain true to his or her old self. Correspondingly, Ifemelu insists on speaking her native language Igbo to Dike, Auntie Uju's son, who was born in Nigeria. She disapproves of how much Auntie Uju, who has been living in America for a number of years, has changed, and she finds naïve her explanation that in a country which is not your own you need to conform in order to succeed, including relaxing your hair before interviews for the position of a family physician (119). Likewise, Ifemelu assesses Auntie Uju's boyfriend Bartholomew, who "was one of those people who, in his village back home, would be called 'lost'. *He went to America and got lost*, his people would say. *He went to America and refused to go back*" (116, original emphasis).

She is also baffled in social situations: “[S]he had struggled to hide her bafflement at the boundaries of hospitality, and also at this business of tipping – paying an extra 15 or 20% of your bill to the waitress – which was suspiciously like bribing, a forced and efficient bribing system” (129). The final disorientation comes with the need to use a social security card belonging to another person, and thus being forced to apply for a job under a different name, which ultimately threatens her identity. What is more, from being an individual person in Nigeria she is being turned into a person identified primarily in racial categories, as black. When she protests that she does not resemble the owner of the social security card, Auntie Uju assures her: “All of us look alike to white people” (120). At this stage of her journey Ifemelu stays in regular contact with Obinze; he is her anchor, keeping safe her sense of self.

Zero Point

Slowly she begins to lose her grasp on reality: “her autumn of half blindness had begun, the autumn of puzzlements, of experiences she had knowing there were slippery layers of meaning that eluded her. The world was wrapped in gauze; she could see the shapes of things but not clearly enough, never enough” (131). Unable to find a job, and increasingly desperate for money, she eventually arrives at the door of a tennis coach seeking a female personal assistant. This is when she will reach the lowest point in her katabatic journey, the zero point. This is how Linda Lappin (n.pag.) describes the zero point:

As [the protagonist] maneuver[s] this terrifying environment, [h]e may encounter a helper to prepare [him] for the confrontation with the reigning entity: the shadow. ...It may... be a person, an animal, a form of addiction, a self-destructive tendency, a fear, a disease, an unpleasant side of ourselves, an evil twin. Whatever or whoever the shadow may be, it must be dealt with before [the protagonist] can go up again. Confrontation with the shadow is a dangerous undertaking that marks the hero's or heroine's initiation. At the resolution of this confrontation, [the protagonist] will receive a boon: power or knowledge to take back up again to the world ... left behind and to which [h]e will return transformed.

The coach perfectly fits the role of the King of the Underworld. The reference to the devil immediately precedes the description of the coach when Ifemelu remembers her mother's habit of blaming everything on him. Then the coach opens the door and leads her to the basement. The descent is thus literal as well as metaphorical. At that first encounter she rejects his offer of a hundred dollars and goes to the station with a stabbing sensation of homesickness. Interestingly, on the way back she notices red and yellow autumn leaves – used as a symbol for dead souls in the classical katabatic (see e.g. Pemberton, n.pag.). After a few more weeks of joblessness and unpaid bills she returns to the coach's house and experiences the lowest point in her journey.

Afterwards she walked to the train, feeling heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud, and, seated by the window, she began to cry. She felt like a small ball, adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around empty. Back in her apartment, she washed her hands with water so hot that it

scolded her fingers, and a small soft welt flowered on her thumb. She took off all her clothes and squashed them into a rumpled ball that she threw at a corner, staring at it for a while. She would never again wear these clothes, never even touch them. She sat naked on her bed and looked at her life, in this tiny room with the mouldy carpet, the hundred dollar bill on the table, her body rising with loathing. (154)

Here, with clear transparency, the protagonist sees herself through the eyes of the ultimate other – Hades, Satan, God – in this case the tennis coach. She is naked; nothing can be hidden. She cuts off her ties with home, changes her phone number and deletes unread emails from Obinze. At the zero point, in contrast to the threshold moment, the protagonist's task is to take risks, to abandon the boundaries of the self, and break unwritten rules prescribed by the Father-god. After Ifemelu shakes off the shock of the encounter she grows more distant from Nigeria: “[I]t seemed suddenly foreign to her, and home itself a distant place” (159), which she sees in the sepia tones of her memories. She has a rich white American boyfriend whom she meets while babysitting for a wealthy upper middle class family. On the surface, the relationship seems to be the epitome of any girl's dreams, and yet eventually it bores her. She also gets a well-paid job at a magazine. She starts an anonymous blog which provides her with a space to voice her observations on America, especially its attitude to race and foreigners. The blog becomes quite successful, and the number of visitors grows steadily, the conversations her posts provoke leading to invitations to give talks at universities. Eventually, she earns a fellowship at Princeton. She comes to adopt American pronunciation – “the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with ‘So’, and the sliding response of ‘Oh really’” (173), even if it took an effort, “the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue” – as well as style. Before an interview she relaxes her hair, repeating what she had so disapproved of Auntie Uju. “It was a new adventure, relaxing her hair.” [...] “Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin” (203).

Still, there is a sense of loss: “The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died” (203). During the interview the woman shook her hand and told her she would be a ‘perfect fit’ – but this expression takes an ironic turn, as her experiments with hair do not stop. After her hairline begins to recede because of the chemicals used in relaxers, she decides to wear her hair in a natural afro. Years later, after she resigns from her job, a woman in the office will say: “Sorry, hon. They need to treat folk better around here. You think your hair was part of the problem?” (212). Then, on a sunny summer day she resolves to return to her Nigerian accent while purchasing a train ticket. This is an exhilarating experience and she feels “a rush of pleasure from giving the *t* its full due [...], from not rolling her *r* [...]. This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake” (175).

Interestingly, the risks she takes bring her closer to her home culture. Nevertheless, a clear sense of identity keeps eluding her. “She did not know what it was but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself” (289). She destroys the two relationships she forms in America by infidelity and lying,

which is especially striking as back in Nigeria the trait Obinze admired in her the most was the “vivid honesty about her” (20). This is not the only instance of her dishonesty in the US. She also lies to the hairdresser about the number of years she has spent in America and about the purpose of her return – to marry Obinze. She is thus creating fictions, inventing her many selves; however here again she subconsciously decides on the version that brings her nearer to home and nearer to Obinze – the two becoming nearly synonymous for her. Eventually she embarks on the last stage in the journey – the return.

The return

Though not typically described in as much detail as the journey downward – and, in fact, often passed over with some brevity – the return of the protagonist marks the end of the katabasis. Typically, this part of the text emphasizes the protagonist’s experiences after returning. Linda Lappin (n.pag.) points out, “After katabasis, the return to our ordinary realm may not necessarily bring perfect happiness – Orpheus cannot bring his dead wife back – but it does confer upon us a new identity and a new awareness of our strengths and limitations as human beings subjected to greater laws in which both faith and hope have a role to play.”

Unlike a typical katabatic story, *Americanah* makes this point in the journey central. A large part of the novel’s space is devoted to Ifemelu’s visit to a hair salon just before her trip back home, where she muses on her decision. She compares the courage it requires for a woman “thrice her size” to display her legs in a mini skirt on a train platform: “[I]t was safe and easy, after all, to display legs of which the world approved – but the fat woman’s act was about the quiet conviction that one shared only with oneself, a sense of rightness that others failed to see” (8). Her decision seems nearly heroic, especially as “everyone she had told she was moving back seemed surprised, expecting an explanation, and when she said she was doing it because she wanted to, puzzled lines would appear on foreheads” (13).

Her decision reverses the direction of most migration tales whose ending point is America, such as Lahiri’s title story in the collection *The Unaccustomed Earth*, whose major lesson for the characters is how to negotiate the cultural background of their country of origin and the new soil, in other words, how to successfully adapt in the new environment. Ifemelu has achieved her American Dream, “and yet there was a cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness” (Adichie 6).

Lappin explains that after spending a great deal of effort traversing the underworld, the protagonist could very easily become accustomed to that type of lifestyle, causing the return home to be anti-climactic. *Americanah* does quite the opposite: it makes the end point of the journey the most important moment, becoming in the process a new kind of migration novel. It recovers the concept of home in the contemporary world in which it has lost its validity. Caryl Phillips, in his collection of essays entitled *A New World Order*, comments on the phenomenon: “These days we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid.

Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions” (6). For Ifemelu home acquires a different sense. It is where she belongs, and it helps her understand who she is – like Obinze, who, since the beginning of their relationship, “made her like herself. With him she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size. [...] It seemed so natural, to talk to him about odd things. She had never done that before” (61). These feelings are usually associated with intimacy, with trust that one can find at home, among those we love. Home, however, is not synonymous with Nigeria. When Ifemelu talks about it, she mentions particular localities such as Lagos or Nsukka which produce particular memories and associations for her – her school years, her time at university, her visits to Obinze’s house, and many others. She does not idealize Nigeria; quite the contrary, the country is presented as corrupted, “an ass-licking economy. The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be because they won’t lick anybody’s ass, or they don’t know which ass to lick or they don’t know how to lick an ass” (77). The economic and political reality is thus rather bleak and in need of improvement. Another problem is the starry-eyed admiration and assimilation of Western culture by Nigerians. This stretches across a range of cultural practices, from food to languages. During a conversation a character recommends a French school in Lagos for it “can only be good for the child to learn another civilized language, since she already learns English at home” (28). Another character advocates the British curriculum at schools. Obinze, who himself used to admire people with foreign accents, “had come to sense as unvoiced yearning in them, a sad search for something they could never find. He did not want a well-educated child enmeshed in insecurities” (29). Kwame Anthony Appiah, in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, defends the assimilation of Western cultural products by non-Westerners as these may make life easier, safer and more pleasurable. Cultural purity itself is an oxymoron, “the odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more” (Appiah 113). Although *Americanah* does not elaborate on it, this intermixing of cultures and influences works in two directions. Yet, for that *mélange* to work, for difference to thrive, for new cultural forms to emerge, a sense of history is needed. Returning to Sheldon Pollock, “affective attachment to old structures of belonging offered by vernacular particulars must precede any effective transformation through new cosmopolitan universals; care must be in evidence, a desire to preserve, even as the structure is to be changed” (Pollock 47). Pollock seems to be suggesting here the key moment in the assimilation of new cultural forms which leads not to homogenization, but to the world’s expanded heterogeneity of cultures. When accepted through the prism of history, adapted to fit the local environment, the foreign forms will necessarily become domesticated, they will differ from their original counterparts whether in the West or East, and they will better serve the local needs and purposes.

Ifemelu likewise applies the knowledge she gained during her years in the US to inspire changes in the Nigeria to which she returns. However, her acceptance of the American influence does not imply the rejection of her roots. She goes back and initially experiences a form of reverse disorientation at the changes that have taken place in Nigeria during her absence. However, she does not join the ranks of other American émigrés who organize meetings during which they can complain about Nigerian ways and look back in nostalgia

at America. Aware of Nigeria's shortcomings and weak points, she decides to start a new blog, which will be a site for more constructive criticism. The form she learned to use – and succeeded in using – in America will be applied to the Nigerian reality. Unlike other American returnees, the eponymous *Americanahs*, she learns to accept her identity and all that comes with it – from the structure of her hair to the propensity of Nigerian women to indulge in their food habits. As mentioned above, the katabatic hero has two options: either he or she will accept the knowledge of himself or herself, or, like Orpheus, he or she will opt for the metamorphic. *Americanah* decides on the Dantean model. In contrast to the Orphic version, Ifemelu's journey has been one of self-discovery, ending on a positive note. She opts for belonging and a sense of self which she hopes to find on her return, and she finally feels complete when she is reunited with Obinze at the end of the novel.

This kind of ending is very rare in contemporary katabatic novels, especially in stories of migration such as Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), an Orphic story ending tragically for most of the characters involved. The difference lies, I believe, in the very way in which the author allows her characters to feel rooted to a place, in this case Nigeria, and at the same time to remain open to other influences. It is precisely through recognizing her attachment to her roots that she can retain her integrity while accepting new cosmopolitan ideas and ideals. In this way Adichie seems to be avoiding the traps of cosmopolitanism that Bill Ashcroft and Timothy Brennan write about, when the term is associated with having an advantage over others and using it, even if unconsciously, in a damaging way. However, even these thinkers have a rather ambivalent attitude to it; they agree with Edward Said and Antony Appiah about the positive role such cosmopolitan elites (including politicians, writers, essayists, and commentators) can play in improving local conditions. Adichie has symbolically crossed the barrier between literature and lived reality and has transferred Ifemelu's blog online under the name of "The Small Redemptions of Lagos". In it she provides constructive criticism and valid commentary on the current situation, ranging from the Ebola epidemic – Ifemelu directly addresses the Nigerian Health Minister – to the financial practices of Nigerian priests or the harmful women's care products available in supermarkets. She proves that Western forms arriving in Nigeria do not necessarily need to be rejected on the grounds that they are global or foreign but, especially with the expanding information technology, can be employed in improving local conditions.

To conclude, Ifemelu fails to become the eponymous *Americanah*. The term by which her friends in Nigeria refer to people who return from the States: "They roared with laughter, at that word 'Americanah', wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding slurry r to every English word she spoke" (65). "American passport is the coolest thing" they added. In fact, the idea does not appeal to her. The narrator says: "[A]nd the suggestion that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin" (17). On announcing to her American boyfriend her plans to return to Nigeria, she receives from him a plant: "It was his house-plant, hopeful green leaves rising from three bamboo stems, and when she took it, a sudden crushing loneliness landed through her and stayed with her for weeks" (7). That plant belonged at Blaine's house. Its removal from that place

symbolized the loss of the possibility of their life together. Likewise, Ifemelu's transplantation to America symbolized the loss of the life she could have led with Obinze, back at home. On her return she finds herself "at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (475). *Americanah* is thus an attempt at a new type of a migration story, one which shows that human nature can flourish even if it returns home to strike its roots.

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