



## A Comparative Study of Identity and Estrangement in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Teju Cole's *Open City*

PRINCE OGHENETEGA OHWAVWORHUA, MARTHA OMOTETOBORE EGBEDI  
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

**Abstract.** With the present wave of migration that has ravaged Africa, literature is expanding to meet a variety of domestic and international challenges. Identity and estrangement are twin concepts that have not garnered the level of critical attention it deserves. The study, therefore, compares the representation of identity and estrangement in Adichie's *Americanah* and Cole's *Open City*. This study employs the postcolonial theory, which explores the experiences of the formerly colonised and how African narratives correct preconceived notions about Africa. The paper explores the different experiences of the two main characters in the texts – Ifemelu and Julius, who both find their way to America in search of better opportunities. While Adichie's *Americanah* exposes Ifemelu's grappling with the challenges of navigating a new culture, which leads to her alienation from her roots, Cole's *Open City* portrays the issues of the mind exemplified in Julius' feelings of extreme loneliness in America even though he is a successful doctor. Ultimately, her return to Nigeria signifies her resolution to her identity crisis, wherein she reclaims her sense of belonging and reaffirms her identity. However, this is not the same as that of Julius whose feelings of estrangement remain unresolved at the end of the narrative.

**Keywords:** Identity, estrangement, postcolonialism, Chimamanda Adichie, Teju Cole.

### 1. Introduction

In the discourse of contemporary African fiction, the current globalisation of the world continues to play a crucial role in how it is conceptualised. One of the major aspects of this discourse is identity crisis and its resultant effects. Identity has been crucial in the study of Modern African Fiction, not just in these contemporary times. The reason for this cannot be said to be far-fetched. The rise of Modern African Fiction may have begun as a result of the attempt to redefine the identity of the African against the lopsided representation of Africans in Western literature.

Although Modern African Fiction may have begun on this premise, the concept of Identity has come to mean and imply many things in our world today, especially in contemporary African Fiction. It is not uncommon knowledge that literature responds to the pulse of history and society (Wa Thiong'o: 1972, p. xv). Identity issues have over the course of African literary history played a major role in African fiction. But what then can be said to be identity? Tajfel (1978) defines identity as "the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and the emotional significance attached to that membership" (p.63). Correspondingly, Proshanky (1978) defines identity from the lens of geography as "those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioural tendencies and skills relevant to this environment" (p.155). Vignoles (2018), however, puts all of these in context when she says "Identity refers to how people answer the question, 'Who are you?'" (p.1). Estrangement from another viewpoint can be intricately tied to the concept of identity. Although they are separate concepts, they are inter-related. It has earlier been established that the African identity can become political once it exists in a distinct non-African environment. With the consistent drain that the African society continues to experience due to under-development, migration has become a key factor in African fiction. A conflict in identity can lead to estrangement and this has been expressed by many writers who have lived in the diaspora. No doubt, the resultant realization of a distinct identity has led to what may be regarded as estrangement in a foreign land. This experience is not common only to the lower placed individuals in the society. This resonates with Ohwavorhua's (2023; p.73) opinion, where he observes that estrangement is a phenomenon experienced by not only the proletariat but the bourgeoisie.

Inasmuch as these issues cannot be said to be foreign in the discourse of Modern African fiction, it is worthy to note that there is still a lot that can be done in order to drive the wheels of scholarship further. This essay engages Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Teju Cole's *Open City* which have been previously studied from the lens of feminism as it relates to the larger issue of racism in America. However, this study, as a way of comparison, takes into acute considerations the socio-cultural identity in both texts.

## 2. Postcolonial Theory at a Glance

The theory selected for this study is the postcolonial theory. The justification for its adoption for a study of this magnitude is as a result of the continuing existence of colonial legacies like identity crisis experienced by Africans at home and abroad. For Montle (2020) such issues pertaining to African identity create a sense of urgency in being addressed (p.89). The postcolonial theory came into prominence in the mid-20th century with the writings of scholars like Bill Ashcroft and Edward Said. As a theory, it looks at all the ways in which literature can be used to tear down narratives that trample upon the unique socio-cultural identity of the African by Western narratives. Awuize (2018) suggests that in justifying the colonial suppression of Africa, colonial narratives endorse the myth of African primitivism and inferiority. He says, "the colonial narratives, such as Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Carry's *Mister Johnson*, about Africa depict Africans as inferior, subhuman and people without a culture" (p.124). Lye, J. (1998) avers that the postcolonial theory entails the documentation of literature of formerly colonised countries portraying the experiences of the colonised people. It does this in a way that the colonised protect and assert their identity, and reclaim their history.

Postcolonial theory critically engages literature in a bid to see how it asserts the African identity as opposed to the one that has been imposed on it by colonialism. Young (1995) gives a great insight on the aims of postcolonial theory when he states that:

*Postcolonial criticism has embraced a number of aims: most fundamentally to re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonised; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonised people and the colonising powers; to analyse the process of decolonisation; and above all, to participate in the goals of political liberation... the contention of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities* (p.11).

Postcolonial studies have become very important in African literary discourse. It is important to note that postcolonial studies cannot be said to be only relevant in the conceptualisation of early modern African fiction, but even in the literature of contemporary times. This is why Irobi (2008; p.1) asserts the place of postcolonial theory in contemporary African society when he says, it is a response to western imperialism and cerebral ideology which is targeted at dismantling the epistemologies of the intellectual hegemony orchestrated by the West.

From the above, it is clear that the postcolonial theory stands as a fundamental aspect of Modern African fiction, even up to this moment. This research looks at how the representations of complex issues such as identity and estrangement are portrayed in the texts, which further tears down notions that position Africans as simple-minded sub humans, whereby negative stereotypes of Africans still have the major portrayal in the West.

## 3. Identity, Migration and Exile in Modern African Fiction

As established in the introductory section of this paper, the origin of early modern African writings may be traced to the need of redefining the African identity. This was not just a passing interest for African writers and literary critics, but a major concern, especially when one takes an in-depth study of the level of misrepresentation that Western literature meted on Africans in novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Carry's *Mister Johnson*. This places identity as central in the canonisation of modern African Fiction as a whole. Brar and Singh (2011) tow this line of thought when they say, *the search for cultural identity is one of the fundamental concerns in the majority of significant works of African fiction and hence occupies a central place in the writers' quest for exposing the authentic African personality and the pressing influences on the psyche... there is need for historical roots and a modern culture based not on foreign ideas but on native African values* (p.469).

This need to revisit African traditional values in which the African can find his firm rooting is mostly driven by the present-day reality of loss of these values, as driven by modern day capitalist society. The conversation on identity is not only serious, but reflects multifaceted realities that African literature has come to be known for. One can say that the African writer is burdened with history, and this burden is what makes the writer act as reminder to the people of their identity and the responsibility of embracing it to reach

the fullness of their potential. The African writer is not distinct from his/her society as Mbiti (1969) gives a philosophical disposition of the African sense of communal living when he speaks of Africans saying "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am" (p.108). Ojaide (1992; p.45) supports this claim when he avows that the African writer is raised in a society where the sense of communality is strong. From the foregoing, it is obvious that writers and critics were very much concerned with forging an African identity through their writings but the ideology of the African identity has changed over the years due to the increased number of socio-political challenges. Alu (2011) buttresses this claim that just like it did for other national and continental literatures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the twenty-first century presents a variety of challenges for African writers. In retrospect, most countries may view the difficult realities of Africa's development and her journey to a perfect state as a hindrance to their progress (p.343).

With issues such as globalisation, transnationalism, multiculturalism, it is clear that what was said to be the purview of the African identity has significantly expanded. It is, therefore, not out of place to assert that globalisation as a concept plays a role in modern African fiction, especially taking into consideration the fact that the definition of modern African literature has been beleaguered by the question "Who is an African writer?". This question stems out from the fact that many African writers who claim to write African literature do not even reside in the African continent. Many writers have left the shores of the continent for better opportunities in the Western world and this has further complicated the concept of the African identity. This position then becomes important to consider when speaking of identity in modern African fiction. Identity can therefore be considered to have transcended its initial concern with re-imagining the African from an African perspective but to ask "Who is an African in this time and age?". This question does not stem from a lack of knowledge about who the African person is, but an awareness that the African identity has indeed become complex in a changing world like ours. These other identities must be duly acknowledged and explored in modern African fiction. Although the idea of identity has had a thorough investigation in African literary criticism, attention has been focused more on the African writers themselves, not on the evolving nature of the African identity as portrayed in the fiction of the 21st century. This is one reason why this research has focuses on contemporary fiction as its target for investigating identity and estrangement in modern African fiction. African writers in the diaspora are continually changing the

dynamics of the African identity and the African experience. Before now, one would imagine the concept of the African identity as simply revolving around the African experience, but one can notice a scope of identity that now involves the experiences of Africans in foreign countries, where their identity as African immigrants into that country is crucial in understanding how they fit into that society.

More so, it may be tempting to view estrangement as a different concept from identity, it is not difficult to ascertain that both concepts are interrelated and interconnected. From a semantic perspective, estrangement can imply several things but among these things, one stands out - the idea of alienation and exile. It is not news that migration has contributed a major factor when considering the canon that has now come to be identified as modern African fiction and this has changed the dynamics of the African identity. It is worthy to state at this point that estrangement can be said to be rooted in migration and migration is not a recent import in the African continent and for African writers. This migration of African writers was mostly forced in the new post-colonial African states as a result of the several issues that arose during that period. Kubayanda (1990) speaks on this also when he avows that "postcolonial dictatorship in Africa concerns itself with repression, which in effect means the arrest, execution, or consistent harassment of dissent voices" (p.5). For him, dictatorship in Africa creates an ambience of fear. Many African writers who spoke against the ills of the government were persecuted and many of them sent to jail. Migration became a necessity for them and this has often times instigated them to share their Diaspora experiences in their works, thereby adumbrating related themes of exile and identity crisis. This is not to say that the unfriendly environment orchestrated by their social activism is the only reason for their migration as a means to escape. Other factors may have contributed immensely to this. Bromley (2008; p.28) opines that even though conflict, violence and right abuse are factors that may prompt people into relocating from their places of origin, the lack of opportunities, longing for a better life, and economic scarcity are also potent factors. This clearly points to the fact that recent migration of African writers can be attributed to other factors apart from the initial reasons that forced African writers to seek refuge in other countries. Migration has therefore become a topical issue in modern African literature because of the divergent dimensions it introduces in the study and critic of Modern African literature. Kabore (2016) traces this trajectory of migration when he says "a look at most of the literary productions, in the last fifteen years, suffices to convince the doubtful mind of the

recurrence of migration in African literature” (p.2). Unlike previous generations of African writers, who had fled the African continent for safety and out of compulsion, many African writers are making the willing choice to leave their home countries for better opportunities in First World countries.

The concept of estrangement can be said to be a result of migration, which has now played a dominant role in the conceptualisation of contemporary African Literature. Taking a cue from this, one can say that in studying estrangement – a core theme in contemporary African fiction – a critic is engaging one of the consequences of migration that continues to occur in the African continent – a migration that is driven, not as a result of compulsion, but choice. It is no longer difficult to see writers who are willingly in exile as a result of leaving their countries for a long period of time. This is the case as with Tanure Ojaide’s published work, *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* which solidifies Ojaide’s place within the body of writing that has now come to be referred to as migrant literature. Ojaide (2008) makes an interesting study on the issue, tying it intricately to identity when he asserts that “migration, globalisation and related phenomena of exile, transnationality and multilocality have their bearing on the cultural identity, aesthetics, content and form if the literary production of Africans abroad” (p.1).

#### 4. Identity and Estrangement in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and Teju Cole’s *Open City*

In *Americanah* and *Open City*, migration can be seen as an avenue which both writers use to expose the misguided conceptions of Africa and Africans by the West. Ifemelu and Julius, both central characters in the selected texts, leave their home country to America wherein they both realise that being Black is completely different from what they experienced in their home country. Taking into serious consideration the historical dimension of blackness as an identity in the American space, this analysis is aimed at focusing on the black experience as encountered by African migrants in the West as a way of reconstructing how the world views Africans in the diaspora.

Ifemelu, who travels to America for greener pastures, is made conscious of the fact that her black skin makes her inferior, something that was never a serious concern while she lived in Nigeria. Identity therefore becomes a fundamental aspect of the novel. Firstly, there is a racist implication of Ifemelu as Black in America; and secondly, even though Ifemelu is recognisably Black, there are several experiences that

she cannot relate to because of her African identity. This is where socio-cultural identity comes to play as it is obvious that Ifemelu as an African immigrant is what distinguishes her experiences as a Black person in America. Adichie sufficiently explores this using Ifemelu’s blog titled *Raceteenthor Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negros) by a Non-American Black*, which explores the different ways Black people relate their experience. It is worthy to note at this point that blackness as a term does not and cannot imply a homogenous experience. In fact, the Black identity can only be said to be an umbrella term that carries with it other specific terms, such as the African-American identity, the African in Diaspora identity, the Caribbean identity etc.

In America, Ifemelu not only realises that she is Black, but that she is a non-American Black. This awareness comes with its own implication to Ifemelu as there are things she cannot explicitly understand because of her position as an African immigrant. She expresses this in her post, *To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black, Baby* (Adichie, 2013) where she also explains what it means to be Black in America:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing, stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t “black” in your country? You’re in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the society of former Negros. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was....And here’s the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as “watermelon” and “tar baby” are used in jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about – and since you are a Non-American black, the chances are that you won’t know. (In undergrad a white classmate asks if I like watermelon, I say yes, and another classmate says, oh my God, that is so racist, and I’m confused. “Wait, how?”). You must not when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say “You are not alone, I am here to” (p.255).

Blackness as an identity was something that Ifemelu was previously unaware of until she came to America and as one can notice from the excerpt above; her origin as an African in America, not an African-American, conditions her experiences as a Black person in America. She cannot understand why watermelon will be regarded as a racist term because she does not have the historical background of slavery.

She also tries to incorporate the idea that blackness as an identity is not one that can be chosen in America, but one which America chooses for you - the only difference being in the way it is experienced and understood. This is why she implores other immigrants who she tags as “Non-American Black” to understand what it means to be black in a country like America.

Ifemelu also realises that in America, there are stereotypes about Africans in America. One of such preconceived notions is that Africans are not intelligent people and they are not supposed to be able to speak correct and fluent English. All of these make socio-cultural identity crucial. If one takes into critical consideration postcolonial studies, it is not difficult to see that there is an attempt to re-narrate the African experience and this is not exclusive of early African literature, but is relevant till this very moment. Many scholars such as Irobi (2008) have worked on postcolonial studies and its relevance in contemporary African fiction and if one takes a look at that, it can be noticed that Adichie tears down such misconceptions of Africans. Using Ifemelu’s African-American boyfriend as a reference, it can be observed that he had done well in school because his White teacher once told him that it was better he focused on getting a basketball scholarship instead of attempting to go to Yale. Inasmuch as this comment was directed to an African-American, one can notice the underlying racial superiority in that comment. Ifemelu has a similar experience, in her freshman year in college when she goes to register her courses. This can be seen in the excerpt from *Americanah* below:

Ifemelu half smiled in sympathy, because Cristina Tomas had to have some sort of illness that made her speak so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering, as she gave directions to the international students’ office. But when Ifemelu returned with the letter, Cristina Tomas said “I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?” and she realised that Cristina Thomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling. “I speak English,” she said. “I bet you do,” Cristina Tomas said. “I just don’t know how well” (pg. 157).

Because Ifemelu is an international student and from a ‘Third World country’, Cristina Tomas automatically assumes that she cannot comprehend English and so she speaks to her in a strange manner which annoys Ifemelu, who had spoken English since her childhood, led the debating club in her secondary school, and always saw the American accent as undeveloped (p. 157).

Another instance where one can see such bias about Africans is when Ifemelu is working as a nanny for Kimberly. It is with Kimberly and her White friend that Ifemelu really understands that the West views Africa as a continent full of wars and starvation, with each of their friends saying how much they would love to save starving babies in Africa, how much hunger is so bad, with each of them seeing Africa as a place to feed their own Western egos through charity. Ifemelu comes into contact with this when Kimberly and her husband Don organises a dinner party in which most of the guests comes to speak about their charities in Africa, Africa being a place that is simply meant to arouse pity and nothing else. This can be seen in the excerpt below:

A couple spoke about their safari in Tanzania. “We had such a wonderful tour guide and we are now paying for his first daughter’s education.” Two women spoke about their donations to a wonderful charity in Malawi, that built wells, a wonderful orphanage in Botswana, a wonderful microfinance corporation in Kenya. Ifemelu gazed at the, there was a certain luxury to charity that she could not identify with and did not have. To take “charity” for granted, to revel in this charity towards people whom one did not know – perhaps it came from having had a yesterday, and having today and expecting to have tomorrow... (p. 199).

In Nigeria, Ifemelu had never considered herself privileged. That was a title reserved for the likes of Kayode Da Silver whose parents could afford to fly him to London every summer. However, in America, she is considered so because in the eyes of Americans, Africans just have to be poor and starved; Ifemelu does not fit into this profile. Adichie’s careful creation of Ifemelu as a character negates such sentiments. Ifemelu is not a rich Nigerian, she is middle class. Her awareness of her identity as an African is more glaring in America as it opens her to how the West generally views Africans and their experiences of which she cannot understand or relate to.

Obinze is also another character that can be used to explore socio-cultural identity. When he moves to England, it is through him that one gets to know how his background as an African conditions his experiences and his identity in England. Like America, in England, there is the tendency to make Africans a set of non-complex human beings, running away from some terrible situations. Human nature is always desperate for choices, and his move to England was as a result of that, not because he was starving or was running away from anything. Obinze realises this when he attends a dinner at Emenike’s place and Alexa, one of the guests, talks on England being a refuge county for “people who have survived frightful

war” (p. 317). Alexa’s mindset is that Africans were in perpetual crisis and here was Europe, being a safe haven to “save” the African victims. Whereas, at some point in history, they left their countries to explore the world, desperate for new experiences and choices. In their earliest narratives of Africa, Africa needed saving and so they cast themselves as the redeemers of Africa. That role is repeated with this false ideology on immigration, where Europe still casts itself in the saviour role of Africans and judges Africans for the same thing that they are guilty of. Adichie tears down such notions, carefully exhibiting how the hunger for choices is simply just a fundamental aspect of human life and how, at some point in history, Europeans themselves had engaged in massive migrations across the world as a way to feed their hunger for new experiences.

The idea of estrangement is seen in the effect of migration on the minds of the characters. During Ifemelu’s early years in America, she feels a stabbing home sickness, a feeling that later resurfaces and spurs her decision to move back to Nigeria. Taking a cue from this, it is important to state that the complexity of the characters created by Adichie is another way of narrating the full humanity of Africans, a narrative that have been denied Africans by the West. It is also a pointer to the fact that identity and estrangement can be seen as twin concepts. In works that entail migration as a key trope, especially between African countries and Western countries, the effect of migration is expressed in the awareness and adoption of a new identity, which often leads to estrangement because of the newness of this identity. America seems more difficult than Ifemelu imagined and tries her best to adapt, even though she still longs for her home, as “the crisp air, fragrant and dry, reminded her of Nsukka during the harmattan season, and brought with it a sudden stab of homesickness, so sharp and so abrupt that it filled her eyes with tears” (p. 154). This particular extraction showcases the feelings of despair that Ifemelu experiences in her early years in America, making her feel cut off from her home. This also leads to Ifemelu cutting off some of her relationships with her past life in Nigeria, after she feels frustrated by the realities of the American life. This is seen when Ifemelu is unable to find a job in her first few months in America. After mounting pressures to complete her tuition fee and pay her rent, Ifemelu goes to see a tennis coach in Ardmore, who asks her to lie down as: He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted. She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness... She had

lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers (p. 156).

This incident leads Ifemelu to question everything that she had known about her life before and the new realities of her life in America and makes her to cut Obinze off for a while, in an attempt to forget what she had done to him.

Teju Cole’s protagonist in *Open City* is a young Nigerian Doctor who experiences loneliness in America. The concept of estrangement functions as a key aspect of this novel as one can go into the world or inside the mind of a Nigerian immigrant in America. The central character, Julius, focuses on taking long walks in New York when he is not at work as a doctor in his residency programme. This is a poignant factor to note. In Nigeria, due to that communal sense of living, it would be difficult for one to walk around an area without being noticed or called by anyone but this is what defines Julius’ life in America. In the beginning of the novel, Julius says,

And so, when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morning Side Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city. The path that drops down from the Cathedral of St. John the divine crosses Morningside Park is only fifteen minutes from the Central Park... Not long before this aimless wandering began, I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment, and I wonder now if the two are connected (p. 1).

From the opening lines in the novel, it is clear how lonely Julius gets in America, calling his walks “aimless wanderings” and simply watching birds migrate from his apartment window. He even adds, “the walks met a need: they were a release from the tightly regulated mental environment of work, and once I discovered them as therapy, they became the normal thing, and I forgot what life had been like before I started walking” (p. 4). This technique brings his desires to fore; what he wants to do, what he doesn’t want to do, what he thinks about his job, and what he thinks about the 9/11 attack. This novel clearly deconstructs the narrative of Africans being simple-minded as a bulk of the novel is made up of the musings of Julius who is the central character and it also shows that Africans have the ability for intellectual thought. New York City, a multicultural and multidimensional city is the place where most of Julius’ musings take place. He describes the city and this is instrumental because it showcases how cut off he feels from Nigeria, trying to draw distinct narratives on how America and Nigeria are different. This is seen when Julius examines the fact that despite the large

number of people on the streets of New York, he still feels lonely. This is evident in the extract below:

At first, I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness, a shock after the day's focus and relative tranquility as though someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set. I wove my way through crowds of shoppers and workers, through road constructions and the horns of taxicabs. Walking through the busy parts of the town meant that I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them (pp. 3-4).

The feeling of community is very lost in America where a person dies in the same apartment block and not even a single cry is heard about it.

As I approached the apartment building with my bags, I saw someone I knew: The man who lived in an apartment close to mine. He was coming into the building at the same time, and he held open the door for me. I did not know him well, in fact I hardly knew him at all, and I had to think for a moment before I remembered his name. He was in his early fifties, and had moved in the previous year. The name came to me: Seth... When the elevator arrived, we got in. We got off at the seventh floor and as we walked down the hallway, our nylon bags rustling, I asked him if they still got away on the weekends. Oh yes, every weekend, but it's just me now, Julius. Carla died in June. She had a heart attack. I was stunned into momentary confusion, as if just been told something that wasn't possible. I'm so sorry, I said... A woman had died in the room next to mine, she had died on the other side of the wall I was leaning against and I had known nothing of it. I had known nothing of it in the weeks when her husband mourned, nothing when I had nodded to him greeting with headphones in my ears... (p. 17).

Julius' neighbour died and for four months he didn't get to know of it. He then remembers the time of his own father's death and how during that period, there was no such thing as a silent grief, with people coming from different parts of the country to grieve with them. This incident pricks Julius and reminds him of how he too had been altered by America, getting used to the idea of individualism that seems to be the culture of the West as he had not even noticed a change with the death of his neighbour. This is evident when he says "I hadn't known him well enough to routinely ask how Carla was, and I had not noticed not seeing her around. That was the worst of it. I had noticed neither her absence nor the change – there must have been a

change – in his spirit. It was not possible, even then, to go knock on his door and embrace him, or to speak with him at length. It would have been false intimacy" (p.28)

Another example of estrangement that can be noticed in the novel is how Julius is also estranged literally from his family, that on getting to America to study Psychotic Medicine, he already had a difficult relationship with his mother, adding to the feelings of loneliness in America. He relates all these issues as one that is generational, connecting the fact that his mother and grandmother had a difficult relationship too. He says:

My mother and I had become estranged from each other when I was seventeen, just before I left for America. I tend to connect this to my mother's estrangement from her own mother. They might have fallen out for reasons as inchoate as the ones that separated my mother and me. My mother had not returned to Germany since she left in the 1970s. Nevertheless, in recent years I have thought of my oma more often. I usually dwell on the one time she came to visit us in Nigeria from Belgium, to which she had moved sometime after my grandfather's death. The picture my mother had painted of her as a difficult and small-minded person was inaccurate; it was a picture that had nothing to do with my oma, and everything to do with my mother's resentment of her (p. 35).

Apart from that, Julius is a mulatto; he is half Black and half German. This makes it difficult to fit into any sect in the American society. Even though his mother is German, he cannot disguise as an American because he's not White. He cannot also identify as black because he's not fully Black and this also adds to his feelings of estrangement in a lonely and foreign land. His identity hangs between two worlds and he seems lost in the middle. Among the Black community, it would be difficult for him to be fully incorporated because of the lightness of his skin and he still does not fit in as a White man. This feeling of belonging to nowhere is expressed in how Julius relates with other Black Americans, trying his best to not forge relations based on race. This is seen in the extract below when Julius is on one of his many walks along New York City, where he meets a Black man who tries to form a bond with him based on race;

Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, "we blacks," had known rougher ports of entry: this, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cabdriver had meant. This was the acknowledgment he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every "brother" he met. I

walked north, along the promenade, listening to the water breathing (p. 55).

This clearly shows that immigration and estrangement have a high level of relatedness, that one can feel uprooted when he/she leaves his/her mother land. The narratives, that somehow the West and the Western mind generally is more superior in terms of intellect and complexity to the African mind, is also further deconstructed in this text. This novel exposes trauma, as Julius, having being traumatised by the events of his childhood seems to be oblivious of certain facts in his life. This is evident when he locks out certain events from his life, including his experiences with Moji. The memory, brutal as it was, went unremembered to him. Trauma has always been referred to as a very Western concept because there is a ploy to not make Africans look complex on the surface, but trauma, if one gives it considerable thought, is a universal concept. It can affect everyone and anyone. Julius, the central character, suffers from trauma and it makes him block certain events from his memory. Even when Moji expresses what he did to her in the earlier portions of their life, nothing moves him. He even goes on a crazy one-night stand with an older woman during the aftermath of his break up with his girlfriend. This oversimplification of Africa is brought to the fore, as one can see Julius as a complex character that experiences different levels of isolation in a foreign land.

This text employs the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique to a large extent, because it is composed of the thoughts of Julius about different things. Taking a cue from this, this novel can fall under the modernist tradition. It is therefore an expository novel that clearly showcases the fact that Africans are indeed complex in their intellectual capacity for individual thought. This aspect is a key aspect of the novel because it defines Julius' feelings and actions throughout the novel. It is also greatly tied to immigrants who reside in a ball of loneliness in a foreign land and also a fall-out from socio-cultural identity. Julius feels estranged to a large extent as a result of migrating to another country in another continent.

## 5. Conclusion

This research focuses on how identity and estrangement have been portrayed by Adichie and Cole to express the misconceptions and identity crisis faced by Africans in the diaspora, and their experience of estrangement from the realities they are already accustomed with. As stated earlier in this study, socio-cultural identity and estrangement are twin concepts that cannot be discussed in isolation as both form part

of the many experiences faced by a typical African in a foreign land. In most cases, the African finds himself in such circumstance having gone in search for greener pastures and greater opportunities in a foreign land. This is what plays out in both texts that have been analysed, with reflections on the misconceptions about Africans both at home and in the diaspora. Adichie's *Americanah* exposes Ifemelu's ordeal, grappling with the challenges of navigating a new culture, which leads to a sense of alienation and disconnection from her Nigerian roots and her own sense of self. This identity crisis is exacerbated by the societal pressures to conform to American norms and the pervasive racial dynamics she encounters. Her estrangement is most poignantly illustrated by her decision to adopt an American accent and later by her conscious choice to drop it, symbolising her struggle between assimilation and the desire to remain true to her Nigerian identity. Ultimately, her return to Nigeria signifies her resolution to her identity crisis, wherein she reclaims her sense of belonging and reaffirms her identity. On the other hand, Cole's *Open City* portrays the issues of the mind and loneliness as seen in Julius' feelings of extreme loneliness in America even though he is a successful doctor. Living in New York City as a Nigerian-German psychiatrist, he finds himself perpetually disconnected from the various cultural and social environments he inhabits. His estrangement is highlighted through his solitary wanderings around the city, where he observes life from a detached perspective. His intellectual and emotional isolation is compounded by his difficulty in forming deep connections with others, including those from his past and his present. This detachment extends to his own heritage, as he struggles to reconcile his multicultural background and personal history. In the end, Julius' feelings of estrangement and identity crisis remain unresolved.

## References

- Adichie, C.N. (2013). *Americanah*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Alu, N. (2011). Between New Challenges in African Literature and Contemporary Realities: The Case Study of Opanachi's *Eaters of the Living*. *An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia* 5(4). Pp.342-353.
- Awuzie, S. (2018). Narratives and the African Experience: The Dialectical Consideration of the Writings of First and Second Generation African Writers in Africa. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 11(5).
- Brar, B.S. & Singh, S. (2011). The Politics of Poetics: The Quest for Ethno-Cultural Identity and Selfhood in Modern African Fiction.

- International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanity* 5. Pp. 469-473.
- Bromley, R. (2008). Between a World of Need and a World of Excess: Globalised People, Migration and Cinematic Narrative. A. Oboe, C. Gualtieri and R. Bromley (eds.). *Working and Writing for Tomorrow: Essays in Honour of Itala Vivan*. Nottingham: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press. Pp. 27–46.
- Cole, T. (2011). *Open City*. USA: Random House.
- Irobi, E. (2008). The Problem with Post-Colonial Theory: Re-Theorising African Performance, Orature and Literature in the Age of Globalisation and Diaspora Studies. *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* 2(1).
- Kabore, A. (2016). Migration in African Literature: A Case Study of Adichie’s Works. *Revue du CAMES Litterature, Languages et Linguistics Numero 4*. Pp.1-17.
- Kubayanda, J. (1990). Dictatorship, Oppression and New Realism. *Research in African Literature*. 21(2). Indiana: University Press.
- Lye, J. (1998). Some Issues in Postcolonial Theory: The Literature(s) of the Colonized. <http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/postcol.php> (accessed 23 June 2009).
- Mbiti, J. (1969). *Africa Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heineman.
- Montle, M.E. (2020). Who is African? Reconceptualising Identity-Crisis as a Threat to African Unity: A Post-colonial Analysis Approach. *Journal of African Union Studies* 9(1). Pp.83-99.
- Ohwawworhwa, P.O. (2023). Re-engaging Alterity and Disillusionment in Selected Nigerian Novels. *EBSU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 13(1). Pp.64-74.
- Ojaide, T. (1992). Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity. *African Studies Review* 35(3). Pp 43-57.
- Ojaide, T. (2008). Migration, Globalisation, and Recent African Literature. *World Literature Today*. 1(43). Pp. 20-35.
- Proshanky, H.M. (1978). The City and Self Identity. *Environment and Behaviour* 10(2). Pp. 147-169.
- Tajfel, H. (Ed.). (1978). *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. London: Academic Press.
- Vignoles, V.L. (2018). Identity: Personal and Social. *Oxford Handbook for Personality and Social Psychology*. Vignoles, V.L., Deaux, K. & Snyder, M. (eds.). Pp. 289-316.
- <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190224837.013.12>
- WaThiong’o, N. (1976). *Homecoming*, London: Heineman.
- Young, R.J.C. (1995). *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. New York: Routledge.