

**Representations of Home, Dislocation, and
Resilience in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
*Americanah***

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to explore the literary representations of ‘home’, dislocation and resilience in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013). Through a close-text analysis of the migrant trajectory from dislocation (within and beyond the boundaries of the homeland) to the possibility of a permanent return home, I intend to investigate what opportunities there are for migrants to overcome the challenges of uprootedness and re-establish a meaningful sense of ‘home’ and belonging in new spaces. The novel depicts two central protagonists who are estranged from their home country as a consequence of post-independent disenchantment, and whose ways of understanding ‘home’ are further challenged upon their return to a ‘strange’ and unfamiliar Nigeria. I have, therefore, found it necessary to investigate alternative perspectives of ‘home’ that offer a broader and more nuanced understanding of what it means to belong in an increasingly globalised and fluid world.

By applying select postcolonial and psychological theoretical concepts and perspectives, this dissertation seeks to explore pathways of managing and overcoming the trauma of emotional and physical dislocation. While acknowledging the severe consequences of border crossing on the migrant’s psyche, I also consider possible coping strategies that initiate a process of building resilience and overcoming adversities. Drawing on recent psychological approaches, I aim to provide a more balanced interpretation of the novel’s depiction of the migrant experience, suggesting that such experiences have the potential to deepen personal growth and world knowledge.

Declaration

I, Mia Hordyk, declare that

- i. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
- ii. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signed:

Date: 13 July 2021

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Contents

Abstract	i
Declaration	ii
Acknowledgements	ii

Chapter One: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Critical Approaches to Adichie's Oeuvre	4
1.3	Theoretical Framework	13
1.3.1	Home and Migration	14
1.3.2	Dislocation and Hybridity	17
1.3.3	Positive Psychology and Resilience: Writing, Humour and Mind-shifts	20
1.4	Structure of Dissertation	24

Chapter Two: Dislocation *within* the Boundaries of the Homeland 25

2.1	Pre- and Post-independent Nigeria: The social and Political Context	28
2.1.1	Pre-independence	28
2.1.2	Post-independence	31
2.2	Literary Representations of the Protagonists' Emotional Dislocation in the Homeland (Nigeria)	39
2.2.1	Out of Place at Home: Ifemelu's Response to Post-independent Disenchantment	41
2.2.2	Out of place at Home: Obinze's Response to Post-independent Disenchantment	43
2.2.3	Contrasting Attitudes towards 'Home' and the Allure of 'Abroad'	44

Chapter Three: Dislocation *beyond* the Boundaries of the Homeland 47

3.1	Rootlessness and Resilience: Perspectives on Ifemelu's Legal Emigration to America	50
3.2	Rootlessness and Resilience: Perspectives on Obinze's Illegal Emigration to England	64

Chapter 4: Homecoming: An ‘Unsettling’ Resettling	70
4.1 Adichie’s Literary Representations of the Returnee Experience	73
4.1.1 Returning from a Position of Inner Strength and Agency (Ifemelu)	75
4.1.2 Returning from a Position of Vulnerability and Insecurity (Obinze)	81
4.2 ‘Home-making’ at ‘Home’	86
Conclusions	93
References	98

Chapter One

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1. Introduction

This study seeks to investigate alternative perspectives of ‘home’ and belonging, as represented through the portrayal of the migrant characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013). The word ‘home’ often implies a sense of belonging, safety and comfort; however, with the rise of globalisation and the mass movement of people and cultural influences around the globe, conventional understandings of home have been held up for scrutiny. I intend to enter the debate on ‘home’ and what it means to belong in an increasingly globalised world, by attempting to chart the migrant’s trajectory from dislocation to the possibility of a return ‘home’ and a re-established sense of belonging. I will begin with an examination of the conventional understandings of home as a physical space that offers a sense of belonging, stability, and emotional comfort. These conventional understandings appear to be incongruent with the experiences of the migrant characters in my chosen novel, for whom home is a restrictive and unwelcoming place. By representing her characters in this way, Adichie calls into question fixed understandings of home and belonging, suggesting that even one’s original home does not always engender a sense of stability and comfort.

I am interested, furthermore, in the experiences of border crossing, and the potential for migrants either to be empowered or diminished by their experiences abroad. I intend to examine the literary representations of emotional and physical dislocation, beyond the boundaries of the home country, as a consequence of migration. The migrant characters in Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) appear to respond differently to the challenges associated with border crossing, with some managing to overcome emotional dislocation and re-build a sense of home, and others who fail to effectively cope with the migrant condition and remain in a perpetual state of unbelonging (even after returning to the country of their birth). What is of particular interest to me is the process that certain migrants go through in their attempt to overcome the challenges associated with border crossing and re-establish a sense of home and belonging. Finally, by drawing on the field of Positive Psychology, I plan to identify the coping strategies used by the migrant characters, and I further intend to investigate whether such strategies support them in overcoming adversity. I suggest that the process of building resilience allows certain migrant characters to reframe their understanding of ‘home’.

It has been recorded that, “in recent years, the ease of travel and communication, the global recession and new conflicts have contributed to rising numbers of migrants across the globe” (Global People Movements 2018). While some people leave their homes willingly, in search of new opportunities abroad, others are forced to flee due to war, violence or poverty.¹ Border crossing, whether voluntary or by force, can be a traumatic experience, and often leads to feelings of profound emotional and physical dislocation. Furthermore, the ease with which cultural values and social norms are communicated across borders in all directions means that people are prone to experiencing emotional dislocation without having to be physically uprooted. With this being said, my study seeks to analyse literary representations of dislocation – within and beyond the home country – and investigate what possibilities there are for migrants to ‘rebuild’ a sense of home and belonging, whether in their original country, or abroad.

We are currently living in a global age of migration, with reportedly over 250 million people worldwide living outside their country of birth.² Given the on-going refugee crisis in most parts of Europe and the recurring xenophobic violence in South Africa current debates regarding home and migration have gained considerable attention.^{3/4} Since the media is inclined to focus on the social and political disruptions within host countries, not much emphasis is placed on the psychological consequences that migration has on the condition of the affected migrants themselves. In light of this, it is important to analyse the impact that migration has on the individual, and what possibilities there are for displaced populations to re-establish a sense of ‘home’ and belonging. My study, which focuses on the complexity of the migrant experience, as well as on the challenges associated with homecoming, is particularly relevant to current debates concerning home and migration, both locally and

¹ It was reported by the United Nations Refugee Agency that by the end of 2018 “almost 70.8 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations” (Global Trends 2018: 2).

² According to a report published by the Legatum Institute, “the number of people globally living outside of their country of birth shows an upward trend, from 173 million in 2000 to 258 million in 2017” (Global People Movements 2017: 4).

³ According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, “in the first three months of 2019, just over 10,200 refugees were submitted by UNHCR for resettlement to 17 countries in Europe” (Europe Resettlement 2019). It was indicated in the same report that “in 2019, six countries in Europe (Germany, Sweden, France, Norway, the UK and the Netherlands) have received 81% of all resettlement submissions (Europe Resettlement 2019).

⁴ In a recent article, Steven Gordon reports that, “there are currently about four million international migrants living within [South Africa’s] borders” (2019: 270). Following the most recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa, Gordon explains that, “a significant share of the general population hold anti-immigrant views and blame foreign nationals for many of the socio-economic challenges facing South African society” (2019: n.p).

globally. By analysing the novel's literary representations of the migrant experience from a postcolonial perspective, I hope to make a contribution towards a broader understanding of 'home' and what it means to belong in an increasingly globalised world.

1.2. Critical Approaches to Adichie's Oeuvre

The selection of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) as my primary text was based on my interest in engaging with an African novel that deals with postcolonial themes of home, migration and dislocation, as well as the challenges associated with home-coming. In addition to responding to global issues of migration, and the migrant experience specifically, *Americanah* (2013) critically reflects on the growing disillusionment in post-independent Nigeria. Through the portrayal of her migrant characters, Adichie offers insight into the personal experiences of home and what it means to belong. In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of Adichie's position within postcolonial African literary studies, as well as of the existing critical material surrounding her novels.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born in the city of Enugu, in 1977, is a leading Nigerian writer and public figure, whose work is partly informed by her own personal experiences growing up in post-independent Nigeria and, later, by her experiences of having to leave her home country to establish her career abroad. In addition to publishing three award-winning novels, a five-time nominated collection of short-stories, and two books of critical essays, Adichie has also delivered two TED Talks, both of which have received global praise and attention. Her earlier novels, including *Purple Hibiscus* (2003)⁵ and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), are primarily focused inwards and depict the social and political realities of her home-country, post-independent Nigeria. While Adichie's earlier novels are largely consumed by her preoccupation with depicting Nigerian history and politics, they also allude to the possibility of migration and the promise of stability, comfort and safety in the West, by offering immigration as an escape from violent political upheaval, military dictatorship and economic collapse.

Adichie's interest, as reflected in her more recent fictional texts,⁶ has shifted from a predominantly inward-looking (within Nigeria) gaze on political turmoil and social discord in military ruled Nigeria, towards a more outward-looking (beyond Nigeria) gaze on topics of globalisation, migration and displacement. In some ways, Adichie's outward focus is partly influenced by her own personal experiences abroad, as she, like the female protagonist in her

⁵ Adichie began writing her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, while studying at Eastern Connecticut State University and continued to work on it while completing her Master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (Owomoyela 2008: 58).

⁶ I refer here to Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), and her latest novel, *Americanah* (2013).

most recent novel, *Americanah* (2013), left Nigeria to attend university in the United States of America. Elena Murphy (2017) comments on this link between Adichie's own personal experiences as an African immigrant living and working in the United States and the themes that are most prevalent in her recent work: "All of Adichie's work has been greatly influenced by the experiences that she has had and her position as what she has referred to as 'an inhabitant of the periphery'" (95). Adichie's outward focus makes her work relevant to the current urgency with which people are responding to issues of global mass migration and displacement. While much of her current critical focus is directed outwards towards global issues of migration, Adichie's recent fictional work also continues to reflect her earlier preoccupation with the social and political realities within post-independent Nigeria.

Early approaches to situating Adichie within "the four decade history of the Nigerian novel" (Griswold 2000: 36) have located her work within the "third generation" of Nigerian literature.⁷ Nigeria's literary output has been arranged according to three generations, the first of which can be traced back to the work of the "pioneers" (47): Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and John Okechukwu Munonye. Writers of the first and second generation lived through colonialism and witnessed the collapse of imperial domination and its aftermath of disappointment and post-independent disillusionment. Much of the work produced by the first generation, therefore, reflects critically on the "disruption of [Nigerian] life by the colonial encounter" (49). Although second generation writers – such as Buchi Emecheta and Kalu Okpi – also experienced the colonial event, their work is mainly characterised by an overwhelming sense of post-independent disillusionment (52).

Those writers who were born in the years following the country's independence from colonial rule – and whose first novel appeared in 1984 or later (Griswold 2000: 48) – have been classified as Nigeria's third generation, the most prominent representatives of which include, Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta and Ike Oguine. While much of the work produced by first and second generation writers is predominantly focused inwards towards national interests and concerns, the work of third generation writers is characterised by an outward shift in focus (beyond Nigeria), and by a growing interest in topics of "nomadism, exile, displacement, and deracination" (Adesanmi & Dunton 2005: 16), all of which are particularly

⁷ Some critics, including Wendy Griswold (2000), have categorized Nigerian literature according to three generations, the third of which refers to those Nigerian authors whose first novels were published in 1984 or later.

evident in the work of Adichie.

To return to Adichie's position within Nigerian literature, her outward shift in focus towards topics of migration, as coupled with her interest in representing her homeland, has led some critics – as, for example, Maximilian Feldner (2019) – to identify her as “the prototypical representative of Nigerian diaspora literature” (5). In his recent study, *Narrating the New African Diaspora: 21st Century Nigerian Literature in Context* (2019) – which offers a “survey of twenty-first-century Anglophone Nigerian narrative literature” (8) – Feldner examines Nigeria's literary output, focusing on the fictional work of a number of prominent Nigerian writers, including Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila, Chris Abani, Ike Oguine and Seffi Atta. The critic positions these writers within the “new African diaspora” (15), which is characterised largely by a strong sense of connection to the African homeland (17). It is the flexibility with which writers of the “new African Diaspora” (15) navigate between their home country and the global North that sets this current form of African migration apart from that which came before it. The critic explains that “members of the new African diaspora [...] are able to move freely between the continents, which allows them to remain in touch with, and invest in, their African homelands” (17). It is from their position as “members of the new African diaspora” that writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ike Oguine have written about matters that pertain both to migratory experiences as well as to socio-political events taking place within Nigeria's borders. The critic designates the work of writers who form part of the “new African Diaspora” as “Nigerian Diaspora literature”, of which Adichie is “the prototypical representative” (5).⁸ Like many of her counterparts, Adichie's position (as an Anglophone novelist living and working abroad while maintaining strong connections to her homeland) informs the “bifocal structure” (117) of most of her work.

At the heart of Adichie's work lies her commitment to creating “art with a purpose, art with a social responsibility” (Emenyonu 2017: 12). Her novels, short stories, critical essays, and public talks work together to educate, uplift and empower, and to bring about social awareness and initiate positive change. In an essay titled, “African ‘Authenticity’ and the Biafran Experience” (2008), Adichie vehemently contests the stereotypical assumption that “there is a single definition of *African*” (43; original emphasis), arguing for a rejection of

⁸ According to Feldner, “Nigerian diaspora literature includes every Anglophone novelist who is or was a member of the Nigerian diaspora, that is, every novelist who was born in Nigeria and left it for a significant stretch of time. In addition, it includes novelists who were born and raised abroad by Nigerian parents but are closely connected to Nigeria” (4).

oversimplified narratives of Africa, and of African people. She continues this important conversation in her globally successful 2009 TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*. Her 2012 TED Talk, *We Should All be Feminists* – which sparked a much needed conversation on what it means to be a feminist, and offers an “important perspective on conventional feminist theory” (Emenyonu 2017: 1) – was released as a book in 2014 and has subsequently been published in 32 different languages, including Portuguese, Spanish, Mandarin, Italian and German. Adichie’s work has been made accessible to a vast international readership, and has been celebrated globally for its ability to engage with profound human issues and social concerns. Ernest Emenyonu (2017) comments that Adichie “has made herself relevant to people of all ages – across racial and linguistic boundaries – whose needs, dreams, peculiar circumstances, successes and failures, hopes and aspirations, she has come to represent” (1). While her public talks and social appearances have done much to initiate global conversations around issues of gender inequality and reductive modes of representation, Adichie has acknowledged, in her aforementioned essay, that “literature is one of the best ways to come closer to the idea of a common humanity, to see that we may be kind and unkind in different ways, but that we are all capable of kindness and unkindness” (2008: 46). Thus, there is a strong engagement in her fictional work with the same social challenges and human complexities that she addresses in her critical essays and public talks.

Adichie’s literary and artistic prowess, and her reputation as “Africa’s pre-eminent story teller” (Emenyonu 2017: 1), have earned her universal critical acclaim. Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) – which won both the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award and the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize – is set in military-ruled Nigeria in the 1990s and deals with physical abuse and religious intolerance amidst political turmoil and social discord. Feldner indicates that “the Nigeria depicted in *Purple Hibiscus* [...] is one afflicted with military dictatorships and economic troubles” (2019: 6). With this in mind, many critics have interpreted the novel’s engagement with domestic violence as “a symbol of Nigerian post-independence reality of dictatorship” (Nabutanyi 2017: 73). Other critics have focused on the ways in which Adichie complicates gender boundaries. One such critic is Cheryl Stobie (2012), who argues that the novel “provides alternatives to the binary extremes of masculine dominance and feminine subordination” (307). Similarly, Janet Ndula (2017) states that Adichie’s project in *Purple Hibiscus* involves “deconstructing oppositional binaries of gender” (32).

Since the publication of her first novel, Adichie has proceeded to write and publish three other works of fiction. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), which won the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, offers a personal account of the Nigerian Civil War from the perspective of various fictional narrators. While the novel serves to provide insight into the devastating consequences of the Biafran War, it also reveals that, amidst the violence and political tension, "people discovered strength and talent and courage" (Adichie 2008: 53). Much critical attention has been directed towards the novel's representation of women and their significant contributions in times of violent political upheaval. For instance, Janice Spleth (2017) argues that, "Adichie's narrative dramatizes the real human dimension of the role that civilians and especially women played in the struggle" (137). In a similar way, Carol Njoku (2017) suggests that Adichie "recreates the Biafran War history to celebrate the tapestry of Igbo woman's valour and resilience at wartime" (166). Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) – which was nominated for a number of awards, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize – is the first of her fictional texts to reflect her outward shift in focus towards issues of migration, belonging and displacement. While some stories within the collection engage with "various situations and issues taking place in Nigeria, including familial relationships, university strikes, and ethnic conflicts" (Feldner 2019: 117), others deal with mobility and migration to the West. Many critics have examined the ways in which Adichie provides insight into the complexity of the migrant condition. Maitrayee Misra and Manish Shrivastava (2017), for instance, have chosen to focus on "issues of dislocation, cultural memory, mimicry, identity crisis, hybridity and the formation of a transcultural identity for better cultural assimilation" (187), as represented in three short stories within the collection: "Imitation", "The Arrangers of Marriage" and "The Thing Around Your Neck".

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Since the focus of my study is on home and dislocation in Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), I will now pay particular attention to some of the critical approaches to the author's latest novel. Adichie's outward shift in focus (beyond Nigeria), and her dual interest in representing "experiences of migration and diaspora, on the one hand, and representations of Nigeria, on the other" (Feldner 2019: 2) find their most pronounced expression in *Americanah* (2013). The novel engages with current topics concerning migration, dislocation and home, as

embodied by the male and female protagonists, who, having left Nigeria in search of new opportunities abroad, struggle to establish a sense of belonging in their respective host countries. The novel proceeds to show the difficulty of adjusting to the harsh realities of border crossing, and attempts to suggest that a return home is possible.

Americanah (2013), for which Adichie was awarded the US National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN Pinter Prize, has received much critical attention since its publication in 2013. Maximilian Feldner (2019), whose study I have referred to previously, examines Adichie's recent fictional work, specifically with regards to how *Americanah* represents the "tension of living abroad while being drawn back to Nigeria" (2). The novel, according to Feldner, "depicts experiences of migration not as linear and one-directional, but as multidirectional movements oscillating between different places" (185). The critic offers an examination of the various stages of the female protagonist's development during her years growing up in Nigeria, her experiences abroad, and her eventual return to the country of her birth, to argue that the novel departs from the typical migrant narrative that depicts migration as a one-way process.

Other recent literary critics have also focused primarily on the novel's representation of the migrant experience. Mary Androne (2017), for instance, charts the growth and development of the two main protagonists throughout their respective journeys abroad, as well as their subsequent return to Nigeria. According to Androne, Adichie's unique portrayal of the main protagonists' "coming-of-age trajectory" (230) sets the novel apart from the traditional bildungsroman genre. The critic suggests that the term 'migrant bildungsroman' is perhaps more fitting, since the protagonists' growth and development are precisely a result of their challenging experiences abroad: "both Ifemelu and Obinze develop and grow as they struggle, learn about themselves and make choices that will determine their futures" (232).

The novel's representation of the migrant experience has also been explored through the lens of multilingualism and translation. Marlene Esplin (2018), for example, focuses on Adichie's use of language and the many instances in which the migrant characters are required to translate as they move between different social and cultural contexts. The migrant experience, according to Esplin, is fraught with the difficulty of constantly having to translate "or endure a setting or relationship that necessitates a sublimation of self and one's identity" (82). For example, the novel's main female protagonist, Ifemelu, "cuts herself off from *her* language"

(80, original emphasis) when she decides to speak with an American accent. However, by charting Ifemelu's transition from "self-abnegation" (80) and linguistic alienation, to an "eventual reconciliation with herself" (80) – after she decides to "move towards a less affected mode of speaking" (2018: 80) – the critic also suggests that multilingual people/characters are eventually afforded "the right to 'be at home' anywhere – the right not to have to translate, assimilate, or sublimate salient aspects of their identities" (74). Another critic, Elena Murphy (2017), whom I have mentioned earlier, also takes issues of language and translation as her main focus. This critic's focus is on instances of translation as exhibited by the novel's migrant characters: "[Adichie's] African characters' transatlantic journeys imply a constant movement between several linguistic and cultural backgrounds which result in cultural and linguistic translation" (98).

The novel has further been read in terms of its depiction of the migrant's experiences of double-consciousness. In her study, "'Reverse Appropriations' and Transplantation in *Americanah*" (2017) – which examines the "transnational mobility" (199) of the novel's "aspiring female character" (199) – Gichingiri Ndigirigi makes use of the arguments put forth by Mary Louise Pratt to argue that "Ifemelu returns to Nigeria with the tangible American car, and her *Americanah* self that positions her as outsider-insider. She doubles 'the self into parallel identities in one place and another'" (209). In Ndigirigi's view, Ifemelu's "doubling of the self" (208), is both fragmenting and empowering in that it equips her with the ability to understand the nature of two systems and "survive in America and Nigeria" (210). Critic, Rose Sackeyfio, in "Revisiting Double-Consciousness and Relocating the Self in *Americanah*" (2017), includes issues of race in her analysis of the novel's representation of identity and 'double-ness'. By drawing on the work of W.E.B Dubois, she argues that: "All of the characters in *Americanah* are transformed by abrasive encounters and a new reality of their blackness that splinters their identity" (213). According to Sackeyfio, in order to survive "the demanding and alienating environments of America and London" (225), both the male and female protagonists develop a double-consciousness. For Ifemelu, "[t]he act of speaking in a foreign voice marks the beginning of a conscious doubling of her identity" (217), while "Obinze's experience with double consciousness takes on concrete dimensions when he actually assumes a false identity as a route to legal employment" (223).

Topics of race and identity are also focal points in the work of Chinenye Amonyeye (2017), who examines the ways in which the migrant characters attempt to negotiate hostility and

racial prejudice in the West. In Amonyenze's view, the various instances of biculturalism, as exhibited by the novel's migrant characters – who adhere to the cultural norms and values of their respective host countries while simultaneously maintaining aspects of their own identity and culture – work to challenge oppressive racial stereotypes. The critic takes on a positive approach, suggesting that Adichie's novel can be read as a “redemptive narrative” (1) that points to “the possibility that marginalised persons can defy the racist master narrative and write their own success story” (2). Despite their negative experiences with racism and oppression in the USA and the UK, Adichie's bicultural characters manage to carve out a path of success.

The novel's depiction of displacement, identity and “otherness” has also been explored through the lens of transculturalism. Augustine Nwanyanwu's (2017) study offers one such interpretation. The critic draws on the concept of transculturalism in his discussion on the novel's portrayal of “emigration/exile and its traumatic effects on the emigrants' lives and identities (387). As “a novel defined by its transcultural concerns” (387), Nwanyanwu suggests that *Americanah* offers insight into the ways in which “American, European, African-American, and African diaspora experiences, histories, and cultures meet, merge, and with varying intensity, engage” (387). Upon arriving in the USA and the UK, respectively, Adichie's migrant characters are confronted with the trauma of being relegated to the margins and inscribed as “other”, a situation in which they are forced to redefine their sense of self. Transculturalism, then, finds its expression in the ways in which the characters attempt to negotiate difference by connecting with people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi (2017) also consider issues of identity and otherness; however, these critics depart from the argument put forth by Nwanyanwu, suggesting that “factors such as stereotyping, racism and racial stratification [are] ingrained in American society [and] continually prevent the realisation of [Adichie's] transcultural objective in the novel” (43). In their view, instances of “racial intolerance” (37) prevent the main protagonists from engaging and forming meaningful relationships across cultural, religious and racial boundaries in their host countries.

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In conclusion to this section, and based on what has been mentioned above, much critical attention on *Americanah* (2013) has been directed at the novel's representation of the migrant experience, with critics focusing largely on topics of linguistic and cultural translation, alienation and double-consciousness, as well as on topics of race and identity. However, to reiterate, not much emphasis has been placed specifically on the migrant protagonists' trajectory from dislocation (within and beyond the boundaries of the home country) to a re-established sense of belonging upon a return to their homeland. In my analysis of the migrant's journey from dislocation to a new understanding of home, I will offer an examination of the literary representations of physical and psychological dislocation, which will be followed by an investigation of the migrant characters' resilience and ability to adopt successful coping strategies in order to rebuild a sense of home and belonging.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is informed predominantly by postcolonial literary studies, an interdisciplinary field that largely concerns itself with literary representations of social and political issues within recently liberated nation-states, as well as with centre/margin imbalances, globalization, migration and exile. Prior to the recent developments in postcolonial literary studies, critical reflections were largely preoccupied with a local, inward-looking gaze that focused on national interests, such as liberation from colonisation and the challenges of post-independence governance. In recent years, however, postcolonial literary studies has shifted its focus towards a more global and outward-looking gaze, including issues such as globalisation, migration and displacement. Sten Pultz Moslund (2010) explains this shift as follows:

[T]he thematic and theoretical momentum in post-colonial studies shifted from the insurgent politics of decidedly anti-colonial writings and readings to the discourses of hybridity and global migration. That is, the study of the literature of the anti-colonial struggle and the emerging national literatures of former colonies gave way to the celebration of migration, border crossing and hybridity as central to the explanation of the post-colonial experience. (9)

The field of postcolonial literary studies continues to foreground the experiences of minority groups, which, in today's "age of unparalleled mobility, migration and border crossing" (Moslund 2010: 1) have largely been occupied by the figure of the migrant. Postcolonial literary theory, therefore, with its focus on the personal experience of border crossing and the emotional consequences thereof, provides an appropriate lens through which to examine migration literature. One could distinguish, as Søren Frank (2008) does, between 'migrant literature' and 'migration literature'. While the former focuses on an author's personal experiences with migration, the latter emphasises a novel's thematic and stylistic properties that work together in creatively representing the migrant experience (17). This is not to say that migration literature ignores the impact that an author's personal migration experience has on his/her literary work. Rather, the emphasis is on the way in which migration is reflected upon "through the lives of the fictional characters" (15), as well as through the "overall thematic framework and the discursive strategies of the novels" (15). To reiterate, current research emphasises topics of home, dislocation and hybridity, all of which are particularly relevant to the research problems with which I intend to engage in my study.

Having observed that postcolonial literary studies foregrounds issues of individual and collective trauma associated with migration, I feel that my study - which looks at the ways in which people manage to overcome the challenges associated with border crossing - will benefit from the psychological perspectives put forth by researchers in the field of Positive Psychology. Therefore, my theoretical framework will also be informed by psychological approaches to resilience and coping with adversity. In what follows, I will provide a theoretical background to some of the main concepts that will inform my analysis of the primary text: home and migration, dislocation and hybridity, and resilience.

1.3.1. Migration and Home

In today's global age of unprecedented mobility, conventional understandings of migration have become insufficient to explain the current complexity with which people and information are moving around the globe. Frank (2008), whom I have mentioned above, explains that early accounts of migration involved very specific and one-directional movements in which people left their original homeland to settle in another country (8). More recent accounts assert migration as multi-directional, "oscillatory and inconclusive [processes]" (8). Similarly, Nikos Papastergiadis in *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialisation and Hybridity* (2000), describes recent forms of migration as "turbulent [...] with multidirectional and reversible trajectories" (7). Earlier forms of migration, as he explains, were mostly linear and characterised by a journey that could be traced back to a single point of departure. Migration, in his view, has changed dramatically in recent years: "contemporary migration has no single origin and no simple end. It is an on-going process and needs to be seen as an open voyage" (4). With this in mind, Papastergiadis challenges conventional understandings of migration as one-directional "physical movement and social settlement" (2000: 15). The critic offers a different approach, which seeks to "understand the flows of cultural change from at least two perspectives: the movement of people, and the circulation of symbols" (2000: 15). The fact that migration can now be understood as much by the movement of cultural signs and religious practices as by the movement of people helps us understand how it is that "we are on the move even if, physically, we stay put" (Bauman 1998: 2).

The postcolonial theme of migration is closely linked to the concept of 'home', as the increased mobility of large populations around the globe has contributed to the destabilization

of fixed and stable understandings of home and belonging. Papastergiadis (2000), for instance, considers the impact that migration has on “established notions of belonging” (2), and suggests that the current surge of people moving around the globe has had a profound effect on the ways in which we attempt to make sense of our ‘place’ in the world. In a similar argument, Frank (2008) explains that contemporary forms of migration have “resulted in a profound renegotiation of the concepts of identity, belonging, and home” (1).

In common parlance, ‘home’ refers mainly to a place of birth or a fixed geographical location, in which the individual feels a sense of community, belonging, stability and emotional comfort, thus suggesting “order, cohesion, [and] the stability of culture” (Nasta 2002: 2). However, with the rise of globalisation and the mass movement of people and cultural influences around the globe, conventional definitions of ‘home’ have been called into question. Writing with this challenge in mind, Caren Kaplan (1996) points to the fact that “there is no possibility of staying at home in the conventional sense – that is, the world has changed to the point that those domestic, national, or marked spaces no longer exist” (7). Unconventional approaches, like Kaplan’s, challenge traditional notions of ‘home’ and belonging, taking into account the vast social, cultural, political, and emotional factors that contribute to an understanding of what it means to belong.

Other critics who also problematize the concept of home include Rosemary Marangoly George, whose study – *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1996) – offers a critical examination of the notion of ‘home’ within Anglophone literature. Similarly, Jopi Nyman, in *Home, Identity and Mobility in Contemporary Diaspora Fiction* (2009), calls into question traditional definitions of home and belonging, suggesting that the concept of “home is not necessarily a stable issue or a merely positive and empowering site” (24). Edward Said (2000) also explores the idea that ‘home’ is not always a place of refuge: “borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity” (147). It is worth pointing out, as Nyman does, that the concept of home has also been a pertinent topic of discussion within feminist literary theory (2009: 24). Roberta Rubenstein (2001), for example, provides a feminist reading of the concept of ‘home’ by pointing to the fact that many women who have been defined purely by their familial and domestic roles, have come to “regard home as a restrictive, confining space” (2). Both Rubenstein and Said consider the possibility that, for some individuals, home is in fact not “a

sanctuary [but] a prison” (2001:2).

Furthermore, Tina Steiner’s *Translated People, Translated Texts: Language and Migration in Contemporary African Literature* (2009) offers critical insight into the ways in which the mass movements of people across the globe blur distinct boundaries and disrupt stable notions of ‘home’ and belonging. The critic draws a link between migration and home, explaining that “the migrant loses the actual experience of the homeland, but gains a perspective of what it is like not to be home, to look at ‘home’ with detachment and to question its underlying assumptions” (14). Sharing the view that migration destabilises one’s understandings of home, Diana Glenn, Sonia Floriani and Eric Bouvet (2011) have also suggested that “migration is above all experienced as a biographical ‘trauma’ through which migrants lose their sense of home and thus perceive themselves [...] as homeless” (1). Some critics have gone so far as to suggest that migration is a new way of existing in the world today. Andrew Smith (2004), for example, suggests that migration has become “the name for human beings *as such*” (247; original emphasis), a “*condition* of human life” (257; original emphasis). In a similar way, Mohsin Hamid (2019) states that “all of us are descended from migrants” (17), and therefore, “none of us is a native of the place we call home” (17).

Finally, Aleksandra Bida, in *Mapping Home in Contemporary Narratives* (2018), philosophically examines the ways in which “growing mobility impact[s] aspects of how we think of and experience home” (6). Although Bida’s work is not strictly speaking categorized as postcolonial criticism, it is a study on what it means to belong in an increasingly globalized and technologically advanced world, and thus offers intriguing critical insight into alternative perspectives of home. In reference to Martin Heidegger’s essay, “Building Dwelling Thinking”, Bida indicates that home is in fact a process of ‘home-making’ (or, feeling at ease in a place) and is not necessarily linked to a particular location as such; rather, ‘home’ is an attitude or mind-set, and refers specifically to “how we live” (18) and the ways in which we think about the spaces that we occupy. The critic points to a shift away from understanding ‘home’ as closely linked to ownership or property, towards an understanding of ‘home’ that relies on mindful living in a space. What this rather unconventional perspective suggests is that a sense of being at ‘home’ can be achieved through a process of sustained reflection and philosophical contemplation.

1.3.2. Dislocation and Hybridity

Generally speaking, the concept of ‘dislocation’ in postcolonial literary studies is largely associated with the movement of people across borders, and refers to the experiences of physical uprootedness and alienation, as well as to the related emotional states of estrangement, unsettledness, unease or disorientation. In what follows, I will briefly outline two main lines of critical approach to dislocation within postcolonial literary studies. While the earlier line of approach focuses on the link between dislocation and colonialism, the more recent line of approach focuses on dislocation in a broader context of global mass migration and globalisation.

Those critics – for example, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (2000) – who focus on ‘dislocation’ in the context of colonialism and liberation from it, have used the concept to describe “the occasion of displacement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event” (65). Dislocation, as seen from this perspective, refers to the physical experience of being violently uprooted through colonial disruption (slavery, imprisonment, invasion and settlement), as well as to the emotional experience of being cut off and isolated from one’s original culture, language and tradition. Bill Ashcroft – in an earlier landmark study, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) – suggests that “the energizing feature of this displacement is its capacity to interrogate and subvert the imperial cultural formations” (11). Therefore, the experience of being physically or emotionally disconnected from one’s home, culture, language and social practices – although traumatic and devastating – can also be a site of resistance, agency and change.

Other critics approach the concept of dislocation in a context of more recent mass migration and neo-liberal politics (post-independent disillusionment and economic and professional advancements). Whether people move due to lack of economic opportunity, environmental conditions, social instability or political turmoil, the resulting experience of this physical uprooting, be it voluntary or by force, is emotionally disruptive and unsettling. Additionally, advancements in technology that have introduced new global networks of communication have brought people together in a way that was previously thought unimaginable, opening up new avenues through which critics are able to explore the concept of dislocation. Migration, then, refers not only to the movement of people, but also to the ways in which new ideas and information are circulated and shared around the globe. As a result, feelings of disorientation and alienation can occur without the physical movement of people, which means that people

are vulnerable to feeling dislocated even within their own homes.

While much emphasis is placed on the traumatic effects of physical and emotional dislocation brought about by the mass movement of people and information around the globe, some studies also consider the ways in which the experience may be useful in also initiating positive encounters between people from different religious and cultural backgrounds. One such study is Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995), in which the critic makes explicit reference to the work of Bharati Mukherjee to explain that, for Mukherjee, dislocation "is not an impoverishment but an expansion of cultural and aesthetic experience" (241). From this perspective, the condition of being physically uprooted has the potential to be a positive experience in that it broadens the migrant's knowledge and understanding of cultures and societies that are radically different from their own. Border crossing, Boehmer explains further, suspends the migrant in an "in-between position" (241), which allows for a more complex understanding of one's position in a place. This leads me to my next discussion point: an understanding of hybridity and of the migrant's capacity either to be empowered or diminished as a result of his/her experiences abroad.

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In postcolonial literary studies, the concept of hybridity is used to describe the influence of one culture over another, as well as to certain overlaps and confluences between cultures. Many critics in the field have used the term to refer to situations in which language, identity and culture are renegotiated. Critics Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk (2005) indicate that "the most conventional accounts assert hybridity as the process of cultural mixing where the Diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or "hybrid identities"" (71). The concept has also been used by postcolonial critics to describe and explain emotional states of ambiguity or uncertainty relating to the "in-between position" (Boehmer 1995: 241) of the migrant.

In his prominent study, *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha questions notions of 'pure' tradition and culture, suggesting that hybridity "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or

fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (37). Bhabha – who famously coined the term “Third Space” (39) to refer to the site at which meaning is negotiated and articulated – asserts that hybridity is productive and can initiate positive encounters between cultures. A comparable argument is put forth by Papastergiadis (2000), whose study I have referred to previously. The critic states that “the positive feature of hybridity is that it invariably acknowledges that identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presences of fissures, gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure” (170). Hybridity, in this sense, lays bare the very foundation on which established notions of identity are constructed: “as an already accomplished fact” (Hall 1994: 222). Far from being fixed and stable, identity is a “production, which is never complete, [and] always in process” (Hall 1994: 222). The perspectives put forth by Bhabha and Papastergiadis acknowledge that hybridity, though sometimes painful and unsettling, has the potential to expose the constructed nature of identity, culture and tradition, as well as the ways in which the “in-between position of the migrant” (Boehmer 1995: 241) fosters a sense of unity and coherence despite difference and change.

From what has been discussed above, it is clear that the “in-between position of the migrant” (Boehmer 1995: 241) has the potential to open up a space in which people from various social and cultural backgrounds are brought together through mutual understanding and an acceptance of difference. However, as many critics have suggested, border crossing and the position from which one negotiates ‘otherness’ is not always an enriching experience. While some critics, including Bhabha, have celebrated hybridity, other critics have provided a more sceptical perspective, which highlights the complexity of the concept while taking into account both its positive and negative qualities. For instance, in her article, “Deterritorialisations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse” (1987), Caren Kaplan states that the hybrid position of the migrant is “fraught with tensions; it has the potential to lock the subject away in isolation and despair as well as the potential for critical innovation and particular strengths” (187). The critic looks specifically at the autobiographical work of two contemporary feminist writers to suggest that displacement “enables imagination, even as it produces alienation” (188). In both cases, the authors grow out of their marginality and vulnerability as they move from a sense of unbelonging and disconnection into a new, reinvented sense of belonging (197).

Offering a slightly different approach to the complexity of the concept, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (1996) argues that “all hybridities are not equal” (159) and suggests that the condition of “straddling worlds” (Boehmer 1995: 241) is experienced by different people in radically different ways. Radhakrishnan differentiates between what he calls “‘metropolitan’ versions of hybridity and ‘postcolonial’ versions” (1996: 159) of hybridity, explaining that, “whereas the former are characterised by an intransitive and immanent sense of *jouissance*, the latter are expressions of extreme pain and agonizing dislocations” (159; original emphasis). In his view, hybridity is “a comfortably given state of being” (159) for some, and “an excruciating act of self-production” (159) for others. Like Radhakrishnan, Zygmunt Bauman (1998) suggests that experiences of contemporary mobility are “radically unequal” (2). To argue this point, the critic makes a compelling case for the necessary distinction between what he calls ‘tourists’ and ‘vagabonds’:

[T]ourists move because they find the world within their (global) reach irresistibly *attractive* – the vagabonds move because they find the world within their (local) reach unbearably *inhospitable*. The tourists travel because *they want to*; the vagabonds because *they have no other bearable choice*. (1998: 92; original emphases)

An interesting and useful parallel can be drawn between Kaplan’s study (1987) – with its focus on the vastly unequal positions from which people move – and Bauman’s contrasting analysis of “tourists” and “vagabonds”. Bauman’s tourist has chosen “deterritorialisation” (Kaplan 1987: 191), that is, the tourist, unlike the vagabond, has the “freedom of movement” (191) and travels into “literary/linguistic exile with all [their] cultural baggage intact” (191). On the contrary, “deterritorialisation” (191) is thrust upon Bauman’s vagabond, and therefore, the vagabond moves not out of choice or from a position of power, but rather from a position of vulnerability. What the studies above seek to show is that because of the vast disparities between the ways in which people experience migrational movement, it is problematic simply to celebrate hybridity.

1.3.3. Positive Psychology and Resilience: Writing, Humour and Mind-shifts

The field of psychology, in general, is widely regarded as “a science largely devoted to healing [and] repairing damage” (Seligman 2005: 3). Researchers and academics in the field of Positive Psychology, however, have initiated a shift away from focusing purely on pathology to reflecting on the “conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing of

people, groups, and institutions” (Slezachova & Sobotkova 2017: 383).

The concept of resilience – with its focus on an individual’s capacity to “bounce back from negative emotional experiences and flexibly adapt to changing demands” (Dwivedi 2017: 334) – is widely regarded as belonging to the field of Positive Psychology. I have found the work of Swati Mukherjee and Updesh Kumar (2017) – who provide an overview of past and current theoretical approaches to psychological resilience – to be most useful for the purpose of my project. According to Mukherjee and Kumar, past research has attributed resilience to innate characteristics within the individual, “labelling those with positive coping as ‘hardy’ or ‘invincible’” (4). However, current research has acknowledged that there is a wide range of factors that are associated with positive coping, and thus, many scholars now tend to define the concept as “a process rather than a trait inherent in an individual” (4). In light of this recent critical approach, some researchers have regarded resilience as “a process of endurance” and an “expedition” that involves “the growth and transformation of an individual” (Parkash & Kumar 2017: 91). Since I will be investigating the route that certain migrant characters take in order to overcome the difficulties of outward migration and return ‘home’ successfully, the current psychological critical perspectives are particularly useful to my study. Having aligned myself with the current research and its process-orientated approach to resilience, I will reflect on three positive coping strategies that inform resilience: writing, humour and mind-shifts.

In an attempt to overcome the harsh realities of border crossing, some characters in my chosen novel turn to writing, specifically weblog writing. I am interested in examining the representations of writing as a coping strategy in the context of migration. One study that I have found particularly useful for the purposes of my research is Kate Niederhoffer and James Pennebaker’s “Sharing One’s Story: On the Benefits of Writing or Talking About Emotional Experience” (2005), in which the critics emphasize a process-orientated approach to the writing paradigm. Niederhoffer and Pennebaker indicate that disclosure by means of writing/talking about a traumatic experience has the potential to “reduce the physiological effects of a massive life stressor, as well as to gain control, find meaning, and facilitate social integration” (580). In another study, James Pennebaker (1997) discusses the positive correlation between writing on the one hand, and physical and mental health on the other, suggesting that, “writing about upsetting experiences, although painful in the days of writing, produces long-term improvements in mood and indicators of well-being” (162). More recent

research has looked at self-initiated weblog writing as a strategy aimed at coping with stressful life events (Petko et al. 2015). What most of the studies seem to suggest is that writing creates a space in which trauma (or stressful life events) may be confronted, negotiated and dealt with in effective and meaningful ways.

In my analysis of the migrant characters' trajectories from dislocation to a possible return to the homeland, I will also be looking at how humour is used as a positive coping strategy. In his study, "Humour and Resilience: Towards a Process Model of Coping and Growth" (2012), Nicholas Kuiper considers the relationship between humour and resilience, suggesting that the "personal use of humour can be quite congruent with a resiliency model" (478). Additionally, Rod Martin and Thomas Ford's *The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach* (2018) – in which they review research that has been conducted on the impact of humour on mental health – is particularly useful in guiding my discussion on how some of the migrant characters in *Americanah* (2013) use humour to overcome major challenges and difficulties. According to Martin and Ford, experimental studies revealed that, "humour positively affects psychological wellbeing by mitigating the negative impact of stressful events" (2018: 297). They elaborate further by explaining that "one important way that humour mitigates the effects of stress on psychological wellbeing is by promoting a reappraisal of stressful events" (299). A number of studies have concluded that humour "provides a way for people to reframe stressful events in a more light-hearted, less threatening way and consequently experience less emotional distress" (299).

Aleksandra Bida (2018), whose study I have referred to previously, offers a different approach to understanding resilience and positive coping. Although the critic does not specifically mention 'resilience', her study — which makes constant reference to positive and adaptive changes in attitudes towards 'home' and belonging — is relevant to a discussion on positive coping. Bida explains that home is a process of 'home-making', and that 'home-making' is about a shift in mind-set or change in attitude to how one *thinks* about the spaces that one occupies. Paying attention to, and being mindful of, *how* one lives, rather than *where* one lives, is conducive to feeling at home in a place. According to Bida's analysis of Heidegger's philosophy, "dwelling", as a form of 'home-making', is an attitude or a mind-set that can be changed or adjusted, which implies that one can live and feel at 'home' in multiple places. Migrants often perceive their conventional understandings of home to be challenged, and are, therefore, faced with the task of having to reflect on and change the ways in which

they think about being at ‘home’ in a place. This process of “rethinking home” (2018: 3) can be interpreted as a positive coping strategy, and is, therefore, particularly useful for my analysis regarding the migrants’ capacity to overcome the challenges of migration and re-establish a sense of belonging.

From what has been discussed thus far, and based on an in-depth search into Adichie criticism, I have noticed that not much emphasis has been placed on the psychological concept of resilience as applied specifically to my chosen novel, *Americanah* (2013), and its focus on migration, home and belonging. I intend to fill this gap by blending the knowledge drawn from the field of Positive Psychology, and the perspectives put forth by Bida (2018), to argue that the process of building resilience allows migrant characters to reinvent their understanding of ‘home’.

1.4. Structure of thesis

By drawing on select theoretical perspectives of dislocation and hybridity as outlined in this first chapter, *Chapter Two* will involve an analysis of the literary representations of emotional dislocation *within* the boundaries of the original homeland. The novel is focalised through its two main protagonists (female and male), each of whom appear to be emotionally dislocated as a consequence of post-independent disillusionment in Nigeria. I will begin by outlining the political and social context in which the novel was written, and will then move on to an analysis of the specific ways in which each of the two main protagonists experiences emotional dislocation in their home country.

In *Chapter Three*, the theoretical perspectives of migration and home, as well as of dislocation and hybridity, will inform my analysis of the literary representations of the main protagonists' physical dislocation abroad. I am interested in examining whether there is a difference between the ways in which the male and female characters experience physical dislocation in their respective host countries. More specifically, an analysis of the female protagonist's experience of physical dislocation (as a legal immigrant in the USA) will be contrasted with an analysis of the male protagonist's experience of physical dislocation (as an illegal immigrant in the UK). While drawing on psychological approaches to resilience, I will analyse the migrant characters' capacity to adapt to alienating contexts in the host country, and I will also examine the possibility of 'home-making' abroad.

Finally, *Chapter Four* will focus on the migrant characters' return to their original homeland and the possibility of 'home-making' in Nigeria. I will begin with an analysis of the literary representations of the returnee experience, focusing largely on the positions from which the two main characters return to the country of their birth. While the female character returns from a position of power and agency, the male character returns from a position of vulnerability. I am interested in examining whether their experiences abroad shape their capacity to reintegrate themselves into the society of their original homeland. With this in mind, I will lastly consider the possibilities of 'home-making' upon a return to one's original home country.

Chapter Two

Dislocation *within* the Boundaries of the Homeland

Located partly in military ruled Nigeria and partly in the global North (the United States of America and England specifically), *Americanah* (2013) is a powerful expression of Adichie's "bifocal" (Feldner 2019: 117) interest in representing her homeland and providing insight into the complexity of the migrant experience. The author employs flashbacks as a postmodern literary technique, through which the novel's central themes of home, migration and dislocation are represented. Through the use of flashbacks, Adichie juxtaposes the novel's time perspectives (past and present) and spatial sequences (Nigeria, the United States of America, and England), thereby destabilising the chronological unfolding of the narrative. In my interpretation, Adichie deliberately disrupts logical and recognisable time and space elements with the purpose of representing "the endemic instability in Nigeria" (Edebor & Ukpi 2018: 11), as well as of recreating – in narrative form – feelings of dislocation and fragmentation. The author's technique of juxtaposition not only emphasises the characters' sense of emotional disruption and estrangement, but it also disrupts the reader's comfort zone so that they too can feel what it is like to be unsettled and confused. Although Adichie, here, deals with time from a postmodernist perspective, I shall – for the sake of clarity and line of argumentation – start by providing a chronological unfolding of the narrative.

Set in a period of political instability and social malaise in Nigeria, the novel traces the lives of the central protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze – two Nigerian-born, middle-class high school students – who meet and fall in love, despite the fact that "the gods, the hovering deities who gave and took teenage loves, had decided that Obinze would go out with Ginika [...] Ifemelu's close friend [and] the second most popular girl" (Adichie 2013: 55) at their school. Ifemelu and Obinze both attempt to navigate their way through high school and university in the midst of on-going political disruption and military dictatorship, all of which make studying difficult and, at times, even impossible. The social and political conditions of post-independent Nigeria foster widespread disillusionment, causing Ifemelu's Aunty Uju to flee the country with her new-born son, Dike, and, later, prompting both Ifemelu and Obinze to seek better life opportunities in the United States of America and the United Kingdom respectively.

The relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze comes to an abrupt end when, after failing to imagine a future for themselves in their home country, Ifemelu pursues an opportunity to study at Princeton University, and Obinze later gains entry to England as a research assistant on his mother's British visa. Set partly in the United States and partly in England, the novel proceeds to chart the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze as they attempt to establish a life for themselves in their respective adoptive countries. The reader first gains insight into Ifemelu's early experiences in America: her reunion with her Aunty Uju and her cousin Dike; her desperate search for acceptance and belonging; her numerous failed attempts at finding work under a false name; and her traumatic sexual encounter with a tennis coach – an encounter that sends her plummeting into a state of anguish, emotional decline and social withdrawal, including from Obinze, with whom she ceases all forms of communication. Later on in the novel, the reader gains insight into Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, a wealthy business owner from an upper middle-class American family; the start of her widely successful career as a weblog writer; the unexpected news of Dike's (her cousin) hospitalisation; and her complicated relationship with Blaine, an assistant professor at Yale university.

Meanwhile, Obinze, who remained behind in Nigeria to complete his University degree, is repeatedly unsuccessful at securing a passport to post-9/11 America. He later gains entry to England, where he obtains work illegally by assuming a false identity, all the while desperately trying to acquire legal status through an arranged marriage. Despite the promise of a stable and prosperous life abroad, and despite his best efforts to belong, Obinze's experiences in England are marked by constant fear, racist oppression, discrimination, isolation, alienation, and profound dislocation. His chances at obtaining legal status through an arranged marriage and at having a life in Britain are brought to an abrupt end when immigration officers arrive at the scene of his "sham marriage" (Adichie 2013: 279) to deport him.

The novel proceeds to outline the personal experiences of Obinze and Ifemelu as they attempt to return to, and re-establish a sense of belonging in their original homeland. An interesting contrast can be drawn between Ifemelu's *voluntary* return to Nigeria and Obinze's *enforced* return to Nigeria (and the extent to which they are each successful in establishing a sense of belonging in their original homeland). In the chapters to follow, I intend to investigate the positions (voluntary versus enforced) from which the main protagonists return and whether or not they are able to re-imagine 'home' in Nigeria. After his (enforced) return to Nigeria,

Obinze rapidly acquires a new life for himself as a wealthy and successful businessman, multiple homeowner, husband and father. Ifemelu eventually decides to return home to Nigeria as well, after having lived in America for over thirteen years. The novel comes to an end with the long-anticipated reunion of Ifemelu and Obinze, and with the hopeful promise of a joint future in Nigeria, the 'home' they once fled and to which they have both returned.

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The remainder of this chapter will be divided into two main sections. In the first section (2.1.), I will offer a brief overview of Nigeria's history (from colonialism through to independence), before moving on to a discussion on the ways in which the social and political realities of post-independent Nigeria are represented in the novel. In the second section (2.2.), I will be focusing my attention on the literary representations of emotional dislocation within the boundaries of the homeland. I will consider female and male responses to feeling out of place at home, with a special emphasis on representations of Ifemelu's and Obinze's alienation in their homeland: before deciding to leave Nigeria.

2.1. Pre- and Post-independent Nigeria: The Social and Political Context

Adichie locates a significant portion of her novel in post-independent Nigeria, a period marked by a pervasive sense of disillusionment and despair as a result of deep-seated ethnic rivalry and aggravating “economic crises and political upheavals” (Griswold 2000: 10). In an attempt to understand the socio-political and economic context in which the novel is set – and thus making sense of the fact that most of the characters in *Americanah* (2013) are drawn to a life abroad – it is first necessary to gain some insight into the history of Nigeria.⁹

2.1.1. Pre-independence

British colonialism has left a strong imprint on the trajectory of the West African country known today as Nigeria. It is important, therefore, to mention a few key historical events that have influenced the country’s more recent social and political situation. Although Britain had been at the forefront of commercial trade in West Africa since the latter half of the eighteenth century, it was only until after the Berlin Conference of 1885 (Griswold 2000: 8) that it committed itself “to a more active colonialism” (8) in Africa.^{10/11} Decisive measures towards amalgamation of the various regions were consequently set in motion and, in 1914, Nigeria’s borders, as we know them today, were established. The Protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria were unified to form the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, which guaranteed Britain outright control over the country, the administration of its population, as well as the exploitation of its resources (for the next forty-six years) (8).

Prior to formal colonialism, Nigeria comprised three geographical areas, each of which existed independently of each other and differed significantly in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and political policies. Britain maintained these pre-existing differences within the newly established colony by formally dividing the area into three distinct and “fragmented” (Falola 2002: 3) regions: the northern region, the western region, and the eastern region,

⁹ Falola and Heaton (2008) have acknowledged that Nigeria’s more recent political, economic, and social problems “are deeply imbedded in the country’s unique and complex history” (320).

¹⁰ British traders were particularly active in “the Niger River area” (Griswold 2000: 8). Britain subsequently established a colony in Lagos in 1861, which later formed part of the “Oil river protectorate” (Owomoyela 2008: 17), or the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the British Empire had firmly established itself along the Niger River; an area that was later proclaimed the Oil River Protectorate (Owomoyela 2008: 17).

¹¹ The purpose of the Berlin Conference was to divide “areas of control” (Griswold 2000: 8) among countries (France, Germany, Britain) that were competing over valuable “African resources” (Griswold 2000: 8).

(Griswold 2000: 8), each of which was administered “separately and quite differently” (8).¹² As a result, developments within each region, most notably in the areas of politics, education, religious practices, and social organisation, “differed sharply” (9).

With a “highly centralized” (Griswold 2000: 8) and unified system of power and authority, Nigeria’s “Islamic [N]orth” (8) was largely administered through indirect rule.¹³ The British initially used “military and diplomatic measures to subdue the region” (8), after which, control in the North was maintained via a pre-existing political structure ruled by emirs, who agreed to “accept British authority, abandon the slave trade, and carry out British policies” (8). Indirect rule was less effective in the smaller states of the country’s southern region,¹⁴ governed as they were by “decentralized political structures of local councils, chiefs, and other kinds of elites” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 7). The point at which developments in each region diverge also hinges on the extent to which western influence penetrated each region. While the northern region “remained relatively untouched by western education and modernization” (Griswold 2000: 10), Nigeria’s southern region was “opened [...] to Christian missionaries and other [w]esternizing influences” (9). The missionizing project of the early colonial period – which was largely responsible for “establish[ing] schools and promo[ting] literacy” (9) throughout southern Nigeria – was particularly effective among the Igbo in the eastern region, many of whom eventually took on “administrative positions and [managed] the growing industrial sector” (10).¹⁵ In contrast, the northern region maintained “Islamic conservatism and the political status quo” (8), and remained isolated from the social, political, and cultural changes brought about by “[w]estern ideas and institutions” (9). The foregoing administrative differences ensured the perpetuation of the country’s internal divisions, the

¹² Despite the fact that there are over “250 distinct ethnic groups” (Griswold 2000: 6) within Nigeria’s borders, only “one ethnic group was dominant in each region – the Yoruba in the west, the Igbo in the east, and the Hausa-Fulani in the North” (Griswold 2000: 10).

¹³ Falola and Heaton (2008) explain that large centralized states, such as those in the north, “developed kingship institutions that placed political and, to some extent, spiritual authority in the person of the king, who ruled from the capital city” (37).

¹⁴ Nigeria’s eastern and western regions are collectively referred to as “southern Nigeria” (Griswold 2000: 9).

¹⁵ The rapid expansion of formal education in the country’s southern region gave rise to a “European-educated elite” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 8), who were given “low-level positions in the government and in European businesses”, and who “enjoyed a higher standard of living than most Nigerians” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 8).

consequence of which is still clearly visible today as the southern region continues to surpass the northern region in terms of economic growth and education.¹⁶

The struggle for independence gained considerable ground in the early-1930s, when members of the southern educated elite united to form the country's first anti-colonial movement (Falola and Heaton 2008: 141). The Nigerian Youth movement, formally known as the Lagos Youth Movement, was considered a "pan-Nigerian nationalist movement" (141); "pan-Nigerian" because "its explicit aim was to unite across ethnic boundaries in order to create a common voice with which to confront the Colonial government" (141), and "nationalist" because its leaders insisted upon "greater indigenization of the civil service, better wages and working conditions for Nigerians, and more elected representation in government" (141). The Nigerian Youth Movement, and other similar movements, sought to advocate unity and inclusion for all Nigerians regardless of ethnic affiliations, and, in doing so, attracted members from as far north as Kano and from as far south as Calabar. However, progress towards unity among all Nigerians, and towards "the development of a true national consciousness" (149) was derailed in the late-1940s when revised constitutional reforms, drawn up by the colonial administration, established "regional houses of assembly in each of the three existing regions – that is, one for the West, one for the East, and one for the North" (149). As regional power gained prevalence over central authority (150), nationalist movements were replaced with "ethnically defined regional political parties" (Owomoyela 2008: 17). Tension mounted as dominant ethnic groups were pitted against each other, and minority ethnic groups fought to defend their own cultural and political interests.¹⁷

¹⁶ Leif Wenar (2016) states that "northern Nigeria has been in overall economic decline for decades" (59), and that "only one girl in fourteen finished secondary school in the North" (59).

¹⁷ As was mentioned earlier, a single ethnic group dominated each region: "the Yoruba in the west, the Igbo in the east, and the Hausa-Fulani in the north" (Griswold 2000: 10). After the Richards constitution was institutionalized in 1947, three distinct political organizations, corresponding to the dominant ethnic groups in each region, emerged. The Yoruba in the west and the Igbo in the east established the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and the Igbo State Union respectively, each with the intention of fostering a sense of unity amongst their own people. Dominant ethnic groups in the north established the Northern People's Congress in an effort to "promote northern unity in the fight to maintain regional autonomy [...] in the face of what seemed like impending southern domination" (Falola and Heaton 2008: 151).

2.1.2. Post-independence

The constitutions of the late colonial period reinforced regional, ethnic, and religious divisions, so that by the time Nigeria gained independence from British colonial rule in 1960, “it was not at all clear what it meant to be a Nigerian” (Griswold 2000: 10).¹⁸ The country – failing to develop a unified national identity and lacking the foundations for “a stable and functioning polity” (Feldner 2019: 22) – has since “moved from one crisis to another” (Falola 2002: 1). Deep-seated differences in ethnic identity, religious beliefs, and political interests paved the way for “a number of conflicts, including the devastating Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, a succession of coups and military dictatorships, and a permanent state of political instability” (Feldner 2019: 21).

After the civil war, a “reunited Nigeria” (Griswold 2000: 10) entered into the new decade optimistic about the country’s economic and political prospects.^{19/20} However, it was not long before economic growth and political stability began to flounder; “the collapse of oil prices in the early 1980s” (10) propelled the country even further into economic crisis, crippling the fragile democracy and “[paving] the way for the military to take over again at the end of 1983” (10). Instead of “revitalizing the shattered government apparatus left behind by the Second Republic (Falola and Heaton 2008: 209), each of the three military regimes²¹ that came into power after 1983 “oversaw the further decline of the Nigerian economy [and] sought to maintain power through oppression, coercion, and the manipulation of the democratic transition process” (209). The regime of Sani Abacha (1993-1998), however, was considered to be the most oppressive (Owomoyela 2009: 18), and it was under his rule that “the country’s economic crisis peaked” (Falola and Heaton 2008: xix).

¹⁸ To support this statement I have drawn from the work of Leif Wenar (2016), who writes that a recent survey indicates that “only one in ten Nigerians said their national identity is more important than their ethnic identity” (59). The critic also writes that, “over two-thirds said that they trusted people from other ethnic groups ‘just a little’ or ‘not at all’” (Wenar 2016: 59).

¹⁹ Profiting hugely from the early 1970s oil boom, Nigeria was “counted among the fastest growing economies in the world (Falola 2002: 3). In spite of this, extreme poverty continued to increase, “from 36 to almost 70 percent of the population” (Wenar 2016: 57). It soon became clear that the money obtained from oil exports was only accelerating the country’s economic decline, “as the soldiers and their civilian allies permitted the other sectors of the economy to atrophy while they secreted the revenues from petroleum into personal bank accounts” (Owomoyela 2008: 18). Thus, ordinary civilians tended “not to see their country’s oil wealth” (Wenar 2016: 58).

²⁰ Towards the end of the decade, “Nigeria appeared to be headed for a more stable, if imperfect, democracy” as the “post war military regime [...] handed over power to the Second Republic in 1979” (Griswold 2000: 10).

²¹ The three military regimes that ruled the country between 1983 and 1999 were “those of Buhari, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB for short), and General Sani Abacha” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 209).

Corruption and mismanagement strained the political system, with military leaders proving to be derelict in their duties of providing essential public services, such as basic healthcare, education, electricity, clean water, and security (Wenar 2016: 58).²² Falola and Heaton (2008) indicate that in the years following independence, “health-care and education facilities have fallen into disrepair; basic medicines, health-care equipment, and educational tools such as books, desks, chalkboards, and so on are scarce and in poor condition” (12). Low levels of employment, severe economic deterioration, lack of infrastructure and development, scant public services, ethnic and religious conflict, and political turmoil all contributed to widespread disillusionment, which prompted qualified professionals to leave the country in search of better work and living conditions abroad.²³ It is worth pointing out that “the pace of exit accelerated considerably during the Abacha years” (Owomoyela 2009: 18), as this is a point that Adichie has also picked up on in her novel.²⁴ The military continued to rule the country up until Olusegun Obasanjo – a former army general who “turned the government over to civilians back in 1979” (Griswold 2000: 11) – was elected president in 1999. Although “Nigeria has [since] been a democratic nation with relatively correct and free elections” (Feldner 2019: 21), the country’s social, political and economic systems continue to be undermined by “financial mismanagement [and] ubiquitous graft, bribery, and nepotism” (21).²⁵

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Based on Ernest Emenyonu’s comment that Adichie’s “commitment as a writer lies in her vision of the writer as a harbinger of social awareness, truth, and empowerment” (2017: 12), it is reasonable to suggest that the novelist occupies a significant space among those Nigerian

²² In *Americanah* (2013), the military is to blame for on-going academic strike action: “The military is the enemy. They have not paid our salary in months. How can we teach if we cannot eat?” (91).

²³ Falola and Heaton (2008) indicate that “by 1993 there were an estimated 21,000 Nigerian doctors practicing in the United States alone” (223), and that “by 2000, between 25 and 50 percent of all Nigerians with university educations lived outside the country” (223). Importantly, Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) presents post-independent disillusionments as one of its main concerns, and aims to offer a closer look at the “push factors” (Feldner 2019: 16) that have resulted in the steady emigration of skilled Nigerians from the country.

²⁴ Commenting on this accelerated pace of exit, Adichie has Obinze reflect, as an older and more mature man, on his past in Nigeria: “Once, during his final year in the university, the year that people danced in the street because General Abacha had died, his mother had said, ‘One day, I will look up and all the people I know will be dead or abroad’” (Adichie 2013: 232).

²⁵ Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, which ranks countries according to their degree of corruption, indicated that, in 2019, Nigeria ranked 146 out of 180 countries (where country 1 was clean, and country 180 was extremely corrupt).

writers who consider it their moral duty to use their creative platform to initiate “positive social and political transformation” (Feldner 2019: 20). In *Americanah* (2013), Adichie focuses on the social implications of political instability and the dishonourable accumulation of excessive wealth/power within the military, thus bringing Nigeria’s “political, economic, and moral problems” (Griswold 2000: 11) into clear view. What follows is an analysis of specific instances in the novel that I consider most effective in representing the social and political realities within military-ruled, post-independent Nigeria.

In *Americanah* (2013), post-independent Nigeria is initially presented to the reader in the form of flashbacks, through which the author draws specific attention to the ways in which political instability, economic decline, “widespread official corruption, and mismanagement of government funds” (Falola and Heaton 2008: xvii) undermine the country’s progress towards a stable and functioning democracy, thus fostering widespread disillusionment. The narrative shifts back and forth in time, as Ifemelu drifts between her immediate reality in America and memories of her youth in Nigeria. Therefore, much of what the reader learns about the events taking place in post-independent Nigeria are focalised through Ifemelu, whose memories – of past experiences and relationships – punctuate the present-day narrative to provide insight into the social and political realities of military-ruled Nigeria, and to reveal a country that is ultimately “starved of hope” (Adichie 2013: 47).

Although they are secondary characters, Ifemelu’s father and Aunty Uju carry crucial roles in exposing the “deteriorating condition of the Nigeria state” (Edebor & Ukpí 2018: 5) under military rule. Ifemelu is a witness to the individual impact of the country’s dire unemployment on both her father and Aunty Uju. Falola and Heaton (2008) explain that, “instability and underdevelopment that has characterized the Nigerian economy for much of the time since independence has led to high unemployment levels, leaving Nigeria unable to utilize its labor resources effectively” (4). Adichie underscores the severity of the country’s unemployment situation by describing Nigeria as a “parched wasteland of joblessness” (2013: 45-46), as also strongly attested by Aunty Uju’s struggle to find a job, despite having a university degree.

While Nigeria’s severe unemployment levels are largely a result of economic instability and underdevelopment – another reason that accounts for the fact that “many qualified people [...] are not where they are supposed to be” (Adichie 2013: 77) – it also points to pervasive

corruption and nepotism within the military regime. In *Americanah* (2013), success appears to be determined, not by merit and hard work, but by a person's willingness to "conform to the society's use of 'connection' [and] nepotism" (Edebor & Ukpi 2008: 5). In the novel, Aunt Uju's affair with The General, a high-ranking military officer, provides critical insight into a political system that is fraught with mismanagement, corruption, and nepotism, and which serves to draw attention to the fact that "army officers acquired more power and money than civilians" (Falola 2002: 2). As the mistress to a powerful man, Aunt Uju is granted special privileges, most prominent among which is her new job at the military hospital in Victoria Island. She describes her privileged position to Ifemelu and Ifemelu's mother as follows:

When Aunt Uju first told them about her new job – 'The hospital has no doctor vacancy but The General made them *create* one for me' were her words – Ifemelu's mother promptly said, 'This is a miracle!' Aunt Uju smiled, a quiet smile that held its peace; she did not, of course, think it was a miracle, but would not say so. (45; emphasis added)

Aunt Uju's rise in social and economic status is juxtaposed with her brother's (Ifemelu's father's) professional and emotional decline. Soon after Aunt Uju starts her new job "as a consultant at the military hospital in Victoria Island" (Adichie 2013: 45), Ifemelu's father is fired – after "twelve years of dedicated labour" (46) – for refusing "to call his boss by the honorific and much-cherished title, 'Mummy'" (Edebor & Ukpi 2018: 5). The country's "high unemployment" (Falola and Heaton 2008: 4) rate is, once again, made explicit as "Ifemelu's father goes job hunting daily, only to be rejected serially" (Edebor & Ukpi 2018: 6). While Aunt Uju continues to prosper as The General's mistress, Ifemelu's father struggles to support his family, and soon becomes "shrunk and lost" (Adichie 2013: 47). Through scenes like these, Adichie depicts "the employment scene" (Edebor & Ukpi 2018: 5) in Nigeria as one dictated by "connection, nepotism, and tribalism" (5) rather than by loyalty, hard work and dedication.

The character of Aunt Uju is also used as a mouthpiece denouncing the military's corrupt affluence. When Ifemelu's family cannot afford to pay rent to the "cramped" (Adichie 2013: 49) flat in which they live, Aunt Uju takes advantage of her relationship with 'The General' to assist them: "At the flat Aunt Uju handed Ifemelu's father a plastic bag swollen with cash. 'It's rent for two years, Brother,' she said, with an embarrassed casualness" (79). Aunt Uju always appears to have more than she could use, which conjures up an image of excess and

serves to elaborate on the vast financial disparity between army officers and the general public.²⁶ Aunty Uju's "big pink house with the wide satellite dish blooming from its roof, her generator brimming with diesel, her freezer stocked with meat" (77) gives off the impression that she is financially secure and independent; however, a closer look reveals that she depends entirely on the man with whom she is having an affair. During a brief conversation with Ifemelu, Aunty Uju admits that "she has not been paid a salary since [she] started work" and that "[her] account is almost empty" (76). Her dire financial position is made all the more apparent after 'The General' dies in a mysterious airplane crash, leaving her and their son, Dike, with "nothing" (87).

Ifemelu is also witness to the failures within the education system, providing yet another aspect of the social and political realities within military-ruled Nigeria. Falola and Heaton (2008) indicate that in the years following independence, Nigeria's "education facilities have fallen into disrepair; [that] educational tools such as books, desks, chalkboards, and so on are scarce and in poor condition [and that] public servants [including university lecturers] regularly go unpaid" (12). This is well illustrated by Adichie, who attributes these failures to a corrupt and negligent leadership. Ifemelu first learns of the lamentable condition of the education system from Ginika's (Ifemelu's friend's) father, who, as a university lecturer himself, expresses his condemnation of the military regime:

'We are not sheep. This regime is treating us like sheep and we are starting to behave as if we are sheep. I have not been able to do any real research in years, because every day I am organizing strikes and talking about unpaid salary and there is no chalk in the classrooms.' (2013: 64)

It appears that Ginika's father is only one among countless academics who are disillusioned by the country's leadership; later, Ifemelu also recalls a conversation with Obinze's mother (an academic), who, like others in her position, firmly believes that "the military is the enemy" (Adichie 2013: 91). Ifemelu's flashbacks to her own personal experiences as a university student (later on in the novel) provide further insight into the deteriorating condition of the country's education system. She recalls "her hostel room, where four beds were squashed into a space for two" (89), as well as the deplorable living conditions and lack

²⁶ This is clearly illustrated on two occasions. First, when she delivers a new television set to Ifemelu's family home, announcing that "The General bought more than [she] needed in the house" (Adichie 2013: 75), and second, when she discloses to Ifemelu that, "[The General] even gave [her] a little more than [she] asked for" (77).

of basic utilities such as “water” and “light” (91), all of which led to violent student protests. Failure within the country’s education system culminates, however, in persistent strikes by lecturers, which cripple the system even further, making studying difficult, and, at times, even impossible. As a result of widespread disillusionment within the post-independent nation, lecturers and students alike are shown to begin systematically searching for better professional opportunities abroad.

The country’s strained social and political condition is further alluded to through vivid descriptions of the harsh, relentless, and volatile weather patterns:

In Lagos, the harmattan²⁷ was a mere *veil of haze*, but in Nsukka, it was a *raging, mercurial presence*; the mornings were crisp, the afternoons ashen with heat and the nights *unknown*. Dust whirls would start in the far distance, very pretty to look at as long as they were far away, and swirl until they coated everything brown...Other nights, a sharp cold wind would descend, and Ifemelu would abandon her hostel room and, snuggled next to Obinze on his mattress, listen to the whistling pines howling outside, in a world suddenly *fragile and breakable*. (93; emphases added)

The weather is used as a literary trope through which Adichie makes implicit references to the country’s turbulent political system. In Lagos, the harmattan is described as “a mere veil of haze” (93), suggesting that the social and political future in the western region is incomprehensible and unclear. In Nsukka, on the other hand, the harmattan is described as a “raging, mercurial presence” (93), indicating that the social and political situation in the eastern region is marked by uncontrollable and unpredictable disruption and violence. Despite the difference in intensity, both regions are depicted as being shrouded by an overwhelming sense of instability, unease and disorientation. Adichie also delves into the on-going academic strike actions, military interventions and ensuing disruption. Ifemelu’s perceptions of the weather provide crucial insight into the ways in which the current political and academic situation affect her sense of belonging. The “[d]ust whirls” (93), the “howling” pines, and the “sharp cold wind” (93) are unsettling and invoke a sense of fear and foreboding, which is made particularly evident by the fact that Ifemelu resolves to “abandon her hostel room” (93) and seek comfort and refuge in her relationship with Obinze.

²⁷ During Nigeria’s dry season, which lasts from November through to March, “a strong cool wind called the harmattan blows in from the Sahara, bringing relief from the heat but also carrying particles of desert sand” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 2), which, during these dry, windy months, cover parts of the country in a thick layer of dust.

Furthermore, the mention of a “veil of haze” (93) conjures up an image of obscurity, of Nigeria as a place with no future, its inhabitants directionless and uncertain of what lies ahead. This overwhelming sense of uncertainty and obscurity is further alluded to by the fact that the nights were “unknown” (93). The word “unknown” is also used earlier on in the novel when Ifemelu recalls – in one of her flashbacks – that, “the news spread around campus of a strike by lecturers, and students gathered in the hostel foyer, bristling with the known and the *unknown*” (91; emphasis added). The repetition of the word ‘unknown’ draws attention to the fact that Nigeria’s social, economic and political systems are “fragile and breakable” (93), infiltrated as they are by violence, ineptitude and rapacity.

Despite the fact that corruption, social disruption, and political instability are central in Adichie’s representation of her homeland’s severe problems, the author offers fleeting moments of optimistic contemplation: “Dust whirls would start in the far distance, *very pretty to look at* as long as they were far away” (Adichie 2013: 93; emphasis added). Here, Adichie expresses a “vast ambivalence toward [her] country, given all its [...] frustrations and its potential” (Griswold 2000: 11). Although the “dust whirls” (2013: 93) are shown to be potentially disruptive and damaging, given their pervasive capacity to “[coat] everything brown” (93), they are also regarded with pleasure when Ifemelu acknowledges that they are “pretty to look at” (93). A lighter, more sanguine tone momentarily takes the place of a darker, more ominous one, suggesting a brief sense of optimism amidst the overall chaos and disruption. Thus, Adichie aims to suggest that, “despite all that Nigeria has gone through, the potential remains for the country to be strong, powerful, wealthy, and internationally esteemed” (Falola and Heaton 2008: 320).

However, without the means to pursue a life of economic opportunity, stability and certainty in their home country, the novel’s main protagonists cast their vision elsewhere and invest (emotionally and physically) in a future for themselves in the global North. Both Ifemelu and Obinze are unsettled and uneasy about their social and political reality, and both are emotionally detached from their home country as a result of it. However, emotional dislocation, as refracted through Ifemelu and Obinze, manifests itself in different ways. While Obinze actively seeks out an emotional escape from post-independent disillusionment by fantasising about a life in America, Ifemelu attempts to disguise her inner feelings of alienation and dislocation by outwardly portraying herself as free-spirited and self-assured. This leads me to the next section of this chapter: the novel’s literary representation of

emotional dislocation within the boundaries of the homeland, with a specific focus on each of the two protagonists' experiences.

2.2. Literary Representations of the Protagonists' Emotional Dislocation in the Homeland (Nigeria)

As discussed in more detail in *Chapter One*, cultural criticism of the last decade had foregrounded the concept of 'home', with many critics challenging the view that 'home' inevitably implies "order, cohesion, [and] the stability of culture" (Nasta 2002: 2). These critical discussions, to which Adichie lends her artistic voice, are particularly relevant for the purpose of this chapter, in which I explore the literary representation of emotional dislocation within the boundaries of the homeland (Nigeria). Speaking in response to the release of her latest novel, Adichie confirms that the concept of "home is one of the major ideas of *Americanah*" (Librairie mollat 2015). More specifically, Nigeria is represented as a place in which the main characters feel estranged, uncertain and uneasy, suggesting that it is possible for people to feel dislocated even within their own 'home' place. By offering a cast of characters who are portrayed as being emotionally alienated within their original homeland, and who look elsewhere (beyond the borders of Nigeria) for stability and certainty, the novel casts 'home' as a hostile and unwelcoming place, suggesting that "home is not necessarily a stable issue or a merely positive and empowering site" (Nyman 2009: 24). In this chapter the focus is on emotional dislocation within the boundaries of the homeland (feeling out of place 'at home'). I will trace the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze as they attempt to navigate their way through high school and university, amidst a collective mood of disappointment, uncertainty and despair.

Ifemelu and Obinze represent an entire generation of Nigerians who "are conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else" (Adichie 2013: 277), to look beyond the borders of Nigeria for economic opportunity, political stability, and certainty (93). Writing with this in mind, Feldner (2019) suggests that certain "push factors" (16) – such as scant social services, "high underemployment, low levels of income, and rampant corruption, as well as limited professional opportunities and education facilities" (16) – have produced an atmosphere "of insecurity and instability that cause many to seek better conditions and political freedoms abroad" (16). With this in mind, Feldner also suggests that "pull factors" (16) – including "the promise of better living conditions, the availability of jobs, educational opportunities, and the possibility of social advancement in the United States and Europe" (16) – are central in contributing to the growing tendency for Nigerians to aspire towards a future beyond the boundaries of their home country. In a recent interview, Adichie explains that the title of the

novel, *Americanah* (2013), is a colloquial word used to refer not only to a Nigerian who returns home with “odd affectations” (Adichie 2013: 65) after spending a significant time abroad, but also to refer to the idealisation of America:

America as an idea is central in this book because [it] is a place that represents something to this generation of Nigerians who are dreaming of America as an extra place where magical things happen. (Librairie Mollat: 2015)

As will be discussed in more detail in the sections to follow, this outward-looking gaze – which tends to focus most commonly on countries like the USA and UK – inhibits feelings of emotional connectedness to the homeland.

Military intervention, political rivalry, and “unending” (Adichie 2013: 91) university strike actions are central in aggravating widespread disillusionment, which, in turn, has resulted in profound emotional dislocation in the lives of the novel’s main protagonists. Interestingly, emotional dislocation, as it is refracted through Ifemelu and Obinze, is represented in different ways. While for Ifemelu, emotional dislocation is an inward-looking process of profound disorientation and discomfort as a result of political instability, for Obinze, feelings of detachment are exhibited by an outward-looking gaze that casts home as the ‘unknown’, and abroad (America) as the imagined ‘known’. Much of what the reader learns about the characters’ feelings and attitudes towards their original homeland is expressed through Ifemelu’s memories of her time spent growing up in Nigeria. Thus, while Ifemelu’s flashbacks offer insight into the socio-political realities of post-independent Nigeria, they also serve to illuminate the main characters’ inner feelings of unease, uncertainty, dislocation, and estrangement.²⁸ Adichie’s use of flashbacks (that is, her deliberate disruption of the novel’s chronological time sequence) serves to represent real-life contexts of social instability and confusion, while also creating an emotional atmosphere of alienation and fragmentation. In this manner, Adichie aims to evoke complex emotions in the reader – emotions similar to those of the characters.

In what follows, I will offer a close examination of the ways in which Ifemelu and Obinze each experience – a profound sense of – emotional dislocation as an expression of the collective post-independent disillusionment.

²⁸ The socio-political realities of post-independent Nigeria were discussed at length in *Section 2.1.* of this chapter.

2.2.1. Out of Place at Home: Ifemelu's Response to Post-independent Disenchantment

Adichie introduces Ifemelu's story at a hair braiding salon in America, from where the narrative shifts back in time to offer flashbacks referring to her experiences growing up in post-independent Nigeria – amidst military dictatorship, political instability, and economic despair. As mentioned previously, Adichie deliberately disrupts the novel's chronological time sequence with the intention of emphasising the main characters' feelings of dislocation and fragmentation.

Due to widespread post-independent disillusionment, the sense of home is represented as fraught with difficulties, culminating in profound emotional dislocation in the lives of the novel's main protagonists. This is strikingly illustrated through the trajectory of Ifemelu, who, as a consequence of constant university strike action and social unrest, is described as feeling “restless” and “antsy” (Adichie 2013: 91). The idea that ‘home’ is perhaps not as stable and comfortable as one might have previously thought is made all the more apparent by Ifemelu's inner ruminations about her experiences as a young university student in Nigeria:

She felt cut away from [Obinze], each of them living and breathing in separate spheres, he bored and spiritless in Nsukka, she bored and spiritless in Lagos, and everything curdled in lethargy. Life had become a turgid and suspended film. (91)

As a result of persistent and pervasive strike action, Ifemelu and Obinze are among the countless university students who are forced into, what appears to be, a perpetual state of stagnancy and uncertainty. Driven apart by “nationwide” (91) strikes, Ifemelu is forced to return to her family home in Lagos while Obinze remains behind in Nsukka. Since Obinze is the one person with whom Ifemelu feels most “at ease” (61), it is plausible that being “cut away” (91) from him has the profound effect of exacerbating Ifemelu's existing feelings of unease and disorientation. In addition to this kind of anxiety, which Obinze's absence provokes in her, Ifemelu, as well as Obinze, are depicted as being “bored and spiritless” (91). By choosing to portray her characters in this way, Adichie draws attention to the fact that persistent strike action, as also fuelled by military intervention and economic turmoil, has given rise to a lack of purpose, as well as an overwhelming sense of despair and hopelessness among the country's ordinary citizens. Ifemelu represents the vast majority of Nigerians, who, failing to establish a sense of meaning and purpose amidst the pervasive collective atmosphere of stasis and uncertainty, have become emotionally detached from their homeland. By comparing Ifemelu's “life” (91) in post-independent Nigeria to a “turgid and

suspended film” (91), Adichie intends to suggest that Ifemelu has become a passive observer of her own life, and that she is watching the unfolding of events with detachment. The image of ‘life’ as a ‘film’ reinforces the general atmosphere of dislocation and fragmentation.

Ifemelu is “different” (Adichie 2013: 60) from most of the other female characters in the novel in the sense that she is depicted as confident, free-spirited, and assertive. However, Ifemelu’s outward appearance (how she projects herself and how others perceive her) seems to be at odds with her inner feelings of alienation, isolation, and dislocation. I am inclined to suggest that Ifemelu attempts to disguise her true feelings of uncertainty and unease by projecting an “image of herself” (60) as confident and headstrong. Thus, her “image” of self-confidence can be interpreted as a façade, which she uses as a “carapace” (60) to protect herself against the emotional turmoil caused by her feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and confusion. Occasionally, when her insecurities rise to the surface, Ifemelu describes her “joy [as a] restless thing, flapping its wings inside her, as though looking for an opening to fly away” (63). At other times, her joy is described as “fragile [and] glimmering” (67).

Although Ifemelu is popular among other high school students, she nonetheless feels like an outsider among her friends. This is especially true in instances when the topic of emigration comes up in conversation and she feels as though she cannot relate to it. During a quiet moment alone together, Ifemelu considers telling Obinze that “she didn’t know what it meant to ‘be on your mother’s passport’, that her mother didn’t even have a passport” (Adichie 2013: 66); instead, she becomes mute with the fear that he might not understand how she feels, and thus, resolves to “[walk] beside him in silence” (66). This particular scene exemplifies Ifemelu’s inner feelings of alienation and confusion.

Unlike Obinze – who appears to be “somehow comfortably inside himself” (Adichie 2013: 70), and for whom being “among people who had gone abroad was natural” (67) – Ifemelu is “sheathed in a translucent haze of difference” (66). Although her being different does not exclude her entirely from her peers, it is enough, not only to inhibit her from establishing relationships based on mutual understanding, but also to evoke in her an overwhelming sense of detachment. Many of the other characters, including Obinze, do not notice how estranged she feels: “[Obinze] admired her for being outspoken and different, but he did not seem able to see beneath that” (67). On the surface, Ifemelu’s difference is presented as an intriguing presence (which is noticeable, but which others pass off as an admirable quality); however,

below the surface, her being different from the other girls at her school marks her as an ‘outsider’, thus instilling in her a profound sense of non-belonging.

Ifemelu’s emotional dislocation is also manifested through her fragmented sense of self. She is detached, not only from those around her, but she is also detached from herself. Before meeting Obinze’s mother for the first time, Ifemelu seeks guidance from Aunty Uju, whose straightforward advice – that Ifemelu should simply be “herself” (70) – triggers a complicated emotional response. Ifemelu’s fractured sense of self is encapsulated in a brief, yet crucial moment of introspection, during which she realises that “she was no longer sure what ‘herself’ was” (70). This realisation is deeply unsettling and seems to exacerbate Ifemelu’s existing feelings of alienation and disorientation.

Given that the country as a whole “remains trapped in a state/State of always becoming and never being, a permanent ambivalence” (Sullivan 2001: 73), I am inclined to suggest that Ifemelu’s fractured identity can be read as a symbol of “Nigeria’s confusions” (Griswold 2000: 11). Just as Ifemelu is shown to experience confusion within herself, Nigeria’s identity as a nation is “fractured and fragmented” (Feldner 2019: 22). Throughout most of its years as a post-independent nation, Nigeria has been “plagued by neo-colonial ills: economic disorders and social malaise, government corruption, state repression” (Boehmer 1995: 237). It is precisely this “tenuous condition of the Nigerian state” (Sullivan 2001: 72) that has contributed to the country’s fragmented sense of identity (72). Thus, through the character of Ifemelu, Adichie implicitly comments on Nigeria’s “search for self-definition and nationhood” (83).

2.2.2. Out of Place at Home: Obinze’s Response to Post-independent Disenchantment

Like Ifemelu, Obinze is emotionally dislocated from his homeland as a result of the social and political ills that disrupt daily life in Nigeria, bringing about a sense of unease, disorientation and general malaise. Obinze’s feelings of emotional dislocation, however, are further exhibited by the fact that he takes on an active interest in American culture; the culture of a country that is not his own. Given Nigeria’s social and political problems that inhibit him from investing in a future for himself in it, Obinze envisions the United States as the only place he was “destined to be” (233). He becomes increasingly preoccupied with “foreign things” (67), especially with American culture – as is indicated by his mother’s comment that

he is “too besotted by America” (70), as well as by his belief that it is important to read “American books because America is the future” (70). Such attitudes disconnect him from his native country, as he stops investing emotionally in Nigerian affairs and fantasises about a future for himself and Ifemelu abroad: “We’ll go to America when we graduate and raise our fine children” (94).

As discussed in more detail in the previous sub-section, the period in which the novel is located is marked by “economic ruin” (Owomoyela 2008: 18), rampant corruption, social unrest, and political instability. With this in mind, I would suggest that Obinze’s obsession with American history, society, and culture is a desperate attempt to remove himself – emotionally – from the current situation in which he finds himself. My interpretation may be supported by Obinze’s inner ruminations about his urge to “escape the life he had always had” (Adichie 2013: 88), which he later perceives as “the need to escape the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness” (277). Thus, like Ifemelu, for whom life in military-ruled Nigeria “had become a turgid and suspended film” (91), Obinze is “mired in dissatisfaction” (277), emotionally stifled by the on-going conflict and disruption. Since physical “escape” does not initially present itself as a realistic option, Obinze resorts to emotional “escape” by delving into fantasies of a life abroad, a life that is wholly different from his own. Obinze regularly “removes” himself (psychologically) from his physical surroundings by conjuring up images of himself enjoying all the pleasures that America has to offer, which serves to show that – while he is physically in Nigeria – in his “mind” (234) he has already escaped to America.

2.2.3. Contrasting Attitudes towards ‘Home’ and the Allure of ‘Abroad’

In what follows, I will compare ‘male’ and ‘female’ perspectives of ‘home’ and abroad, by focusing on the actions and attitudes exhibited by the novel’s characters. I suggest that the male characters (specifically, Obinze and Emenike²⁹) exhibit a keen interest in discovering life beyond the borders of Nigeria, while the female characters (Ifemelu, Ginika³⁰ and Aunty Uju specifically) do not show an aching desire for a life abroad and appear to be less idealistic about their departures.

²⁹ Emenike is one of Obinze’s closest male school friends, who later on in the novel emigrates to England.

³⁰ As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Ginika is Ifemelu’s closest friend, who later on in the novel emigrates to the United States of America, and who assists Ifemelu with finding a job when she first arrives there.

As mentioned previously, Obinze is enthralled by America, and is presented as standing for an entire generation of Nigerians who “[dream] of America as an extra place where magical things happen” (Librarie mollat 2015). Obinze’s lifelong plan “to get a postgraduate degree in America, to work in America, to live in America” (Adichie 2013: 233) rapidly evolves into an idealised attitude towards the future, in which he envisions “himself walking the streets of Harlem, discussing the merits of Mark Twain with his American friends, gazing at Mount Rushmore” (233). While he waits for his chance to apply for a visa, Obinze looks for “magazines and books and films and second-hand stories about America” (233), immersing himself entirely in the culture of a country that is not his own. Interestingly, Ifemelu does not share Obinze’s interest in American culture and literature; for her, the books he consumes with such vigour and delight are “unreadable nonsense” (67).

Unlike Obinze, Emenike’s interest in life abroad is not limited to America. While Obinze had only ever wanted to go to America – since, for him, abroad “has always been America, only America” (232) – Emenike displays an unrestrained eagerness for life abroad in general. His desire to discover life beyond the borders of Nigeria is exhibited by his behaviour towards those who have spent a significant time in a foreign country: “He was awed by people who went abroad. After Kayode [Obinze’s friend] came back from Switzerland with his parents, Emenike had bent down to caress Kayode’s shoes, saying ‘I want to touch them because they have touched snow’” (65). Thus, both Obinze and Emenike are depicted as having a romanticised view of life abroad.

It is interesting to note that contrary to the actions and attitudes exhibited by the male characters (Obinze and Emenike), the female characters (Ifemelu, Ginika, Ifemelu’s Aunty Uju and Obinze’s mother) do not appear to be interested in life beyond the borders of Nigeria. Both Aunty Uju and Obinze’s mother avoid emigration, consciously choosing to stay in Nigeria, despite the obvious challenges they face on a daily basis. Eventually, Aunty Uju has to resort to emigration, since her only hope for economic survival – after the death of The General – is to flee the country of her birth. My view – that the novel’s female characters are less inclined to romanticise life abroad – is further supported by Ginika’s response to the sudden news that she will be emigrating with her family to America: “Ginika complained and cried, painting images of a sad, friendless life in a strange America” (65). Rather than romanticising America by imagining it as a place bursting with endless possibilities and opportunities, Ginika takes on a pragmatic approach, aligning herself with a more realistic

view of what life, as an ‘outsider’, would be like in a foreign country. Similarly, as Ifemelu’s impending departure looms over her, she admits to herself that she feels “flaccid and afraid” (100) at the thought of having to leave her home country. Furthermore, moments before she is about to start her new life overseas, Ifemelu expresses doubts over whether or not she is doing the right thing, telling Obinze that perhaps she should “stay” (100) and finish her degree in Nigeria. While Obinze’s plan to live and work in America is one that has been “nurtured and nursed over many years” (232), Ifemelu only begins “to dream” (99) of a new life abroad when the possibility of studying in America evolves from a “formless idea” (99) into a concrete reality. It is also worth noting that it is only because of Obinze’s encouragement, insistence and enthusiasm that Ifemelu takes the necessary steps in applying for a scholarship to continue her studies in America.

Based on what has been discussed above, it remains deeply ironic that – although he is the one to exhibit a keen desire to pursue a life in America – Obinze is repeatedly denied entry into the United States, while Ifemelu is easily afforded the opportunity to study abroad (Princeton University). As a feminist writer, Adichie evidently chooses to invest her female protagonist, Ifemelu, with a more in-depth reflection and focus (as compared with her representation of Obinze). In doing so, Adichie “reverse[s] the traditional migrant narrative where the aspiring male travels to the metropole, leaving his hopeful girlfriend in Africa” (Ndigirigi 2017: 199). Instead, the novel portrays an “aspiring” (199) female character who leaves her boyfriend in Nigeria to pursue an opportunity to study in the United States. The novel proceeds to chart Ifemelu’s experiences as she attempts to navigate the challenges associated with emigration. As will become apparent in the chapter to follow, Adichie has chosen to dedicate a larger narrative space to developing Ifemelu’s character, and consequently there is more reference to the ways in which the female protagonist learns to cope with the challenges associated with border crossing than there is to Obinze’s coping strategies.

Chapter Three

Dislocation *beyond* the Boundaries of the Homeland

In the previous chapter I focused my attention on the more unconventional understanding of dislocation, and, in doing so, I considered the feeling of being emotionally “homeless” in one’s own country. More specifically, I discussed the ways in which the male and female protagonists are shown to feel uneasy and destabilised in their home country (Nigeria) as a result of neo-colonial ills (post-independent disillusionment). I am now going to turn my attention towards the more common understanding of dislocation by analysing the literary representations of actual migration to another country, as well as the related emotional states of fragmentation and alienation.

Whether people cross borders because of extreme hardships (violence, persecution, poverty, extreme climate conditions), or because of lack of economic opportunity in the home country, migration is always disruptive and can result in a profound sense of loss and estrangement. Critics Tzipi Weiss and Roni Berger (2008) elaborate on the emotional challenges associated with migration, suggesting that such a physical uprooting “involves multiple losses of familiarity with physical and cultural environment, economic and social status and resources, language and identity, as well as a sense of community” (93). The migrant experience is thus always “highly stressful and potentially traumatic” (93), both for those who choose to leave their home country in pursuit of better life opportunities abroad, as well as for those who are forced to migrate due to social violence and extremely poor living conditions in the original homeland. This is not to say that the trauma occurring as a result of border crossing in both situations mentioned above is experienced to an equal degree of severity; rather, what is suggested is that leaving one’s original homeland can cause significant distress even in instances where the migrant has chosen to leave or where conditions in the homeland are not particularly life-threatening.

Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) deals with the kind of emigration that occurs as a result of profound emotional and social dislocation in the homeland. As I outlined in *Chapter One* – where I discussed the authoritarian atmosphere of post-independent Nigeria at some length – the main protagonists experience significant emotional upheaval prior to their actual

migration as a result of the severe erosion of human rights and endemic corruption, both of which have led to the collapse of various institutions. As educated young adults who have a broad understanding of the social and political situation in Nigeria, Ifemelu and Obinze find the authoritarian atmosphere in their homeland intolerable, and are therefore incapable of finding contentment and expressing themselves creatively in both their private and professional lives.

In an interview with National Public Radio, Adichie explains that part of her intention in writing *Americanah* (2013) was to shed light on “a different kind of immigration”, one that she felt her readers were not particularly familiar with:

I think the immigration story that we are very familiar with, when it concerns Africa, is the story of [...] the person who's fleeing war or poverty, and I wanted to write about a different kind of immigration, which is the kind that I'm familiar with, which is of middle-class people who are not fleeing burned villages, and who [...] had ostensibly privileged lives, but who are seeking what I like to think of as choice — who want more. (2013: n.p)

The migrant protagonists in *Americanah* (2013) both leave Nigeria in search of “choice and certainty” (276), thus reflecting Adichie’s decision to represent the African immigrant story as one that does not necessarily involve the “fleeing [of] war or poverty”. Although neither Ifemelu nor Obinze was suffering materially in Nigeria, they both felt suffocated spiritually and emotionally by the lack of meaningful life choices. I would go so far as to argue that neither of them felt that they had a choice but leave Nigeria, since they both found it morally unconscionable to live in an utterly corrupt society.

In writing about ‘a different kind of immigration’, Adichie sheds light on the migrant experience of those individuals who might have, in the past, received limited attention. As Adichie has alluded to in the above quotation, much of the focus on migration – both in literature and in the media – is directed towards the experiences of those who are forced to flee their home country due to war or poverty, while considerably less focus is directed towards the experiences of middle-class people who are “mired in dissatisfaction” (277), and who leave their home country in search of stability and better professional opportunities. In light of this, what follows is an analysis of the literary representations of geographical uprootedness from the perspective of two migrant protagonists “who are not fleeing burned

villages” (Adichie 2013: n.p), but who are stifled in both their professional and creative capacities by military dictatorship in Nigeria.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the various coping strategies for overcoming the traumas of geographical uprootedness. While in the previous chapter I focused on emotional dislocation within the boundaries of the homeland (Nigeria) as a consequence of post-independent disillusionment, I will now focus on physical dislocation beyond the boundaries of the homeland as a consequence of emigration. Adichie moves her migrant protagonists from the “periphery” (Nigeria) to the political and economic centre (the United States of America and the United Kingdom, respectively), where they are forced to contend, not only with feelings of disorientation and alienation, but also with “racial oppression” (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2017: 257) in both its covert and overt forms of expression. As mentioned in *Section 1.4* of this dissertation, my analysis of the literary representations of physical dislocation abroad will be divided into two sections as a way of differentiating between the two migrant protagonists’ diverse experiences of geographical uprootedness, as well as their emotional states of disorientation and alienation.

Weiss and Berger (2008) offer a useful starting point for my discussion on coping strategies and resilience as applied to the novel’s migrant protagonist. As the critics suggest, “immigrants face the challenges of managing emotional distress as well as coping with the threats to their fundamental beliefs about their identity and their place in the world” (96). Subsequent to emigrating to their respective host countries, Ifemelu and Obinze both exhibit feelings of profound alienation and fragmentation, and encounter “a new reality of their *blackness* that splinters their identity” (Sackeyfio 2017: 213; original emphasis). Interestingly; however, the two migrant protagonists each appears to respond differently to their own uprootedness, with one (Ifemelu) who is somewhat successful in managing emotional distress, and another (Obinze) who fails to cope with border crossing and the emotional consequences thereof. As indicated in *Section 1.4*, I will be drawing on psychological approaches to resilience to guide my discussion on the various coping strategies used by the novel’s main protagonists in overcoming the challenges associated with migration.³¹

³¹ See page twelve for a more detailed discussion on psychological coping.

3.1. Rootlessness and Resilience: Perspectives on Ifemelu’s Legal Emigration to America

Ifemelu emigrates to the United States of America with a sense of hope, only to discover that she has escaped military dictatorship in Nigeria just to arrive in a country where she is treated as an “other” (Sackeyfio 2017: 215). It is worth noting that Ifemelu’s legal status does provide her with certain privileges, as she does not actually have to endure the worst of what other (illegal) emigrants, such as Obinze, have to endure. However, in spite of the fact that Ifemelu is a legal emigrant who enters the United States on a university scholarship, she too is persecuted based on race. Many novelists and academics have made it particularly clear that racial discrimination continues to be a major issue in American society. For instance, Nigerian writer and philosopher, Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2003) – whose work is largely influenced by his personal experiences – describes the “situation of being ‘black’ in the United States [as] an unwarranted and unbearable burden” (35).³² Alluding to the pervasive inequality and injustice of white-dominated societies (such as the United States), Ifemelu remarks: “There’s a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top [...] and American Black is always on the bottom” (2013: 184). Although “the laws may have changed” (2003: 45), Táíwò posits that the mind-sets that oppress and disadvantage black people persist (45).

Therefore, given the enduring prejudicial belief system that serves to sustain racial ordering of the kind described by Ifemelu above, Black Americans and emigrants alike are “perceived to be out of place in many areas of American life” (2003: 45; original emphasis). This is clearly illustrated in the novel, as Ifemelu is made to feel like a complete stranger in both her public and private engagements. Not only are black African emigrants – like Ifemelu – treated as “permanent strangers” (45), they also face devastating threats to their identity and sense of self upon their arrival to a “*raced*” America (43; original emphasis). Describing the “singular transformation” (42) that almost all African emigrants are forced to endure, Táíwò refers to his own personal experience as follows: “as soon as I entered the United States, my otherwise

³² The views expressed by Táíwò (2003) regarding the perpetuation of racism in the United States are still very relevant today. Speaking in response to George Floyd’s murder, Trevor Noah recently stated on *The Daily Show* that, “black people in America are still facing the battle against racism” (YouTube 2020). Shortly after Noah’s public statement regarding the current reality of racism in America, Kenyan journalist, Larry Madowo, wrote in an article for BBC News that black people in America have to contend “with a system that constantly alienates, erases and punishes them” (BBC News 2020). Therefore, Adichie’s novel, with its focus on the African migrant experience in the United States, is still relevant today. I would even go as far as to suggest that the novel is even more relevant today than it was in 2013 when it was published because racial and immigration prejudices have been aggravated in recent years.

complex, multidimensional, and rich human identity became completely reduced to a simple, one-dimensional, and impoverished nonhuman identity” (42).

In a more recent study, Joe Feagin (2014) – who has written extensively on the topic of race and gender in the United States – draws attention to the enduring “relationship between being a black person or other person of color and being a target of serious racial discrimination” (143). Having conducted substantial research on the issue of racism in the United States, Feagin asserts that, “virtually all Americans of color continue to suffer significant discrimination” (143). Studies such as Feagin’s are particularly helpful in anchoring my analysis of the migrant protagonist’s experiences within a particular social context.

When Ifemelu first arrives in the United States, she is overcome by “a frisson of expectation, an eagerness to discover America” (106). However, the harsh reality of emigration soon prevails when Ifemelu is faced with joblessness and deprivation. She becomes increasingly anxious and dispirited, as her efforts at finding work under a false name are repeatedly unsuccessful. Given Ifemelu’s initial financial crisis and personal hardships, America as a place of financial opportunity and stability is severely challenged in the novel. Like many others in her position, she is seduced by the imagined promise of infinite economic possibilities in affluent countries abroad; yet in reality, the prospects of personal enrichment and professional growth are dim:

The careers services office, an airless space, piles of files sitting forlornly on desks was known to be full of counsellors who reviewed resumes and asked you to change the font or format and gave you dated contact information for people who never called you back. (201)

Ifemelu’s early experiences in America – particularly the difficulty she encounters trying to find employment and pay her bills – do not coincide with the idealistic expectations that she initially had of the country. The commercials on television “showed lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions” (113), yet Ifemelu lives on the brink of destitution while struggling with feelings of alienation and severe inner dislocation. This discrepancy, between the way Ifemelu envisioned life in America, and the actual reality of her position as an African immigrant living in unfamiliar territory, is severely disorientating and causes Ifemelu significant emotional distress.

As a foreigner living in America, Ifemelu reflects on “the liminal position of the migrant” (Nyman 2009: 23), as well as on her own personal feelings of dislocation and alienation that arise from occupying such a precarious position:

She was standing at the periphery of her own life, sharing a fridge and a toilet, a shallow intimacy, with people she did not know at all. People who lived in exclamation points [...] people who did not scrub in the shower; their shampoos and conditioners and gels were cluttered in the bathroom, but there was not a single sponge, and this, the absence of a sponge, made them seem unreachably alien to her. (128)

Not only is Ifemelu physically removed from her original homeland; she is also culturally and linguistically alienated from the country to which she has emigrated. Ifemelu’s roommates – with whom she shares a common living space and “a *shallow* intimacy” (128; emphasis added) – are unknown to her in the sense that they behave in ways that are unfamiliar and strange to her. Even ordinary household objects (or the lack thereof) and small daily habits that carry little significance on their own have become indicative of the cultural “boundaries” (Steiner 2009: 12) that exist between them. Even as they share “a shallow intimacy” (2013: 128), neither Ifemelu nor her roommates engage in “the kind of cultural translation” (Steiner 2009: 7) that would allow them to establish relationships built on mutual understanding and acceptance of difference.

The difficulty of translating across cultural differences imposes significant strain on Ifemelu’s romantic relationships as well. Given that there were always “slippery layers of meaning that eluded her” (131), Ifemelu comes to the realisation that she is in fact a stranger in her romantic relationships. In contrast to her past relationship with Obinze – “the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself” (6) – her more recent romantic relationships with Curt, and later with Blaine, are somewhat stilted by the constant need to translate across cultural and linguistic barriers. While reflecting on her position as a “cultural and linguistic ‘outsider’” (Rubenstein 2001: 66), Ifemelu realises that Curt “would, on some level, never be fully knowable to her” (207). She feels similarly out of place in her relationship with Blaine:

He [Blaine] expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate. With his close friends, she often felt vaguely lost [...] Surrounded by them, Blaine hummed with references unfamiliar to her, and he would seem far away, as though he belonged to them. (314)

Even something as normal and as seemingly insignificant as an element of one's body shape or physical appearance can be a marker of difference, and can come to acquire extraordinary proportions. As in some of Adichie's other fictional texts – for instance, the short stories 'Hair' (2007) and 'Imitation' (2009) – the topic of hair in *Americanah* (2013) is central in drawing attention to profound social issues and private concerns. After arriving in the United States, Ifemelu is made aware of the fact that her hair – having acquired highly politicised social value – has become a marker of her difference. This awareness makes her feel completely isolated and estranged. While in the process of preparing for a job interview, Ifemelu is advised by her career counsellor, Ruth, to “lose the braids and straighten [her] hair” (202), since in America, hair “matters” (202). Had Ifemelu stayed in Nigeria, her hair would not have been such an issue, but since immigrating to the United States, her hair has become a constant reminder of her position as an outsider. Ifemelu reluctantly heeds the advice of her counsellor and resorts to straightening her hair in an effort to become assimilated into the mainstream white culture. Through such scenes, Adichie provides a typical example of “racial microaggression” (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008: 329), a term used by researchers in the field of counselling psychology to “describe the brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental slights and indignities directed towards Black Americans, often automatically and unintentionally” (329). Given that racial microaggressions convey “a hidden demeaning message” (329), targeted individuals – for instance, Ifemelu – often have to engage in a process of “meaning making [which] usually involves interpreting the events in question, unmasking their hidden messages, and surmising the intention of the microaggressor” (Sue et al. 2008: 333). Research indicates that one of the most prominent hidden messages communicated through racial microaggression is the assumption that “white [cultural values and] standards of beauty are superior” (334-335). This is clearly demonstrated through the portrayal of Ifemelu, who, after arriving in the United States, is forced to “adopt white cultural values to ‘fit in’ and ‘be successful’” (334).

The novel offers a first-hand account of the social and political implications associated with “one's physical appearance (hair texture and style)” (Sue et al. 2008: 335). As Lauren Vedal (2013) has said, “whiteness functions as a set of assumptions about what is normal and good” (69). Therefore, in America Ifemelu's natural hair is considered “abnormal and strange” (Sue et al. 2008: 335), the underlying message being that, “conforming to White standards of beauty (i.e., relaxing or straightening one's natural hair) will result in more acceptance from White co-workers and/or friends” (335). It is evident, however, that acceptance into the

mainstream White culture involves a “level of self-sacrifice” (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008: 334), and is achieved at the expense of losing a part of oneself. Rose Sackeyfio (2017) – who draws on the work of W.E.B. DuBois in her analysis of the migrant characters’ experiences with “double consciousness” – suggests that, “African immigrants pay a price for assimilation through a devalued and eroded sense of identity” (226). By having her hair “relaxed” and “flat-ironed”, Ifemelu conforms to what her new society considers beautiful and professional, while in the process becoming detached and alienated from her own sense of self:

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. The verve was gone. *She did not recognise 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*, had made her feel a sense of loss. (203; emphases added)

The change that takes place in Ifemelu’s outward appearance – namely her “straight and sleek” (203) hairstyle – signifies a more profound change in her identity and sense of self. As she inspects her new hairstyle in front of the mirror, she discovers that “she did not recognise herself” (203). This scene – which succinctly captures the pain of being forced into a category of identification that one does not fully relate to – echoes Jackie Kay’s sentiment: “being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself” (Kay cited in Gagiano 2019: 279). In many ways, Ifemelu’s loss of identity upon having her hair straightened is allegorical of the “crisis of identity” (Quayson 2000: 145) that many West African (particularly Nigerian) immigrants go through when they first arrive in the United States and discover, for the first time, that they are black.³³

Olúfemi Táíwò (2003) – whose study I have referred to previously – provides a useful starting point for understanding the phenomenon of “becoming black” (43) in the United States. As a “recent [immigrant] from Africa” (43), Ifemelu inevitably has to endure “the experience of being *raced* on arriving in the United States” (43; original emphasis). Drawing on his own personal experiences as an African immigrant in America, Táíwò describes the “confining influence of race” (45) as follows: “to become ‘black’ in the United States is to enter a sphere where there is no differentiation, no distinction, and no variation. It is one under which you

³³ In an interview with Hope Reese (2018) for JStor Daily, Adichie explains that race did not form a major part of her identity growing up in Nigeria, and that it was only when she arrived in America that she “became black”.

are meant to live one way and one way only, regardless of what choices you wish to make” (42). This experience – of being forced into an “undifferentiated [and] unsubstantiated type” (48) – is traumatic and can result in feelings of severe inner dislocation and fragmentation. As a result of having to contend with “a new reality of her blackness” (Sackeyfio 2017: 213), Ifemelu develops a “split consciousness” (Quayson 2000: 145) as she begins to see herself “through the eyes of others” (Sackeyfio 2017: 224), as a stranger.

Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez (2017), who provides a more optimistic outlook on the interrelatedness of hair and self (247), suggests that Ifemelu’s eventual reconciliation with her natural hair and her rejection of “social expectations regarding appearance” (254) marks the beginning of her transition “from a position of [a] controlled submissive [subject] to that of [an] empowered social [agent]” (258). Thus, Ifemelu’s decision to embrace her natural hair and reject societal expectations can be read as an assertion of her individuality and as a positive step towards claiming a more empowered subject position. It is at this point in the novel – when she manages to overcome the painful (both in the literal and emotional sense) ordeal of straightening her hair – that Ifemelu discovers weblog writing as a means of coping with the challenges associated with migration (a point that I discuss in greater detail later on).

After a tumultuous few years, Ifemelu eventually begins to find emotional stability and, with the success of her new weblog, seems to slide into a life of relative ease. Suddenly, her life appears to have more purpose, but it is still not enough as she feels increasingly that she does not fully belong in America. This tension of “straddling words” (Boehmer 1995: 241) – a term which may be used to describe the precarious position of living in one place while being emotionally drawn to another – causes significant emotional distress in the lives of Adichie’s migrant characters. Ifemelu continues to feel out of place in her host country even as her “economic, educational, employment, medical, and personal safety conditions” (Weiss and Berger 2008: 93) continue to improve remarkably. In her particular case, “the achievements of [immigration] are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind” (Said 2000: 137). Outwardly, Ifemelu seems to lead a meaningful life as her blog attracts “thousands of unique visitor each month” (6) and earns her “good speaking fees” (6). Her “fellowship at Princeton and [her] relationship with Blaine” (6) – which, on the surface, appear to offer her emotional comfort and a sense of belonging – add to the impression that she has found meaning and purpose in her new life. However, contrary to how Ifemelu’s life may appear on the surface, her ruminations reveal that she is weighed down by the “cement in

her soul” (6). Drawing on the concept of ‘weight’ in reference to the novel, the “cement” in Ifemelu’s “soul” may be symbolic of the psychological burdens of living in a foreign place. While consciously reflecting on her painful feelings of loss and estrangement, Ifemelu becomes finally aware that she does not belong in America:

It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longing, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into piercing homesickness [...] Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. (6)

Maximillian Feldner (2019) – whose study I have referred to at some length in *Chapter One* – points out that, although Nigeria has its own array of challenges, the country “exerts an undeniable gravitational pull” (2) on Nigerian expatriates, as reflected in Nigerian literature (2). This is evidently the case for Ifemelu, as she considers Nigeria to be “the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out” (Adichie 2013: 6). Her ruminations suggest that while she is physically in America, she remains emotionally “rooted” in Nigeria. I am reminded here of a comment that Adichie made in the aforementioned interview with National Public Radio, where she spoke about her own feelings and attitudes about America as a place that she likes to “spend time in”, and about Nigeria as a place where she is “happiest”:

I consider myself a Nigerian — that's home, my sensibility is Nigerian. But I like America, and I like that I can spend time in America. But [...] I look at the world through Nigerian eyes, and I am happiest when I am in Nigeria [...] I don't think of myself as anything like a 'global citizen' or anything of the sort. I am just a Nigerian who's comfortable in other places. (NPR 2013)

Taking the above comment into account, some critics have argued that the character of “Ifemelu can be read as Adichie’s autobiographical representation” (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2017: 254). I am inclined to agree that the character of Ifemelu appears to have been influenced by Adichie’s own experiences of living abroad while being drawn back to the country of her birth (Nigeria).

From what has been discussed, it can be concluded that the migrant experience is “destructive, agonizing, and painful” (Moslund 2010: 3). Having gained insight into the

private hardships that arise as a result of geographical uprootedness, it is also necessary to discern in what ways migrants can overcome the challenges associated with border crossing. Therefore, in what follows, I will draw on the field of positive psychology in my analysis of the various ways in which Ifemelu attempts to cope with feelings of severe inner dislocation, alienation, and fragmentation.

Surviving “the real America”³⁴

The field of psychology has dedicated extensive research to the matter of coping with adversity, which can be defined as the process of “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the [emotional] resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman 1984: 141). Broadly speaking then, coping may “include anything that the person does or thinks, regardless of how well or badly it works” (1984: 142). With this in mind, psychologists have distinguished between adaptive and maladaptive coping styles. While adaptive coping strategies usually include “healthy psychological behaviours” (Govender et al. 2011: 413) that are effective in managing stressful situations, maladaptation is defined as “a condition in which [...] behaviour patterns are detrimental, counterproductive, or otherwise interfere with optimal functioning in various domains, such as successful interaction with the environment and effectual coping with the challenges and stresses of daily life” (American Psychological Association 2020: n.p).

Interestingly, the novel’s female protagonist – Ifemelu – appears to be particularly proactive in her response to her own personal experiences with geographical uprootedness, as well as the ensuing feelings of loss, alienation, and fragmentation. Subsequent to emigrating to the United States, Ifemelu suffers profound emotional distress as a result of being physically cut off from “the familiar landmarks that made her who she was” (Adichie 2013:111). I suggest that – in addition to having to cope with feelings of severe alienation that arise as a result of physical uprootedness – Ifemelu also has to contend with “a new reality of [her] *blackness*” (Sackeyfio 2017: 213; original emphasis), which, to borrow from Weiss and Berger (2008),

³⁴ This phrase, “the real America” (111) is borrowed from Adichie’s novel and refers to Ifemelu’s initial expectations of the country. She comes to associate “the real America” (111) with commercials on television, which portray “lives full of bliss” (113). However, contrary to her initial expectations of the country, “the real America” is in fact wholly unglamorous, and may even be construed as a place that is somewhat unwelcoming and intolerant of difference.

presents a major threat to her identity and sense of self. Without taking into account the oppressive structures of race in white-dominated societies like the United States, physical dislocation is disruptive and can result in feelings of profound inner fragmentation and disorientation. For Adichie's migrant characters though, "blackness remains a fundamental factor in shaping their immigrant experience" (Halter & Johnson 2014: 21). Therefore, coupled with having to cope with the emotional pain associated with geographical uprootedness, Ifemelu also has to contend with race as an unfamiliar and extremely uncomfortable category of identification that is forced on her upon resettlement.

While in my previous section I focused on physical dislocation and its emotional impact on the individual migrant, I now intend to identify and discuss the various coping strategies (adaptive and maladaptive) used by the female protagonist in her attempt to overcome adversity, and to reclaim her identity and sense of belonging in the world. From my own understanding, the relative success with which Ifemelu manages to adapt to her host country can be attributed to a multitude of adaptive coping strategies that all work together in building resilience: weblog writing, humour, and deliberate mind-shifts.

Faced with uncertainty and a profound sense of loss and estrangement, Ifemelu's initial response is to become "somebody else" (Adichie 2013: 8), both in the sense that she assumes a false identity as a route to economic survival, as well as in the sense that she actively engages in a "conscious *doubling* of her identity" (Sackeyfio 2017: 217; original emphasis). Ifemelu manages to acquire an American accent and "a pitch of voice and a way of being that [is] not hers" (Adichie 2013: 175). Her fake accent and affectation have – ironically – been interpreted by some critics as "a coping mechanism" (Sackeyfio 2017: 216). The words of Ifemelu's Aunt Uju: "you are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (Adichie 2013: 119), are called to mind when Ifemelu 'succumbs' to faking an American accent or when she changes her hairstyle in an effort to be accepted by her new adopted society.

After the painful ordeal of straightening her hair, Ifemelu finds "*HappilyKinkyNappy.com*" (209), an online "hair community" (209) that celebrates natural hair. She is comforted by the realisation that she is not alone in her experience, and through her connection with like-minded people, Ifemelu is able to re-build her relationship with her natural hair, and, by implication, to recover her lost sense of self. In complete contrast to the feelings of utter loss

and despair that Ifemelu first experiences after straightening her hair, she now feels “revived” (213) as she learns to “love” her hair again: “she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (213). Her engagement in this particular online hair community initiates a process of emotional healing and recovery, which calls to mind the importance “of social support in [mental and physical] health” (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker 2005: 577). The power of positive social relationships in overcoming significant emotional distress is thus alluded to through the character of Ifemelu, whose online engagement with other members of the hair community makes her feel “valued, accepted and understood” (APA Dictionary of Psychology: n.p). As will be discussed below, Ifemelu’s own weblog may also be interpreted as a form of social coping. As many psychologists, including Algorani and Gupta (2020), have pointed out, social coping has the potential to provide people with “emotional [and] instrumental support” (n.p).

Ifemelu’s decision to start her weblog is triggered by her correspondence with Wambui, to whom she writes “about things unsaid and unfinished” (295). Initially, writing to Wambui alone is enough to alleviate the unbearably heavy burden that is otherwise brought about by inhibiting painful emotions, and allows Ifemelu to manage her unresolved feelings. She becomes increasingly aware of the value of sharing and disclosing her feelings and emotions through writing, but later discovers that her private correspondence with Wambui “was not satisfying enough [and that she] longed for other listeners, and longed to hear the stories of others” (296). It is at this particular point in the novel that Ifemelu establishes her weblog – “*Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America*” (296)³⁵ – signalling the transition from writing as a private activity, to writing for a public audience. Since blogging is an inherently “social practice” (Petko et al. 2015: n.p), it provides Ifemelu with the kind of social support that she was missing in writing only to Wambui. It is the essential elements of “information sharing and social support” (2015: n.p), therefore, that set weblog writing apart from traditional pen-to-paper journaling. However, although “weblogs seem to provide effective support for writers to overcome stressful situations” (2015: n.p), the aspect of publicly sharing one’s inner thoughts and feelings also has potentially negative consequences. While weblog writing “opens up new possibilities for social support” (2015: n.p), it can also expose the writer to scathing and derogatory remarks.

³⁵ Ifemelu changes the title of her weblog later on in the novel to “*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*” (315).

By deciding to start a weblog, through which she publicly shares her personal thoughts and experiences, Ifemelu exposes herself to this possibility of vulnerability.

Ifemelu's weblog – through which she writes about her own personal feelings and experiences, thus initiating necessary discussions on gender, race, and the intolerable burden of “living black” (Táíwò 2003: 36) in America – provides a relevant framework for coping with profound emotional distress. Given that weblog writing has both positive and negative consequences, I consider it to be mainly adaptive, as well as occasionally problematic. The numerous benefits of writing on a social platform seem to outweigh the potential dangers of receiving demeaning comments and remarks. As an adaptive coping strategy, Ifemelu's weblog not only provides an outlet for expressing powerful emotions, but it lends itself to more complex emotional processes as well, such as the potential to re-frame negative experiences and to make sense of complex emotions. By “forming a narrative” (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker 2005: 577) in which she “[translates her] life story into a language that is both understandable and communicable” (577), Ifemelu is able to make sense of, and attach meaning to, her emotions. Through writing, Ifemelu re-frames her negative experiences so that they may become less threatening and painful. In other words, writing provides Ifemelu with an opportunity to re-interpret her experiences from a different perspective. The way in which Ifemelu depicts herself and the social situation in America suggests that she has chosen a new narrative in which she is no longer a helpless victim of migration, but rather an empowered and informed individual.

The idea that writing can provide a space in which re-framing might be possible calls to mind Aleksandra Bida's study – *Mapping Home in Contemporary Narratives* (2018) – in which the critic draws on Heidegger's notions of “dwelling” (14) to suggest that “home-making” (14) is an attitude or a mind-set that is rooted in *how* one lives, rather than *where* one lives. The critic argues for a shift in mind-set, whereby individuals re-think or ‘re-frame’ their understanding of ‘home’ and belonging in a more positive light. By re-framing her situation and changing the way in which she thinks about the space that she occupies, Ifemelu manages to overcome the emotional hardships of emigration.

The act of writing is in itself a cathartic experience – in that it serves as an outlet for painful emotions – and the content of Ifemelu's blog posts can be interpreted as adaptive coping. From a problem-focused approach to coping, Ifemelu's weblog functions as an avenue

through which she is able to “confront the problem causing the distress” (Algorani & Gupta 2020). As “a ‘leading blogger’ about race” (305), Ifemelu actively confronts various social and political issues that have proven to be particularly influential in shaping her experiences abroad. In a rather lengthy blog post, Ifemelu directly addresses the “American non-black” (325), thereby confronting those who are largely “responsible for or otherwise associated with the [negative] stressor” (APA Dictionary of Psychology: n.p).

In their study, “Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans” (2008), counselling psychologists, Sue, Capodilupo and Holder, argue “that [those] who understand the psychological impact and dynamics of racial microaggressions are better prepared to cope with dilemmas they must endure in their daily lives” (335). This may be applied to the character of Ifemelu, as she – a victim of numerous acts of racial microaggressions herself – endeavours to understand all there is to know about the dynamics of race in America by observing daily human interaction and behaviour between people of diverse backgrounds. Although Ifemelu is not an “American”, she nonetheless experiences the emotional pain of being forced into “an all-consuming identity” (Sackeyfio 2017: 224) that she does not fully relate to. Ifemelu documents her daily observations and personal experiences in her weblog, which serves not only as a creative outlet for expressing her inner feelings of alienation and disorientation, but also as a public platform through which she attempts to raise awareness and initiate necessary discussions on racism in America.

Therefore, part of the success with which Ifemelu manages to cope with emotional distress can be attributed to her forthright approach in writing about the “dynamics of racial microaggressions” (Sue, Capodilupo & Holder 2008: 335). In one of her blog posts, she writes that the more time one spends in America, the more one begins to understand the “ladder of racial hierarchy” (Adichie 2013: 184), suggesting that she has, to a certain degree, succeeded in managing and integrating daily threats to her identity and sense of belonging. By gaining insight into the dynamics of race in America, Ifemelu empowers herself with the ability to overcome feelings of inferiority and severe inner dislocation and fragmentation.

Ifemelu’s weblog – which has initially offered her some emotional support – eventually fosters a sense of hollowness and falseness in her. Researchers in the field of psychology have established that writing also “has the potential to disrupt people’s lives” (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker 2005: 581); therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that Ifemelu’s weblog has the

potential also to become maladaptive, eventually undermining her efforts at alleviating negative emotions. Initially, blogging does assist Ifemelu in easing her emotional pain; however, when her writing becomes motivated by the desire for a more financially stable life, it starts to become destructive and counterproductive for her. As she recalls: “the more she wrote, the less sure she become. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false” (5). Desperately trying “to be fresh and to impress” (5) her readers with new and interesting content, Ifemelu describes herself as “a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use” (5). It would seem that Ifemelu’s main motive for writing is no longer to seek emotional support and to make sense of her experiences (and of the larger social context in which she finds herself), but rather to keep her readers interested and engaged.

Apart from writing and web-blogging, another way in which Ifemelu is shown to cope with the challenges associated with emigration is through the use of humour. Researchers in the field of positive psychology have studied the role of humour “in coping with life stress and adversity” (Martin & Ford 2018: 26). Nicholar Kuiper (2012), for instance – whose study aims to distinguish between “facets of humour that might be viewed as positive strengths contributing to resiliency [and] facets of humour that are clearly negative and maladaptive” (480) – outlines four main styles of humour: “affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humour” (480). In the novel, Ifemelu is shown to make use of some of these types of humour, shifting between affiliative, self-enhancing, and aggressive humour. Occasionally, Ifemelu uses humour to amuse others in a light-hearted and non-offensive way, thereby demonstrating an affiliative humour style. While affiliative humour typically occurs in social interactions, and is therefore used to enhance social relationships, self-enhancing humour is a more private endeavour in which individuals attempt to “maintain a humorous perspective on life” (Kuiper 2012: 481) in spite of adverse life experiences. In this way, “humour may allow people to gain control by redefining the circumstances as less threatening” (Crawford & Caltabiano 2011: 238). At times, Ifemelu is shown to make light of extremely difficult situations through her playful tone. Self-enhancing humour does not necessarily involve joke-telling or laughter, but is rather reflected in the manner in which Ifemelu perceives her own position within society, as well as society as a whole. While Ifemelu is mostly critical of the society in which she lives, she occasionally expresses amusement at the sheer absurdity of racial dynamics in the United States.

Distinguishing between the different styles of humour, Kuiper (2012) indicates that not all humour is benign. Although Ifemelu does use humour in a light-hearted and non-offensive way, at times it can also be very incisive and, at times, even belligerent. Aggressive humour is, therefore, demonstrated in the novel through the deeply satirical tone in which Ifemelu exposes racial prejudice and inequality within society. She holds society as a whole up for ridicule in her depiction of the “American non-black” (325), who would rather make idle claims, such as: “I’m colour blind” (325) or “the only race is the human race” (326) than acknowledge the fact that racism is a painful reality for many people. By targeting a particular group of individuals, Ifemelu is condemning an entire social system that seems content on skirting around the topic of racism. While some researchers in the field of psychology have commented on the potential for “aggressive humour” (Martin & Ford 2018: 21) to assist in reducing “the feelings of distress that others cause” (27), Kuiper (2012) suggests that this particular style of humour can be maladaptive in that it has the potential to undermine “one’s social and interpersonal relationships” (481). When applied to Ifemelu, it would seem that aggressive humour – or humour in the form of satire – does seem to provide her with a degree of emotional respite, even if only temporarily.

By way of concluding this section, Ifemelu is shown to rely mostly on writing and humour as ways of coping with feelings of severe inner dislocation, alienation, and fragmentation. To a large extent, these two main coping strategies are effective in alleviating the emotional pain of emigration, and allow Ifemelu to confront significant threats to her identity and sense of belonging. While Ifemelu is mostly successful in overcoming adversity, her attitude and behaviour can occasionally be interpreted as maladaptive as well. I will now shift my focus towards Obinze’s experiences with emigration, and the ways in which he attempts to cope with the trauma of border crossing.

3.2. Rootlessness and Resilience: Perspectives on Obinze's Illegal

Emigration to Britain

Having noticed that Adichie has chosen to invest less narrative space to the development of Obinze's character profile, it is necessary to point out that my comments on Obinze's section will be correspondingly shorter. Nonetheless, the character of Obinze offers intriguing insights into the experiences of *illegal* emigrants abroad, and is thus particularly useful when compared to Ifemelu's experience as a *legal* emigrant in the United States. Obinze's inner feelings are informed largely by external factors beyond his immediate control and it is, therefore, necessary to gain insight into the social and political spaces to which Obinze emigrates. In order to anchor my discussion within a particular social and political context, I will briefly consider local British attitudes towards immigrants, and what these particular attitudes indicate about racial discrimination in the country more broadly.

In *Americanah* (2013), Britain in the 2000s is portrayed as a country that is not particularly "open and inclusive in its orientation toward cultural diversity" (Berry 2001: 619). The city of London is often described in the novel as a place that is "cold" (227) and "glum" (256), which implies that the society is openly hostile and unwelcoming towards immigrants. The reception of migrants in the country is not only skilfully represented in literary texts (such as Adichie's *Americanah*), but is also well supported by research and public polls that have been conducted on the topic. For instance, Lauren McLaren and Mark Johnson (2004), whose study examines local British attitudes towards immigration over an eight-year period (1995-2003), indicate that "Britain has seen a large increase in anti-immigration sentiment since 1995" (196). As the number of immigrants entering the United Kingdom increased drastically over the eight-year period, so the local British attitudes became more hostile and unwelcoming in their reception to foreigners entering the country. Thus, as the findings of McLaren and Johnson's study would suggest, there is a correlation between increasing intolerance and the "overall increase in [the] numbers of immigrants" (2004: 196). An earlier study by Shamit Saggat and Joanne Drea (2001) surveys previous research that has been conducted on local British attitudes towards foreign immigrants to show that the United Kingdom "possesses a significant proportion of people who express intolerant attitudes to migrants and ethnic minorities" (3). According to Saggat and Drea, disapproving attitudes

displayed specifically towards Black immigrants “would seem to suggest a degree of racial discrimination” (2001: 14).³⁶

Adichie’s depiction of the conspicuous and enduring nature of racism in England³⁷ is well supported in a current article by Gary Younge (2020), who states that racism “is neither fleeting nor indirect [and that] many non-white Britons have had a racial slur said to their face on several occasions” (2020). Through the character of Obinze, who is a victim of “overt acts of racial hatred and bigotry” (Sue et al. 2008: 331), Adichie shows that racism in the UK is an everyday “lived reality” (2020) for many black emigrants and Britons alike.³⁸ Not only is Obinze isolated and alienated in British society as a result of cultural and linguistic differences; he is driven even further “into marginalization” (Sackeyfio 2017: 222) by people’s attitudes towards him.

In the novel, weather is used as a literary trope through which the author makes implicit references to the crippling instability within Nigeria’s social, economic, and political systems, as well as to the migrant characters’ experiences with physical uprootedness abroad. In the previous chapter, I suggested that Adichie makes use of weather as a metaphor of political instability and social malaise in Nigeria. Interestingly, Adichie also offers detailed descriptions of the weather in London as means of alluding to Obinze’s related emotional state:

In London, the night came too soon, it hung in the morning air like a *threat*, and then in the afternoon a blue-grey dusk descended, and the Victorian buildings all wore a *mournful* air. In those first weeks, the cold startled Obinze with its *weightless menace*, drying his nostrils, *deepening his anxieties*. (227; emphases added)

Shrouded by a “mournful air” (277), the Victorian buildings seem to mirror Obinze’s inner misery, hopelessness and despair. The reference to “night” (277) as a dark and ominous force that “[hangs] in the morning air like a threat” (277) alludes to the hostile and unwelcoming atmosphere in England, as well as to the incessant worry and fear that living in London

³⁶ To add to this, findings of a recent poll indicate that in the United Kingdom, “people have consistently been more opposed to refugees and migrants who are non-white and more culturally distinct” (Dempster & Hargrave 2011: 11).

³⁷ Other novels also come to mind here. For instance, Caryl Phillips’ novel, *A Distant Shore* (2004), critically reflects on issues of immigration and racial discrimination in England. The novel’s opening line: “England has changed” (1), suggests that much of the racism in England is informed by a pervasive and overwhelming sense of anxiety, which the constant influx of immigrants produces in the local population. This is perhaps also congruent with the findings of McLaren and Johnson’s study outlined above.

³⁸ Obinze’s school friend, Emenike, becomes a British citizen, yet he too is a victim of racism.

illegally has engendered in Obinze. This foreboding image of darkness also serves to foreshadow the brutally swift termination of his stay in the UK by deportation.

As an *illegal* emigrant in England, Obinze reflects on the “liminal position of the migrant” (Nyman 2009: 23), as well as on the crippling sense of fear and uneasiness that is brought about by inhabiting such a severely unstable and vulnerable position:

[...] he lived in London indeed but *invisibly*, his existence like an erased pencil sketch; each time he saw a policeman, or anyone in a uniform, anyone with the faintest scent of authority, he would fight the urge to run. (257; original emphasis)

The image of invisibility alludes to the way in which Obinze experiences the emotional liminality. His position is such that he must reduce his entire existence to “an erased pencil sketch” (257) in order to avoid rejection and failure. Obinze’s only hope of surviving as an illegal emigrant in “the hostile environment of London” (Sackeyfio 2017: 111), is to lead a “false existence” (223) under another name: “That evening, as dusk fell, the sky muting to a pale violet, Obinze became Vincent” (2013: 250). This experience, of having to constantly navigate a divided identity, is emotionally disruptive and alludes to Obinze’s fragmented sense of self.

The emotional impact of illegal emigration on the psyche is aptly demonstrated by Obinze’s relationship to women. His sham marriage to Cleotilde and his sexual relationship with Tendai, an immigrant from Zimbabwe, are indicative – I would suggest – of his failure to establish meaningful connections with the people around him. The relationships that he forms with Cleotilde and Tendai are devoid of any true feelings: his relationship with Cleotilde is only useful to him as a means to obtain legal status in England, and his relationship with Tendai is only useful to him as a means to satisfy a sudden “sexual urge” (258). Having been rejected by Ifemelu, and subsequently having had to live with the constant fear of deportation in the UK, Obinze keeps Tendai and Cleotilde at an emotional distance. The way in which Obinze relates to women is indicative of the fact that he has become emotionally numbed and hardened by his experiences abroad. Although his inner emotional state is in part a response to Ifemelu’s rejection of him (and to the ease with which she attempts to resume their relationship later on), it may also be read as a consequence of illegal emigration. Obinze seems to embody the spiritual emptiness that this particular kind of mobility engenders in people.

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The character of Obinze is represented in the novel as a painfully dislocated and emotionally fragmented individual who adjusts to the new country with great difficulty. Given Obinze's illegal migrant status in England, one could possibly draw the conclusion that his maladaptive coping strategies are linked to the fact that the author has chosen to grant him fewer 'opportunities' of developing as a character. Therefore, in contrast to Ifemelu, whose trajectory is endowed with creative capacity and adaptive coping, Obinze has to endure the worst of emigration, to which he responds mostly in maladaptive ways. The difficulty with which Obinze attempts to adjust to his new adopted country also reflects something about British society. As mentioned previously, the general atmosphere towards immigrants in Britain is hostile and openly disapproving, perhaps even more so than the local attitudes in the United States.

Instead of grappling with the multitude of challenges that confront him as an illegal emigrant, Obinze turns to escapist solutions. Just as he once attempted to cope with his feelings of emotional dislocation in his home country (Nigeria) by imagining a future for himself abroad, he now similarly attempts to cope with his feelings of extreme alienation in England by escaping – once again – into the fantasised familiarity of American culture and literature. Obinze's idealised view of America is in stark contrast with Ifemelu's depiction of the country, suggesting that even had he emigrated to America – a country which he had always longed to be "a part of" (256) – he would not have found any comfort or resolve. Obinze not only escapes into fantasies of a life in America; he also escapes into shallow relationships that seem to hold little emotional value or meaning for him. As I have mentioned earlier, Tendai and Cleotilde are useful to Obinze insofar as satisfying his desire for physical intimacy and obtaining legal status is concerned. In addition to attempting to escape the challenges of illegal emigration by entering into an arranged marriage with Cleotilde, Obinze also employs escapist strategies through mere sexual contact with Tendai. His relationships with the two women, therefore, are a degradation of his humanity in that he treats them with a degree of indifference and disrespect. In many ways, his treatment of Tendai and Cleotilde – as having purely instrumental value to him – can be interpreted as a consequence of the way in which he himself has been treated, firstly by Ifemelu and, later on, by the British society to which he emigrates.

Given his illegal status in England and its severe emotional toll on his identity and sense of belonging, Obinze practises what appears to be a kind of ‘retrospective’ coping. Only once he will have returned ‘home’ and lived in Nigeria for some time will he begin to confront his bitter memories of his experiences in England. Upon his return to Nigeria, he writes to Ifemelu about his own emigration story, a positive step towards emotional healing and meaningful self-reflection:

He began to write to [Ifemelu] about his time in England, hoping she would reply and then later *looking forward to the writing itself*. He had never told himself his own story, never allowed himself to reflect on it, because he was too disoriented by his deportation and then by the suddenness of his new life in Lagos. (372; emphasis added)

Like Ifemelu, whose weblog provides a degree of emotional respite, Obinze is positively affected by the writing process, as it allows him to express his inner feelings by translating his experiences into a language that he can make sense of. While neither of the migrant protagonists is able to change their immediate situation (more exactly, people’s attitudes towards them), they are somewhat able to alleviate, through writing, the emotional pain associated with border crossing and, in the case of Ifemelu, through various other forms of positive coping.

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In support of my comparison between the two migrant protagonists, I have drawn on Sten Pultz Moslund’s *Migration Literature and Hybridity* (2010), in which the critic argues that, “the characters of migration literature invariably cope with migration in different ways” (3). Although the critic looks specifically at the work of Bharati Mukherjee, Jamal Mahjoub, and V.S. Naipaul, I have found that the argument put forth by Moslund may also be applied to Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), since the novel involves two migrant characters who each copes with the trauma associated with border crossing in significantly different ways.

While Ifemelu manages to build resilience by drawing on the adaptive aspects of humour and writing – which enables her to cope with alienating contexts in the host country – Obinze is not as successful and therefore, he struggles to cope with his migrant condition and to

establish a sense of belonging abroad. When compared to Obinze, Ifemelu is shown to be much more successful at coping with the various challenges associated with physical dislocation. This is not to say that Ifemelu offers a perfect example of adaptive coping; her behaviour can, at times, be interpreted as maladaptive as well. Generally speaking though, in the case of Ifemelu, “high levels of adaptive coping [appear] to act as a protective factor in the presence of maladaptive coping” (Thompson et al 2010: 463), and it is perhaps because of this that she manages to regain control of her identity and sense of belonging in the world. It must also be noted that Adichie has chosen to portray her female protagonist (Ifemelu) in a more favourable light – as better equipped to cope with adversity – and, in doing so, points to her position as a feminist writer.

Given that Adichie chooses to grant her female protagonist certain ‘advantages’, Ifemelu’s “liminal position” (Nyman 2009: 23) seems to be less severe when compared to the way in which Obinze experiences liminality. I would go so far as to suggest that Ifemelu’s “liminal position” (23), though painful and disruptive, provides an opportunity for self-reflection and for new ways of thinking and existing in the world. The kind of inward reflection that Ifemelu demonstrates while abroad is what prepares her to return to Nigeria as a resilient individual with a deeper awareness of herself and the complexities of the world around her.

Chapter Four

Homecoming: An ‘Unsettling’ Resettling

In the previous chapter I considered ways of searching for new rootedness amidst rootlessness. I will now focus my attention on the migrant protagonists’ experiences upon their return to Nigeria, in order to discuss what opportunities there are for Ifemelu and Obinze to reintegrate themselves into the society of their original homeland. As I have attempted to illustrate throughout my study, being ‘at home’ in one’s own country of birth is not always a given. Through my analysis of the novel’s literary representation of the returnee experience, I intend to show that a return to the original homeland – while entirely possible – may also be deeply unsettling.

Far from romanticising the experience of homecoming – as a heart-warming reunion and a simple solution to the migrant characters’ inner feelings of loss, alienation, and dislocation – Adichie seeks to foreground feelings of confusion and discomfort that are brought about by returning to a country that is both “familiar” and “strange” (Adichie 2013: 385). The return to the homeland, therefore, is not always an easy process, as is amply attested by the novel’s migrant protagonists, both of whom are initially shown to feel out of place upon their return to Nigeria. The physical return to their natal soil does not in itself offer the main characters a sense of stability and comfort, since, as Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (2016) point out, home is not necessarily “a welcoming place with which [returnees] can identify politically, ideologically, or socially” (8). As a result, Ifemelu and Obinze have actively to engage in a process of home-making in which they may once again learn to *feel* at ease in the spaces that they occupy, whether it be through relationships, through finding connections with the landscape/natural environment, or through a change in attitude that allows them to finally be at ‘home’ in Nigeria. As I have attempted to illustrate throughout this dissertation, ‘home’ is not necessarily linked to a particular geographical location, and does not necessarily invoke feelings of safety and comfort. Therefore, in much the same way that emigrants are forced to participate in a process of home-making abroad, returnees, too, are required to engage in a process of creating a new sense of ‘home’ within their ‘original’ homeland. This ‘home-making process’, which I will discuss in more detail in *Section 4.2*, has also been observed by literary critic, Julia Udofia (2016), who suggests that “returnees may have to negotiate [or re-

negotiate] home in the spaces in which they find themselves, as home is not one place in which people are rooted but each is a place of *construction*” (14; emphasis added).

The return-home process is complex, and has been studied by social scientists and literary critics alike. Researchers in the field of anthropology, as for instance, Anders Stefansson (2004), indicate that the return ‘home’ can be looked at from the perspective of those who return to an “original” (13) homeland (in which they were born and lived prior to emigration), as well as from the perspective of those who return to an “ancestral” land (13). In this regard, the return home can be studied from varying perspectives of different generations of migrants. Annie Gagiano (2019), for example, who refers to the autobiographical narratives of four female African writers, focuses on the return of those who come back temporarily to the country of their forebears. The critic suggests that “the ancestral land is no longer ‘home’” (286) for the four authors discussed by her, as each of them remains detached from their “lands of origin” (270), even as they come to acknowledge their connection to it. Whereas the writers discussed in Gagiano’s study eventually “return to their ‘Western’ countries of residence” (287), Adichie, in this novel, seems to have chosen a more permanent return for her migrant characters.

Given that migration “involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain” (Chambers 1994: 5), many literary critics have been inclined to suggest that such a return may not be possible. From this perspective, homecoming is impracticable, since culture, language, and identity are constantly changing, and, therefore, as Jopi Nyman (2009) has argued in reference to a novel by Caryl Phillips, “the place that one returns to is never the same as the one remembered” (37). Apart from literary critics, many social scientists have also engaged with the matter of return home by various emigrants from different countries. Laura Hammond (2004), for instance, offers a more optimistic and forward-looking approach to homecoming, suggesting that a return ‘home’ is in fact possible. The critic indicates that the movement back to one’s original homeland is “more a process of pragmatic homemaking than of return to something familiar” (42). Thus, Hammond’s study provides a future-orientated perspective that foregrounds return as a social and emotional process, “whereby new relationships between person/community and place [are] forged” (43). It is in this particular way, as the critic suggests, that returnees do not simply “*come* home; rather they [make] a new home that [holds] meaning for them” (51; original emphasis). From a literary perspective, many novelists have attempted to

represent a similar view: ‘home’ as a process of re-positioning oneself in relation to place, rather than as a fixed site to which one returns. For instance, Julia Udofia (2016) in reference to Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1970) suggests that the novel “deconstructs myths of natural belonging and shows that homes are constructed” (25). This particular observation might be applied to Adichie’s novel, in which Ifemelu, upon returning to a ‘strange’ Nigeria, attempts to create a new sense of ‘home’ through the pragmatic imagination.

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The remainder of this chapter will be divided into two sections:

- *4.1. Adichie’s Literary Representations of the Returnee Experience:* I will briefly outline the social and political context to which Ifemelu and Obinze return, and will then move on to a more detailed analysis of their actual experiences as returnees in Nigeria.
- *4.2. ‘Home-making’ at Home:* I will explore what opportunities there are for Adichie’s migrant protagonists to re-establish a sense of belonging in their ‘original’ homeland.

4.1. Adichie's Literary Representations of the Returnee Experience

In order better to understand the characters' experiences upon their return 'home' to Nigeria, it is first necessary to gain some insight into the social and political context to which they return. Having left military-ruled Nigeria in search of better living conditions and professional opportunities abroad, Ifemelu and Obinze now return to a country that is politically different from the one they had left behind. The death of General Sani Abacha in 1998 paved the way, so to speak, for the country's transition "from a military dictatorship into a democracy" (Feldner 2019: 5). Military rule was replaced by a democratically elected government in 1999, when Olusengu Obasabjo "was sworn in as the first civilian president of the Fourth Republic" (Falola and Heaton 2008: 235). Despite this promising new era, the democratic government did little to improve the everyday lives of its citizens. Thus, Ifemelu and Obinze return to a democratic country in which public services (electricity, running water and road maintenance) remain in a lamentable state, and in which widespread corruption continues to enrich "the elite class of comprador businessmen and government officials [...] at the expense of Nigeria's poor majority" (Falola & Heaton 2008: 237).

Apart from certain systemic shortcomings – frequent power outages, potholes, and corruption – other aspects of life have changed dramatically. Many familiar sites and situations (the urban landscape and the relationships between people) have, with the passing of time, become strange and unrecognisable to the returnees. Ifemelu and Obinze, too, have changed. They return to Nigeria with an expanded understanding of the world at large, as well as of the social and political situation in their home country. Having painfully acquired an understanding of how race and gender relations operate in other parts of the world, and having developed new perspectives on life more generally, Ifemelu and Obinze return to Nigeria as 'insiders/outsideers', an issue that Annie Gagiano (2018) has also observed in her study.³⁹ Ifemelu and Obinze return as 'ex-insiders' to Nigeria, the country in which they were born and grew up, yet they also return as 'outsiders' in the sense that they arrive 'home' with new perspectives and ideas about the world, ideas which might be considered foreign or strange by those who stayed behind. In addition to the difficulty of adjusting to the 'new' environment in which they find themselves upon their return 'home' to Nigeria, Ifemelu and Obinze also have to grapple with the tension that arises from simultaneously occupying an 'insider' and 'outsider' position. Ifemelu, in particular, is nostalgic for her own youth and returns with

³⁹ In her article, critic Gagiano (2018) has discussed this matter in relation to four other writers, namely, Maya Angelou (1986), Aminatta Forna (2002), Jackie Kay (2010), and Noo Saro-Wiwa (2012).

certain expectations of the country, yet the sarcasm implied in the ‘welcome’ back of the returnee is often in conflict with such expectations.⁴⁰ Commenting on the way in which returnees in general are treated upon their return to their ‘original’ homeland, Stefansson (2004) writes:

one of the most unexpected and disillusioning aspects of homecoming is the cool welcome, if not downright hostility, that the homecomers often receive from the population that stayed behind in the homeland. (15)

This statement is intriguingly echoed in Adichie’s novel, as Obinze and Ifemelu are frequently mocked upon their return to Nigeria. The local people are not very welcoming, displaying a degree of jealousy and resentment as expressed in the cynical tone of those who make comments about returnees. Speaking perhaps of a broader collective sentiment, Ifemelu’s friend states outright: “I don’t have energy for you returnees” (407). The same friend “teased [Ifemelu] often” (385), calling her an “Americanah” (385), an “unflattering Nigerian term for people who when back home did irritating Americanized things like carry water bottles and complain that their cooks couldn’t make Panini” (MacFarquhar: 2018). Obinze – a returnee himself – is also critical of people who have moved back to Nigeria after spending a significant amount of time abroad, as when he reflects on their facile optimism:

There was a manic optimism that he noticed in many of the people who had moved back from America in the past few years, a head-bobbing, ever-smiling, over-enthusiastic kind of manic optimism that bored him, because it was like a cartoon, without texture or depth. (371)

Imagining how “changed” Ifemelu would be by her experiences abroad, Obinze fears that she, too, will return with “a head-bobbing, ever-smiling, over-enthusiastic kind of manic optimism” (371), which he had come to dislike in people who returned ‘home’ from America. Obinze has already anticipated – before even being reunited with her – the possibility that Ifemelu has “become a person he would no longer recognize” (375), or worse, that she has adopted the same kind of superficial cheerfulness displayed by other returnees from America. Obinze’s own personal attitudes are representative of the preconceived notions that many local people have of returnees more generally.

⁴⁰ This is also seen in other literary works, such as in Caryl Phillips’s second novel, *A State of Independence* (1986), in which “Jackson Clayton’s patronizing view on the returning (im)migrants from Britain clashes with Bertram’s attempt to find hope in community, memory, and shared values” (Nyman 2009: 44).

In light of the local attitudes towards those who return after a lengthy time spent abroad, the significance of the novel's title becomes clear, as it reflects the mocking tone with which returnees are received upon their arrival back in Nigeria. The title also points to the difficulty with which homecomers adjust to the new circumstances in their 'home' country, as well as to the "unsettling consequences" (Stefansson 2004: 10) that return migration has on those who stayed behind. Therefore, not only do returnees have to grapple with the private challenges of adjusting to the changes that have taken place in the country, as well as within themselves, but they also have to contend with a collective sentiment that is not particularly welcoming or accepting.

Ifemelu and Obinze return to Nigeria from contrasting positions. Ifemelu returns to Nigeria as an official resident of the United States, who, in spite of her legal status, was still exposed to racial microaggression on a daily basis. However, through her resilience and capacity to reflect deeply on her daily existence in the United States, she was able to cope with insidious threats to her identity and sense of belonging. Given Ifemelu's legal status, as well as her emotional and creative capacity to rise above the psychological consequences of racial microaggression, I suggest that she returns from a position of strength and agency. In contrast to Ifemelu – who willingly returns to Nigeria – Obinze, an illegal emigrant who is exposed to major humiliation and deportation, returns from a position of severe vulnerability and extreme insecurity. Keeping in mind these contrasting positions from which each of the two migrant protagonists return 'home' – one from a position of strength and agency, the other from a position of vulnerability and insecurity – I will now move on to a more in-depth analysis of each of their experiences as returnees in Nigeria.

4.1.1. Returning from a Position of Inner Strength and Agency (Ifemelu)

The position from which Ifemelu returns to Nigeria is informed by her status as a legal resident of the United States, as well as by the relative success with which she managed to cope with her own uprootedness abroad. In addition to having navigated feelings of alienation and severe inner dislocation, Ifemelu also managed to rise above racial discrimination, all of which disrupted her sense of self and belonging. As I have discussed in the previous section of this chapter, Ifemelu is shown as having had the emotional and creative capacity to reclaim a more anchored and integrated sense of self, in spite of constant threats to identity and sense of belonging. As critic, H. Oby Okolocha (2016), has argued, Ifemelu manages to "recover

from the crisis of identity” (156) she endured in the United States. Owing to her reclamation of an identity that she feels is “honestly hers” (157), Ifemelu returns to Nigeria “not as a splintered immigrant but a fully realized Nigerian woman” (Sackeyfio 2017: 226). Having said this, the process of resettling in one’s ‘original’ homeland can be profoundly unsettling, even for those who – like Ifemelu – return from a position of strength and agency.

In spite of having established herself as a successful blogger in the United States, Ifemelu was weighed down by “[layers] of discontent” (7), which, together with a “piercing homesickness” (6), prompted her to return ‘home’ to Nigeria. Even while she was abroad, her mind was occupied with memories of her past with Obinze, and she began to imagine “other lives she could be living” (6) in Nigeria. Thus, after having lived in the United States for over thirteen years – during which time she managed to obtain financial stability, and to adjust to alienating contexts in the host country – Ifemelu finally decides to return ‘home’ to Nigeria. At first, Ifemelu’s return is characterised by disorientation, confusion and profound estrangement as she attempts to find her place amidst the chaos and disorder of everyday life in Nigeria. She gradually begins to find some degree of stability and normality as she adapts to the ‘new’ way of life in her home country. After working briefly as a features editor for *Zoe*, ““a leading women’s monthly magazine”” (391), Ifemelu starts a new weblog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* (418). All the while, Ifemelu catches “imagined glimpses of Obinze” (393): in traffic, in the office where she worked prior to starting her blog, at the bank; however, it is not until much later that they are reunited with one another. Although much has changed between them, they seem comfortable in the “strangeness of their intimacy” (430), and are able to reconnect with each other in ways that neither of them had been able to do with other partners. Much like the return itself, the reunion between Ifemelu and Obinze is not without its own challenges and complications. The “rhythmic joyfulness” (442) that characterised the onset of their reunion is followed shortly thereafter by a phase of painful estrangement, as Obinze is torn between his love for Ifemelu and his commitment as a husband and a father. Unlike Ifemelu, who is capable of making bold and independent decisions, Obinze is indecisive and is unable to fully commit to Ifemelu straight away. His initial indecision creates a disjunction in their relationship, which leads to a period of painful estrangement between them. In spite of this, Ifemelu manages independently to establish a sense of belonging in Nigeria.

The decision to give up financial security in the United States and return to the economic uncertainty of a developing country attests to Ifemelu's boldness, and further confirms her empowered position. I am inclined to suggest that, given the freedom of choice that her legal status had provided, and the relative success with which she managed to adjust to the extreme hardships (political, economic, social, private) of emigration, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria from a position of strength and agency. Having had the opportunity to reflect deeply on her experiences as an emigrant in a racialized America, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria comparatively unburdened by the emotional pain endured. The return home is not as simple as conventional wisdom would have it; quite often, as already shown in my dissertation, coming home can be as turbulent as leaving home. Although her return is unsettling, as it gives rise to a sense of disorientation and profound estrangement, Ifemelu appears to have the emotional capacity to cope well with the new environment of her 'original' homeland. The position from which she returns to Nigeria is, therefore, placed in stark contrast to Obinze's, as he arrives 'home' still traumatised by his experiences with illegal immigration to and deportation from the UK. Having considered the position from which Ifemelu returns 'home', I will now move on to a more in-depth analysis of her experiences as a returnee in Nigeria.

The Nigeria to which Ifemelu returns is significantly different from the country she left behind all those years ago, thus calling to mind Jopi Nyman's comment that "the place that one returns to is never the same as the one remembered" (2009: 39). While there were indeed positive developments that had taken place (especially with regards to the democratisation of the country) during her absence, Nigeria is also perceived as a 'strange' place in the sense that Ifemelu no longer recognises (or is able to connect with) those aspects of the country with which she was once so familiar. Almost every aspect of life – from the urban landscape and unbearable heat, to the cultural values and relationships between people – has become strange and unknown. Ifemelu, too, has changed. Much of her growth and development as a character occurs beyond the borders of her 'original' homeland, and thus, having been so immersed in and influenced by American culture, she returns to Nigeria a profoundly changed person. As Julia Udofia (2016) notes in her study on the difficulties of homecoming, "the possible comforts of being back home are challenged by changes in both the country of return and the migrants themselves" (13). It is precisely because of such changes that the return home is often experienced as "a complex process that challenges boundedness and fixity" (13-14). Thus, as a returnee, Ifemelu is made painfully aware of the changes that have taken place

within her country during her absence, as well as of the changes that have taken place within herself.

As a recent returnee to Nigeria, Ifemelu reflects on the difficulty of adjusting to the changed environment of her 'original' homeland:

[...] she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had [Nigeria] always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? When she left home, only the wealthy had mobile phones, all the numbers started with 090, and girls wanted to date 090 men. Now, her hair braider had a mobile phone, the plantain seller tending a blackened grill had a mobile phone. She had grown up knowing all the bus stops and the side streets, understanding the cryptic codes of conductors and the body language of street hawkers. Now, she struggled to grasp the unspoken. (385)

The pronounced emotional difficulty with which Ifemelu is shown to adapt to the immense changes in her homeland might be interpreted as an instance of "reverse culture shock" (Gaw 2000: 85), as the term has often been used, particularly by psychologists, to refer to the challenges associated with "re-adjusting to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural environment" (85). The utter confusion and bewilderment expressed by Ifemelu upon her arrival are, therefore, suggestive of the emotional hardships faced by many returnees, most of whom return after having been disconnected from the language and culture of their homeland for a significant length of time.

Having been "assaulted" (385), upon her arrival, by the unbearable heat and the frantic pace of everyday life in Nigeria, Ifemelu has "the dizzying sensation of falling" (385). Her "dizzying" arrival is perhaps suggestive of the chaos of ordinary life in Nigeria, as well as of her own feelings of profound disorientation and bewilderment as she returns to a country that is both "familiar" (385) and "strange" (385). Ifemelu is entirely lost and out of place amidst "the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars [...] and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadside like a taunt" (385). Those aspects of the country – frequent and long-lasting power outages, "roads infested with potholes" (386), the smell of "exhaust fumes and sweat" (386), and the "warm, humid air" (390) – that were all once familiar, have become completely foreign to her. Just as Ifemelu is no longer accustomed to the physical environment of the country, she is also culturally and linguistically alienated from the local community as a result of the difficulty she faces in attempting "to grasp the unspoken" (385). In depicting Ifemelu as an outsider in her own

home country, the novel questions the assumption that ‘home’ inevitably fosters a sense of comfort and stability.⁴¹

Not only has Nigeria changed, but Ifemelu, too, has changed. As I have already mentioned, much of her growth and development as a character occurs beyond the border of her ‘home’ country, and as such, she returns a “new person” (385), with a new understanding of herself, and of how race and gender operate in other parts of the world. Ifemelu’s position as an outsider is once again brought into clear view as she returns to Nigeria having reached a deeper level of self-awareness, and having painfully acquired new knowledge of how the world works. Ifemelu’s aesthetic views have also changed. It is only after she arrives in Nigeria that she becomes aware of how different she actually is from the person she used to be. In one particular scene, in which Ifemelu disagrees with her friend over the aesthetic appeal of her boss’s house, she realises that her “taste” (433) in things has changed: “she had once found houses like [her boss’s] beautiful. But here she was now, disliking it with the haughty confidence of a person who recognized kitsch” (393). Returning to Nigeria after having acquired new tastes and perspectives on life while abroad, Ifemelu occupies the precarious position of the returnee, who “is caught between the two cultures of host country and home country” (Gaw 2000: 86). Given how “changed” (433) she is, Ifemelu struggles to find common ground with old friends, whose perspectives on life – and, more specifically, on the aesthetic value of material objects – she was once inclined to share.

Struggling to adjust to the unfamiliar environment of her homeland and to re-establish meaningful connections with old friends, Ifemelu joins the “Nigerpolitan Club” (407), where she interacts with other returnees like herself. When among them, Ifemelu feels a sense of “familiarity” (408), as each of them has encountered similar experiences and can therefore, “reach [...] for the same references” (408). Ironically though, that which makes Ifemelu feel a comforting sense of familiarity among the other returnees is also what finally sets her apart from them. The shared references that unite them are also what invoke in Ifemelu a strong “urge to be contrarian” (409). It is here – in the company of others like her who have returned ‘home’ after having been exposed to new social and cultural influences in America – that Ifemelu begins to feel uneasy about the new person she has become:

⁴¹ The novel’s depiction of Ifemelu as an outsider in the country of her birth calls to mind Barbara Kingslover’s *Animal Dreams* (1991), in which the main protagonist is also “painfully estranged from the community in which she grew up” (Rubenstein 2001: 42).

An unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here, and she wished she were not. She wished, too, that she was not so interested in this new restaurant, did not perk up, imagining fresh green salads and steamed still-firm vegetables. She loved eating all the things she had missed while away [...] but she longed, also, for the other things she had become used to in America [...]. This was what she hoped she had not become but feared she had: a ‘they have the kinds of things we can eat’ kind of person. (409)

Ifemelu is able to look critically at herself and her own estranged way of thinking, as reflected back at her through the behaviour of other returnees. She recognises the undercurrent of “arrogance” (421) and superiority implicit in the attitudes – as, for example, regarding the mediocrity of the food and popular entertainment on offer in Nigeria – of Nigerian returnees in general, while acknowledging that she, too, has acquired a similar attitude. While this insight is deeply unsettling, it is also potentially constructive, in that it prompts Ifemelu to reassess her own way of thinking and thus, leads to an even deeper level of self-awareness. I suggest that this kind of self-reflection could perhaps facilitate rather than hinder the process of reintegrating herself into her ‘original’ homeland, an idea that I will explore in more detail in *Section 4.2*. After becoming aware of her own superciliousness, Ifemelu makes a conscious effort to “set herself apart” (409) from the other returnees, hoping that in doing so, she will “be less of the person she [fears] she had become” (409). After having had some time to reflect on her own personal experiences at the ‘Nigerpolitan Club’, Ifemelu writes in her new weblog – *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* – that “Nigeria is not a nation of sandwich-eating people [nor of] people with food allergies [or] picky eaters for whom food is about distinctions and separations” (421). This particular weblog entry, while indicative of Ifemelu’s condemnation of the condescending attitudes of returnees (including her own), also suggests that she has come to accept, and perhaps even embrace, the Nigerian “way of life” (421).⁴²

Finally, it is worth taking into consideration the long-anticipated reunion between Ifemelu and Obinze, particularly the impact that this extremely emotional event has on Ifemelu’s experiences upon her return. Although Obinze has a significant role to play in informing Ifemelu’s decision to return to Nigeria – as it is her memories of him that form part of what actually propels her homewards – it is not until much later that she finally decides to make

⁴² I will be speaking more about this in section 4.2 (*‘Home-making’ at ‘Home’*), when I consider what opportunities there are for Ifemelu and Obinze to reintegrate themselves into their ‘original’ homeland. I suggest that the kind of inward reflection displayed by Ifemelu is a necessary step in the process of reintegration.

contact with him. Seeing Obinze again for the first time in over ten years, Ifemelu realises that he is both “changed and unchanged” (426), both “familiar and unfamiliar” (438). What is ‘changed’ and ‘unfamiliar’ in Obinze makes Ifemelu feel extremely uneasy, as her idealised memories of an earlier time of their lives together are in sharp contrast with the man he has become. Notwithstanding her initial unease, the deep affinity between Ifemelu and Obinze, and the relative ease with which they manage to reconnect with each another makes Ifemelu feel “safe” (440) and “fully alive” (449).

Interestingly, as much as Ifemelu is drawn to Obinze and feels ‘fully alive’ when in his presence, she does not rely on him – at least, not to the extent that Obinze is shown to rely on the women in his life for emotional and financial support⁴³ – as a means of obtaining a sense of comfort and belonging as a returnee to a developing country. Thus, Adichie invests the character of Ifemelu with the potential to feel at ease in spite of various social challenges and disjunctions in her relationship with Obinze. Nonetheless, Ifemelu eventually manages to find herself in Nigeria: “she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being” (475). She does so, even while feeling estranged from Obinze, which undoubtedly affirms her self-reliance and emphasises the fact that she does not depend on him to make her feel at ‘home’ in Nigeria. Ifemelu’s return can, therefore, be read as a deeply private journey during which she attempts to reconnect with what she had left behind all those years ago, a point I discuss in more detail in section 4.2. *‘Home-making’ at ‘Home’*.

4.1.2. Returning from a Position of Vulnerability and Insecurity (Obinze)

While Ifemelu returns to Nigeria “as a relatively wealthy and successful ‘been-to’” (Cousins & Dodgson-Katiyo 2016: 7), Obinze is forcibly “removed” (Adichie 2013: 279) from England, where he spent most of his time “cleaning toilets” (236) and delivering kitchen appliances (251) under a false name. His deportation – which can be read as a public rejection of him – has devastating consequences on his own sense of pride and self-worth. Not only is Obinze publicly humiliated by the undignified manner in which he is forced to return to Nigeria, he is also privately burdened by an overwhelming sense of “failure” (234) for having “made nothing of himself” (234) during his time abroad. In contrast to Ifemelu, who *chooses*

⁴³ I will briefly expand on this point in *Sub-section 4.1.2* of this dissertation, where I focus on Obinze’s experiences as a returnee in Nigeria.

to return to Nigeria, Obinze is *forced* to return, and does so, therefore, from an extremely vulnerable and insecure position. As a deportee, Obinze's emotional state is further aggravated by the fact that he felt "raw, skinned, the outer layers of himself stripped off" (281). Adichie's description reinforces my interpretation of Obinze's position as being one of extreme vulnerability and insecurity. Without the emotional capacity to protect himself against the public embarrassment of his deportation, Obinze feels utterly exposed and defenceless. Moreover, his experiences as an illegal immigrant in Britain, more generally, have also eroded his dignity and sense of self-worth, to the point that he felt 'raw' and 'skinned'. In many ways, his deportation can be read as the culmination of years of rejection and emotional degradation.

I suggest that – given the undignified manner in which Obinze is "removed" (279) from Britain and subsequently forced to return to Nigeria, as well as the earlier difficulty with which he adjusts to his own uprootedness as an illegal immigrant abroad – Obinze struggles (significantly more so than Ifemelu) to cope with feelings of disorientation and estrangement upon his return to his 'original' homeland. Having relied predominantly on maladaptive coping strategies to ease the hardships of illegal emigration, Obinze failed to process his feelings and emotions in any meaningful or sustainable way, and, therefore, he did not manage to build the level of resilience necessary for him to reintegrate himself into the society of his 'original' homeland. This failure to build the level of resilience that would have sustained him during his journey back 'home' – coupled with the degrading manner in which Obinze was forced to return to Nigeria – is what informs his position of vulnerability and insecurity, and is what ultimately prevents him from establishing a meaningful sense of belonging in Nigeria.

The difficulties of "return migration" (Gmelch 1980: 136),⁴⁴ and the subsequent re-integration into his country of birth are made worse especially by Obinze's own unresolved emotional trauma. Not having had the same opportunities (as Ifemelu) to process his own precarious situation as an illegal immigrant in Britain, Obinze returns to Nigeria under the weight of his traumatic experiences abroad (372) and, therefore, appears to be emotionally unprepared to cope with the challenges associated with homecoming. Utterly disorientated, he continues to struggle with feelings of inner dislocation and fragmentation. This state of disorientation,

⁴⁴ The term, "return migration" is used here to refer to "the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle" (Gmelch 1980: 136).

together with his cripplingly humiliating “removal” (279) from England, which makes him feel completely worthless – as though he were “a thing without breath and mind ” (279) – is partly what informs the vulnerable and insecure position from which he returns to Nigeria.

Thus, Obinze returns to Nigeria “still reeling from what had happened to him in England, still insulated in layers of his own self pity” (23). Initially depicted as incapable of supporting himself, he spends his time escaping, once more, into books. It is finally his cousin, Nneoma, whose firm and direct manner prompts Obinze to stop “moping” (23), and to take control of his financial situation. With her help, Obinze is eventually offered a job as an evaluation consultant for an extremely wealthy and powerful man named Chief, a job which he immediately accepts out of desperation. Whether or not Obinze’s new position is ethical is left open-ended; however, his sudden shift from being “broke and squatting in his cousin’s flat [to having] millions of naira in his bank account” (459) does rouse suspicion in the reader. Shortly after his sudden rise in social status, Obinze meets Kosi, whom he later marries, and with whom he has a daughter. After settling for this marriage of convenience, Obinze is reunited with Ifemelu, who seems to revive in him the kind of meaningful connection that he had failed to find with others, including his wife (who, as he says, “did not share his interests” (459) and “did not know him at all” (458)).

Struggling to re-establish a sense of belonging in his home country, Obinze feels as though he is “an intruder in his new circle” (29). Adichie’s particular use of the word “intruder” (29) to refer to Obinze’s outsider position implies that not only does he feel like a stranger among his new Nigerian acquaintances, but he also feels as though he is unwelcome or unwanted by them. In addition to feeling entirely out of place in this new social network, Obinze feels like a stranger in his romantic relationship as well, acknowledging to himself that “he behaved like a foreign husband” (30) to his wife, Kosi. He does so, partly because of the fundamental differences that exist between them. Obinze recalls that “the questions he asked of life were entirely different from hers” (459), thus emphasising their divergent views on life in general. By representing Obinze in this way – as a painfully estranged figure who continues to feel a profound sense of unbelonging even after he has returned ‘home’ – Adichie outlines his position as a “double-outsider” (Dannenber 2008: 85). Not only was Obinze an outsider in the cold city of London, but he has also remained (for the most part) an outsider in Nigeria, the country of his birth.

Furthermore, Obinze is alienated from himself as well. Shortly after returning to Nigeria, he unwittingly launches himself into a ‘new life’ – that of an excessively wealthy businessman and husband to a woman who “did not know him at all” (458) – a life to which he cannot seem to relate in any meaningful way. He is severely “disorientated” (372), and not only by the “suddenness of his new life in Lagos” (372), but also by the kind of person his ‘new life’ expected of him to become:

This was what he now was, the kind of Nigerian expected to declare a lot of cash at the airport. It brought to him a disorienting strangeness, because 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)

The “hollow space” (27) that exists between Obinze and “the person he was supposed to be” (27) is suggestive of his dislocated and fragmented sense of self. The values that Obinze attempts to uphold are placed in direct contrast to the values of those with whom he is in business. It is, therefore, deeply ironic that Obinze, who values “honesty” (33) and who strives “to be truly honest” (33) himself, accepts a job that requires him to be dishonest, as his cousin, Nneoma, explains: “They call it a big-big name, evaluation consulting, but it is not difficult. You undervalue the properties and make sure it looks as if you are following due process” (26). Struggling to come to terms with the pace at which his life has changed, and to behave in accordance with the kind of person he is expected to be, Obinze looks to Kosi (his girlfriend at the time) to make him feel “reborn” (459) and empowered, as though “he owned his new life” (459). Even though Obinze did in fact come to associate Kosi’s scent with ‘home’, it was a superficial kind of home, as their relationship, being one of convenience, was devoid of any meaningful connection. Thus, the image of hollowness persists, morphing later on into an intolerable “lightness”:

[Obinze] was tired. It was not a physical fatigue – he went to the gym regularly and felt better that he has in years – but a draining lassitude that numbed the margins of his mind. He got up and went out to the veranda; the sudden hot air, the roar of his neighbour’s generator, the smell of diesel exhaust fumes brought a lightness to his head. Frantic winged insects flitted around the electric bulb. He felt, looking out at the muggy darkness father away, as if he could float, and all he needed to do was to let himself go. (35-36)

Although the idea of a “light” existence might seem desirable in that it implies an easy and carefree life, it is also associated with rootlessness and a lack of meaning and purpose. In this

particular instance in the novel, the reference to “lightness” (36) suggests that Obinze is spiritually and emotionally unfulfilled by his ‘new life’ in Nigeria. Feeling as though “he could float [and that] all he needed to do was to let himself go” (36), Obinze gestures towards his inner sense of emptiness and rootlessness. While on the surface, he seems to live an easy and carefree life, below the surface, his life lacks meaning and purpose and is devoid of any true feeling or emotional value. The emotional pain of enduring a rootless existence is underscored when Obinze recalls “a draining lassitude that numbed the margins of his mind” (35). It is rather paradoxical that a seemingly “easy” (27) and materially carefree life should be so intolerable. Thus, in spite of the fact that he is financially stable and safely married to Kosi, Obinze is deeply unhappy, and occasionally “overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free” (21); free of the gnawing unhappiness that exists deep within himself.

*

To summarise what has been discussed in *Section 4.1*, Adichie foregrounds the protagonists’ homecoming journey as a deeply unsettling experience, as both Ifemelu and Obinze are confronted with the public and private challenges of return migration. However, the author also invests her main characters with the potential to be ‘at home’ in a changed Nigeria, suggesting that a return home, while profoundly uncomfortable, is in fact possible. I will conclude my analysis of the migrant protagonists’ journey back to Nigeria with a discussion on the possibility of ‘home-making’ at home. Having observed the difficulty with which Ifemelu and Obinze return to their ‘original’ homeland, I will now consider what opportunities there are for these two protagonists to reintegrate themselves into the society of their ‘original’ homeland.

4.2. 'Home-making' at 'Home'⁴⁵

What follows is a discussion on home-making more generally. Without necessarily seeking to examine the possibility of home-making in reference to each of the two migrant protagonists separately, I intend to offer a broader understanding of the concept by drawing on specific instances in the novel. It must be noted, however, that Adichie has chosen to dedicate more narrative space to the character of Ifemelu. As a result, my analysis will reflect the author's choice in this regard, and will, therefore, dedicate more reflective space to the female character's capacity to reimagine a sense of belonging in Nigeria.

Adichie's fictional vision in *Americanah* (2013) – whether this is plausible or not – suggests that it is possible for migrants to return 'home' and to reintegrate themselves into the society of their 'original' homeland. With this in mind, the author invests her central protagonists – particularly Ifemelu – with the potential to feel at ease in the new Nigeria. Having said this, Adichie does not offer the return as a simple solution to the character's feelings of alienation, nor does she suggest that homecoming offers immediate comfort or automatic re-integration. Rather, the journey 'home' – which can be read as both a literal return to a physical location, as well as an on-going 'search' for a meaningful sense of belonging – demands that Ifemelu and Obinze become mindful of the way in which they think about the spaces that they occupy. Therefore, each is to reflect deeply on his or her own way of thinking about 'home' before either is to feel any meaningful sense of belonging in Nigeria. In this way, the novel constructs the return 'home' as a complex process of gradual integration, whereby the migrant protagonists slowly progress from being 'outsiders' who are painfully estranged from their homeland, to feeling a renewed sense of comfort and ease in Nigeria.

In many ways, the protagonists' 'search' for a more meaningful sense of home can be read as home-making in a more general sense, a topic that has attracted the attention of social scientists and literary critics alike. For instance, Aleksandra Bida – whose study, *Mapping Home in Contemporary Narratives* (2018), I have referred to in previous chapters – provides useful philosophical reflections on what it means to be at home in a place. The critic suggests that home is not necessarily associated with a particular geographical location or physical structure, but rather, that 'home' is a mind-set that is carefully cultivated through an on-going process of conscious reflection and mindful living. Therefore, according to Bida, feeling truly

⁴⁵ The title of this section draws on Aleksandra Bida's *Mapping Home in Contemporary Narratives* (2018).

at home or at ease in a place has less to do with one's physical location, and more to do with one's ability to cultivate the right attitude towards that particular structure/locality.

Similarly, Laura Hammond (2004), who explores the topic of 'home-making' from an anthropological perspective – more specifically, with reference to the return home journey of refugees and migrants – foregrounds the emotional processes that are involved in constructing a new sense of home. 'Homemaking', as Hammond describes it in her study, is not so much about the actual task of building a physical structure as it is about the meaning that is derived through this process. The critic has observed that while the physicality of 'home' itself does not hold much emotional value for returnees, one's inner emotional process of relating to a place is what enables a meaningful sense of connectedness and belonging.

Therefore, much like Bida, Hammond emphasises the value of paying attention to *how* one lives, as opposed to *where* one lives. The critic observes that "through daily practice [returnees] have come to invest their environment with meaning, constructing a new home [both physically and emotionally]" (54) in their original homeland. Hammond's conceptualisation of 'home-making' as a process through which people ascribe meaning and emotional value to their lives and to the spaces they occupy, bears some resemblance to the views raised in Bida's study. What Bida and Hammond both seem to be suggesting is that one does not automatically feel a sense of belonging by simply inhabiting a physical space, but rather, that feeling at home in a place is carefully and purposefully cultivated through an on-going process of conscious reflection and mindful living.

As I have mentioned previously, the novel presents the return home as a *gradual* process of reintegration, whereby the migrant protagonists move from a state of disconnection, to a state of ease and meaningful connection. Initially, Ifemelu finds little comfort at 'home' in Nigeria, "even after a rather high level of nostalgia and homesickness motivated [her] to return" (Bida 2018: 55). In spite of the numerous challenges she faced all those years ago as a young university student living in the midst of Nigeria's on-going political turmoil, Ifemelu longs to reconnect with an earlier stage of her life.⁴⁶ However, she soon discovers that the home of her youth, as she remembers it all those years ago, no longer exists. Therefore, in much the same way that Roberta Rubenstein (2001) has argued in reference to other literary texts, Ifemelu

⁴⁶ Given that Ifemelu chooses to return to a country in which she previously felt utterly disorientated, attests to the fact that one is capable of feeling at 'home' even in the most uncomfortable of places.

will never be able to return to “the home of [her] childhood” (18). While visiting old friends for the first time in over a decade, Ifemelu experiences a “strained nostalgia” (Adichie 2013: 398), as she “[struggles] to find, in [the] adult women, some remnants from her past that were often no longer there” (398). As Stefansson (2004) points out, “the illusory dream among diasporic peoples to return to a place and a community frozen in time” (11) has led some scholars to believe that homecoming is an “impossible project” (11). While Ifemelu may initially be included among those who wish ‘to return to a place and a community frozen in time’ – as she yearns for an earlier time of her life, and expects to find in her grown-up friends some traces of her past – Adichie does not seem to suggest that a return home is that impossible. The writer invests her female protagonist with the capacity to reflect deeply on an earlier time of her life, while simultaneously choosing to construct a new sense of ‘home’ within the ‘old’ home country.

To return to the scene at the Nigerpolitan Club meeting, where Ifemelu mingles with other permanent returnees to Nigeria, I suggest that it is at this particular point in the novel that Ifemelu begins consciously to reflect on her own way of understanding ‘home’, thus illustrating the process of ‘home-making’ that Bida (2018) refers to in her study. Adichie describes Ifemelu’s revulsion at the way in which returnees constantly complain about the country, and, in doing so, reveals that she too has adopted a similar attitude. Although Ifemelu is not in denial of the many shortcomings in the country, she does not wish constantly to complain and live in endless resentment and dissatisfaction, as many others are shown to do. Her views in this regard are expressed in one of her blog posts later on in the novel:

Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been indisputably itself, but you would not know this at the meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos had ever been close to being like New York [...] Nigeria is not a nation of people with food allergies, not a nation of picky eaters for whom food is about distinctions and separations. It is a nation of people who eat beef and chicken and cow skin and intestines and dried fish in a single bowl of soup, and it is called assorted, and so get over yourselves and realize that the way of life here is just that, assorted. (421)

This particular weblog entry – in which Ifemelu takes a firm stance against stereotypical attitudes towards her home-country as expressed by many fellow returnees, and in which she embraces the Nigerian “way of life” – represents a significant turning point in Ifemelu’s

homecoming journey, as she begins to cultivate a more forgiving and tolerant attitude by re-evaluating her own way of thinking about home. Therefore, the cynical tone with which Ifemelu wrote her earlier blog posts (in America) has since transformed into a more nuanced acceptance of what ‘home’ can be. Based on her deeper understanding of the challenges she had faced abroad – such as, severe alienation and emotional fragmentation – Ifemelu is now empowered with the capacity to choose what is meaningful to her in terms of her social and private relationships, as well as in terms of her local environment. While Ifemelu is not very interested in material welfare, Obinze’s mind is clouded by the pursuit of profit and wealth, and, therefore, he struggles to find a sense of purpose and meaning in the new Nigeria. Whereas Ifemelu is able to translate her initial distrust of the country through a change of attitude based on a profound analysis of her experiences in the United States, Obinze unreflectively only endures his bitter dissatisfaction, unable to articulate it.

Through the character of Ifemelu – who learns how to reintegrate into Nigeria, despite the obvious challenges that pervade the country – the novel seeks to suggest that one can feel at ease even in less comfortable and welcoming circumstances. The fact that Ifemelu is able to establish a meaningful sense of belonging in spite of the country’s severe shortcomings reinforces Bida’s understanding of ‘home-making’ as an attitude or a mind-set that allows one to be at home in many places – even in places that are unfamiliar and unsettling. Ifemelu returns to a ‘home’ that is both “familiar” and “strange” (385), thus echoing the views expressed in Bida’s study:

To understand home as inherently *unheimlich* means to wilfully expand the concept beyond associations with nostalgia or comfort and explore the multifaceted, dynamic concept as a framework for identity, belonging, and all manner of homely and unhomely, welcome and unwelcome, as well as familiar and strange elements. (2018: 61; original emphasis)

Here, Bida suggests that home is not necessarily a welcoming or comfortable place, and that by understanding and embracing the notion of ‘home’ in all its complexity (as both strange and familiar), one is able to feel at ease and ‘homed’. In the novel, Ifemelu is shown as having expanded her understanding of ‘home’ to include even those aspects that are ‘unhomely’, ‘unwelcome’ and ‘strange’. In this way, Ifemelu manages to feel increasingly at ease in Nigeria, and in spite of certain unwelcoming and unhomely aspects of the country. She is acutely aware of the country’s shortcomings (for instance, corruption, potholes, power

outages), as suggested by her new blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, in which she writes about “the waterlogged neighbourhood crammed with zinc houses, their roofs like squashed hats” (475). However, she is also sensitive to, and appreciative of, the positive aspects of the country, as for example, in her blog entry on a small and seemingly insignificant act of human kindness and generosity: “the gateman helping a hawker raise her tray to her head, an act so full of grace that she stood watching long after the hawker had walked away” (475).

The contrasting images of hope and despair depicted in Ifemelu’s blog posts serve to show that while she is acutely aware of the country’s failures, she is also attuned to the real potential of a shared humanity and a better future for all. Importantly, Ifemelu’s decision to return to Nigeria does not suggest that the country is suddenly a different place. Rather, Adichie’s female protagonist has learnt to live with uncertainty and imperfection, based on trust in the potential for a better future for the country and for herself personally. She is, therefore, prepared to accept the existing state of affairs in Nigeria, and imagines that she can contribute towards the betterment of society. The way in which Ifemelu is shown to approach her homecoming journey, towards the end of the novel, reflects a significant shift in attitude from years before when she was angry and resentful, and could not imagine a future for herself in Nigeria.

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While Ifemelu continues to involve herself with the difficult task of reflecting on and processing her own attitude and behaviour, as well as reflecting on broader issues of Nigerian society, Obinze seeks emotional escape through books and convenient relationships. Not only is Ifemelu deeply self-reflective, she is also acutely aware of the societal issues (social, political and economic) that surround her, both in Nigeria and in the United States.⁴⁷ Obinze, on the other hand, is engrossed in material pursuits and superficial relationships. It might be interesting to apply the Heideggerian concepts of “calculative” versus “meditative” thinking to the way in which Ifemelu and Obinze reflect on ‘home’ and homecoming. Bida (2018), drawing on Heidegger, distinguishes between these two divergent ways of thinking as follows:

⁴⁷ The societal issues that I refer to here are mostly to do with poverty and corruption in Nigeria, and with racism in the United States.

Calculative thinking nurtures a drift toward ease, profit, or trends and fosters a culture of disposable and replaceable connections and investments, while dwelling and *meditative* thinking support a means of mooring experience and integrating it in a more representative manner that speaks to the qualitative nature of an individual's lived experience. (17-18; emphases added)

In many ways, the character of Ifemelu embodies features of 'meditative thinking', as she is able to reflect on her own thinking processes in a sincere and meaningful way. Through her inner growth and change in attitude, Ifemelu acquires a more holistic understanding of 'home'. In stark contrast to Ifemelu, one might interpret the manner in which Obinze seeks comfort and ease in material welfare and in shallow relationships as an apt example of 'calculative thinking'. Therefore, unlike Ifemelu – whose 'meditative thinking' emphasises the quality of daily interaction and experience – Obinze's preoccupation with profit and material power prevents him from reflecting in ways that would allow him to feel truly at 'home' in Nigeria. As Bida (2018) would put it, "quantity, ease, and the commodification of everyday life can continue to supersede an examination of Being" (15).

However, this is not to say that the author does not also invest Obinze with the potential to reflect deeply. On the contrary, both characters are shown as having the capacity to feel at 'home' in Nigeria, albeit in different ways. While Ifemelu is resilient enough to be able to reassess her own way of relating to 'home', Obinze depends on Ifemelu to reach a similar level of self-reflection and critical awareness as she has. Unlike Ifemelu, who takes a firm stance against the arrogance of the other returnees at the Nigerpolitan Club, Obinze simply endures his unhappy marriage with Kosi and his discomfort among his wealthy friends. He is not able to re-establish a sense of belonging in Nigeria on his own, and needs Ifemelu as a wise guide to help him reconsider his thinking about 'home' as an on-going process of conscious reflection and mindful living. With the help of Ifemelu, Obinze learns how to maintain a balance between 'meditative and calculative thinking' and living.

In affirming Adichie's feminist values, the novel ends with Ifemelu generously helping Obinze find a renewed sense of belonging in Nigeria. What the author finally seems to suggest is that through Ifemelu, with whom he has a deeply authentic relationship, Obinze has a chance to pull himself out of his emotional morass. While some critics might interpret the ending as unrealistic or romanticised, I suggest that Adichie does not provide an ideal resolution to the characters' problematic trajectories, but rather, she offers glimpses of hope:

that it is possible to resume relationships with people, and even one's own country – against all odds.

Conclusions

As indicated in my introductory chapter, in this dissertation I have investigated alternative perspectives of ‘home’ and belonging, as represented through the portrayal of the migrant protagonists in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013). I started by situating my study within the larger framework of third generation Nigerian literature, the main focus of which is on issues of global mass movement and the emotional consequences thereof. It was noted that Adichie occupies a prominent position among other Nigerian writers of the third generation, including Sefi Atta, Chris Abani, and Ike Oguine. I suggested that Adichie’s novel, with its focus on physical and emotional displacement, is particularly relevant in today’s globalised world. In my analysis of the migrant’s journey from dislocation (*within* and *beyond* the boundaries of the homeland) to a new, reinvented understanding of ‘home’, I offered an examination of the literary representations of physical and psychological disruption, suggesting that dislocation is as much an emotional condition as it is a physical one, and that people are prone to feeling paradoxically ‘unhomed’ within their own ‘home’. Having taken a keen interest in Adichie’s dramatic representation of her protagonists’ challenges abroad, I found it necessary also to investigate the migrant characters’ resilience and ability to adopt successful coping strategies in order to re-establish a sense of belonging, both in their respective host countries abroad and at ‘home’ in Nigeria.

In *Chapter One*, I provided an overview of critical responses to Adichie’s oeuvre, highlighting that *Americanah* (2013) has received a great deal of critical attention for its depiction of the migrant experience, particularly with regard to cultural translation, alienation, and double-consciousness. I noticed that topics of race and identity have also been explored to a large extent, with critics paying particular attention to the ways in which Adichie’s migrant characters attempt to maintain aspects of their own identity and sense of belonging while grappling with hostility and racial prejudice in their adoptive host countries.

In this chapter, I also offered an introduction to the theoretical framework that underpinned my close-text analysis of the novel. Postcolonial literary studies, with its more recent focus on mass movement in the context of neo-liberalism, has proven to be an appropriate lens through which to conduct my study, which explores the individual and collective experiences of multi-directional movements and the emotional consequences thereof. I provided a theoretical

background to some of the main postcolonial concepts that informed my analysis of the novel; namely, home and migration, and dislocation and hybridity. Insights from various postcolonial literary critics who focus on migration, as for instance, Caren Kaplan (1996), Nikos Papastergiadis (2000), and Jopi Nyman (2009) – all of whom challenge traditional notions of home and belonging – were considered. My theoretical framework was also informed by research conducted in the field of Positive Psychology, with a special focus on resilience and coping with adversity. The work of Swati Mukherjee and Updesh Kumar (2017), for instance, helped situate my study within more recent psychological approaches to resilience. While conducting research into Adichie criticism, I noticed that not much emphasis has been placed on the psychological concept of resilience in relation to the novel's literary representation of migration and unbelonging. My original contribution combines elements drawn from the field of Positive Psychology and of postcolonial literary criticism to argue that the process of building resilience allows migrants to reformulate their understanding of 'home' and belonging in a more sustainable and meaningful way.

In *Chapter Two*, I delved into a close-text analysis of the literary representations of emotional dislocation *within* the boundaries of the original homeland. Guided by recent critical debates on 'home' and belonging, as well as by the social and political context in which the novel was written, I suggested that both Ifemelu and Obinze are estranged from their homeland as a consequence of post-independent disillusionment. A comprehensive examination of the historical events that led to the country's more recent political dispensation as a democratic nation deepened my understanding of the local environment and lent clarity to my close-text analysis of the novel's depiction of 'home' as a place that is fraught with tension and unease. I noted that the issues that continued to plague post-independent Nigeria – such as military dictatorship, political instability, rampant corruption, economic uncertainty, and social malaise – gave rise to the pervading atmosphere of disappointment and despair, as depicted in the novel. It was my contention that due to such inauspicious circumstances in the homeland, the main characters feel creatively and emotionally stifled and, therefore, cannot image a future for themselves in Nigeria.

In this chapter I also outlined the contrasting ways in which emotional dislocation – as a consequence of post-independent disenchantment – manifests itself in the lives of the two main protagonists. While Ifemelu responds by retracting inward and attempting to conceal her feelings of confusion and discomfort, Obinze's response is to look beyond the borders of

Nigeria for emotional security and comfort. Conventional understandings of ‘home’ as a place of guaranteed safety and security are highly problematic, particularly in today’s global age of migration. The novel’s migrant protagonists attest to this, as both Ifemelu and Obinze feel out of place in Nigeria and eventually leave their home country in search of improved professional opportunities abroad. This calls for a need to examine alternative perspectives of ‘home’ and belonging, as was discussed in detail in *Chapter Four*, when I examined the return-home process and the possibility of re-establishing a sense of belonging in one’s original home country.

In *Chapter Three*, I shifted my focus from dislocation in the homeland to dislocation abroad, offering a close-text analysis of the novel’s literary representations of the main protagonists’ physical uprootedness in America and England respectively. A major section of this chapter was dedicated to an examination of the experiences of actual emigration and the difficulty of adjusting to alienating contexts in the host country. Through an in-depth study of the novel, I observed that there is in fact a difference between the ways in which the female and male characters are shown to experience physical dislocation in their respective host countries. I suggested that this was due largely to the fact that Ifemelu is a *legal* immigrant in America, and Obinze is an *illegal* immigrant in England. While both characters experience a profound sense of loss and estrangement upon their arrival in their respective adoptive host countries, Ifemelu (given her legal status) is in a better position, when compared with Obinze, to cope with the harsh realities of emigration. I argued that Obinze’s status as an illegal immigrant in England has severe implications for his capacity to cope with the migrant condition. On the other hand, Ifemelu’s legal status in America, though emotionally painful and disruptive, creates opportunities for self-enrichment and empowerment, as double-consciousness helps her gain a broader understanding of herself and the world in which she lives.

Keeping in mind the specific contexts and conditions in which the migrant characters find themselves abroad, I also considered the ways in which they attempt to overcome the challenges of emigration. Drawing on psychological approaches to resilience and positive coping, I examined the extent to which the migrant characters are able to adapt to alienating contexts in the host country. With regards to the way in which Ifemelu attempts to cope with the migrant condition, I identified three adaptive coping strategies that all work together in building resilience namely, writing, humour, mind-shifts. By making use of these positive coping strategies, Ifemelu empowers herself to confront that which has served to marginalise

and oppress her. In contrast to Ifemelu, who manages (to a large extent) to overcome adverse experiences in America, Obinze is significantly less able to cope with the harsh reality of illegal emigration, and thus resorts to various forms of emotional escape.

Finally, in *Chapter Four* I traced the migrant characters' return to their original homeland, suggesting that homecoming is a deeply unsettling experience for each of the characters involved. In contrast to other literary studies, which have looked at the temporary return of migrants, my study focuses on return as a more *permanent* resettlement. My close-text analysis of the literary representations of the returnee experience was informed largely by the positions from which the two main characters return to the country of their birth. I suggested that while the female character returns from a position of inner strength and agency, the male character returns from a position of extreme vulnerability and insecurity. I drew on the insights gained in the previous chapter to indicate that the protagonists' experiences abroad shape their capacity to reintegrate themselves into the society of their original homeland upon their return to Nigeria.

I lastly considered the possibilities of 'home-making' upon a permanent return to one's original home country. Bida's (2019) study on what it means to be at 'home' in a place formed the basis of my argument regarding the potential for migrants to feel a sense of comfort and belonging even in highly unfavourable situations. I indicated that the return-home process, while profoundly unsettling, invites a new, reinvented perspective of 'home' – one that is not necessarily linked to a particular geographical location or physical structure, but that is rooted in pragmatic reflection and mindful living in a place. I suggested that while Ifemelu is able to reflect deeply on her understanding of 'home' and her position as a permanent returnee in a changed Nigeria, Obinze is less successful and relies heavily on Ifemelu to guide him towards a more reflective and conscious mode of living and engaging with 'home'. The novel ends on a decidedly feminist note, with the female character shown to be the more resilient, successful, and emotionally emancipated of the two protagonists.

In a broad sense, this study has sought to emphasise the emotional and creative capacity of migrants to overcome the challenges of emigration and to re-establish a sense of 'home' and belonging in the new spaces that they occupy. Against the backdrop of physical uprootedness and the related emotional states of alienation and fragmentation, I offered a more balanced reading of the emigrant experience by exploring various coping strategies that might support

migrants in building resilience and overcoming adversity. The psychological concept of resilience as applied to a selection of West African/South African postcolonial literary texts of emigration and return-home trajectories is under-researched, and would warrant further exploration in the future.

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