

“Or What Do You Think?”
: The “Chase” for Oneself in Chimamanda Ngozi
Adichie’s *Americanah*

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I. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work often casts light on various identity problems that contemporary women who immigrate to the United States from Africa confront. Being a Nigerian immigrant to the US, the writer is driven by the importance “to tell African stories” in her writing (Azodo 147). “The Things Around Your Neck” (2009) depicts struggles of a Nigerian woman in the US to live among American values and to maintain relationships with her home country changelessly, and another story, “The American Embassy” (2009), offers difficulties of a Nigerian woman exposed to risk from the Nigerian government to escape to the US through a scene of her unsuccessful visa interview. Adichie’s style of writings is often said to reflect the aesthetic of “Afropolitanism,” the contemporary African way of embracing their multinational identity. As one of her “Afropolitan” texts, *Americanah* (2014) also depicts the modern immigrants’ pursuit of their identity, especially Ifemelu, the protagonist, who departs from her own country and comfortable relationships to find herself in a foreign soil surrounded by the asymmetric power balances.

As part of the theme of pursuit for her identity, the meaning of the protagonist’s

name is sometimes questioned by the characters in the novel. The first time when Ifemelu is asked about her name is in the conversation with her boyfriend Obinze's mother in Nigeria, when she encounters the impossibility to explain her name:

"What a beautiful name you have. Ifemelunamma," she said.

Ifemelu stood tongue-tied for seconds. "Thank you, ma."

"Translate it," she said.

"Translate?"

"Yes, how would you translate your name? . . . Now translating your name from Igbo to English might be Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made, or what do you think?"

Ifemelu could not think. There was something about the woman that made her want to say intelligent things, but her mind was blank. (83)

Ifemelu is unable to come up with an adequate translation to answer Obinze's mother. In order to translate her name, she needs not only to apply the literal meaning from Igbo to English, but also to take into consideration the cultural background in which she has experienced as an Igbo person. Romanus Aboh points out that, in most African communities, "names are more than labels of identification; they provide us with historical and spiritual/religious, and significantly, ethnic accounts" (26). Because the name "Ifemelu" includes the context of Igbo language or culture and also her own stories in her life beyond the literal meaning such as "Made-in-Good-Times" or "Beautifully Made," she seems to fail to "translate" her name. In other words, Ifemelu is faced with the question of her identity. With her name which possesses untranslatability, Ifemelu continues to try to quest and realize her identity in the US,

the different country from her home.

However, it is not the ultimate goal of the novel whether she can completely satisfy her identity in the foreign country. The important point is, for one, that she acquires a way to pursue her identity on her own in America; writing blogs on what she has seen or felt through the American society and people,¹ whereas Obinze, her boyfriend in Nigeria, cannot obtain such a way to represent himself in his destination country, the UK. However, after all, because her writing in the US is restricted by the others, namely the readers with whom she can share her experience in public, she encounters the limit of the struggle of quest for her identity in asymmetric power balances in race, economy and gender, so that she bids farewells to the US. Returning to her home country, she finally restarts her quest for her self-fulfillment in the equal and safe relationship with Obinze.

Through the process of her pursuit for her identity, the novel seems to suggest one example of African immigrant's hybridity, or "Afropolitanism," resisting the imaginary character of an African woman in American society, even though it remains unsolved whether she attains her stable identity or give herself the answer to how to translate her name in the novel.

II. Asymmetric Relationships in America

"I'm chasing you" (72)—this is a phrase used by Obinze, Ifemelu's boyfriend in Nigeria, in expressing his love toward her. Although it is apparently mere romantic words from one ordinary boyfriend, his phrase and manner to "chase" her affect her

pursuit (or chase) for her identity. As it is narrated that “she . . . felt . . . what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size” (73), for Ifemelu, being chased by Obinze is an ideal form and foundation of her self-fulfillment, so that she can continue her safe and relieved quest for her identity. Later, Ifemelu moves to the US due to “Afropolitanism” as described below, where she struggles to chase her identity, but her efforts end up incomplete because American society demands her to adapt to itself, exercising hegemonic power on her; she is forced to “chase” a preferred image which American society retains. While Obinze’s attitude of chasing her creates mode of an equality in Nigeria, where the novel begins, that turns out to be difficult for her to gain with anybody in the US.

It is true that Ifemelu feels “self-affection” and has a possibility to safely chase her identity with Obinze in Nigeria; however, they both do not hope to stay in their home country, because they have their eyes for the world beyond Nigeria, especially toward the US. Their desire toward the foreign country is found in the scene where their classmates see off Ginika, one of their friends, to America:

“She’ll come back and be a serious Americanah like Bisi,” Ranyinud said. They roared with laughter, at that word “Americanah,” wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl from a short trip to America with odd affections, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke. (78)

The way they laugh at and insult Bisi as “Americanah” in fact implies their envy of her experience of staying in America, in other words, her embodiment of “Afropolitanism.”

Afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a way of being African in the world, which is one of the contemporary types of African identity. The term means the mobility and the flux that the presence of African is multinational/transnational, redefined in the twenty-first century as “what Africa is and what it means to be African for a hybridised, globalised, diasporic citizen of the world who maintains a connection with their African origin” (Knudsen and Rahbek 116).² The expression of “Americanah” refers to Bisi as a woman who once has accomplished Afropolitanism, in that she does not stay in Nigeria but visit the US, though she also does not settle there but comes back to her home country, pretending as she speaks American English, thereby making an appeal of her identity as not only a Nigerian but also an American; having Afropolitan identity indicates the freedom from the tie to her home country. This ideal of Afropolitanism is also seen in Ifemelu’s thought when she returns to her home country, “she felt suddenly, guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay” (481). As a result, this mode of transnational identity drives Ifemelu and Obinze in their high school days away from Nigeria. In spite of the affection between them, their longing for Afropolitanism, or a life in America, leads them to different paths, Ifemelu to the US and Obinze to the UK, where both of them will be unexpectedly confronted by the struggle to find their own identity in the new land.

Then, Ifemelu pursues higher education in the US, where her aunt Uju and her cousin Dike live, separating from Obinze. After her departure, Obinze also emigrates to England, giving up his initial plan of going to his favorite destination of the US, because of the September 11 terrorist attacks. At this stage, “I’m chasing you,”

Obinze's words, come to implicate that he is chasing Ifemelu, who has been to America, where he is eager to emigrate. That is, he is chasing Ifemelu and America in the first half of the novel. Being separated from each other and surrounded by the new circumstances in which their roles are defined not by their personalities but their superficial traits like their skin color, hair style and English accent, as Ava Laundry observes that "African immigrants must learn not only how to enter a new society but also how to enter a new society that has already systematically subordinated them" (135), their struggle to seek their identity or dignity in the foreign soil begins.

After moving to the US, unlike the previous environment as with Obinze's mother, where she is recognized her as an individual and allowed to have her own opinion about the meaning of her name in the equal relationships in Nigeria, Ifemelu in the US often finds herself in asymmetric power balances which work to fix her identity in the mold of an African woman having immigrated to America. In these asymmetric relationships, her name is interpreted and decorated with an arbitrary meaning from unappreciation by an American. When she introduces herself to Kimberly, who is looking for a babysitter, Ifemelu's name comes up in conversation:

"What a beautiful name," Kimberly said. "Does it mean anything? I love multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures." Kimberly was smiling the kindly smile of people who thought "culture" the unfamiliar colorful reserve of colorful people, a word that always had to be qualified with "rich." . . .

"I don't know what it means," Ifemelu said, and sensed rather than saw a small amusement on Ginika's face. (180)

At the beginning of their conversations on Ifemelu's name, both Obinze's mother and Kimberly begins with the same sentence "What a beautiful name." However, Ifemelu's attitude toward them is different in the two scenes. Ginika's "small amusement" indicates that the protagonist's answer to Kimberly includes some other feelings than not knowing the meaning of the name. As Ifemelu notices that Kimberly describes black people as "beautiful" (181), it would become only "rich" or "beautiful" around anything related to Africa in the frame of racial unappreciation that Kimberly has, even if Ifemelu explains the meaning of her name. Then, presumably being concerned that Kimberly forces her own value and stereotype of Africa on Ifemelu, she decides not to tell what her name means and tries to tacitly resist such efforts to determine her identity from outside.

Ifemelu goes through asymmetric relationships in the US with other characters, too. At the beginning of her life in America, she has to deal with the difficulties of getting a job. After having failed many job interviews and struggling even to pay her rent, she determines to earn money by giving a "massage" to a tennis coach without being required to give her name (188). As an anonymous impecunious woman, she realizes that "the power balance was tilted in his favor" and feels "defeated" (189) during the massage, and finds herself "sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself up" (192) after the job is done. This oppressive experience which is caused by her economic inferiority brings her a harsh denial of her identity; her individuality does not matter for him at all except for her gender. His violence from superiority in gender and economy psychologically strikes her deeply. Being not able to confess the experience to anyone and suffering from "depression" (194), she loses contact with

Obinze, as she at first stops calling him, then deletes his e-mails, and at last never reads a letter from him (196-197). In America, she experiences the violence caused by the sexual, economic and racial inferiority of hers, and this trauma continues to injure her whether she is aware of it or not, until she discloses it to Obinze in the last part of the novel.

Moreover, she continues to experience her economic and racial inferiority with other boyfriends in America. After she breaks contact with Obinze, Ifemelu first gets along with Curt, a white man, the cousin of Kimberly, who Ifemelu serves as a babysitter. Thanks to “some call” Curt makes, she gets a job at a company that enables her to get “a work visa *and* start [her] green card process” (249). He is an essential person for Ifemelu to enjoy the legal protection, for which she expresses her gratitude to him. As Julie Iromuanya argues, Curt plays a role of “sponsorship” as a “moneyed and powerful” man (177). However, she also feels a little guilty like “a pink balloon” in that she does not pay any costs as the other African friends in the US do, and a small resentment against their inequality in terms of race and gender: “Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (250). She becomes aware of Curt’s superiority in racial and economic aspects at some points and cannot “entirely believe herself while with him . . . with his ability to twist life into the shapes he wanted” (355). As a result, she cheats on Curt and causes their break-up. As long as she is with him, her position as “a black woman” or a subordinate to a white man in the US is more reinforced because of his privileges, and her act of cheating on him is interpreted as her resistance against the structure of a protected black woman and a protecting white man. She resists being fixed herself

into the racial and economic hierarchy in America.

Even though Blaine, her second boyfriend in the US, who is an African American assistant professor at Yale University, has the same skin color as Ifemelu, their relationship does not go well because of the pile of subtle differences on what they think or how they feel on racial matters. They get together after Blaine gets interested in Ifemelu's blogs on racial problems in American society. He has the similarity with Ifemelu in skin color and basically shows understanding of what she writes on her blog; however, he gradually interferes in her style of writing, telling her "[to] keep [her] style but add more depth" and describing her as "lazy" (386-387). It is true that Ifemelu does not feel the racial inferiority to him so much than with Curt, but he also hopes her to modify the way she is in accordance with his values, as is seen in the scene where once Blaine accuses the fact she is African, not African American. Then comes a crucial moment when she does not participate in the demonstration which is important for Blaine, the African American, making going for lunch priority and lying to him that she cannot join him because she takes a nap too long. He does not understand her behavior in his belief and accuses her, saying "You lied" (427), and consistently refuses to talk to her or does not forgive her in spite of her apologies. His attitude of rejecting anything which does not apply to his belief is similar to what Curt does on Ifemelu's infidelity. Their relationship is renewed thanks to the election of President Obama; however, when she decides to move back home, Lagos, Nigeria, she tells him the end of their relationship by implication because "layer after layer of discontent had settled in her and formed a mass that now propelled her" (8). She is defined by Blaine as an "African" who cannot regard what he believes good as

important, a blogger who does not consider the racial matter deeply enough because she is “lazy,” and a student who should study and learn the way of thinking mainly from Blaine as the teacher. Her break-up with him means the end of this unequal relationship.

Both Curt and Blaine exercise hegemonic power on her consciously or not and, unlike Obinze, do not “chase” Ifemelu in an equal power balance; rather, they demand her to “chase,” or more specifically “follow,” the image of herself they make up in accordance with their desire. Her American boyfriends require Ifemelu to be the person as they want her to be. Curt believes that Ifemelu will obey and never betray him in return for giving Ifemelu a safe life using his racial and economic advantages. His anger and curse at Ifemelu after her one-time cheating can represent his potential idea of his superiority in terms of race, economy and gender. In short, Curt imposes the identity of a powerless, obedient and protected woman of color on her. In a similar vein, because Blaine hopes Ifemelu to share his sense of being as “black” people, he is disappointed and blames her for not participating in the demonstration which opposes the inequality of race in the US. Their same skin color rather clarifies, for Blaine, the difference in their identity. Ifemelu is assigned the identity as a lazy African, who will never become an African American like him. As a result, such asymmetric relationships in which she is required to endeavor to adapt and fit the frame American people have made make it difficult for Ifemelu to seek her identity in the US freely and cause Ifemelu to resist her boyfriends.

III. Writing and Constructing Self-Image among the Others

In the process of resisting the racial and economic structures which people in the US have created and pursuing her identity in America, Ifemelu turns to a new effort: the act of writing. While getting along with Curt, she experiences the difference of perception about "racial skewed" (364) from him. After she disagrees with Curt on the validity of the magazine which targets black women, she sends a long e-mail to Wambui, her African American friend, writing "the things unsaid and unfinished" to Curt. The "digging, questioning, unearthing" e-mail expresses her feelings that are verbally unrepresentable, and Wambui recommends Ifemelu to start a blog because she felt more people should read Ifemelu's experience as things that happen around black women. Then, longing for "other listeners" and "the stories of others" (366), Ifemelu starts her blog after breaking up with Curt. Writing becomes a means of constructing her self-image for her.

She continues to post articles which mainly focus on racial issues, such as "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor," "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby," and so on. In writing her experience in and opinion on American society, she refers to the tribalism in the US that puts the greatest emphasis on race, not on class, ideology or region (227), and points out that it is inevitable to be identified as and become "black" in the American racial rule no matter where they actually come from (273). Ifemelu discovers the way of things in America and attempts to understand and adjust to the society. In this way, her blog serves to establish her reputation as an African author who cuts to the point

of a racial discrimination in the US and gives her adequate income.

Her act of writing offers improvement of her racial and economic standing and can be seen as a way of establishing her identity in the US. Yet, the posting necessarily involves others, especially black women like her, who listen to her stories and speak their stories in response. In other words, she attempts to form a virtual community of those who have experienced similar events and feelings and struggles to locate herself as a black African woman in American society. Because the purpose of writing her blog is to reach others, the act of writing demands her to suppose the contact points with others and to arrange her words for them, which can be seen in her behavior that she “[takes] down the [first] post” and puts it up again, “modified and edited, ending with words she still so easily remembered” (366). In addition, her traumatic sexual experience imposed by the tennis coach remains unspoken because the topic might be too personal to disclose to others publicly. She is conscious of the readers to whom she tells her stories and the image of herself which they will hold during writing her blog. That is, even though she actually has her own words in blog, her self-representation is under assumption of how she is looked at by others who read it; her own sense of self is not completely expressed in her blog entries.

It is also essential to pay attention to her reluctance to name herself as a different person. Immigrants in the US often assume fake names to get their job; however, Ifemelu seems to be surprised and hesitant to become another person from the beginning as she asks to Aunty Uju “I’ll use her name?” (131), when she was told about the necessity to use Ngozi Okonkwo’s Social Security card for working. Moreover, at the first job interview in the US, she “forgot that she was someone else”

and fails to give the job interviewer her name as Ngozi (159), and at the next, even after repeating "I'm Ngozi Okonkwo" in practice, she pauses to answer the manager's question if he can call her Goz (160). Instead of acquiring an identity with a different name, it can be said that Ifemelu retains her longing for a "true" identity. Although she cannot get the job in the name of Ngozi Okonkwo, finally she is hired as a babysitter by Kimberly without disguising her true name with the help of her old friend, Ginika (180) and becomes a famous blogger with her own name. The rejection of pretending to be someone else, as a result, seems to allow her to pursue her identity as Ifemelu herself in the US, which is destined to remain incomplete nevertheless.

It is true that, in this novel, to give someone their original name suggests their individuality. For instance, when Ifemelu feels defeated by giving massage to tennis coach, her name is not even required, and she does not think of introducing her name voluntarily, and also the actual name of the "tennis coach" is not mentioned. This omission of names suggests the anonymity and the alternativity of individuality; it is important for him that a woman who gives him massage has come, and it does not matter if she is Ifemelu or not. However, it does not mean that the possibility of naming herself with the original name directly leads the fair recognition of herself. Even though she insists on using her actual name, as in the conversations with Kimberly, her name does not have a meaning beyond being "rich" or "beautiful" (180) in such an asymmetry of power balance. Additionally, writing blog posts with her own name cannot realize her pure pursuit of identity because her writing is based on the perspectives from the others. The quest for her identity in the US ends up fitting herself in the frame of American society even in naming herself.

Then, after her stay in the US for 13 years, she decides to go back to Nigeria, her home country, which means that Ifemelu admits the limit of her quest for her identity in America through the intercommunication with others. Having decided to return, she ends the “relationship in which she was not unhappy” with her second boyfriend Blaine, “closed a blog she enjoyed and now she was chasing something she could not articulate clearly, even to herself” (234). In other words, though Ifemelu does not feel unable to fully represent herself, who has become “black” on arriving in America, there are something left unsaid or unfulfilled in her sense of self through her act of writing. This testifies to the limit of representing everything of herself as a black female blogger in the eyes of others. Now she starts to “chase” her another identity which is left undiscovered.

IV. Addressing to the One

Contrary to Ifemelu’s move to America, her Nigerian boyfriend Obinze cannot realize his hope to emigrate there because the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 makes it difficult to accept visa application from “foreign young men” (289). As a result, with the help of his mother, a university professor, he gets a six-month visa to the UK as her research assistant instead of the US. His failure to immigrate his favorite country and his personal character define his passive attitude toward acquiesce for his identity, as seen in scenes where he often reads what someone writes or easily adapts someone’s name. Comparing the couple clearly reveals Ifemelu’s features of active and subjective pursuit of her identity from perspectives of their act of writing, attitude

toward their fake names, and objectives which they "chase."

In contrast to Ifemelu, who utilizes writing her blog as a means of pursuit of her identity in the US, the act of reading takes an important role for Obinze. In his immigration to England instead of America, he "visit[s] the bookshop, buy[s] an overpriced caffeinated drink, read[s] as much as he could for free, and become[s] Obinze again" (317). Here, what he prefers to read are American novels or newspapers because he hopes to find "a resonance, a shaping of his longings, a sense of the America that he had imagined himself a part of it" (317). In the unsatisfying place, Obinze attempts to remind himself of the way he has been eager to be. In other words, he tries to escape from where he actually is, what he experiences, and how he feels in England through the act of reading something related to America. Reading thus plays an essential role in his quest for American identity.

However, he also realizes that his behavior is meaningless as it is narrated that "the life he now had" is "lacquered as it was by work and reading" and that he feels extremely "lonely" (321). He notices that what he acquires through reading and chasing America cannot fill his emptiness experienced in England; nevertheless, lacking the means to representing himself unlike Ifemelu, he fails to keep his dignity or identity in England. In addition to his initial dissatisfaction with Britain, which was not his destination country, he actually finds himself in a series of humiliating situations: cleaning up "a mound of shit on the toilet lid" (293), unfair relationship between Vincent, who excessively demands him to "raise" charge in compensation for arrangement of his marriage and job (323), and repatriation which makes him feel himself as an "inanimate" thing (345). These experiences from asymmetrical

relationships inflict a sense of inferiority on him and further deprive him of his dignity, so that Obinze remains unable to turn active in his search for identity.

His passive attitude toward the pursuit of his identity in Britain can be seen in his adaptability to his fake name, which makes a stark contrast to Ifemelu. While Ifemelu feels unwilling to become someone else, Obinze seems less reluctant to use a fake identity, comfortably introducing himself as “I’m Vincent” (311), and he continues to working as Vincent until he is suspected of his illegal status. After being deprived of the name of Vincent, he is unable to find jobs and at last deported back to Nigeria. Obinze cannot keep his character and seek for his identity in England because of his superficial adaptation, fitting himself in a form of someone’s name, while lacking opportunities represent himself. Compared to Ifemelu, who continues to use her actual name and to write her blogs with it, he does not change his way of adapting himself passively to the surroundings.

The difference in adaptation to their fake names between Ifemelu and Obinze suggests that to identify themselves with their actual name is essential for their “authentic” identity. However, like Ifemelu in the US, it does not necessarily mean that Obinze can embody how he really hopes to be even in his real name. Back in Nigeria to be a successful man, he tells Ifemelu “I do what rich people are supposed to do” (541) and “I sometimes feel as if the money I have isn’t really mine” (533). It can be observed that his behavior is still based on other people’s expectation—what he has to do in his position, instead of what he wants to do, and he is not satisfied with his life. As for Ifemelu, she also does not gain her own identity through her blogs which postulate others’ gaze, even though she actually uses her real name. Through

their immigration to America or England, they realize the importance of seeking their identity on their own and also the difficulties of attaining it.

This state begins to change some years after he is deported to Nigeria and becomes a successful man with his own family, when he comes across Ifemelu’s blog:

He read all the archives of *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negros) by a Non-American Black*. The blog posts astonished him, they seemed so American and so alien, the irreverent voice with its slanginess, its mix of high and low language, and he could not imagine her writing them. . . . Because he had last known her when she knew little of things she blogged about, he felt a sense of loss, as though she had become a person he would no longer recognize. (464-465)

When he reads the blog, his passion toward America has already disappeared due to his economic success in Nigeria. Therefore, his act of reading at this point is not the way to go after his desired identity, but to understand Ifemelu; it is a form of “chasing” her. Reading her posts, he recognizes the image of her in the blog as “so American and so alien” (464). It is no surprise that he cannot feel sympathy because the blog describes her experiences in the US, where he cannot go. Moreover, what makes him feel “alien,” the strong feeling of division between them, is that Ifemelu shapes herself in the form of acceptable form to others in the US in order to seek her identity there. For him, Ifemelu as a blogger seems to be different from the one he used to “chase.”

At the same time, driven by a need to share the grief for his mother’s death with her, he finally begins to write about his time in England in an email to Ifemelu. In

contrast to her blog which addresses many readers, Obinze writes his story only to her:

He began to write to her 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. Writing her also became a way of writing himself. He had nothing to lose. (461)

In the process of writing, instead of his lifelong habit of reading, he tells his own story in England which he has avoided retracing; he recovers his trauma and loss experienced in England through writing the e-mail to Ifemelu. For Obinze, she is the only person with whom he can tell his true story and embody his image who he wants to be. Therefore, what is essential for him to seek his identity is the act of writing his own experience, thoughts, and feelings, addressing just one person, Ifemelu.

Comparatively speaking, Ifemelu, who has been writing her blogs in the US, still cannot represent her personal experience of giving massage to the tennis coach, which has defeated her and caused depression, until she meets again with Obinze in Nigeria. She cannot reveal her personal trauma to others who read the blogs because writing it is a public action which demands her to set her stories acceptable for the reader. However, she finally tells Obinze in Nigeria of her experience which she has never written about in her blog in the US. Then, between them “an ancient silence that they both know” grows and she feels “safe” (543); with Obinze, the ideal listener/reader, she regains her voice to narrate her own story. Both of them at last can safely

share what they have experienced in each country only with each other.³

“I’m chasing you” (588) —this phrase from Obinze to Ifemelu appears again at the end of the novel. The words in the beginning literally mean that Obinze is chasing Ifemelu as a lover; however, this phrase comes to include more suggestions after he has gone through the denial and pursuit of his identity in England or in Nigeria in her absence. As mentioned above, Ifemelu and Obinze actually tell their stories by their voices only to each other; they are the only persons with whom they can share their identities safely. That is, the words “I’m chasing you” mean that Obinze is chasing Ifemelu so that he receives an essential mirror, in her, that reflects his actual experience and feelings, namely his own identity.⁴ Likewise, Ifemelu, who is chased by Obinze, is able to face her own past and feelings in the equal relationship and restarts to chase her identity in Nigeria. The pursuit for one’s identity through the other person with whom they can feel “self-affection” is at the core of the novel.

V. Conclusion

As a modern African woman who faces actual stereotypes in the US, Adichie seems to feel danger of stereotypes which “straitjacket our ability to think in complex ways” and reduce variety of people’s story to a simple single one (Adichie 43). Needless to say, her resistance against the stereotypes is represented in her novels and stories. Moreover, in her opinion, “modern African stories can no longer claim anything like ‘cultural purity’” (Azodo 147) in this era of globalization, as seen in her language use of Igbo and English. She challenges to write the variety of African

society and also the hybridity in each African individual, which has become more and more complicated in her generation. *Americanah* places Ifemelu at the center of the novel, the Nigerian woman immigrating to the US due to the collective longing for “Afropolitanism,” who pursues her identity in her hybridity not surrendering to a mold of monolithic society, in contrast to her boyfriend Obinze, who has trouble of acquiring positive attitude to his quest for his identity in the UK. Through the unequal relationships which demand them to follow American or England social rule in terms of race, economy, and gender, to write about themselves addressing to one person is recognized as essential for pursuit of their hybrid identity. Equal relationship in which they disclose themselves safely makes it possible for them to set off to chase their identity.

Although the subject of name is often brought up by the characters, throughout the novel, the meaning of the name “Ifemelu” remains unexplained. This is because the novel’s motif of her pursuit of her identity takes the form of discovering the meaning of her name. The importance of asking her name’s meaning to herself appears again in the scene where Ifemelu thinks of the question by Obinze’s mother after her death:

And when Ranyinudo mentioned his wife’s name, Kosisochukwu, an uncommon name, Ifemelu imagined Obinze’s mother asking her translate it. The thought of Obinze’s mother and Obinze’s wife deciding which translation was better—God’s Will or As It Pleases God—felt like a betrayal. That memory, of Obinze’s mother saying “translate it” all those years ago, seemed even more precious now that she had passed away.

(508)

This scene reenacts the earlier episode when Obinze's mother suggests to Ifemelu that translation of her name "might be Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made" and then asks "or what do you think?" (83). In Ifemelu's imagination, however, she urges Obinze's wife to choose the translation from only two options prepared by his mother, not giving Kosi herself any room to come up with another answer—the "or what do you think" part. This difference makes Ifemelu feel like a "betrayal" of his mother's sincerity toward translating someone's name. Therefore, it suggests that Ifemelu places great value on questioning the meaning of their name to their owners and on the process of coming closer to the answer by themselves.

In this sense, Ifemelu regards the memory of being told to translate her name more precious after her actual journey to pursue her identity in the US. In her mind, striving to find the translation of the name is equivalent to seeking for identity. Even though both Ifemelu and Obinze acknowledge each other as the essential existence, being with each other does not mean the accomplishment of self-fulfillment and the achievement of identity, as the "true" meaning of her name Ifemelu is still withheld to her. They will keep searching for their identity based on the reliable relationship after the end of the novel.

Notes

1 In regarding the novel as Ifemelu's autobiography and putting an emphasis on lessons

written in her blog, Ava Landry indicates that the novel offers the new way of struggling in the frame of Blackness, not only fitting in it, referring the acculturation process of African immigrants as “ethnicized Other” (127) in the relation with African American.

- 2 Focusing the Afropolitan characters’ ontological and affective tropes of return and self-understanding, Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek infer Ifemelu’s lack of feeling safety after going back “home” and suggest her writing blog in Nigeria as the way of rediscover in her home country, from the perspective of protagonists’ sense around their own “skin” while the emigration and return to their home country.
- 3 Marlene Esplin’s study on the multilingualism of Ifemelu throughout the novel points out the severe realities of the immigrants’ experience out of their home countries and their loyalty to Nigeria, revealing the association between “home” and the place or relationships around Ifemelu and Obinze in which it is unnecessary for the characters to translate themselves.
- 4 Katherine Hallemeier examines Ifemelu’s relationships with men who get along with her, comparing the capitalistic system in Nigeria with that in America, and concludes that the reunion of Ifemelu and Obinze suggests the “affective bonds” which can surpass the global capitalist system that values the pursuit of wealth.

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