

## Head, Adichie and the Patterns of Migration Struggles

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### Abstract

Over the years, migration literature has focused on migrants' identities, shifts, and modes of negotiating certain tensions and prospects presented by identity-defining factors confronting migrants. Migration literature has also foregrounded identity shifts necessary for migrants' adaptations to host environments in ways that propose understanding migrant identities as fluid, multiple, and intrinsically complex. This paper, however, looks at the varying circumstances that initiate migration, the forms of struggles within this seminal conflict, and the metaphorical and material aspects of border crossings. It further investigates the individual's struggles with 'self and the other' as intrinsic to certain frameworks of identities, adaptation, and new cultural formations. By thematising conflict and struggle as resonant features in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (2011) and Adichie's *Americanah* (2014), the paper aims to critically engage the crossroads and paradoxes of migration, to tease out requisite nuances, subtleties and complexities of transcending boundaries, literally and figuratively. Arguably, the reference points that migrant characters use in negotiating attendant issues of specificity, agency, belonging, and alienation are dynamic; but a key question remains: Do commonalities exist, especially at the points of border crossing and in host countries as represented in migration literature?

**Keywords:** negotiating boundaries, conflict, identity, migration and struggle, *Americanah*, *A Question of Power*

### Introduction

Migration has remained an essential historical part of human experience; hence, the growing need for the study of migration and the related theories that surround migrants, from the

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moment of decision-making, through the act of migrating to the period of residence in a host country. Among many other reasons for migration is the age-old need to keep-in-motion, physically and non-physically. Humans' travelling instinct has continued as a result of a constant search for basic needs like food, shelter, and acceptance. Furthermore, human's exploratory, dominating and possessive desire has also contributed to keeping alive the human desire to keep in motion. Hence, the tail end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st century have seen a greater instance of migration, not only because of instinct but also due to globalisation and increased international transactions of both human and material resources. According to Fatemeh Pourjafari and Abdolali Vahidpour, migration is heavily influenced by our present rapidly changing societies whose "borders have become mixed" as a result of "outstanding developments in the field of communication technology such as satellite, TV, Internet and the modern means of transportation followed by the globalisation of the world economy" (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 2014, 679). These rapid changes, they posit, have tampered with modern societies to the point of rendering them borderless, thereby introducing complexities to factors relating to migration and therefore to the identities of migrants themselves. It is this complex attribute that enables interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts and struggles in migrants whose desires are underscored by the need for acceptance in their host society. Pourjafari and Vahidpour (2014) are, therefore, of the view that migrant literature aims at grappling with these complexities (especially the conflicts and struggles) that define migration.

By way of definition, migration is the movement across the spatial borders, motivated either by a mere desire for change or by that which is desired on the other side of the border. Migration is the "temporary or permanent move of individuals or groups of people from one geographic location to another for several reasons ranging from better employment possibilities to persecution" (Jessica Hagen-Zanker 2008, 4). These definitions suggest a movement across space and geographic locations, affirmed by Kok's assertion that although the distance covered in migration must be significant, it is required that the boundary of the migration area must have been crossed before a move can be classified as migration (Kok 1999, 19). By this boundary, migration highlights points of departure and destination as two different territories at the sides of the border crossed by the migrant. Some migration analysts consider labour as the basic reason for migration, leading to one of the classifications of migration as labour migration. They opine that the initial motivator for migration is the search for labour opportunities caused by the imbalance in the labour market across the world. On the other hand, the situation-oriented migration critics link migration to social, cultural, economic and/or political factors (Lee 1966; Srivastava and Sasikumar 2003, 1).

In literary studies, migration has remained a growing interest since the 1980s. Coinciding with the wave of border crossing, especially by postcolonial subjects, literary works have reflected the trajectories of characters who leave their homes and seek refuge or stay in places other than theirs. It foregrounds forced or voluntary transnational border crossing for

a better livelihood as a key feature of human existence. The literary representation of migrants' experience and resettlement in a host country enables a new way of seeing the realities of migration. By fictionalising lived experiences, literature makes known the abstract, bringing to the reader that which lies outside the limits of his/her usual experience. In Crawshaw and Fowler's terms, literature "somehow condenses and distils a mode of behaviour which is empirically identifiable and raises to consciousness social processes which otherwise remain implicit" (Crawshaw and Fowler 2008, 457). Through its nuanced representation of the everyday, literature keeps our gaze on that which ordinarily exists outside our boundaries of experience, such as migrants' struggle for survival, the horrors of girl trafficking, the plight of the refugee, and racism.

Furthermore, migration literature blurs the interdisciplinary boundary between migration and literature. This is because these migrant writers, especially those that are migrants themselves, bring their migration experiences to bear on their artistic works (Siobhan Brownlie 2022, 6). In them is the intersection of their stories and experiences as migrant writers. This fictional representation of the realities of migration also serves political purposes as it negatively or positively conditions public perception. By becoming part of the cultural and cognitive consciousness of the receiving population, the stories condition perception and decision making.

Literary and critical works on migration capture the diversity of migrant experience. Studying the questions of evolving identities in contemporary migrant fiction, Vilasini Roy (2016) examined the interface between migration and digital technology in Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011). In her study, Roy (2016, 48) asserts that tension and home-sickness are an inherent part of the migration experience and that online access is a bridge that eases migration tension and allows for migrant reconnection with roots. She cites Ifemelu's ability to "create an online space for herself and others to express their preoccupations" as an example of technology enabling the migrant to transcend the trauma of geographical displacement. The implication of technology that enables online access does not, however, distend the case that "happy memories of the lost homeland and the nostalgia the migrant characters experience for their past life are of very less emphasis in the migration literature" (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 2014, 680). Here, Pourjafari and Vahidpour stress that the underlying structure of migrant literature is rather the compendium of struggles and conflicts the migrant is often in confrontation with. One can emphatically argue that what migrant literature brings to the fore of its engagement is the representation of "human identity, the ways migrant characters cope with their new life places, the uncertainties and insecurities they suffer from and the communication problems" (ibid., 680). This paper explores the varying circumstances that initiate migration, the forms of struggles between these circumstances as points of conflict, and the metaphorical and material aspects of border crossings. It further investigates the individual's struggles with 'self and the other' as intrinsic to certain frameworks of identities, adaptation, and new cultural formations.

### Conflict and Struggle at the Spatio-Symbolic Emigrational Threshold

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (2011), seen as an autobiographical novel, has been analysed basically in consideration of the theme of insanity and societal oppression. Writers like Shannon Young connect the text strongly to Head's actual life and even provide instances where "Kenneth Stanley Birch [Head's uncle] writes an explanation, apology, and defence of his family's disregard of Bessie Head's existence ... [explaining] in reasonable tones the family dynamics that resulted in Head being excluded from the family circle and consequently propelled into existence of terrible hardship" (Young 2010, 229). Nixon, tracing the coincidences in Head's life "as a first generation coloured, an orphan, a refugee, a certified mad woman, a single mother," (Nixon 1993, 107) with her novel, and concerning the dissolution of borders, affirms *A Question of Power* as authentic autobiography. Adetokunbo Pearse examines the text based on cause and effect. He asserts that Elizabeth's madness is a result of the internalisation of the sense of alienation and inferiority and evil imposed on her by the apartheid society and her distorted life as a result of her "mental retention of South African life" (Pearse 1983, 86).

Similar to Pearse's psychoanalytic discussion of *A Question of Power*, Adewale Ajayi, in classifying the text as a "Freudian psychoanalytical classic", engaged the text at the point where physical factors translate into the psychic. He traces the protagonist's oppressed life from her childhood experiences, through that of her adulthood, to her life in exile to buttress the protagonist as a symbol of the contemporary woman in confrontation with "social forces" (Ajayi 2009, 8). It is pertinent to note that the identity of Head's character continues to shift following different conflicts that lead to struggles. Hyginus Ezebuilo and Theodor Ojiako (2016) believe that the identity of Head's protagonist characterises a hybrid, an in-between which leaves Elizabeth in the third place of a cultural sphere. Elizabeth is a character who suffers from a mental state of disorderliness resulting from a traumatic experience. Yet as Ezebuilo and Ojiako would say, Elizabeth has to face the difficulty of adapting to a foreign community. Elizabeth's survival in her new place of living is highly dependent on the confrontation with her past. One could, therefore, say that *A Question of Power* documents crises of migrational identities and exile consciousness. Head engages the struggles as characterised by different patterns of conflict, including interpersonal and intrapersonal, and that is what Ezebuilo and Ojiako summarise in the following:

Head's protagonist has her inner being disturbed and shattered by different causes: difficulty of adaptation, racial and class prejudices, traumatic memories, repressed feelings and unconventional philosophical or religious beliefs. The aim of her protagonist is to lessen her inner alienation as she revolts against the hostile environment of her existence. A good mental balance brings the characters to a healthier and happier existence (ibid., 131).

Ezebuilo and Ojiako's research seems closer to the present study because the term 'confronting' suggests a battle which in this study is an implication of conflict and struggle.

While Adichie's *Americanah* has hardly been subjected to autobiographical analysis, it has attracted a range of criticism, including diaspora experiences, identity at the cross-border, interculturality, love, language and identity, and narratology (Arabian and Rahiminezhad 2015; Austin 2015; Seiringer-gaubinger 2015; Koziel 2015). Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi (2017) investigate the identity of Adichie's migrant characters and discover that each of the characters struggles over an identity which is shattered by social interactions and engagements in his or her efforts to belong to the new society. A look at these migrants shows that each character faces the conflict emanating both from within the character and his/her environment. Adichie's characters are caught in a web of sociocultural contradictions prevalent in the host countries to which the migrants travel. The contradictions include racism and general unemployment, contrary to young Ifemelu and Obinze's initial belief of leaving for Europe and America where opportunity is abundant. This present study adds to the existing study on the texts by way of casting a critical lens at the points of intrinsic and extrinsic conflicts that necessitate leaving one's homeland and crossing the point of the spatial and cultural border (in) to the host land. The major concern of this study, therefore, is to examine migrant characters at the different territories of departure and destination to ascertain the trends of conflict at the point of decision-making and the actualisation of border crossing. Examining the spatio-symbolic crossing of thresholds in the process of migration is a projection of the plight of the migrants whose border crossing remains endless. This study brings the two texts into a conversation regarding the experiences of migrants in relation to conflict. The texts depict characters faced with the pressures of sociopolitical and economic structures that bring about attitudes and behaviours that are constantly changing to influence or adapt to reality.

In *Americanah*, young adults like Anty Uju, Emenike, Ginika, Ifemelu and Obinze are examples of migrants whose migratory factors are personal. Uju leaves Nigeria because her military boss dies and his family will be coming to Lagos, which spells doom for her and her son. Obinze dreams of life in America as though America is the land of El Dorado. He goes into an emotional conflict with his mother, who does not share the same sentiment with him about life in the diaspora. Obinze eventually pushes his mother to take him abroad. Ifemelu faces an intrapersonal conflict of abandoning her university education to go to America where she becomes a babysitter, though she nurses the hope of continuing her education in the US when she becomes stable. It is observed that after conflict comes struggle and as soon as these characters cross the borders to their host countries, they are faced with an endless struggle for survival which invariably influences their identities.

Looking at conflict and the inevitability of struggles that are associated with migrants in Adichie's works, Andre Kabore (2016) points out some intrapersonal factors such as economic

motives that set characters on the move to migrate. Kabore quotes the opening sentence of “The Thing Around Your Neck” which says that young Africans believe everyone in America owns a car and moves around with a gun, and their relatives share similar beliefs (ibid., 4). According to Kabore, characters in this short story remain nameless and, in his opinion, namelessness is an indication of loss of identity. It follows that once the migration takes place, the character loses his/her original identity to nothingness. From there, the character faces identity struggles that are often never achieved but can only leave the individual a hybrid of a sort. And for Kabore, no name fits a hybrid character (ibid., 4).

Head’s *A Question of Power* also presents a protagonist, Elizabeth, whose intersectional identity – being coloured and an orphan – casts her at the edge of South African identity definition during the apartheid era. As she migrates to Botswana, she maintains her position at the fringe of the society in her identity as a refugee, a certified madwoman, a single mother pushed away from the mainstream of life. The court case that ruled against her as a member of a banned party (even though she was just two days old in it) resulted in her displacement in Botswana.

All migrants tend to desire a better opportunity in their host land. Elizabeth was captivated by the teaching opportunity advertised in Botswana. She struggles with the decision to walk out on a promiscuous husband, and she finally does without returning. Becoming a single mother, a victim of an oppressive apartheid system and finally condemned by the ruling of the court against her party pushes her to the threshold of South Africa’s border, which she crosses without return. Living in her country was like living with “permanent nervous tension” (Head 2011, 12), and a teaching opportunity in Botswana makes the exodus from South Africa more enticing. Yet, the description of Motabeng in Botswana depicts the motif of no greener pasture anywhere.

Motabeng means the place of sand. It was a village remotely inland, perched on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. Seemingly, the only reason for people’s settlement there was a good supply of underground water. It took a stranger some time to fall in love with its harsh outlines and stark, black trees. A fellow passenger on the train to Botswana had laughingly remarked: “You’re going to Motabeng? It’s just a great big village of mud huts!” ...During the rainy season, Motabeng was subjected to a type of desert rain. It rained in the sky, in long streaky sheets, but the rain dried up before it reached the ground (ibid., 13).

The above terrifying description, as well as the oddly captivating and the pitch-black darkness of Botswana (ibid., 13 – 14), presents Elizabeth’s destination as a land of no greener pastures. Heading on to such a destination describes persistence in migrants who seem to be propelled by a force that cannot be resisted. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s struggle to leave the shores of

Nigeria for America was initiated by an incessant strike in the university (Adichie 2013, 120). Hence a better study opportunity becomes her irresistible bait. In her is the conflict of deciding between leaving her university education in Nigeria and accepting a partial scholarship to study in America. The desire to experience the other side of the border, mostly seen as the better side, propels her to emigrate.

Once the border is crossed, the survival instinct is activated in the migrant. Steiner's definition of migration as "a movement from an often oppressive system that made the exodus necessary in the first place to a host environment, which instead of facilitating the building of a new home rejects the migrant on racial or cultural grounds" (Steiner 2009, 4), captures the trajectory of the migrant's plight. And because most host environments offer rejection instead of assistance, the migrant develops survival strategies and/or sometimes becomes a victim of the oppressive system. Elizabeth encounters darkness in Botswana where she had hoped for light. This darkness symbolises the unjust treatment and hostility in her past. Dispelling the darkness with candlelight highlights her determination to survive (Head 2011, 15). At certain points in the migrant's life, the struggle is intrapersonal. This results in internal struggles to either oppose or keep pace with societal expectations. Elizabeth's inner life is so disoriented that she feels like "a person driven out of her own house while demons rampaged within, turning everything upside down" (ibid., 46). When she loses hold of what brought her to Botswana, the teaching job, she goes to Eugene to take another survival option. She struggles despite her ill health to grow a garden, a lifeline on which to hold for the restoration of her sanity (ibid., 68). *A Question of Power* and *Americanah* present migrants whose souls and personalities defy total subjugation despite moments of entrapment and societal incarceration.

Other times, a migrant's struggle for survival manifests in the form of confrontation with identity distortion. Migrants suffer imposed identity. Their desire to be and to prefer is thwarted by the powers that push them and enforce another name upon them. Elizabeth experiences and opens up to Birgette: "I am being dragged down, without my will, into a whirlpool of horrors. I prefer nobility and goodness but a preference isn't enough; there are forces who make a mockery of your preferences" (ibid., 86). She believes that the events in her world, just like in the racialised world of Ifemelu, were easily invaded and controlled (ibid., 110). The character's confrontation with stack racism, where they are told to their face how stupid they are to be black (ibid., 83), suggests a struggle with being and remaining black.

Thus, to survive, migrants sometimes distort their identity or allow the system to distort it. Name changing, role changing and all forms of symbolic border crossing emerge, given systemic pressures in the struggle for survival. Learning to fit into the environment is well detailed in *Americanah*, the character of Ifemelu contrasts almost everything done by other migrant characters in the text – Ginika, Aunty Uju, and her flatmates. In this contrast, the text narrates the struggle of the migrant to deal with the idea of cultural metamorphosis, changing or compromising one's cultural identity to take the path other migrants finally took

after their struggle. Hence, while Ifemelu and Obinze represent migrants at the beginning of cultural change, the likes of Ginika and Aunty Uju are migrants who have been hybridised or changed. The latter are migrants who crossed from a symbolic space of real identity to that of imposed identity to survive. At this threshold, Ifemelu sees herself as “standing at the periphery of her own life” (Adichie 2014, 151), caught between territories. She struggles with self-definition and self-assertion by imitation or by expression. In London, Obinze confronts a similar condition of living another identity to survive. He bears another person’s name, thereby burying himself. When asked by a little boy: “Do you live in London?” Obinze’s answer in affirmation throws him into the realisation that “he lived in London indeed but invisibly” (ibid., 297). He compares his existence as a migrant in London to an erased pencil sketch. And battles within to understand,

Why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty (ibid., 318).

Despite the conflict and struggles faced by migrants in the host country, they hardly attain certainty. Having left his/her country, s/he suffers double alienation from the two territories, of departure and destination. The migrants are in a process that is never completed since they live as continuous outsiders. The idea that the migrants remain a process suggests a personal struggle in the belongingness of the migrant. S/he is physically outside his/her homeland and symbolically outside his/her host land. S/he is an outsider, a liminal subject who has left the homeland and who is yet to arrive in the host land. S/he ceases to be part of the home country, and at the same time is yet to be integrated into the host country. In the unrealisable struggle to be integrated into Botswana, Elizabeth accepts that “definitely as far as Botswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on their things” (Head 2011, 20). Hence, while physically she has succeeded in crossing the spatial border between South Africa and Botswana, she psychologically remains outside the Botswana borders. She may have sympathisers, but the act of sympathy, in no way, accepts or relieves her plight. For instance, even though the principal sympathises with Elizabeth, he still had to present her with a letter that suspends her as a teacher (ibid., 66).

The principal’s sympathy towards Elizabeth is likened to the interracial relationship that had existed between Ifemelu with Curt and Blaine which did not, in any way, give the migrant what they needed. Migrant displacement has a way of allowing a constant void that cannot be filled by one or the other. Hence, the migrant tends to stand alone amidst many. Elizabeth’s disquiet is in her mind, made manifest in the relationship that goes on there with Sello, the Father, Metusa, B and Dan.

Borrowing the figure of inseparability from the Igbo folklore, leaving one's homeland creates a sense of what is termed the tortoiseshell whereby the memories and influence of home remain with the migrant even when the physical border is successfully crossed. There is always a look back home, what James Clifford (1994) expresses as border relations with the old country. Clifford asserts that dispersed people, who once separated from homelands by vast oceans and political barriers, increasingly find themselves in constant non-physical return to home facilitated in some cases by modern technologies (Clifford 1994, 304). In Debora Castillo's term, this inseparability is umbilical (Castillo 2007, 124-25). Experiences and encounters are always viewed with the home-country lens, which informs the character's being as a migrant and reinforces the indispensability of the natal home in the being of the migrant in the host country.

In South Africa, self-importance for the blacks means incurring more hatred from the whites. Elizabeth recalls that the system has instilled in her a dread of the whites' awful scorn for blacks who express self-importance. In place of self-importance, the system puts a consciousness of self-denigration, an "unwritten law" that requires blacks' consideration of the self as "essentially a product of the slums and the hovels of South Africa" (Head 2011, 20). And because she has witnessed so many black people being despised by the whites on account of the former's display of self-importance, she chooses to be the same as the blacks regardless of the opinion of the white, and she sees the evils overwhelming her as a relentless hounding from South Africa (ibid., 55). For Ifemelu, enjoyment of love and success in the host land cannot dwarf the moments of home-sickness and longing for Nigeria. Despite her success with her blogs, longing for Nigeria builds up in her and finally explodes by way of a radical decision to return back home. She believes without any clear reason that "layer after layer of discontent had settled in her and formed a mass that propelled her" (Adichie 2014, 18) to go back to Nigeria.

The migrant is, therefore, in Patrycja Austin's terms, caught between the global and the local, and is left to transcend the dichotomies to create the new (Austin 2015, 9). Austin argues that the migrants' definition of the host country is continually filtered through the memory of the home country (ibid., 10). Her assertion resonates with migrant's "nostalgic backward glance" (Steiner 2009, 42) and desperation on the grasping of "familiar selfhood while realities shift and slide around him[her]" (Falconer 2001, 484). This is an act that helps the migrant in making sense of his/her life as a continuous process of crossing threshold.

The texts also share the understanding of African hair as an umbilical cord and a site of identity struggle. Migrant literature, especially African migrant literature, presents hair as a special symbol of Africanness. The African migrant positively or negatively associates with African kinky hair. Elizabeth is accused by Metusa of not liking African hair. This is reiterated as the text narrates Dan's preference for girls with "properly African hair" (Head 2011, 134). He presents Elizabeth with a girl who has her hair braided in traditional African style thereby making Elizabeth's torments seem like a penance for being less African. *Americanah*, on the other hand, foregrounds how far an African migrant goes to keep the identity expressed

by the African hair. Ifemelu for instance “did not like that she had to go to Trenton [from Princeton where she lives] to braid her hair” (Adichie 2014, 13), yet she embarks on the journey as a way of reasserting herself as an African. Elizabeth’s own struggle, realised as an internal conflict, is to be like the other; to be accepted; to belong; to become a partaker of the social rights of her host society. But no matter how hard she tries, she is unable to completely shed her African identity because of the perpetuation of her skin colour. Hence, she can only adapt to hybrid identity. On the other hand, Ifemelu’s insistence on maintaining her African hair/style implies that she is satisfied with who she is and proud of her roots. And the fact that she equally abides by the sociocultural norms of her host society subjects her identity to hybridity.

### Conclusion

This essay has examined in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* and Adichie’s *Americanah* the trajectories of the spatial and symbolic crossing of threshold in the cause of migration. The conflict and struggle of the characters examined as migrant characters in the two texts expose movement from the homeland, through the catharsis of identity and struggle for survival to the realisation of self. While Elizabeth’s emigrational blueprint moves between her physical and psychic world, Ifemelu’s struggles involve more of the physical.

By exploring the various vistas of the struggles and conflicts encountered by Elizabeth and Ifemelu in their migration experiences, this paper has outlined significant cross points and dissimilarities between the two named characters as well as among different characters in the two texts. One of such cross points is hybridity, whereas a significant dissimilarity is in what Pourjafari and Vahidpour (2014, 686) call “personal maturity” or participation in “reciprocal recognition” as Frantz Fanon (1952, 170) would say. This means to reach a state where the migrant no longer clings “to cultural traditions and lost or repressed...histories” (Pourjafari, and Vahidpour. 2014, 686). While Ifemelu may be said to not have reached this personal maturity as she clings to her cultural traditions evidenced by her decision to retain her African hairstyle, Elizabeth moves in the axis of “un-homeliness,” (Bhabha 1994, 9 quoted in Moosavinia and Hosseini 2017, 342), never longing to remember home.

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