Journey and Return: Visiting Unbelonging and Otherness in Adichie’s Americanah

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Abstract  
This article explores some important issues within the outlook of diaspora and the effects of displacement on the lives of immigrants. Diaspora is the issue of everyday life for many people all around the world who leave their homeland voluntarily or by force with the hope of making a new home in another place. Over the last decades, the meaning of the term diaspora was changed from what it originally referred to as the historical involuntary movement from the Holy land of Palestine and today it appears to be used to refer to any group of immigrants and their descendants who leave their land of origin toward other lands. This paper which is a qualitative library-based research, aims to discuss Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah (2013), the Winner of the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, through the lens of diaspora in order to find how diasporic displacement affects the characters’ sense of belonging both toward homeland and host land and also to distinguish discriminatory behaviors which bring a sense of alienation for the immigrant characters and effect their decisions of return. This study reveals how immigrants leave their country of origin toward West with a hope of making a new home but racial discrimination in western societies alienates them as ‘other’ and brings them a sense of unbelonging which effects their decisions considering the issue of return.  
Key words: diaspora, displacement, hybridity, unbelonging, otherness, discrimination, return

Introduction  
The concept of diaspora has its roots in “social science discourse, reflecting the inextricable connection between human geographical mobility and its various social dimensions, on one hand, and human societies in their long process of evolution, on the other” (Fazal and Tsagarousianou, 2002, p. 6). During the past decades, the established concept of diaspora is used as a prominent research lens through which to view the consequences of international migration and the shifting of state borders across populations (Fazal et al., 2002) and also the term is expanded out of its old meaning which was used with a capital ‘D’ to refer to specific groups of people which had been dispersed from a historical ‘homeland’ including Jews, Greeks, and Armenians (Bakewell, 2008). In this regard, Roger Brubaker remarks, “the application of the term diaspora [is expanded to] an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space” (Brubaker, 2005, p. 3). Diaspora studies construct a new form of knowledge and ways of perceiving the world through the involvement with migrancy; therefore, in this qualitative library-based research, a close reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah (2013) will be presented regarding displacement, belonging, otherness, and return of diaspora subject. Adichie is a Nigerian writer who was born in 1977. She moved to United States at nineteen with her family and studied communications and political science. Then she continued her studies and achieved her master’s degree in creative writing. She has written three novels. Her first novel is Purple Hibiscus (2003), which won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. Her second novel is Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) which is a historical fiction that is set during the Nigerian Biafra war and tells the story of two sisters entangled in the war. Adichie's novels are mostly about Nigerian people especially women and the problems they are struggling with (Tunca, 2014). Adichie’s third novel, Americanah (2013), was selected as one of the 10 Best Books of 2013 by the editors of the New York Times Book Review (Tunca, 2015b). It tells the story of a smart and ambitious Nigerian woman who leaves Africa for America in search of better educational and social opportunities. After migration there are lots of problems that she faces. Since she is not anymore in Nigeria, she cannot follow her pervious lifestyle nor should she adapt herself to the new American one. She struggles to acculturate but America alienates her as black and different. Discrimination affects her sense of belonging toward her new land and finally she decides to return to Nigeria. Ifemelu, the main character, is not the only person who
leaves her homeland throughout the novel, her aunt, Uju, and her boyfriend, Obinze, also leave Nigeria toward west but every character reveals a special situation after displacement. The present study elaborates the concept of diaspora regarding the aforementioned notions of displacement, belonging, otherness, and return through the three separate displacements within the novel in order to clarify how displacement effects their lives and how they cope with this phenomena.

**Diaspora**

Etymologically, the term diaspora is derived from the Greek word *diasperien* which is comprised of *dia* meaning over and *speiro* meaning to sow *(Tölölyan, 2007)* and generally it is defined as “the voluntary or forceful movement of people from their homelands into new regions” *(Ashcroft et al., 1998, p. 61).* The term diaspora was initially associated with the historical involuntary movement of a group of people which has come to be seen as the archetypal ‘diasporic community’, but gradually it was used to refer to other groups living outside their country of origin as a result of both forced and voluntary migration and recently the application of the term involves it to a broad set of cases *(Tölölyan, 2007).* As Khachig Tölölyan *(1991, p. 4)* says, “to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed over the globe.” Not only the use of the term was extended through the diversity of applications and interpretations, but also there was a serious attempt, during the last few decades, to offer more comprehensive definitions of the term by different scholars *(Fazal et al., 2002).* Though these definitions differ on their perspective, they share some critical aspects which include displacement, a sense of belonging, otherness, and the issue of return. Taking these shared aspects into consideration, this study looks into Naqvi’s novel in order to reveal the situation of diaspora subjects after displacement.

**Displacement**

Regarding displacement as the first and the most important aspect of diaspora, William Safran *(1991, pp. 83-84)* presented his definition as: Expatriate minority communities that are dispersed from an original center to at least two peripheral places, that maintain a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland; that believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country; that see the ancestral land as a place of eventual return, when the time is right. Safran *(1991)* limited the displacement of diaspora people only to the ‘communities’ who move from a specific place toward other lands. He also takes this point for granted that diaspora people’s displacement is forceful and his definition is limited to involuntary reasons such as war, exile, or famine. In contrast to Safran’s view point, some scholars like Khachig Tölölyan defined diaspora people not only as a community but also as individuals who leave their homeland toward other places. *(Tölölyan, 1991, p. 4)* says, “The term that once described Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersion now share meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, [and] ethnic community.” Therefore, *(Tölölyan, 1991)* in his definition of displacement involves both groups and individuals to the category of diaspora people. Furthermore, James Clifford *(1994, p. 303)* in his article, *Diasporas,* explains that “diaspora can longer be looked at in terms of the movement from homelands by a homogenous group of people, but also encompasses individuals moving for a myriad of reasons that have come to characterize migration.” Clifford’s argument not only includes both communities and individuals in the issue of displacement, but also it considers both voluntary and involuntary reasons for their displacement. A close reading of the novel clears that *(Tölölyan, 1991)* and Clifford’s definitions *(1994)* are well fitting for the characters found in the novel, since the characters are the individual immigrants who are concerned with creating their homes away from homeland for different reasons. In *(Americanah)* *(2013),* aunt Uju is the first person who leaves Nigeria toward America. Uju is a mistress of a wealthy and powerful General and they have a one-year-old son named Dike but unfortunately General dies in a military plan programed by the governor. After General’s death, some of his relatives come to Uju’s house and threaten her and her son to death; therefore, she “leave[s] immediately” toward America and “take[s] everything” with her *(Adichie, 2013a, p. 142).* Though Uju’s departure is not as the result of forceful facts such as war, famine or exile; it cannot be categorized within the voluntary displacements. Uju leaves Nigeria since she cannot stay and continue her life as an ex-mistress; therefore, there is a kind of social pressure which forces her to move. The second displacement is accomplished by Ifemelu, the main character, who receives a scholarship and leaves Nigeria toward America in search of higher education and better social opportunities. Ifemelu’s mother wished her to “prosper in America” *(Adichie, 2013a, p. 77)* since during that time Nigeria was under military dictatorship and even political “strikes were common [in universities]” *(Adichie, 2013a, p. 76).* Some years after Ifemelu’s movement toward
America, Obinze also tries to join her but it is after 9/11 and America denies him a visa so “he moved to England” (Adichie, 2013a, p. 174) to find a way toward America. Ifemelu and Obinze’s displacements are not categorized as forceful. The only reason behind their movement is a kind of dissatisfaction which they wish to conquer through their prosperity in west. As Obinze reflects in his friend’s party while staying in London: [original settlers] understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards 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. (Adichie, 2013a, p. 216).

**Belonging**

Belonging as the second important aspect within the concept of diaspora, is defined differently by diaspora scholars. Safran (1991, p. 83-84) believes that diaspora people “maintain a collective memory or myth” about their original land and regard their “ancestral land as the true, ideal home” which indicates a kind of unidirectional sense of belonging toward the homeland. In contrast, several more recent discussions de-emphasize this kind of homeland orientation. Clifford, for example, has criticized what he called the “central” model of Safran and others, in which diasporas are by definition “oriented by continuous cultural connections to a source and by a teleology of return.” He remarks that diaspora people are “not so much oriented to roots in a specific place and a desire for return as around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations.” For Clifford, “decentered lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return” (Clifford, 1994, pp. 305-306). Beside Clifford, Avtar Brah also de-emphasizes Safran's homeland orientation. He pays attentions to the meaning of the term home and explains: The notion of home is much more complex than approaches to diaspora premised on the power of nostalgia, [it] is intrinsically linked with the way in which the processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It relates to the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’. (Brah, 1996, p. 194). He broadens the definition of ‘home’ and explains that for diaspora people, sense of belonging is not just toward their natal land, it can also be toward their host land as the place of their everyday life. Regarding this sense of belonging in Americanah (2013), characters express different feelings toward the issue. At the beginning of the novel, Ifemelu does not reveal any sense of belonging toward her motherland and even she looks for a way to leave; thus, when she receives a scholarship, she leaves her country with a hope to “prosper in America” (Adichie, 2013, p. 77). But after displacement, the situation changes and she faces a different life in America. Discrimination and racial issues alienate her as a black which brings her a sense of unbelonging toward America; consequently, she returns to her African origin and reveals her sense of belonging toward Nigeria. Ifemelu “stop[s] faking an American accent” (Adichie, 2013, p. 135) in order to show her dissatisfaction of America. She also stops relaxing her hair with chemicals and starts hair braiding. “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” (Adichie, 2013, p. 167). Like Ifemelu, Obinze reveals a sense of belonging toward America before displacement. He cares about American literature and “to him, only American films were worth watching” (Adichie, 2013, p. 175). Even when he thinks about leaving Nigeria he thinks just about “America, only America” (Adichie, 2013, p. 182). But after 9/11, when America denies giving visa to Obinze and he forcefully moves toward Britain, everything changes and he loses his inclination toward America. Fifteen years later, back in Nigeria, when in a friend’s party some women glorify western school’s curriculum, Obinze intervenes and says, “Didn’t we all go to primary schools that taught the Nigerian curriculum?” (Adichie, 2013, p. 21) which indicates his sense of belonging toward Nigeria. In contrast to Ifemelu and Obinze, Uju does not lose her sense of belonging toward America. When she leaves Nigeria, she quickly adapts herself to America lifestyle. She adopts an American accent and straightens her hair. She never loses her sense of belonging and never thinks about returning to Nigeria. She even always says to her son that “you are not black” (Adichie, 2013, p. 290) which emphasizes her orientation toward American-hood.

**Otherness**

William Safran in his famous definition remarks that diaspora people “believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it” (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-4) which means that though diasporas try to cope with host land and the meaning of home changes for them, original settlers does not accept them and discriminate them as different inferiors so
for diaspora people there is always a sense of alienation while living in host land. Besides Safran, Homi K. Bhabha (1983) presented his theory of otherness and evaluated the complete question of colonization that is how the colonizers came to build their colony and the colonized, who are now, termed the ‘other’. Bhabha (1983, p. 23) states that colonial discourse is an apparatus of power that turns on the “recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences” and its aim is to “construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” so colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. He states that the stereotype image of the colonized is a negative one. In other words, they are considered inferior to the colonizers in color, race, knowledge and culture. Bhabha (1983, p. 19) says that racial and sexual epithets “come to be seen as modes of differentiation, realized as multiple, cross-cutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse, always demanding a specific and strategic calculation of their effects.” Based on Bhabha’s (1983) theory of otherness, colonial society is built in large part on the assertion of the inferiority of colonized people. The colonizer always looks at the colonized as the ‘other’ and here the issue of discrimination reveals itself which means that in colonial society the colonized are not accepted as original settlers and the colonizer treats them differently. They keep the colonized dependent and inferior so the colonized feels a lack of acceptance and alienation while encountering dominant society. In addition, as Kastan (2006, p. 307) says: Bhabha have argued that we live not only in a postcolonial world but also a post- or transnational one. Diaspora, the movement or dispersal of people resulting from slavery, colonialism, or ethnic conflicts, is a useful concept for describing contemporary migrations of people around the globe, and the fluidity of national and cultural identities resulting from these movements. As a result, diaspora minority as a branch of the colonized is also considered as ‘other’ and inferior while encountering the dominant majority and faces an everyday sense of alienation in host land. In *Americanah*, there are many examples of racial discriminations. As an illustration, when Ifemelu tries to find a job in America she is forced to relax her hair in order to seem professional. Answering a friend’s question she says (Adichie, 2013a, p. 160): My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky. In another part of the story once she is out of town with her white boy-friend, Curt, she goes to a salon and asks to wax her eyebrows but the woman in the salon says, “We don’t do curly” (Adichie, 2013a, p. 227). The woman avoids waxing her eyebrows since she is black and different. Then her white boy-friend intervenes and threatens the manager, therefore she apologizes and accepts to wax the eyebrows. Not only Ifemelu suffers from such racial discriminations but also Uju and her son face racism in America. Like Ifemelu, Uju is forced to relax her curly hair for job interviews as a physician since otherwise she will be considered as unprofessional. She says, “I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn’t wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional” (Adichie, 2013a, p. 92). Uju’s son, Dike, is also discriminated at school by his teacher. Once students were staying in a camp, their teacher gave them sunscreen but she denied to give to Dike since he was black. Dike tells his story to Ifemelu and continues, “I just want to be regular” (Adichie, 2013a, p. 144) which emphasizes that even Dike as a small boy faces discrimination and feels that sense of unbelonging in American society.

**Return**

The last noticeable point in the definitions of diaspora is the issue of return. Safran (1991, p. 84) remarks that “for diaspora people, their homeland is their ideal home where they or their descendants should eventually return.” This definition implies that, while people live faraway, they remain emotionally attached to ‘home’ as the place of origin. As a result, for Safran the issue of return is a kind of linear act toward the land of origin. It is while in recent studies the notion of home has changed and it has a number of dimensions, both physical and emotional, which are not always tied neatly to the same location. As Brah (1996, p. 192) puts it, “home is both a place of origin and the lived experience of a locality”; therefore, home can be defined as both the place where one lives everyday life and the place where one was born. Besides, Tsagarousianou (2001, p. 30) also puts emphasis on the ability of diaspora people on “making one’s home by going back to a homeland” and therefore does not consider return as simply going back to homeland. Since the notion of home is broadened the issue of return is not a linear act of coming back to the original land. In the case of those people who are blended to the new land and feel belonging to the place of everyday life, return has no meaning. For them
attachment to place is related to the existence of important personal relations so return is just possible for those who have alliances and tendencies toward the land of origin (Brah, 1996). Displacement brings a sense of unbelonging for Ifemelu and Obinze; therefore, in order to overcome this sense of unbelonging, they revive their African hood via returning to their mother land, and African values, and expressing their sense of belonging to Nigeria. For example, Ifemelu starts to relate to her African origin and stops relaxing her hair with chemicals. One day "on an unremarkable day of early spring...she looked in a 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" (Adichie, 2013a, p. 167) from that moment onward Ifemelu started hair braiding in African style. She also later "decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July" (Adichie, 2013a, p. 135) and finally she decides to return to Nigeria. He says to Dike, "maybe you could come and visit me" (Adichie, 2013a, p. 292). Like Ifemelu, Obinze tries to overcome his sense of unbelonging so he choose a physical return toward his homeland. When he was arrested by the police, he easily accepts to come back. His lawyer offers help to keep him more in England but he says, “I'm willing to go back to Nigeria” (Adichie, 2013a, p. 219). They consider return as a way of revival since it can put an end to their sense of unbelonging while for Uju as a mother and a physician the only secure home is America. She does not come back and even when Dike decides to take a trip to Nigeria she expresses her worries. She says to Ifemelu, "Lagos? Is it safe? You know what he has been through. I don't think he can handle it" (Adichie, 2013a, p. 323). Therefore, Uju as an individual who is entangled with the host land, in spite of discriminatory experiences, does not show any inclination of return toward Nigeria. The following table summarized all the facts based on diaspora concepts including displacement, a sense of belonging, otherness, and return in Adichie’s *Americanah*.

**Table 1. Diaspric facts of displacement, unbelonging, discrimination, otherness and return in *Americanah***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Displacement</th>
<th>A Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Otherness</th>
<th>Return</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ifemelu</td>
<td>Her mother wished she &quot;prosper in America&quot; (p. 77) because Nigeria was under military dictatorship and even political &quot;strikes were common [in universities]&quot; (p. 76).</td>
<td>Ifemelu &quot;stop[s] faking an American accent&quot; (Adichie, 2013, p. 135) after reaching a sense of unbelonging toward America. She also stops relaxing her hair with chemicals and starts hair braiding. &quot;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&quot; (Adichie, 2013, p. 167).</td>
<td>Discriminated as unprofessional while having hair braids: &quot;I need to look professional for this interview&quot; (p. 160). Discriminated as black while asking to wax her eyebrow in a salon: &quot;we don't do curly&quot; (p. 227).</td>
<td>Return toward Nigeria as the real home which revives African hood. She says to Dike: &quot;maybe you could come and visit me&quot; (p. 292).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt Uju</td>
<td>Uju’s friend says to her: ‘you have to leave immediately. Make sure you clear the house, take everything” (p. 142).</td>
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<td>Discriminated as unprofessional while having hair braids: &quot;I shouldn’t wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional&quot; (p. 92).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dike</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>Discrimination of Dike as the only black boy at school and denying him sunscreen by the teacher: ‘I just want to be regular’ (p. 144).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Obinze</td>
<td>America denies him a visa as a result “he moved to England” (p. 174) to find a way toward America. Fifteen years later, back in Nigeria, when in a friend’s party some women glorify western school’s curriculum, Obinze intervenes and says, “Didn’t we all go to primary schools that taught the Nigerian curriculum?” (Adichie, 2013, p. 21) which indicates his sense of belonging toward Nigeria.</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>Return of Obinze toward Nigeria as the real home: “I’m willing to go back to Nigeria” (p. 293).</td>
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</table>
Conclusion

Diaspora as the issue of everyday life for many people all around the world includes both voluntary and forceful displacements of groups and individuals toward other lands. The critical shared aspects within the concept of diaspora including displacement, a sense of belonging, otherness, and the issue of return are best shown by Adichie in her novel. *Americanah*’s accomplishment is in presenting the hardships of living abroad including that sense of belonging both toward homeland and host land before and after displacement, and also that sense of alienation which is caused as a result of being different. In the world of novel, characters leave their country of origin with the hope of making a new home in another land. But the situation changes in their new land. As Adichie (2013b) says in one of her interviews, “race is such a strange construct because you have to learn what it means to be black in America.” Racial discrimination makes immigrant characters different. Different in terms of being treated inferior by original settlers which brings them a sense of alienation and unbelonging which affect their lives and forces them to return toward their motherland and African values.

References