

# A TRANSNATIONALIST READING OF MIGRATION, IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *ZIKORA* AND *DREAM COUNT*

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## Abstract

African prose fiction has demonstrated significant awareness towards reconstruction of African identity in migrant literature. Chimamanda Adichie, one of the incumbent migrant writers, has produced works that capture transnationalist experiences. Existing studies on her works have focused on cultural integration and gender debates with little attention on comparative study of clashes between cultural injunction and Western ideology. Therefore, this study was designed to examine the conflict between cultural values and Western ideology in the integration process of Africans in diaspora in *Zikora* and *Dream Count* by examining identity negotiation and cultural hybridity in the texts. The study adopts Transnationalist theory by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Gristina Szanton Blanc, and the concept of hybridity by Homi Bhabha to interrogate identity negotiation and cultural hybridity of the migrant characters. The theories are selected to engage the prism of transnationalist experiences ranging from globalisation, gender reconstruction, and migrant integration in the diaspora. Qualitative research method was used to select the two texts and they are subjected to literary analysis. *Zikora* and *Dream Count* examine the clash of cultural consciousness and globalization in the integration process of Africans in the West. It is evident in the novels that identity and cultural standpoints of migrants enter dilemma which often necessitates critical reflection to (re)find their stance. Migrants are instantly struck by their exposure to the other culture and identities in the diaspora which compels them to reassess their own identity. The experiences of *Zikora*, Nafissatou, Amina and Chiamaka highlight the struggle for autonomy, the redefinition of cultural expectations and the constant negotiation of self that characterise the transnational condition. Their journeys are not just personal

but emblematic of the broader experiences of individuals living in a transnational world, where belonging is never fixed, identity is constantly fluid and women must continuously assert their agency and reshape their roles in the family and society. Globalisation continues to shape the experiences of migrants in diaspora and reconstruction of the ideation of home and national identity sets in. The study submits that African migrant fiction engages transnational experiences like globalisation, identity negotiation and cultural hybridity as factors that precondition migrants' existence in the West.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism, identity negotiations, cultural hybridity, Chimamanda Adichie, Zikora, Dream Count.

### Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st Century, African prose fiction has undergone a significant shift, both in its thematic concerns and stylistic representation. While the 20th-century literary movement focused on reclaiming African identity in post-independence, the 21st century has witnessed a shift toward migration narratives, reflecting contemporary global realities such as economic mobility, displacement and transnational identities. Akinsete and Ojo (2021:63) state that contemporary African writers are “largely influenced by their exilic experiences.” Uche et al. (2025:60) observe that “migration and identity are prominent themes in contemporary literature, reflecting the global realities of displacement and cultural integration.” This evolution has prompted the emergence of, not just new styles, but new subgenres, one of which is migrant literature. The increasing prominence of this subgenre reflects broader changes in African literary production and how African writers engage with contemporary realities. Also, the rise of migrant literature signals a departure from earlier preoccupations in African fiction, highlighting new dimensions of storytelling that resonate with present-day experiences. The expansion of this subgenre has contributed to a growing body of work that transcends geographical boundaries, situating African literature within global literary discourses. The proliferation of African writers publishing internationally has further amplified the reach of migrant literature, ensuring that these narratives are not only consumed within the continent but also engaged with diverse audiences beyond Africa.

In this light, it is essential to define migrant literature, especially since it is a complex concept that overlaps with categories like exile literature, immigrant literature, and diasporic literature, and establish its distinctive attribute among these categories. According to Aiyetoro (2023:2), “exile is an age-long phenomenon, prompted by critical issues such as war, violence, famine, human rights abuses, political instability, economic and social deprivation, lack of opportunity, and the desire for greener pastures.” Hence, Connell et al. (1995) asserts that exilic literature often focuses on displacement caused by political persecution or forced migration, whereas immigrant literature is typically concerned with the experiences of voluntary relocation. Diasporic literature reflects a sense of belonging to multiple spaces and an ongoing negotiation between the homeland and the host country (Brah, 1996). These categories, while overlapping, do not entirely encompass the breadth of migrant literature, which extends beyond the binary of forced and voluntary migration. Thus, migrant literature encapsulates a range of experiences, from economic migration to asylum-seeking, from first-generation immigrant narratives to the cultural expressions of subsequent generations (Ponzanesi & Merolla, 2005).

Furthermore, migrant literature challenges the notion of a fixed national literature since postcolonial migration has problematised traditional literary canons by introducing hybrid identities and transnational perspectives (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999). The works of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Ocean Vuong illustrate how migrant literature often straddles multiple linguistic and cultural traditions, thereby resisting rigid classification. This hybridity, as Bhabha (1994) suggests, fosters 'third spaces' where new cultural identities emerge, making it difficult to categorise migrant literature within singular national or thematic frameworks. Another characteristic of migrant literature is its engagement with the concept of 'home'. As noted by Rushdie, migrant writers often construct imaginary homelands, where memory and nostalgia play a crucial role in shaping narratives of belonging (Rushdie, 1992). This notion aligns with Safran's definition of diaspora, which emphasises the role of collective memory in sustaining a connection to an ancestral homeland (Safran, 1991). Migrant literature, therefore, does not merely reflect geographical displacement but also articulates the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration. Given these complexities, it is evident that migrant literature cannot be reduced to a

single definition. Thus, for the purpose of this study, I argue that migrant literature should be understood as a fluid and evolving category that intersects with exile, immigrant, and diasporic literature while maintaining its own distinct characteristics. By foregrounding hybridity, transnationalism, and the negotiation of home, our definition of migrant literature then provides a critical space for exploring the multifaceted experiences of migration in a globalised world.

As previously stated, the thematic concerns of African prose fiction has undergone a significant transformation in the 21st century, with references to different aspects of postcolonial studies, namely colonialism (Omobowale, Akanle and Akinsete, 2019), (post)apartheid reflections (Adebisi, 2015), among others. It now reflects broader socio-political shifts on the continent, particularly engaging with themes of migration, transnational identity and displacement. Bashir (2021) argues that contemporary African writers have written about how migration affects young Africans that travel to Europe for greener pastures and other related reasons. Chimamanda Adichie exemplifies this shift through her works, exploring the complexities of migration, belonging, and identity negotiation in a globalised world, offering nuanced representations of diasporic experiences, and reflecting the changing concerns of contemporary Nigerian literature. For instance, Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is a seminal text that provides an intricate examination of transnational identity. Unlike early African migration narratives like Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), which often depicted exile as a purely traumatic experience, Adichie presents migration as a complex and multifaceted journey. Ifemelu, the novel's protagonist, experiences what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the 'third space,' where hybrid identities emerge, resisting simplistic national or cultural categorisations. Adichie's exploration of racial consciousness in the U.S. further situates her work within global discourses on migration, identity and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

Similarly, several contemporary Nigerian writers have engaged with migrant experiences in their works. Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) presents a meditative, introspective approach to migration, focusing on alienation and urban solitude through its protagonist, Julius, a Nigerian-German psychiatrist, navigating life

in New York. Also, Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2013) explores the intersection of gender, migration, and professional ambition as the novel's protagonist, Deola, negotiates her identity between Lagos and London. Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015) and *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) also engage with transnational themes, particularly the psychological impact of migration and exile. These authors collectively contribute to an evolving body of Nigerian literature that reflects the realities of globalisation and displacement. However, Adichie's unique contribution lies in her ability to merge personal and political narratives, making migration a lens through which broader social issues like race, gender, and class are examined. This perspective marks a departure from earlier narratives that often framed migration solely as a survival strategy as Adichie's protagonists navigate migration as a process of self-discovery, engaging with multiple cultures while interrogating their own positions within them.

### Theoretical framework

Transnationalist theory goes beyond traditional notions of nationality and borders, exploring how individuals maintain multiple, simultaneous affiliations across different places and how migration, identity and the global exchange of ideas shape lives. Its major proponents, Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Gristina Szanton Blanc define transnationalism as "the process by which migrants create and sustain social relations that connect both their home and host societies" (1992). In other words, they argue that migrants are not uprooted individuals but active participants in two or more societies simultaneously. The theory also intersects with cultural hybridity, a concept developed by Homi K. Bhabha. To him, transnationalism can be referred to as "cultural, social and economic processes that create new forms of hybridity, ambiguity and ambivalence, challenging traditional notions of identity, culture and nationhood" (Bhabha, 1994:213). In his concept of cultural hybridity, Bhabha explains that culture is neither pure or fixed but develops by contact, negotiation, and exchange between different peoples. He argues that when cultures meet, a new identity emerges which he refers to as 'third place,' where meanings are reshaped and old boundaries become unstable (Bhabha, 1994:56). These two concepts are adopted to interrogate identity negotiation and cultural hybridity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Zikora* and *Dream Count*. For instance, the boundaries of identity in *Zikora* are continually shifting and

redefining through the experience of Zikora, the novel's protagonist. The story emphasises how identities are not fixed but are instead fluid and continuously shaped by external forces—such as migration, exposure to new cultures and personal experiences. While Zikora physically resides in the U.S., she is emotionally tethered to Nigeria through her family and cultural values. Likewise, in *Dream Count*, Chiamaka's sense of home aligns with identity negotiation where she holds multiple identities in tension. She neither rejects Nigeria nor fully embraces America; rather, she exists in a liminal space where neither location completely fulfills her. These novels speak to the realities of living in a transnational world, where characters constantly negotiate their identities between overlapping and often conflicting cultural and national spheres.

### Identity Negotiation and Cultural Hybridity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Zikora* and *Dream Count*

Chimamanda Adichie adopts the experiences of her characters in the two texts to portray the realities of African migrants in the West as they grapple with identity crisis and cultural hybridity. As noted by Joseph and Borah (2025:1), in Kekeghe et al. (2026:7), “migrations often place individuals into spaces that lack stability, familiarity and personal connection,” which often lead to individuals finding their identity in the diaspora. In the novel *Zikora*, the eponymous character's life, Zikora, is shaped by the pressures of both traditional Nigerian society and the more liberal Western ideals. Adichie explores the tension between these two worlds through Zikora's experience. Zikora's pregnancy becomes a site where her identity as a Nigerian woman, as an educated woman in the U.S. and as a woman making choices for herself, all intersect. This shifting identity is a key feature of transnationalist theory. In a world where the boundaries between cultures, countries and identities are increasingly porous, individuals like Zikora must navigate the complexities of a globalised world that often does not recognise or accommodate the traditional, fixed categories of identity.

Although her education in the United States gives her a more progressive and autonomous worldview, she is constrained by the cultural expectations of her Nigerian heritage, particularly regarding gender roles and the societal pressures

to marry and bear children. The conflicting demands of these two spaces illustrate the complexities of transnational identity. Zikora is caught between two cultures, neither of which wholly accommodate her desires and aspirations. The story critiques the idea that one's identity can be easily split between two distinct national or cultural spaces. Zikora cannot simply embrace one identity over the other; her existence is transnational, and her experience is shaped by the simultaneous pull of both worlds. This reflects the challenges many migrants face in a globalised world, where they navigate multiple cultural and national influences in their everyday lives.

Similarly, Nafissatou's story in *Dream Count* illustrates the tensions of cultural hybridity and identity negotiation in a migrant's experience. Her life is shaped by a duality—her past in Guinea and her present in America—forcing her to navigate the space between cultural preservation and assimilation. Central to this struggle is her relationship with her daughter, Amina, whose adaptation to American culture creates an emotional and linguistic distance between them. Nafissatou envisions America as a place of opportunity, particularly for Amina, whose education and future she sees as paramount. This aspiration is evident in the sacrifices she makes, including her relentless work ethic and willingness to accept help from Chiamaka. However, this pursuit of a better life comes at a cost as reflected below:

Amina was taking AP classes, her American accent faultless, and Amina herself sometimes bewildering in her mix of familiarity and foreignness. Her childish superiority had emerged, she now refused to eat bread and mayonnaise. Mayonnaise is a condiment in a sandwich, it's butter you should eat on bread, she said. Nafissatou thought: she will return to our patterns of eating whenever she seeks comfort.

Each time Amina slipped more  
English in her Pular, Nafissatou  
mourned a small loss, and yet  
she wanted for Amina this  
ability to own two worlds.  
(199)

Amina's embrace of American culture—her fluency in English, her shifting values and her growing independence—gradually erodes the deep cultural bond she once shared with her mother. Nafissatou notices this shift when Amina begins questioning cultural traditions, such as marriage customs, in ways that unsettle her mother. When Amina expresses her willingness to marry outside their Fula heritage, Nafissatou feels a profound loss, as she has always assumed her daughter would adhere to their community's expectations: "Amina was never scandalised by Amina, but this she did not approve of, the thought of marrying a man who was not Fula felt to her a painful blasphemy". As Kekeghe et al. submit, migration gives rise to absence and displacement, which creates void in the mental processes of both the migrant and his family members (2026:7). Thus, this moment in Nafissatou and Amina's journey exposes the generational and cultural rupture caused by migration.

Hence, cultural hybridity and blending are compelling components in realizing the identity of migrants in diaspora. Zikora's life in the United States, away from her home in Nigeria, exemplifies the creation of a hybrid identity. She does not simply embody a singular Nigerian or American identity but exists in a space between both worlds. This hybrid identity is seen in Zikora's choices and her internal conflict. Her Nigerian upbringing imbued her with a sense of duty to her family, while her exposure to Western values encouraged her to prioritise her own personal freedom. The decision to keep the child, despite her non-traditional path as a single mother, could be read as an embodiment of this hybridity. She does not follow the traditional Nigerian path of marriage before motherhood, but she also does not entirely reject her cultural heritage. Instead, she carves a new path, reflecting a synthesis of these cultural influences. The experience of hybridity is one of constant negotiation, a defining feature of the transnational condition. Zikora is neither entirely Western nor fully Nigerian but instead lives a life that combines elements of both. Adichie portrays this negotiation in the emotional turmoil and complex decisions Zikora faces,

highlighting the broader impact of global interconnectedness on identity formation.

However, despite the tension between her Nigerian heritage and her American lifestyle, Zikora's story ultimately reflects cultural reaffirmation and resistance. As Zikora grapples with the expectations of her Nigerian background and the more liberal freedoms of the U.S., she actively resists the role that has been prescribed for her by both cultures. This resistance can be seen in her decision to keep the child and to reject the pressure from her father to adhere to a more conventional path. Zikora's resistance is not merely an act of rebellion; it is a complex negotiation of power, choice and identity. In a transnational world, individuals are not passive recipients of cultural norms but active participants who can choose to embrace, reject or hybridise the cultural values they inherit. Zikora's decisions represent an assertion of agency, demonstrating that even within the constraints of cultural norms and familial expectations, individuals can carve out spaces for autonomy and redefine their roles. This transnational lens emphasises that such acts of resistance are common among individuals navigating multiple cultures. Adichie's portrayal of Zikora's journey is a reflection of the broader experience of many people who must challenge and negotiate the expectations of both their homeland and their adopted countries.

Nafissatou, unlike Amina, struggles with this hybridity. Her longing for a connection to her past manifests in her relationships with other African immigrants, particularly Chiamaka. Yet, even in these interactions, she remains an outsider. Chiamaka, who has spent years in America, easily navigates both worlds but for Nafissatou, the cultural divide remains insurmountable. When she first meets Chiamaka, she is taken aback by her openness, a trait she associates with Americans: "It seemed to Nafissatou to be too much information, but Americans did that all the time, give details that nobody had asked them for, and Chiamaka must have lived a long time in America" (194). This moment highlights Nafissatou's difficulty in adjusting to the cultural norms of her new environment, reinforcing her status as someone who remains caught between two worlds.

Thus unlike Nafissatou, Chiamaka's character in *Dream Count* embodies the complexities of cultural hybridity that define contemporary Nigerian migrant

fiction. Adichie constructs Chiamaka as a postcolonial subject that navigates the liminal space between Nigeria and America, and her identity continuously shifting in response to her surroundings. Her confession, "I have always longed to be known, truly known, by another human being" (1), underscores a profound existential yearning, reflecting the fractured selfhood characteristic of diasporic individuals. This longing to be 'seen' and understood encapsulates her alienation, as she exists between two cultural realities, never fully belonging to either.

Adichie explores this hybridity in Chiamaka's relationships with particularly Zikora and Darnell. Chiamaka's interactions with Zikora, another Nigerian immigrant, reveals shared cultural nostalgia, yet also exposes how each woman assimilates differently into American life. Meanwhile, her relationship with Darnell, an African American academic, highlights the power dynamics and unspoken resentments in Black transnational encounters. Darnell often reminds Chiamaka of her privileged Nigerian background, reinforcing the socio-historical fissures between African and African American identities. His casual remark:

"So how are you and Chia related again?" Darnell asked.  
 "Because you know Chia's people probably sold my people? All that old Igbo money going back centuries. They sold more than palm fruit on that West African coast, because they certainly made a killing." (53)

This reveals a deep-seated frustration, reducing complex histories of colonialism and migration into a simplistic, confrontational narrative. Chiamaka's silence as response suggests her awareness of these tensions, yet also her unwillingness or inability to fully bridge the divide. Chiamaka's reflections on place further illustrate her cultural dislocation. Her ambivalence toward New York and Paris highlights the paradox of the Western metropolis in migrant narratives, both alluring and alienating. She describes New York's 'tart edge' (13) and 'anonymity [that] sings' (13), a city that makes her feel 'unmoored, like a pebble rattling in a

large indifferent gourd'. Similarly, she critiques Paris, stating, 'Paris wears its badge of specialness too heavily, and therefore gracelessly' (13). Her experiences in both cities reveal her inability to find a stable sense of belonging, reinforcing the alienation inherent in diasporic existence.

Darnell, however, complicates this sense of displacement. He romanticizes Paris, but only through the lens of James Baldwin and the African American expatriate experience. He dismisses mainstream appreciation of the city, insisting that "For him, a thing had value simply by being obscure" (59). His intellectual elitism and performative detachment gradually erode Chiamaka's confidence. She begins to mold herself to his expectations, suppressing her own pleasures to maintain his approval. A pivotal moment occurs when she orders a mimosa at a Parisian bar. The seemingly innocuous act incites Darnell's derision: "Don't take her seriously... A mimosa is a vulgar drink". This public humiliation crystallizes the power imbalance in their relationship—his control, her acquiescence. In hindsight, Chiamaka recognizes her "weakness in such sharp relief, being pliant and docile in exchange for nothing". Through Chiamaka's experiences, the author critiques the illusion of cultural belonging in the diaspora. Chiamaka is neither fully Nigerian nor fully American, oscillating between the two without ever feeling at home. Her longing to be "truly known" is not merely romantic, but emblematic of the postcolonial subject's quest for wholeness in a world that continually fractures identity. In the end, she realizes that true self-knowledge cannot be anchored in external validation, especially not from men like Darnell, whose own insecurities manifest in domination. This revelation signals the beginning of her self-reclamation, even if the path remains uncertain.

### Conclusion,

Chimamanda Adichie's *Zikora* and *Dream Count* are rich exploration of the complexities of identity, migration, culture and gender in the context of transnationalism and hybridity. By focusing on Zikora, Nafissatou, Amina and Chiamaka's emotional and psychological struggles as they navigate the tension between their Nigerian heritage and lives in the U.S., Adichie provides a poignant critique of how migration, globalisation and cultural hybridity shape contemporary lives. The texts emphasise the complexity of belonging, the

shifting boundaries of identity and the intersectionality of gender, race and class in a world that is increasingly interconnected. Through *Zikora* and Chiamaka's experiences, Adichie highlights the struggle for autonomy, the redefinition of cultural expectations and the constant negotiation of self that characterise the transnational condition. Their journeys are not just personal but emblematic of the broader experiences of individuals living in a transnational world, where belonging is never fixed, identity is constantly fluid and women must continuously assert their agency and reshape their roles in the family and society. However, while Chiamaka succumbs to her swaying choices between her traditional Nigerian culture and the Western world, without fully belonging to any, *Zikora* resists the role that has been prescribed for her by both cultures. Thus, the two novels illustrate how global forces affect the individual at a personal level, creating tension, growth and transformation in the search for selfhood in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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