The Context: Journal of English Studies
Volume 13, Issue 3, April 2026
ISSN: 2349-4948
www.thecontext.in

Research Article

Transcultural Feminist Agency and the Limits of Portability: Re-reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* Through the Lagos Return Narrative

Dr. Mamta Kishanrao Jonipelliwar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Baliram Patil Arts, Commerce and Science College, Kinwat, Maharashtra, India;
mamtasnemmaniwar@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5 April 2026

DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19429705

Abstract: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) has attracted sustained scholarly interest for its treatment of race, diaspora, and Black women's experience in the United States. Existing research focuses almost entirely on the novel's American sections, leaving the Lagos return narrative largely underanalyzed. This paper argues that the return to Lagos is not a narrative resolution but a theoretical site where feminist agency, built within one cultural context, encounters the limits of its portability. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subject, Oyeronke Oyewumi's African feminist epistemology, Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, and Chandra Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism, the paper reads the Lagos chapters as a sustained examination of how feminist consciousness must be rebuilt when the cultural conditions that shaped it no longer apply. The paper identifies a productive third path between feminist regression and Western feminist imperialism, situated in Nnaemeka's model of negotiated feminist practice.

Keywords: transcultural feminism; Lagos return narrative; nego-feminism; African feminist epistemology; portability of agency

ISSN 2349-4948

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013) tells the story of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who emigrates to the United States, builds a life and a feminist consciousness there, and then returns to Lagos after more than a decade abroad. The bulk of academic attention to the novel focuses on Ifemelu's American years, particularly her racial awakening, blog writing, and the intersection of race and gender in her professional and romantic life. These are genuinely rich areas of analysis. However, the novel's final movement, Ifemelu's decision to return to Nigeria and the process of readjustment that follows, has attracted far less sustained scholarly engagement. This is a significant gap in the literature, and filling it requires not just a closer reading of the Lagos chapters but a rethinking of the theoretical frameworks critics have used to approach Adichie's work.

The Lagos return narrative raises questions that the American narrative alone cannot answer. What happens to feminist agency when the cultural context in which it was formed changes entirely? Can a feminist consciousness shaped by American racial politics, American professional culture, and American intersectional theory function effectively in Lagos? Moreover, if it cannot function as-is, does that mean it must be abandoned, or can it be renegotiated into something new? These questions matter beyond Adichie's novel. They speak to a persistent tension in feminist theory between the universalist claim that women's rights and feminist principles transcend cultural boundaries and the situationist insight that feminist agency is always developed within specific material and cultural conditions.

This paper argues that *Americanah* does not endorse either pure universalism or cultural relativism. Instead, the Lagos return narrative offers a more nuanced account: feminist agency has a genuinely portable core, but the forms through which it is expressed, the strategies, language, and frameworks that give it traction in the world, are deeply contextual. When Ifemelu returns to Lagos, she does not lose her feminism. She loses the particular expression of feminism she developed in America, and she must work to develop a different one. This process is painful, disorienting, and ultimately productive. It is also, this paper argues, the most theoretically ambitious thing the novel does.

Theoretical Framework

The most immediately useful theoretical framework for approaching Ifemelu's transcultural feminist trajectory is Rosi Braidotti's concept of the nomadic subject. Braidotti argues that feminist subjectivity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process, always shaped by the specific cultural, political, and material conditions through which a subject moves. The nomadic feminist, for Braidotti, maintains 'the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior' (Braidotti 5). This is not simply a romantic celebration of movement. It is a structural claim about how feminist selfhood is made: not once, in a moment of consciousness-raising, but continuously, through encounter with new forms of power and exclusion.

Braidotti's framework captures something real about Ifemelu's experience. Her feminist awareness was not present when she left Nigeria as a young woman. It grew through specific encounters: the experience of racial classification in the United States, the professional and romantic negotiations of immigrant life, the disciplinary experience of trying to make a voice heard across lines of race and national origin. By the time she leaves for Lagos, she has become a particular kind of feminist subject, one shaped by American intersectional politics, by the specific visibility politics of Black womanhood in the United States, and by the experience of speaking to an audience of Black Americans through her blog. However, Braidotti's framework requires significant qualification before it can be applied to a postcolonial African context. The nomadic subject runs the risk of being theorized too freely, too unconstrained by the specific histories of colonialism, gender politics, and cultural knowledge that shape African women's lives. Here, two additional theoretical voices become essential.

Oyeronke Oyewumi's foundational argument in *The Invention of Women* (1997) is that gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization, and that applying Western gender categories to African societies constitutes an epistemic distortion. As Oyewumi puts it, colonial modernity imposed 'a Western bio-logic of gender' onto societies that had organized social difference on other bases (Oyewumi 4). The implications of reading Americanah are significant. When Ifemelu returns to Lagos, she encounters a social world that is certainly gendered in the contemporary sense, shaped by both precolonial traditions and the colonial and postcolonial reorganization of those traditions. However, the specific forms that gender takes in Lagos, the expectations, the hierarchies, the silences, and the permissible are not identical to the gender politics that Ifemelu learned to read in America. Her American feminist toolkit was built for a different epistemological environment.

Chandra Mohanty's essay 'Under Western Eyes' (1988) offers the third essential component of this paper's theoretical framework. Mohanty demonstrates that Western feminist scholarship has consistently produced a reductive, homogenizing image of 'Third World women,' an image that serves the needs of Western feminist self-definition rather than the complex realities of women in postcolonial societies (Mohanty 64). Mohanty's critique applies not only to Western academic feminism but to any feminism that exports its categories without attending to the local conditions that those categories encounter. Ifemelu's American feminist consciousness is itself a form of positioned knowledge. It was produced within a specific geopolitical and cultural setting, and it carries that setting's assumptions with it when it travels. The task the Lagos narrative sets for Ifemelu is precisely to recognize which of her assumptions do not survive translation and to build a new feminist practice from what remains.

Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism, introduced in her 2004 essay in *Signs*, provides the most locally calibrated framework for understanding what that new practice might look like. Nnaemeka argues that African women's feminist strategies have historically operated through negotiation rather than confrontation, through the building of coalitions and the exploitation of available social structures rather than adversarial opposition to them (Nnaemeka 363). She calls this 'nego-

ISSN 2349-4948

feminism,' playing on both 'negotiation' and the phrase 'no ego,' to signal a form of feminist practice that does not center individual self-assertion as its primary mode. This framework illuminates the Lagos chapters of *Americanah* in ways that no Western feminist theory quite manages, because it starts from the actual conditions of African women's lives rather than from imported principles.

Constructing Feminist Subjectivity in America

Ifemelu's development as a feminist subject in America is inseparable from her racial awakening. She arrives in the United States as a young woman who, by her own account, had not previously considered herself Black. Race, in the American sense, is a category she has to learn to inhabit. This process is not simply an education in racial taxonomy. It is a restructuring of her self-understanding, her social position, and her available forms of resistance. The blog that she eventually starts, titled 'Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black,' becomes the space where she works through this transformation publicly, using the outsider's perspective to denaturalize American racial assumptions for her readers. In one of the blog posts reproduced in the novel, she addresses new African immigrants directly: 'Dear Non-American Black, when you choose to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I am Jamaican or I am Ghanaian. America does not care' (Adichie 220). This is a moment of genuine political clarity, but it is also a claim whose authority rests entirely on its American context. Outside of that context, it loses its explanatory power.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality is the theoretical language most naturally suited to Ifemelu's American experience. Crenshaw argues that the experiences of women of color cannot be understood through either a race-only or a gender-only lens, because 'the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately' (Crenshaw 1244). Ifemelu does not simply become aware of race or gender in America. She becomes aware of how the two interact to position her in specific and compounding ways: as a Black woman in the American labor market, as a Black woman in romantic relationships with both white and Black American men, and as a Black woman speaking publicly about race in a media environment that has its own investments in how that speech is received. Each of these intersections teaches her something that feeds into her feminist practice. However, each of these intersections is also specific to the American racial formation. Race and gender interact differently in Lagos, and the specifically American lessons do not map cleanly onto those different interactions.

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity is useful here for understanding what kind of self Ifemelu builds in America. Hall distinguishes between two ways of thinking about cultural identity: as a fixed essence that needs to be recovered or expressed, and as a production that is 'never complete, always in process' (Hall 222). Ifemelu's American feminist selfhood is emphatically the second kind. It is not the expression of something she always already was. It is built through encounter, through discomfort, through the labor of making sense of a social world that constantly assigns her meanings

ISSN 2349-4948

she did not choose. This processual quality is what makes it so mobile and so adaptable within the American context. However, it is also what makes it fragile when the context changes, because a self that is produced through encounter with a specific social world is not automatically equipped to function in a very different one. When Ifemelu returns to Lagos, she brings a processual feminist self that was processed in and by America. It will need to be reprocessed by Lagos.

Mohanty's later work in *Feminism without Borders* (2003) makes the additional point that feminist solidarity across cultural boundaries requires genuine epistemic humility, a willingness to recognize the limitations of one's own knowledge rather than assuming that what one has learned in one context applies universally. 'Feminist solidarity,' Mohanty writes, 'requires that we attend to the local and specific while keeping the cross-cultural and global in view' (Mohanty 84). Ifemelu has developed a sophisticated cross-cultural and global view of race and gender through her blog writing. What she perhaps has not developed is the local, specific knowledge of Lagos that her feminist practice will need when she returns. The American narrative of the novel is the story of how she builds intersectional knowledge through discomfort. The Lagos narrative is the story of how she has to begin that process again.

The Dynamics of Return: Lagos as a Feminist Challenge

When Ifemelu returns to Lagos, the novel enters a very different register. The disorientation of homecoming is mixed with the specific disorientation of the returnee. This person left one world and returned to find that both the world and herself had changed in incompatible ways. Lagos is still recognizable: still loud, still chaotic, still charged with the energy and frustration of a West African megacity under pressure. However, Ifemelu cannot simply inhabit it the way she once did. Her way of reading social situations, her expectations of how gender relations work in professional and personal contexts, her habits of naming and analyzing power: all of these carry the marks of her American formation. She is, in the novel's own term, a Nigerpolitan, a category that describes both a social type and a problem of belonging.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's work on African diaspora studies helps theorize what Ifemelu experiences as a returnee. Zeleza argues that the African diaspora is not a simple condition of exile or nostalgia but a complex set of formations that shape the identities of those who leave and those who stay in mutually constitutive ways (Zeleza 7). The returnee does not simply recover a pre-emigration identity. The diaspora experience has permanently altered their relationship to the home country, and the home country has changed in their absence. This double alteration is exactly what *Americanah* captures in the Lagos chapters. Ifemelu is not the woman who left, and Lagos is not the city she left. Her feminist consciousness, developed in dialogue with American social conditions, encounters a Lagos with its own gender politics, its own forms of feminist possibility and constraint.

James Clifford's influential account of diasporic consciousness emphasizes what he calls the 'constitutive tension' between roots and routes: the pull of the homeland as an origin point and the shaping power of the routes traveled, the paths of emigration

ISSN 2349-4948

and return (Clifford 308). This tension is structurally built into Ifemelu's Lagos experience. Her feminist consciousness developed through specific routes: the routes she traveled through American racial geography, and the intellectual routes she traced as she developed her blog's analysis of race and gender. When she returns, she returns to roots: to social networks, family expectations, professional hierarchies, and gender norms of a Lagos with its own logic. The tension between what her routes have taught her and what her roots require of her is the animating dynamic of the novel's final section.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space offers one way to theorize the productive dimension of this tension. Bhabha argues that cultural meaning is always produced in the interstices between established cultural positions, in hybrid zones where neither original cultural system operates in its pure form (Bhabha 37). Ifemelu's Lagos is a third space in this sense. She is not the traditional Nigerian woman that family members and some professional contacts expect her to be. She is equally not the American feminist she might have become had she remained in the United States. She occupies a genuinely hybrid position, one that is not defined by either of its constituent cultures but by the new possibilities and new frustrations that their encounter generates. This hybrid position is uncomfortable. However, discomfort, as Sara Ahmed argues, can be a productive affective state, one that makes visible the norms that produce it by refusing to let the subject settle (Ahmed 154).

William Safran's foundational discussion of diaspora and return identifies returnees as potential cultural bridges: people whose experience of two worlds equips them to introduce new perspectives into the societies they return to (Safran 91). This optimistic reading of returnee experience is one that *Americanah* explores but complicates. Ifemelu introduces new perspectives in Lagos through her journalism, the blog she starts about Lagos life, and her social circle of other Nigerian returnees who are collectively working out what it means to come back. However, the bridging role is not straightforward. The perspectives Ifemelu brings are not straightforwardly applicable to the Lagos she encounters, and the novel does not pretend otherwise.

Portability and Its Limits: What Feminist Agency Cannot Cross

The central theoretical question raised by the Lagos narrative is whether feminist agency is portable. The novel's answer is carefully qualified. It is not that feminism as such is culturally specific, a claim that would reduce to cultural relativism and the implicit acceptance of gender inequality wherever it can be framed as local tradition. What is culturally specific is the particular form that feminist agency takes: the strategies, language, and conceptual frameworks through which feminist awareness translates into feminist action. These forms are built for the social environments in which they develop, and they lose traction when those environments change.

The clearest example of this limit in the Lagos narrative involves the social expectations around marriage and domestic life. In Lagos, as in much of West African society, pressure to marry operates through different mechanisms and carries different social weight than in the United States. The American feminist strategies Ifemelu has

ISSN 2349-4948

developed, including a discourse of personal choice, career priority, and the refusal to treat marriage as a condition of female success, do not directly address the specific textures of Lagos's gendered social expectations. Ifi Amadiume's scholarship on gender and kinship structures in West African societies demonstrates that gender relations are organized through kinship networks, economic interdependence, and communal obligations that Western feminist frameworks were not built to analyze (Amadiume 7). Ifemelu's return confronts her with these structures not as an outside observer but as someone subject to them, with family and social networks that make demands on her.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's work on African women's writing makes the related point that African feminist literary traditions have consistently developed from within the specifics of African social arrangements rather than by importing Western categories (Ogunyemi 109). The womanism that Ogunyemi traces in Nigerian women's writing is not simply a lighter version of Western feminism. It is a practice oriented differently, taking community, family, and social interdependence as givens rather than problems to be solved. Ifemelu's American feminism is oriented differently. It was built in a context that valorizes individual assertiveness, direct naming of power, and the refusal of social expectations as forms of feminist resistance. These orientations are not wrong. However, they do not map cleanly onto a Lagos social world with its own feminist possibilities, embedded in distinct social logics.

Gayatri Spivak's analysis of epistemic violence is relevant here, though it requires careful application. Spivak's original argument concerns the violence done to colonized subjects by colonial systems of knowledge that render their forms of self-understanding illegible (Spivak 281). Ifemelu's situation is not colonial in this sense, but a structurally analogous dynamic is at work in her relationship to Lagos. Her American feminist framework constitutes a form of knowledge that, if applied without sensitivity to local conditions, risks rendering illegible the feminist strategies that Lagos women have developed within their own social context. The novel is not heavy-handed about this. However, it does insist that Ifemelu's American knowledge is partial, and that recognizing its partiality is a condition of developing a more adequate feminist practice for Lagos.

Adichie's own voice in *We Should All Be Feminists* is illuminating here. She writes that 'the problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are' (Adichie 26). Applied to the question of transcultural feminist agency, this formulation cuts both ways. The gender norms of Lagos that constrain Ifemelu are prescriptive, telling her what a woman of her age and status should be doing, whom she should marry, and what ambitions are appropriate for her. However, an American feminist framework that tells her what resisting those norms should look like is also prescriptive. The novel navigates between these two forms of prescription by insisting on the priority of Ifemelu's own situated experience, her feelings about Lagos, her specific relationships, and her particular professional situation as the ground from which a new feminist practice must grow.

ISSN 2349-4948

Nego-Feminism and the Question of Third-Space Synthesis

If the limits of portability are real, what replaces a portable feminism? The novel does not suggest that Ifemelu abandons her feminist consciousness and returns to pre-feminist Nigerian social scripts. Nor does it suggest that she successfully applies her American framework to Lagos without modification. What it suggests is a third path, one that resonates strongly with Nnaemeka's nego-feminism and with Bhabha's notion of the third space.

Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, as she elaborates it in her 2004 Signs essay, is not a compromise in the weak sense of surrendering feminist principles under social pressure. It is rather a recognition that feminist practice in the African context has always succeeded by working with the grain of social possibility rather than against it in the confrontational style that Western feminist traditions valorize. As Nnaemeka argues, nego-feminism 'starts with what is possible and works outward from there' (Nnaemeka 377). This is not quietism. It is a strategic reorientation that takes the specific conditions of African women's lives seriously as the starting point for feminist action. The Nigerpolitan Club scenes in *Americanah* show Ifemelu beginning this reorientation, slowly and not always comfortably.

The Nigerpolitan discussions are among the most analytically dense sections of the Lagos narrative. The returnees who gather there are collectively working out what it means to have come back: what to do with the perspectives, habits, and standards they brought from abroad, and how to engage with a Lagos that does not always recognize those perspectives as legitimate. The conversations are sometimes awkward, sometimes self-congratulatory, sometimes genuinely searching. What they show is that no smooth synthesis is available. The returnee feminist cannot simply merge her American framework with Lagos social reality and get a perfectly calibrated new feminism. What she can do is begin the work of negotiation, identifying where her feminist principles do apply in Lagos and where they need to be expressed differently.

bell hooks argues in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that feminist practice is most powerful when it is located in specific social relations rather than derived from abstract principles (hooks 24). This is exactly what the Lagos narrative demands of Ifemelu. Her American feminist practice was relatively abstract, operating through a blog, analytical distance, and the observer's perspective. In Lagos, she has to practice feminism amid specific relationships: with Obinze, with her family, with professional contacts, and with former friends who have developed their own ways of navigating Lagos's gender politics in her absence. This transition from analytical distance to relational embeddedness is at once a loss and a gain.

The recovery of her relationship with Obinze is often read through a purely romantic lens, but a feminist reading is more interesting. Obinze is, in the novel's terms, a man who does not require Ifemelu to be smaller than she is, who engages with her feminist views without feeling threatened, and who recognizes her professional and intellectual agency as conditions, not obstacles, to genuine intimacy. What makes the relationship feminist in the strongest sense is not only that Obinze is a supportive

ISSN 2349-4948

partner but that Ifemelu has developed enough flexibility in her feminist practice to navigate a relationship within Lagos's social constraints without abandoning what she believes. This is negotiation in Nnaemeka's sense: working with available social materials to make feminist principles real, rather than insisting on a purity of feminist expression that the context cannot support.

Stuart Hall's argument about cultural identity as an ongoing production rather than a fixed essence also applies here. The Lagos narrative does not show Ifemelu recovering a true Nigerian self that her American years had covered over. It shows her producing a new self, one that is neither straightforwardly American nor straightforwardly Nigerian, but something specific to the experience of having been in both places and having slowly learned how to be in Lagos again. This new self is more flexible than the American feminist she was, not because she has compromised her principles, but because she has learned that feminist principles can be expressed through different strategies in different contexts.

Conclusion

Americanah is a novel that takes feminist theory seriously enough to test it against the complexities of actual women's lives. The Lagos return narrative, which has been critically underread in existing scholarship, is where that testing is most rigorous and most productive. By staging Ifemelu's return as a scene of feminist disorientation and renegotiation rather than resolution, Adichie challenges the universalizing tendencies that have often characterized both Western feminist theory and popular feminist discourse. Feminist agency is real and durable in the novel. However, it is not portable without cost, and the cost is not simply discomfort. It is the labor of developing a new feminist practice suited to different conditions and using different tools.

What this reading suggests for feminist literary scholarship is that the critical bias toward American or Western sections of transnational novels is itself a form of the universalism that those novels often critique. *Americanah* asks readers to take the Lagos narrative as seriously as the American narrative. When scholars have done so, as this paper attempts to do, what emerges is a richer, more difficult, and more honest account of what feminist agency looks like in the world: not a set of principles that travel intact across cultural boundaries, but a practice that must be rebuilt, with different materials and on different ground, every time the ground shifts. That rebuilding is not a failure. In Adichie's novel, it is the most feminist thing a woman can do.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ISSN 2349-4948

Works cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. Knopf, 2013.

---. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Anchor Books, 2014.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.

Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, 1987.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. 2nd ed., Columbia UP, 2011.

Clifford, James. 'Diasporas.' *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1994, pp. 302–338.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.' *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora.' *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 222–237.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 2000.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.' *Feminist Review*, vol. 30, 1988, pp. 61–88.

---. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke UP, 2003.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. 'Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 357–385.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. U of Chicago P, 1996.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Safran, William. 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return.' *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, pp. 83–99.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. 'African Diasporas: Toward a Global History.' *African Studies Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1–19.