FRONTIERS INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (FIJIS)
ISSN: 3080-1346 (Online); 3080-1338 (Print)
Vol 1. No 1. February, 2026
https://fijis-uba.com

The Ordeal of African Immigrants in Contemporary America: Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adechie's *Americanah* and No Violet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names.*

Ngong Joseph Sam
The University of Maroua

Abstract

The plight of African immigrants seeking better opportunities abroad has become increasingly awful in the 21st century. Every week, hundreds of Africans lose their lives attempting to reach Europe and the United States through illegal migration routes. Driven by abject poverty, unemployment, political instability, and violence in their home countries, many risks dangerous journeys in hope of a better future. Thousands are detained at borders, and many perish in deserts and seas along their way. As the American Senate and countries within the European Union debate immigration policies, focusing on undocumented immigrants, deportation, and visa quotas for skilled workers, the experiences of those who do arrive are often marked by hardship. African immigrants in America face significant challenges, which include racial discrimination, identity crisis, cultural dislocation, and the struggle for integration in a multicultural society (Amstutz, 2015). This paper explores these ordeals through a critical analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and NoViolet Bulawayo We Need New Names. It interrogates the promise of the American dream in the lives of African immigrants. Framed by African American and Postcolonial literary theories, the study contends that for many immigrants, the promise of a better life is complicated by systemic and personal struggles, ultimately raising the question of whether "home" might offer a more authentic sense of belonging. The findings indicate that neither America nor Europe serves as a safe haven for African immigrants. Adiche and Bulawayo have thus contributed significantly to the discourse on immigration in contemporary African and diaspora fiction. Their novels underscore the importance of understanding the immigrant experience as an interplay of opportunity and disillusionment.

Key words: immigration, African American, identity, racism, integration and multiculturalism

1 Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a significant influx of African immigrants to the United States, driven by a myriad of factors including the allure of the American dream which has to do with economic opportunities,

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

political instability, and the pursuit of a better quality of life. Darling's dream in *We Need New Names* is to travel to America to live like her relative. Despite the pejorative labels often attached to some African nations as "rags of countries" or "shithole countries", the American dream of a better future continues to persuade many African youths to seek opportunities overseas. Except for relatively stable countries such as South Africa, Botswana and Tanzania, nations like Congo, Somalia, Niger and Sudan are often perceived as "rag countries". These countries are regarded by immigrants as a terrible place of hunger, instability and poverty (Bulawayo, p. 26). Paradoxically, although Africa is blessed with abundance of natural resources and many households still manage to meet their basic needs, the dominant narrative manipulates African citizens to look for "greener pastures" in Europe and America. This has led to a phenomenon where some "bush fallers" abandon local agricultural enterprises, such as coco farms and plantations in favour of uncertain futures for America. As a result, they languish in untold misery and abject poverty across the Atlantic Ocean. The migration experience is elucidated in Immigrant and Diasporic literature, particularly in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. Through their narratives, Adichie and Bulawayo illuminate the issues encountered by African immigrants such as racism, identity crisis, linguistic adaptation, displacement, assimilation and disillusionment. These issues manifest across various sectors which include education, employment, housing, health care, justice system and efforts of social integration in the United States. This paper traces the historical and contemporary experiences of African immigrants from the period of slavery to the present day. It also seeks to investigate how African immigrants overcome these challenges in the United States of America as represented in the above-mentioned literary works. In order to grapple with the issues, this paper poses the following research questions: How do the authors illuminate the challenges faced by African immigrants in their novels? How do the selected novels use character experience to critique "greener pastures" narratives and reveal the paradox of the African immigrant experience in America? What forms of resilience and community do the characters in *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* employ to overcome obstacles like racism and language barrier in the United States? The analysis reveals a profound tension between the promise of opportunity and the reality of disillusionment. This study interrogates the

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

persistence of the American dream amidst pejorative perception of African immigrants. Using literary texts as primary sources, it explores the disillusioning reality behind the dream and investigates how the promise of "greener pastures" is manipulated, pursued, and reconciled by characters in the novels. Thereby, it contributes to a critical understanding of global migration in the contemporary society.

2 Racism and its Effects on African Immigrants

The abolition of slavery did not mean the end of suffering for Blacks in a white-setup America. The proponents of the American dream state that America is a land of equal opportunities. This ideal has not been achieved by Black Americans. As Coates (2015) observes, the elusive nature of the dream which promises opportunity, freedom, and equality to all, but has never truly been attainable for Black people in America. Instead, the dream has been a source of oppression, violence and discrimination for the Black community. It is often built upon the exploitation and suffering of Black bodies, from the era of slavery to mass imprisonment (pp.119-120). In this vein, the enduring effects of racism is felt in the domain of employment, education and the justice system.

The workplace serves as the main place of racial and economic discrimination. The said dream is illusive in the sense that in *Americanah*, Ifemelu, the heroine, finds herself in America because she gets a scholarship to study there. Her scholarship does not cover her from racial prejudice. Her search for a job is thwarted by the colour of her skin, leaving her with the option of working as a babysitter for a white family which is headed by Anti Kimberly. Similarly, Anti Uju, a qualified nurse, is insulted and mocked by patients who do not accept her because of the colour of her skin. Ifemelu is a keen observer of American society. She writes a lifestyle blog called "Raceteens or various observations about African Americans, those formerly known as negroes by non-American Black" (10). She declares, "Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves…nobody wants black babies in this country, I don't mean biracial, … even the black families don't want them." (10) Gates (1988) opines that reading subtexts can be a survival skill for people whose direct speech might be dangerous. This idea underscores how some white people claim that most Blacks do not speak good English. Ifemelu, a principal character in the novel, learns that questions like "Where are you really from?" or "You

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

speak good English" are not mere inquiries but are full of racial assumptions. This ties in with the question Donald Trump asked the Liberian President. He is surprised that the president speaks good English: "Such good English is beautiful. Where did you learn to speak so beautifully? Joseph Boakai informed Trump of his educational background, prompting Donald Trump to express his curiosity: "That's very interesting", he said, "I have people at this table who can't speak nearly as well." (McCluskey and Madowo, 2025) These examples make it clear that racism is often revealed through coded language and assumptions. It remains a persistent issue in the lives of Black people in America.

Also, racial discrimination is further explored in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names.* Darling, the protagonist emigrates from Zimbabwe to America in order to seek a better life. While in the United States, she faces indirect racism as observed in Washington Academy. She thinks of giving up the ghost because she is teased by her classmates with regard to her name, accent, hair, expressions, and the way she behaves. She claims that blacks are given jobs that are "back broken" because they are given menial jobs like cleaning, clearing, dishwashing, garbage collection, street sweeping, and janitorial work. These jobs are considered as unskilled or lacking in prestige. From these instances portrayed by the authors, one realizes that the majority of African immigrants in the United States are just managing to put food on the table.

In addition, Darling's narration highlights a racial hierarchy in the job market, where white individuals are afforded first-class employment opportunities and Black immigrants are forced into menial jobs. She recounts: "And when at work they asked for our papers, we scurried like startled hens and are flocked to unwanted jobs, where we met the others, many others..." (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 108). This imagery clearly underscores their plight and the systemic nature of racial discrimination. Also, the employment opportunities available to African immigrants in America and Europe are often relegated to dangerous or risky degrading working conditions as indicated below:

> We worked with dangerous machines, holding our breath like crocodiles underwater, our minds on the money and never on our lives. Adamou got murdered by that beast of a machine that also ate three fingers of Sudan's left hand. We cut ourselves working on meat; we got skin diseases. We inhaled bad smells until our lungs thundered. Ecuador fell from forty stories working on a roof and shattered his spine, screaming, *¡Mis hijos!*

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

> *¡Mis hijos!* on his way down. We got sick but did not go to hospitals, could not go to hospitals. We swallowed every pain like a bitter pill, drank every fear like a love potion, and we worked and worked…Our extended families sent requests and we worked, worked like donkeys, worked like slaves, worked like madmen. (Bulawayo, 2013,pp.108-109)

The above excerpt depicts dehumanization through animal and machine imagery. The workers toil like donkeys which are regarded as 'beast of burden', slaves and like madmen. This leads to a situation of physical and psychological breakdown. Furthermore, machine is personified as beast. This inverts the natural order where human beings become prey to mechanical or industrial instruments. Also, there is a spectrum of bodily harm, notably, murder, mutilation, disease and toxic inhalation. The repetition of the phrase "we worked and worked" represents a tragedy of black immigrants who are compelled to labour without safety rules or job security. They are money minded and do not care about their lives. They have ignored the Biblical question: What does it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36). This idea illustrates the fate of Adamuo who was murdered by a machine that also cut Sudan's three fingers of his left hand, and Ecuador, who died after falling from a story-building while working on a roof.

Similarly, Darling's job involves sorting recycled bottles and cans, where she routinely encounters biohazards such as cockroaches, bloodstains, urine and condoms (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 107). These dangerous and unsanitary working conditions, disproportionately assigned to African immigrants, portray how racial hierarchies are embedded within the labour market in America. From the period of slavery to the present, Black American and African immigrants have frequently been relegated to menial jobs in the United States. As Bulawayo writes, these are "backbreaking jobs that gnawed at the bones of our dignity…" (pp.108-109).This is exemplified by the protagonist Darling, who washed bottles before becoming a cleaner. Her duties include dusting, picking up disordered belongings, cleaning bathrooms and kitchens. She has to dust tables, and picked up socks and T-shirts and under wear, towels and magazines left out in disorder over the floors. It is further illustrated as follow:

> You're just acting up, I know you've seen all sorts of crazy shit over there, he says, speaking over his shoulder. I open my mouth to tell him to leave Africa out of it, but he disappears back in his office and slams

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

> the door, so I just hold up my middle finger and then get down from the table. The beer bottles are the worst. They will come with all sorts of nasty things. Bloodstains. Pieces of trash. Cigarette stubs drowning in stale beer the color of urine, and one time, a used condom. When I started working here, back in tenth grade, I used to vomit on every shift. (Bulawayo, p.113)

The tasks highlighted in the above quote are demeaning in nature. Unfortunately, some African immigrants prefer to do these jobs in America than to die of abject poverty in their various countries although they keep on complaining about their working conditions. The discussion with Darling's co-worker is crucial for understanding the plights of other immigrants. He speaks over his shoulder in a gesture of pride and invokes Africa as a symbol of chaos, violence and disorder. The middle finger is a poor gesture of defiance and the act of getting down the table signifies a return to her subordinated position. The author does not employ flowery language to describe this horrifying incident. The list of ugly items such as cigarette stubs, urine and used condoms creates realism. The extract is a microcosm of Darling's migrant experience. It shows that her struggle for survival is not only economic, but existential. The filth she cleans represents the racist projections she is forced to endure.

In the same light, African immigrants in America face economic challenges such as limited job opportunities, lower wages compared to their American counterparts, and difficulties in accessing financial resources. Fostalina has two jobs - one at the hospital and the other at the nursing home taking care of the disabled and old. She works hard because she wants to finish paying the house she bought back home in Paradise (a shantytown in Zimbabwe) for Mother and Mother of Bones as stated in the text: "...These days the magazines have replaced working out because Aunt Fostalina doesn't have the energy since she is so busy with her two jobs, one at the hospital and one at the nursing home..." (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 80). From the said examples, it is obvious that African immigrants have difficult working conditions.

The 21st century America is a sequel of the 20th century as Dubois (1903) lamented that the problem of the century was the problem of the colour bar. This issue is still a borne of contention in the present era. Coates (2015), opines that the African immigrants are treated with hatred by whites who view them as elevated baboons because they are not given equal opportunity like

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

whites due to their skin colour. He strongly believes that racism is a practice which is ascribed to blacks as a means to humiliate them as observed in the following expression: "… Americans believe in the reality of race…Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them…" (Coates, p. 7). By implication, racism is still alive in America today.

Likewise, Okri (1993) portrays dream differed exercised by African American immigrants .It is evident through the protagonist, Azaro who is a spirit-child born into poverty in Nigeria. He journeys to "Abroad" hoping for a better life, but his dream of living as a successful person in America is shattered into broken Chinese plates in the sun. Mirroring the desire of many immigrants, the novel portrays "Abroad" as a place where many African immigrants are stuck in low-paying, physically demanding jobs. Azaro's journey shows the resilience of immigrants, striving for a better life despite challenges and hardship (pp. 143-189).

In a similar vein, the economic disparity and dangerous working conditions faced by African immigrants in America is portrayed by Díaz (2007). He explores the dangerous working conditions faced by Dominican immigrants in America. Oscar Wao, the protagonist, struggles to make ends meet in a perilous environment, working in factories with hazardous conditions and low wages. The novel portrays the exploitation of immigrants for cheap labor, often putting them in dangerous situations for minimal pay. Likewise Oscar Wao showcases the stark economic disparities between immigrants and the dominant white population. Oscar, like many immigrants, faces lack of opportunities, as he struggles to break out of low-wage jobs. This reinforces the theme of economic marginalization, making it clear that the "American Dream" is not equally accessible for all. According to Said (1978), the colonizer constructs a binary system where the colonized are deemed "other" and therefore inferior, different, and needing to be controlled. This "othering" process is based on stereotypes, prejudice, and a desire to maintain power and dominance (p. 13).

Racial discrimination is also displayed at the educational level. An instance of racism in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is portrayed through the children or students at Washington Academy. Darling recounts to Aunt Fostalina that she wanted to die because she has been teased by her classmates.

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

> When I first arrived at Washington, I just wanted to die. The other kids teased me about my name, my accent, my hair, the way I said things, the way I dressed, the way I laughed. When you are being teased about something, at first u try to fix it so the teasing can stop, but then those crazy kids teased me about everything, even things I couldn't change and it kept going and goings so that in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my everything. (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 75-76).

The insidious nature of racism is vividly depicted through Darling's painful experience of being relentlessly bullied and ostracized by her classmates at Washington Academy. The teasing encompasses various aspects of her identity. It targets her name, language, hair, dress and laughter. She incarnates a scene of shame and discomfort in the said academy. The traumatic experience is no longer about their actions but a shadow of her own perception. This highlights racial discrimination and the profound impact it has on Darling's sense of self-worth and belonging. The continuous nature of the bullying not only erodes Darling's confidence but also underscores the pervasive and systemic nature of racism that permeates societal structures, resulting in internalized feelings of inadequacy and alienation.

Besides, racial discrimination is evident in the novel through the justice system. Tshaka Zulu is unjustly treated by the men in uniform. He has been mentioned about ten times in the novel to show that he is an important figure, but he has been humiliated and murdered by police officers. He is the antithesis of the South African King who was highly respected by the international community. When he goes mad, he shoots the pizza boy with a spear which rips the boy's guts and instantly, the police arrives and ask him to drop his weapon not considering the fact that Zulu has gone mad. The police shoots and kills Tshaka Zulu just because he is a black mad man. This is seen in the following quote: “Drop your weapon. Drop your weapon! Drop your weapon! And I know that Tshaka Zulu will not drop his weapon. When I look over my shoulder, he is lunging skyward like some crazy plane trying to take off.” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 121). The swift escalation to violence by law enforcement without considering Zulu's mental state reflects the dehumanizing impact of racial bias within criminal justice practices. This scene serves as a stark reminder of the disproportionate and often lethal outcomes faced by Black individuals in

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

encounters with law enforcement portraying the pervasive nature of racial discrimination within society. This scene mirrors the disparity illustrated by Alexander (2010), who explores the insidious ways in which the criminal justice system perpetuates racial discrimination through mass incarceration, drawing parallels to the historical oppression of Black communities under Jim Crow laws. Similarly, the tragic fate of Tshaka Zulu serves as a distressing example of the systemic injustices faced by Black individuals within law enforcement encounters between white police officers and black immigrants.

Both works underscore the enduring legacy of racial bias in society, shedding light on the harsh realities of systemic racism and its profound impact on marginalized communities in the modern era. Racism is a strategy that has been enacted by law for the purpose of excluding African immigrants from the mainstream society in the United States. It is the main obstacle facing African immigrants in America today. It is still alive. African immigrants have to keep on fighting against social injustice in the domain of employment, education, health, housing and the justice system, just to mention but these.

Racism in America has historically fostered a longing for Africa among Black Americans, a sentiment powerfully articulated by Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement. Garvey argued that, "following a divine injunction," every race must eventually "return to its own vine and fig tree". He proclaimed, "let Africa be our guiding star: our star of destiny" (p.7).This perspective remains pertinent, as many in the Black community experience disillusionment with systemic white supremacy, even with Black political leadership The election of Barack Obama for instance, was initially seen as a harbinger of improved conditions, but for many, this hope gave way to a familiar disappointment. Consequently, the quest for a true "home" in Africa emerges as a compelling solution. For instance, Ifemelu scans Nigerian websites on the internet such as Facebook, blogs and each click brings a story of young people who have recently moved back to Nigeria, clothed with American or British degrees. Nigeria becomes the only place she is supposed to be, the only place she could trace her roots. The reader is further informed that Lagos is full of American returnees (p. 20). This further ties with Garvey's (1921) view of "Africa for Africans". Here, it is observed that the safest haven for Africans racial disparity is within an African commonwealth. Thus, the concept of home is presented as a potential remedy for the profound wounds of racial inequality.

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

FRONTIERS INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (FIJIS)
ISSN: 3080-1346 (Online); 3080-1338 (Print)
Vol 1. No 1. February, 2026
https://fijis-uba.com

3 Identity, Assimilation and Linguistic Adaptation

African immigrants in America face issues of identity crisis. The movement from their home country to the host country comes with a lot of traditional and cultural changes. So, characters try to assert themselves in a new society. They grapple with a new way of life and living standards in America while struggling with their traditional heritage. In *Americanah* Ifemelu and other characters go through issues of identity. In order for her to get a job, she decides to change her identity by taking another person's name which still does not enable her get the job. Identity crises is a predominant issue in racist regimes like the case of Fugard's (1986) Apartheid South Africa, Sizwe Bansi changes his name in a passbook to look for a job. Ifemelu also adopts the American accent in order to be accepted in the American society. However, she succeeds in America because of self-realization and confidence. Identity is a complex issue for many African immigrants in America, who may struggle to balance their cultural heritage with the pressures to assimilate into American society. It is portrayed in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through Stina. According to him, "leaving your country is like dying and when you come back you are like a lost ghost returning to earth, roaming around with a missing gaze in your eyes" (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 68). This means that, leaving one's country means losing his/her identity when they go back home.

Darling tries to sound like Americans. She does her best to forget her African (Zimbabwean) roots to that of the Americans. This is seen when she constitutes a list of American words like talisman, pain in the ass, for real, awesome speaking using her tongue in order to sound America (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 82). Furthermore, Darling claims that their children are not named after their parents because they fear that their teachers and friends would not be able to pronounce their names rightly. They continue by saying that they held their American birth certificates tightly and carefully. They gave them names that would make them belong to America and some of the names given to their children are Aaron, Josh, Dana, Corey, Jack and Kathleen (Bulawayo, 2013, p 105). The immigrants face a lot of trials, suppression and hatred which leads to psychological trauma and the desire to go back home. Ifemelu goes back to Nigeria. She quits being a prolific blogger so as to go back because of nostalgic feeling. In *We Need New Names*, Darling comes to America for a better life, but

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

ends in disillusionment. The challenges she and other immigrants face force her to go back to her country to meet her mother and friends.

Moreover, these immigrants also struggle with issues of assimilation. In order to be accepted in the host country, they need to devise a strategy. They need to eat what Americans eat, speak like them and do things their way. This is evident in *We Need New Names* as Darling develops the attitude of watching cartoons and develops the American accent she turns to live a reckless life in order to be accepted by her friends. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu goes through the process of assimilation. In preparing for a job interview, she is advised to relax her hair so as to meet up with the social standards of America. Unfortunately, she burns her scalp in the process. She also gets assimilated by dating a white guy named Blaine.

Both characters, Darling and Ifemelu explore the pressures of assimilation in a foreign culture that demands conformity to its norms. Darling's engagement with American cartoons and her adoption of an American accent reflect what Fanon describes as the desire for acceptance within a society that marginalizes her identity. This "masking" of her true self is a survival strategy, as she feels compelled to adopt behaviours and preferences that align with those of her peers. This act of assimilation can be seen as a response to the alienation she experiences as an immigrant, mirroring Fanon's assertion that the colonized individual often internalizes the values of the colonizer (Fanon, 1952, pp. 9-10).

In addition, African American immigrants also face language problems. In *We Need New Names*, Darling realises that the English she learns and speaks as a result of colonial education is different from the English spoken in America. She therefore needs to ameliorate and speak English like her friend Krystal. Darling's realization that the English she learned is distinct from the American vernacular underscores the challenges of linguistic adaptation faced by immigrants, compelling her to modify her speech to fit in with peers like Krystal. In *Americanah* Ifemelu too discovers that the way they speak English is different from the way Americans do. For mutual understanding therefore, they need to speak like them in order not to be interrupted. Ifemelu's awareness of the differences in English usage highlights the necessity of conforming to local linguistic norms for effective communication and social acceptance. Both characters illustrate how language serves as a barrier and a tool for integration, revealing the broader implications of colonial education on identity and

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

belonging in a new cultural context. This is reminiscent of the language of signifying in African American literary theory and criticism, where enslaved Africans and their descendants adapted Black English to serve their own cultural, and communicative strategies (Gates, 1988).

4 Socio-cultural Stigmas and the Immigrant Status

Many African immigrants struggle with adapting to the African lifestyle which has to do with cultural differences and social norms. This is evident in the Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through Aunt Fostalina and uncle Kojo's parents. To Aunt Fostalina who is a Zimbabwean and has been living in America for over fifteen years, weight loss means fitting someone in the American society which stipulates that one can adjust his or her body if they are unhappy with it. This implies weight loss and plastic surgery. Some characters in the text find it absurd because they have a different mindset. For instance, uncle Jojo's parents who are Ghanaians see Aunt Fostalina pictures on which she lost weight exclaims: "And last time I sent family pictures of my mother, she actually cried ah ah ah, my son, oh please please please feed your wife and don't nah bring her here looking like this, you will embarrass us" (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 69-70). From the above quotation, African back home are not comfortable with the idea that bush fallers lose weight in America. Nonetheless, some African women prefer to look like white American women.

In a like manner, Marcia in *Americanah* complaints about Black women who are fat because their bodies are sites of anti-slavery resistance (p.312). Ginika on her part tells Ifemelu that fat in America is a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like stupid and bastard. So, she had banished the word fat from her dictionary. At this juncture, Ifemelu decides to write a blog under the tag 'race, gender and body size'. Body size is a serious issue in the novel because it has been discussed in detail. The following quote clearly illustrates this view:

> During her first year in America, when she took New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and then the subway to visit Aunty Uju in Flatlands, she was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and, as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat. She had not thought of them as"fat," though. She had thought of them as "big, because one of the first things her friend Ginika told her was that"fat" in America was a bad word, heaving

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

> with moral judgment like“stupid” or “bastard,” and not a mere description like “short” or “tall.”So she had banished “fat” from her vocabulary. But “fat” came back to her last winter, after almost thirteen years, when a man in line behind her at the supermarket muttered, “Fat people don’t need to be eating that shit,” as she paid for her giant bag of Tostitos. She glanced at him, surprised, mildly offended, and thought it a perfect blog post, how this stranger had decided she was fat. She would file the post under the tag “race, gender and body size.”(Adiche, 2013, pp.11-12)

From the above quotation, it is noted that body size enhances cultural stigmatization in the American society where most black women are insulted because of they look fat. The word fat has been addressed in the *Americanah* over twenty five times to show the degree of seriousness.

The character in this context dwells on body politics. She notes that the train moves from Manhattan where there are wealthier, whiter and slimmer people to Brooklyn where one finds Black, larger-bodied people. Ifemelu is reminded by Ginika that in America, fat is an insult. Years later, when a man calls her fat she regains the sting. She sees it as public shamming or fatphobia. This is ironical because she has abstained from using the word fat, but she is insulted by the same word. Consequently, Black women often attempt to change their body shape in order to match up with the taste of beautiful white women.

Furthermore, cultural adjustment is portrayed in *We Need New Names* through Darling. On Dumi's wedding. Darling says she cannot eat well because she cannot use a fork. “I am hungry but I don't eat that much food when it's eating time because even after so much practice, I still haven't properly learned how to eat with a fork and knife. I always spill my food all over the place...” (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 81). This means that some Black African women eat “corn fufu” or “Achu” with a fork which is often regarded as a taboo in African communities.

Besides, Aunt Fostalina faces difficulties in commanding from the Angel Collection. She faces some hard times when it concerns pronouncing the word "Angel" till she has to spell it letter by letter. “Ah-ngeh-l, Aunt Fostalina adds helpfully, dragging out the word like she is ranking gravel. I silently mouth - engel. Engel, I hear the girl make a small sign. I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean ma'am, she says finally. You can tell from her voice that she is getting tired from

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

trying to understand" (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 84-85). Cultural adaptation at this juncture is linked to language barrier and identity crises.

Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural identities are not fixed but are instead fluid and constantly evolving through interactions and exchanges (p. 43). The struggle to pronounce "Angel" reflects her negotiation of identity within a foreign context, where her Zimbabwean roots clash with the expectations and norms of her new surroundings. Aunt Fostalina's spelling out of the word, "Ah-ngeh-l," while also mouthing "engel," symbolizes her attempt to bridge the gap between her native language and the English she encounters. This hybridization process is indicative of Bhabha's notion that cultural identities are formed through a process of translation and transformation, wherein individuals must navigate and negotiate their place within multiple cultural frameworks.

In addition, Black Americans grapple with traditional and modern marriage. In Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the first and second generation African Immigrants as Darling claims that at first, they ask their parents' permission or approval to get married while their children do not ask for their approval before getting married. "When our children became young adults they did not ask for our approval to marry. We did not get bride prices, we did not spill beer and tobacco on the earth, did not beat drums to thank our ancestors - we smiled" (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 110-111). According to the Zimbabwean tradition, children must seek for approval from their parents before marriage. Bride price should be given and beer and tobacco should be poured on the ground for a marriage to be blessed. This experienced is not only felt abroad but in some African societies like the example in Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ngugi wa Mirri's *I will Marry when I want*. The generational shift in attitudes toward marriage highlights the cultural dissonance experienced by African immigrants, as first-generation parents cling to traditional customs while their children embrace a more individualistic approach. This divergence underscores the complexities of cultural adjustment, revealing how the younger generation's rejection of ancestral rituals and approval signifies a broader struggle for identity in a new societal context.

Many African Immigrants face challenges related to their immigrant status including obtaining legal residency or citizenship, dealing with deportation threats, and facing stringent immigration laws. When Darling in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* insists on visiting home, Aunt Fostalina tells her

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

that Obama is not her father and that, Darling has come on a visitor's visa which has already expired. It means that, Darling cannot move out of the country because she would not be able to come back to America (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 84-85). Most Africans obtain visitor's visa, but decide to illegally transform it to a working visa without a resident permit. Consequently, they spend their time hiding from one place to another. Darling asserts that instead of going to school, they have broken the laws by working. She reiterates by saying that, they are now considered as illegals which makes them live in fear. Similarly, Darling could not attend her parents' funerals because she does not have papers and thus, she has to mourn from afar (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 110). Since she cannot return to Zimbabwe, she remains with her tradition in the United States of America.

The stress of adjusting to a new country, dealing with discrimination, and maintaining connections with family back home can take a toll on the mental health of African immigrants in the 21st century America. This is evident through Tshaka Zulu who goes mad and starts speaking insane talks about his children, grandchildren and his home country, Zimbabwe:

> Tshaka Zulu picks up his shield, raises it above his graying head, and shouts, Bayethe, I welcome you to my kraal, do you want to see my spear? And I have to try hard to suppress a laugh. I know he is not himself and all, but this is something else. The good thing, though, is that he is not reallydangerous. He gets down from the bed and proceeds toward his wooden stool, the kind that old men used at home, and sits under the poster of a topless Masai girl, crazy beads all over her body.Being in Tshaka Zulu's room is like being in a museum of remembrance or something—the walls are choking with things: newspaper clippings of Nelson Mandela when he came out of jail and stuff,pictures of our country's president when he first became president and he had all his hair, a picture of Kwame Nkrumah, Kofi Annan, a big picture of Desmond Tutu, pictures of Miriam Makeba, Brenda Fassie, Hugh Masekela, Lucky Dube, a newspaper clipping of Credo Mutwa, framed pictures of Bébé Manga, Leleti Khumalo, Wangari Maathai, and so on. (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 105)

Tshaka Zulu uses the same spear to shoot the pizza boy because of his madness that becomes too violent. This is ironical in the sense that, he portrays his act of

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

madness only towards the whites. The act of displaying his spear demonstrates a traditional way of life in Zulu culture. Unfortunately, he is shot by the police.

Africans in America have a problem with immigrant status. They are forced to leave their families behind in their home countries due to visa restrictions or other immigration issues leading to emotional distress and feelings of isolation. This is portrayed in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* when Darling leaves Paradise to Detroit leaving behind her family; Mother and Mother of Bones, her childhood friends Chipo, Bastard, Sbho and Godknows. While in America, Darling tries everything possible to return back to Paradise but to no avail mainly because she does not have papers and transport fees (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 78).

Also, Darling stops schooling alongside other African immigrants because they had to work to meet up with their daily food and they do not have money to pay their school fees. Darling says "...No school for us, even though our visas were school visas we knew we did not have money for school to begin with, but we had applied for school visas because that was the only way out" (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 107-108).

In addition to travel restrictions, healthcare access can be a significant issue for many African immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented or lack health insurance. This is evident in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the workers. They have no access to hospitals neither do their employers provide them with healthcare facilities. Darling states "...We got sick but did not go to hospitals, could not go to hospitals. We swallowed every pain like a better pill, drank every fear like a love potion and we worked and worked." (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 104). The imagery of swallowing pain and fear highlights their resilience but also reflects a deep sense of helplessness, as they prioritize survival over seeking medical help. This situation illustrates the broader challenges of facing health crises within a socio-economic context that marginalizes vulnerable minorities.

African solidarity is crucial for African immigrants as they adjust to life in America. Many African immigrants rely on community organizations, religious institutions, and other social networks to provide them with information, resources, and emotional support. These networks help immigrants overcome the difficulty of adjusting to a new culture and society. This is evident in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the Zimbabwean cultural gathering

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

where Uncle Themba, Uncle Charley, Aunt Welcome, Aunt Chennai and others visit Aunt Fostalina. They cook their traditional dishes which are "ezangaphakathi", "sadza" and "mbhida" and occasionally, they will bring "amacimbi", "umfushwa" and other foods from home. Darling says it is the only time that it is almost interesting despite the challenges they face in the 21st century America as African immigrants (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 68).

Bulawayo's depiction aligns with broader discussions on immigrant experiences, such as those presented by Portes (1995) where he emphasizes the importance of social networks for immigrants' adaptation. Portes argues that these networks facilitate access to resources and information crucial for successful integration (p. 23). Thus, Bulawayo's narrative exemplifies how cultural gatherings can mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance resilience among African immigrants.

Memory of their homeland and the challenges they faced can also play a role in the experiences of African immigrants in America. Many immigrants grapple with feelings of nostalgia, loss, and dislocation as they adjust to their new lives in the U.S. These memories serve as a source of comfort and connection to their roots. Memory is evident in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* through the Zimbabwean cultural meeting. This meeting is held at Aunt Fostalina's house where they discuss their lives back in Zimbabwe. Darling says that whenever her uncles and aunts come for the meeting, uncle JoJo would leave the house because everybody will be speaking in their "real language", laughing and talking loudly about back home and how their lives were when they were growing up before things turned bad (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 68). This resonates with Edward Said's concept of "nostalgia" in his (1978) work. Said discusses how exiles often grapple with a longing for their homeland which can lead to a sense of dislocation in their new environments. Both authors emphasize that memory is not merely a personal experience but also a collective one, shaping identity and community among immigrants.

Poverty is a reality for many African immigrants in America, particularly those who arrive as refugees or asylum seekers. Economic challenges can make it difficult for immigrants to access healthcare, education, and other essential services. Poverty can exacerbate feelings of isolation and marginalization making it difficult for African immigrants to fully participate in American society. Poverty is evident in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* when Darling says she has

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

to stop schooling because she does not have money to pay her fees and look for jobs (Bulawayo, 2013, 102). Another instance of poverty is seen when Darling insists on visiting home, Aunt Fostalina says it is yet time because she does not have money to financial Darling's trip to Paradise. She reiterates by saying that, it is not as if Obama is Darling's father and that he owns the Air force (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 80).

Darling says that when she arrived America, especially Detroit, the house they live in with Aunt Fostalina is not what she saw on television. She says that the house is not made up of bricks but planks and those planks get mold and smelled when it rains. (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 80). Also, Darling says that only the poor inhabit their neighbourhood and that she usually hears gunshots in their neighbourhood. Darling recounts the story of a woman who lives a few houses from theirs, drowned herself and her three children in a bathtub because of poverty. They were tired of begging and holding up signs to beg for money (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 80).

Education disparities are another significant issue facing African immigrants in America. Many African immigrants come to the U.S. with high levels of education and professional experience but may struggle to find work that matches their qualifications. Discrimination, language barriers, and lack of recognition of foreign credentials contribute to these disparities. This is seen through Darling in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. After fourteen years of living in America, Darling drops out of school because of financial instability. She later thinks of restarting school but the tuition for an international student is too high. She says she was thinking of applying in Cornell College because she feels like she already knows the place but when she sees the tuition fees, she almost dies. She reiterates that, it is also difficult for an international student like her to get scholarships (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 118).

The portrayal of Darling's challenges with language fluency and feeling like an outsider at the Washington Academy in *We Need New Names* underscores the education disparities faced by African immigrants in America. Darling's experience reflects a broader issue of systemic barriers that hinder the full utilization of the education and professional experience brought by many African immigrants to the U.S.

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

5 Conclusion

Despite the challenges of racism, identity, assimilation, language barrier, stigmatization, integration and immigrant status, many African immigrants in America have found success and achieved the American dream. Through hard work, perseverance, and support from black communities. Many immigrants have built successful careers, businesses, and families in the United States. Their stories of resilience, determination, and achievement serve as inspiration for others in the African immigrant community and beyond. In Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Darling recounts Aunt Fostalina's successful professional story. *Americanah* and *We Need New Names* serve as powerful commentaries on the ordeal of African immigrants in 21st century America. Through their vivid storytelling and rich character development, Adichie and Bulawayo not only shed light on the challenges faced by African immigrants in the 21st century America but also celebrate the resilience and strength of their characters. The novels underscore the importance of understanding the immigrant experience as a complex interplay of hope, struggle, and transformation. As they experience the intricacies of their new lives, these narratives remind the characters of the broader societal issues of race, belonging, and the quest for self-definition in an increasingly globalized world. Ultimately, both authors contribute to a deeper understanding of the African immigrant experience, urging readers to empathize with the realities faced by those who seek a new beginning in America.

References

Adichie, C. (2013). *Americanah*. Knopf.

Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of color blindness.* New Press.

Amstutz, M. (2015). Two theories of immigration. www.firstthings.com

Baker, A. (1984). *Blues, ideology, and Afro-American literature: A vernacular: Theory*. University of Chicago Press.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture.* Routledge.

Bulawayo, N. (2013). *We Need New Names*. Reagan Arthur Books.

Coates, T. (2015). *Between the world and me*. Spiegel & Grau.

Díaz, J. (2007). *The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books.

Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua

Fugard, A. (1986). *Statements: Sizwe Bansi is dead, the island, statements after an arrest under the immorality act*. New York Theatre Communication Group.

Gates, L. (1988). *The Signifying monkey: A Theory of Afro-American literary criticism*. Oxford University Press.

Garvey, M. (2009).Philosophy and opinions of Marcus Garvey. Majority Press.

Garvey, M. (2009). If you believe the Negro has a soul. AMISTAD

McCluskey, M. & Madowo, L. (2025). Trump praises 'good English of Liberian president, prompting criticism across Africa. CNN.

Okri, Ben. (1993). *The famished road.* Anchor Books.

Portes, Alejandro. (1995). *The economic sociology of immigration: Essays on networks, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Thiong'o, N. and Mirri, N. (1982). *I will marry when I want*. Heinemann.

Corresponding author: Ngong Joseph Sam
fienbian@gmail.com
The University of Maroua