# Proportions of Psychological Projection in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the psychological projections in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel Americanah (2013) through Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Psychological projection, a defence mechanism where individuals assign their unacceptable thoughts, feelings or motives to another person, is a recurring motif in the interactions and experiences of Adichie's characters. The novel elucidates the numerous ways characters project their insecurities, prejudices and desires onto others; to provide an intricate analysis of the characters' coping mechanisms and the broader implications for understanding identity formation and cultural adaptation in contemporary literature by considering the interplay and complexities of identity, race and belonging. The protagonist, Ifemelu, circumnavigates her journey as an African immigrant in America, confronting the projections of both herself and those she encounters. This paper delves into particular instances of projection in Americanah, underlining how Adichie portrays the intricacies of self-perception and otherness in her novel. The paper highlights the psychological underpinnings of the characters' behaviours and interactions. This paper concludes by maintaining that Adichie's exploration of psychological projection not only enriches the narrative but also provides an insightful exploration of the wide-ranging sociocultural dynamics of identity formation, self-perception and racial relationships in the contexts of Nigeria and the United States in contemporary America.*

**Keywords**: *Adichie, Americanah, Coping Mechanisms, Psychoanalytic Theory, Psychological Projection*

## Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is set against the backdrop of a globalised world where issues of race, identity and cultural displacement are prominently explored. The novel traces the journey of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who moves to the United States for education and becomes a prominent blogger addressing race and identity. The context of the paper lies in examining how psychological projection, an unconscious defence mechanism where

individuals attribute their unacceptable thoughts and feelings to others, manifests within this narrative. In *Americanah*, projection serves as a critical tool for understanding how characters navigate their complex identities amid cross-cultural interactions. Ifemelu's reflections on race and her experiences in America prompt her to project her internal conflicts and insecurities onto others, thereby influencing her perceptions and relationships. The theory of psychological projection is particularly relevant in this context as it helps unravel the underlying psychological dynamics that drive character behaviour and interpersonal relationships in *Americanah*. This exploration not only enriches the understanding of Adichie's characters but also offers insights into the broader implications of projection in discussions of race and identity in contemporary literature. The context of the paper thus emphasises the importance of psychological mechanisms in interpreting character motivations and thematic elements within the novel.

While *Americanah* has been extensively explored about migration, identity, race, and gender, there remains a gap in the scholarship concerning the psychological dimensions of character behaviour, particularly in the use of psychological projection as a defence mechanism. Many analyses focus on the socio-political or transnational aspects of Adichie's work, often overlooking the internal psychological conflicts that influence the characters' choices and relationships. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a psychoanalytic reading of *Americanah*, with a focus on how projection structures character motivations, interpersonal dynamics, and the broader themes of self and otherness.

This paper aims to examine the role of psychological projection in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the lens of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. It focuses on identifying significant instances where characters project their inner conflicts, insecurities, and desires onto others. The paper also explores how projection functions as a coping mechanism in response to cultural dislocation, racial tension, and personal dissatisfaction. By analysing these manifestations, the paper seeks to demonstrate how psychological projection shapes identity construction and interpersonal relationships in the novel, thereby enriching the reader's understanding of both the individual and collective experiences of diasporic characters.

**Theoretical Framework**

Psychological projection is a concept within the realm of psychology that describes a defence mechanism wherein individuals attribute their unwanted feelings, thoughts or characteristics to someone else. This phenomenon is particularly intriguing as it reflects not only individual

psychological states but also broader sociocultural dynamics. A person might deal with uncomfortable emotional states by projecting these onto others, thereby alleviating the internal conflict associated with acknowledging undesirable traits within themselves. This mechanism often operates unconsciously, and as such, individuals may not be aware that they are employing projection as a way to cope with their feelings or behaviours. The role of psychological projection in influencing interpersonal relationships and self-perception is crucial to understanding both individual psychology and group dynamics in various contexts. Whiteley reveals:

> Recent investigations into emotion and discourse processing using the Text World Theory framework (Werth, 1999) regard psychological projection as a key factor in readers' emotional responses to discourse (Gavins, 2007; Lahey, 2005; Stockwell, 2009). The present article examines psychological projection in relation to an extract from Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and the comments made by a group of readers discussing the novel. As a result, a more nuanced account of psychological projection is proposed, which highlights the multiple perspectives which readers are able to monitor and adopt during text-world construction. (23)

The theoretical underpinnings of psychological projection can be traced back to early psychoanalytic theorists, most notably Sigmund Freud, who first identified it as a defence mechanism. Freud posited that projection allows individuals to cope with anxiety or feelings of guilt by attributing these feelings to others, thus defending their self-image (Lilienfeld et al. 27). This idea was later expanded upon by other psychologists, including Karen Horney and Anna Freud, who articulated the significance of projection in various psychological states and disorders. Lilienfeld et al. say:

> Watkins et al. (1995) found that 5 projective techniques, including the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), were among the 10 instruments most frequently used by clinical psychologists. For example, 82% of clinical psychologists reported that they administered the Rorschach at least "occasionally" in their test batteries and 43% reported that they "frequently" or "always" administered it. (27)

Contemporary psychology continues to explore projection's implications, examining its manifestations in different social contexts and its utility as a tool for understanding complex emotions and behaviours linked to mental health.

In considering the manifestations of psychological projection, it's essential to consider both individual and collective dimensions of this phenomenon. At an individual level, projection can manifest in various ways, such as accusing a partner of infidelity while experiencing insecurities about one's fidelity, or projecting feelings of inadequacy onto colleagues. This often contributes to a cycle of conflict and misunderstanding within relationships. In an organisational context, projection might arise when leaders exhibit distrust toward team members, stemming from their feelings of insecurity regarding their leadership capabilities. This dynamic can lead to significant adverse outcomes, such as reduced teamwork and increased interpersonal conflict (Zheng *et al.* 1213)

Psychological projection can emerge in group settings as individuals unconsciously shift their undesirable traits onto others within the group. This is particularly evident in scenarios involving stereotypes or societal biases, where individuals may project their negative feelings about a particular group onto members of that group. For instance, a person might harbour feelings of anger or resentment and project these onto a minority group, thereby rationalising their prejudices and justifying discriminatory behaviour. The impact of these projections can be profound, perpetuating a cycle of negativity and conflict within society at large (Kaulio).

The contemporary implications of psychological projection extend beyond individual and societal dynamics; they are also relevant in therapeutic settings. Clinicians often engage with projection when attempting to address clients' maladaptive behaviours and thoughts. Understanding how projection manifests allows therapists to guide individuals toward greater self-awareness and emotional acceptance. Techniques such as reflective listening and guided visualisation can help clients untangle their projected feelings from their true experiences, fostering healing and emotional growth. Additionally, training in cultural competencies recognises projection's role in cross-cultural interactions, where individuals may mistakenly attribute their own cultural biases to those from different backgrounds, further complicated by social narratives and stereotypes. Gharib and Phillips are of the view:

> By starting the process early, in introductory classes, we can better prepare our students to engage in more in-depth and meaningful cross-cultural learning in future upper-division classes. For example, Chew et al (2009) suggested using service-

> learning projects in psychology courses to foster greater cultural awareness. Introducing the theme of psychological differences among cultures discussed in introductory psychology may lay the foundation for upper-division courses that could incorporate service-learning projects. (428)

In literature and artistic expression, psychological projection plays a pivotal role in how audiences interpret characters or themes. Researchers have utilised frameworks like Text World Theory to elucidate how readers project their emotions into narratives, thereby shaping their understanding and engagement with the text. This reflects an intricate interplay between reader experiences and textual interpretations (Whiteley 23-42). Literature, therefore, becomes a mirror reflecting not only societal fears and desires but also individual insecurities and projections.

**Review of Related Literature**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* is an exploration of identity, race, migration, and cultural dynamics experienced by its protagonist, Ifemelu, a Nigerian immigrant attending university in the United States. The narrative intricately weaves personal experience with broader socio-cultural discussions, particularly concerning race and identity in a transnational context. Ifemelu's journey is not merely one of physical relocation but also of self-discovery, where she navigates the complexities of code-switching, cultural identity, and the often-fraught experience of being a Black woman in America.

At the heart of *Americanah* is the illustration of code-switching, a phenomenon highlighted as vital for character development and thematic emphasis within the text. The theme of transnationalism is prevalent throughout the narrative. Adichie critiques the multicultural policies that push immigrants towards assimilation while simultaneously valorising the diverse identities they carry. Ifemelu and her love interest, Obinze, embody this theme as they navigate their identities across national borders, wrestling with notions of home and belonging. Acharya and Koirala are of the view that *Americanah* reimagines immigrant identity by examining nationality, globalisation, and culture through the experiences of Nigerian lovers Ifemelu and Obinze. Adichie uses their transnational journeys to critique Western assimilation policies while highlighting how migrants like Ifemelu contribute to their homeland's growth despite globalisation (67). This critique extends to how globalisation impacts individual identity, particularly for migrants who grapple with cultural duality and the expectations placed upon them by both their homeland and host country.

The novel also looks into the personal experiences of race and identity, particularly how these constructs are perceived and lived by Black individuals in America. Ifemelu's blog, which serves as a narrative device, provides a platform for her to articulate the nuances of race and culture, effectively making her voice an important counter-narrative to dominant discourses around race (Koutchadé and Loko). Her reflections allow her to confront and dissect the complexities of being Black in America while also highlighting her cultural heritage as a Nigerian woman, establishing an intersectional perspective on identity.

*Americanah* engages with significant issues surrounding hair as a symbol of identity and resistance. The narrative depicts hair as a form of cultural expression that carries deep personal and political implications within African communities (Dick 859). Hair becomes a metaphor for self-identity, femininity, and cultural heritage, providing deeper insights into the characters' relationships with themselves and societal perceptions. The act of hair styling, particularly for women, serves as a site for cultural significance and a form of resistance against Western beauty standards. This intersectional analysis highlights the multiple layers of identity that characters navigate, making hair a pivotal motif in the story (Kmita 119).

The novel also addresses broader themes of 'otherness' and the complex constructions of identity within diasporic spaces. As Ifemelu grapples with her sense of self amid a milieu that often marginalises her identity, the text presents a rich tapestry of cultural dialogues that underpin the immigrant experience. Nwanyanwu observes that Adichie's *Americanah* explores themes of otherness and identity, showcasing African immigrants' struggles to affirm and redefine their identities in marginalised migrant cultures. (386) This exploration reveals a subtle understanding of how African emigrants affirm and redefine their identities through the lens of their experiences within predominantly white societies. Such themes resonate profoundly in contemporary discussions around race and identity, extending Adichie's commentary beyond the confines of individual experiences to encompass broader societal critiques.

As Ifemelu's journey unfolds, the construction of masculinity and its implications for cultural identity also emerge as pertinent themes within the narrative. The interaction of gender and cultural expectations significantly informs the characterisation of Obinze, illustrating how hegemonic norms shape the lives of male characters in diasporic contexts (ELKATEB and Amara 119-128). This complex interplay highlights the necessity of examining identity formation as multifaceted, influenced by race, gender, and cultural background. The male

characters in Americanah negotiate their identities within the matrix of these intersecting factors, reflecting the broader societal pressures faced by immigrants in their pursuit of belonging.

The struggle against alienation and for acceptance is a recurrent motif in the novel, as characters experience both the excitement and the heartbreak of migration. Adichie engages with the metaphor of crossing borders—both literal and metaphorical—to depict the conflicts and reconciliations that immigrants experience as they confront new cultural landscapes. Okolie and Abonyi observe that their paper examines how individuals grapple with "self and the other" within identity frameworks, adaptation, and cultural shifts, using Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Adichie's *Americanah* to explore migration's conflicts and paradoxes. It also questions whether shared experiences exist among migrants, particularly in border crossings and host countries, as they navigate belonging, alienation, and agency in literature (22). The emotional landscape of the characters is marked by moments of alienation that compel them to reconsider their identities and place in the world, driving home the resonant themes of belonging and identity negotiation. In addition, Adichie's exploration of Afropolitanism adds depth to her examination of identity in Americanah. Ifemelu's eventual decision to return to Nigeria serves as a counter-narrative to the prevalent idea that leaving Africa equates to advancement. Instead, her return prompts a significant re-evaluation of what constitutes 'home' in the context of modern African identities, challenging the notion that migration is a necessary path to success. Òké says in his article:

> …follows a perplexing juncture in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*: Ifemelu's choice to return to Nigeria. Following the themes of "home," "travel," and "Africanness," this article explores the link between the migration away from and to Africa and the apparent racelessness Ifemelu experiences as she crosses the fragmented racial zones between Nigeria and America. It challenges the claim that returning to Africa is counterintuitive and only a departure from the Continent is desirable, thus, analysing the logic of travel concomitant with contemporary phenomenologies of Africanness (Afropolitanism). (289)

This critical look at the parameters of 'Africanness' allows Adichie to reframe the dialogue surrounding migration, identity, and cultural belonging in contemporary society. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of immigrant experiences across generations reinforces the complexity of acculturation processes. The novel juxtaposes the experiences of first-generation

immigrants, like Ifemelu, with those of their second-generation counterparts, enhancing the reader's understanding of the immigrant experience as fluid and multifaceted, one that encompasses both challenges and adaptive strategies as migrants navigate their cultural identities. (Niraula 47)

**Textual Analysis**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* meticulously dissects the psychological phenomenon of projection, wherein characters externalise their internal conflicts, anxieties, and unmet desires onto others, revealing the fraught intersections of race, identity, and relationships. Ifemelu's blog posts, for instance, transform personal alienation into sweeping indictments of racial privilege, while Blaine's critiques of her activism betray his insecurities about performative allyship. Obinze, disillusioned by unfulfilled aspirations, projects his self-contempt onto Nigeria's elite, and Aunty Uju's suffocating expectations for Dike mirror her unresolved trauma as an immigrant single mother. Even Curt's colorblind romanticism obscures his discomfort with racial realities, exposing projection as both a shield and a weapon—a means to evade self-scrutiny while imposing one's unresolved tensions onto intimate and societal bonds. Through these layered portrayals, Adichie illustrates how projection distorts self-perception and interpersonal dynamics, rendering it a pivotal lens for understanding the novel's exploration of belonging, power, and self-deception.

To begin with, Blaine, Ifemelu's African-American boyfriend, has strong opinions on social justice and identity. His frustrations with Ifemelu, particularly regarding her blog or her involvement in racial discussions, reflect his insecurities or unmet expectations in their relationship. Blaine projects his anxieties about racial identity or his frustrations with societal injustices onto Ifemelu, criticising her for not being "enough" of an activist or for approaching issues in ways that differ from his ideals. Ifemelu notices Blaine's disappointment when she doesn't participate as actively in his social justice efforts or when she voices opinions that don't align with his. This indicates that Blaine is projecting his idealistic views and frustrations onto her, expecting her to conform to his standards of activism and identity. When Blaine becomes critical of Ifemelu's approach to racial issues or her level of involvement in activism, Ifemelu resents it:

> At first, thrilled by his interest, graced by his intelligence, she let him read her blog posts before she put them up. She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to

> make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said. Then she began to resent it. Her posts sounded too academic, too much like him. (227)

This might be seen as a projection of his insecurities about whether he's doing enough or being effective in his efforts.

After returning to Nigeria, Obinze struggles with the reality of his changed circumstances and his unfulfilled dreams. He repeatedly visits Chief, hoping for an opportunity, while enjoying the hospitality and hopeful atmosphere of the gatherings. He observes the dynamics of wealth with both disdain and desire, torn between pity for the wealthy and his aspirations to join them. (23) He projects his dissatisfaction onto others, particularly those who represent the success he feels he should have had. Obinze projects his frustrations and feelings of failure onto his peers or colleagues, attributing to them the emotions or desires he harbours. When Obinze reacts to the lifestyles of other wealthy Nigerians, it could be interpreted as a projection of his internal conflict about his success and the compromises he made.

Aunty Uju's relationship with The General is complicated by power dynamics and societal expectations. Ifemelu reflects on the situation:

> So many women lose themselves in relationships like that. What I really had in mind was Aunty Uju and The General. That relationship destroyed her. She became a different person because of The General and she couldn't do anything for herself, and when he died, she lost herself. (303)

Aunty Uju's feelings of dependency and resentment are projected onto others, particularly Ifemelu:

> "I'm trying to forget him, Aunty. Stop talking about him!"
>
> "Sorry," Aunty Uju said, not looking sorry at all. She had told Ifemelu to do everything to save the relationship, because she would not find another man who would love her as Curt had. (218)

Aunty Uju projects her feelings of entrapment and helplessness onto Ifemelu, criticising her for not understanding or appreciating her situation. Aunty Uju's harshness towards Ifemelu when discussing her life choices is a reflection of her dissatisfaction with her reliance on The General and her unfulfilled aspirations.

Ifemelu's blog posts often explore themes of race, identity and societal expectations. These posts contain exemplars of projection, where Ifemelu attributes her frustrations or observations to broader societal trends. Ifemelu projects her personal experiences and frustrations onto her readers, generalising her struggles as universal truths about race relations. Ifemelu demands in her blog post that when a Black American shares their experiences of racism, don't immediately compare it to your struggles, dismiss their perspective, or make excuses—listen and acknowledge that their reality with race is different from yours. Avoid claiming colour-blindness, insisting you're "tired of talking about race," or using token friendships to defend yourself—Black Americans don't *want* racism to exist, but they must keep addressing it because it keeps happening. (237) In blog posts where Ifemelu discusses the concept of "privilege," she is projecting her feelings of alienation and anger onto the broader white community.

Aunty Uju faces significant challenges as a single mother in a foreign country, which causes strain in her relationship with her son, Dike (117). She projects her anxieties and fears onto Dike, interpreting his actions or behaviour as a reflection of her fears about his future. In a tense conversation, Ifemelu confronts Aunty Uju about telling her son, Dike, that he isn't Black, arguing that she failed to affirm his identity while dismissing racial struggles. Aunty Uju defends herself, attributing Dike's depression and suicide attempt to clinical illness rather than unresolved identity issues (274). Reading further, Dike's issue gets more attention from Ifemelu. Ifemelu blames herself for Dike's suicide attempt, believing she failed to see his hidden pain behind his laughter. Overwhelmed with guilt, she becomes overly protective, restricting his interactions even against professional advice (275). Ifemelu projects her concerns about Dike's potential struggles with identity and belonging onto him, possibly overreacting to his actions or interpreting them as signs of deeper issues. And when Aunty Uju becomes overly critical of Dike, it could be seen as a projection of her fears of him facing the same struggles she did as an immigrant, especially regarding issues of race and identity in America.

Also, Obinze's marriage to Kosi is marked by his internal dissatisfaction and longing for a more authentic connection, which he previously experienced with Ifemelu. His feelings of emotional emptiness are projected onto Kosi, interpreting her actions as contributing to the distance between them:

> It was stupid to claim that he needed time to think things over when all he was doing was hiding from a truth he already knew. She (Edusco) had called him a coward, and there was indeed a cowardliness in his fear of disorder, of disrupting what he did not even want: his life with Kosi, that second skin that had never quite fit him snugly. (329)

Obinze recalls the birth of their daughter, Buchi, and is unsettled when his wife, Kosi, apologetically says they'll "have a boy next time," realising how little she truly understands him. He feels disdain for her conformity to gender expectations and regrets their lack of deep communication, recognising their fundamental differences in outlook on life (331). Obinze compares his passionate, demanding sexual relationship with Ifemelu to his wife Kosi's passive compliance, feeling guilt over his lingering attachment to Ifemelu. When Kosi notices his emotional distance, he avoids comforting her, torn over whether to confess his unresolved feelings for another woman. (333-334) Obinze projects his guilt or feelings of inadequacy onto Kosi, blaming her for their emotional disconnect when in reality, his unresolved feelings for Ifemelu are the root cause. When Obinze feels a lack of fulfilment in his marriage, he perceives Kosi as overly materialistic or emotionally distant, projecting his internal discontent onto her actions.

Moreover, Curt, Ifemelu's white boyfriend, is deeply in love with her, but their relationship is marked by cultural and racial differences that Curt sometimes downplays or overlooks:

> Curt came into the kitchen, smiling shyly, his hair slightly wet, wearing a fresh, light cologne. "Hey," he said. He had called her at night to say he couldn't sleep. "This is really corny but I am so full of you, it's like I'm breathing you, you know?" he had said, and she thought that the romance novelists were wrong and it was men, not women, who were the true romantics. (196)

Curt projects his idealised view of their relationship onto Ifemelu, ignoring or minimising the racial dynamics that Ifemelu experiences. Reading further: "He was full of plans. "I have an idea!" he said often. She imagined him as a child surrounded by too many brightly coloured toys, always being encouraged to carry out "projects," being told that his mundane ideas were wonderful" (146). She felt a deep, unfulfilled longing with Curt, unable to fully embrace the emotions he inspired, despite loving him and the carefree life he offered. Though she cherished his optimism, she sometimes wanted to disrupt his happiness, as if testing the limits of their relationship. (210) This projection is his way of dealing with the discomfort of acknowledging

these differences. Curt's tendency to dismiss Ifemelu's concerns about race, or to believe that their love can overcome all obstacles, is a projection of his desire to see their relationship as uncomplicated and free from societal issues.

Aisha, the hairdresser who does Ifemelu's hair, is a minor character who shows an intense interest in Ifemelu's personal life, particularly her relationships (33). Aisha projects her desperation and anxiety about securing her future onto Ifemelu, pushing her to reunite with Obinze because she sees it as a way to ensure her security through marriage. When Aisha insists that Ifemelu must return to Nigeria and marry Obinze, this is a projection of her fears about being alone or unfulfilled, reflecting her deep-seated anxieties about her life and relationships.

## Conclusion

*Americanah* exposes how projection, rooted in unmet desires, racial tensions, and cultural dislocation, shapes relationships and self-perception. Key observations emerge: Ifemelu's blog generalises personal struggles as societal truths, Blaine's activism masks performative insecurities, and Aunty Uju's fears for Dike reveal intergenerational trauma. To mitigate these distortions, Adichie implicitly recommends self-awareness and honest dialogue, as seen in Ifemelu's eventual rejection of performative allyship and Obinze's confrontation of his emotional dishonesty. The novel's closure, particularly Ifemelu's return to Nigeria and reconciliation with Obinze, suggests that authenticity, not projection, offers redemption. Characters reclaim agency, urging readers to interrogate their own biases and embrace the messy, unvarnished truth of identity and connection by confronting their projections. Adichie's work thus stands as both a mirror and a map: reflecting our defences while charting a path toward genuine self-reckoning.

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