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## "The Proust Effect" --The Trigger Effect of Sensory Memory in Adichie's *Americanah*

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### Abstract

In *Americanah*, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the connection between sensory stimulation, memory and time. Specifically, for Ifemelu and Obinze, sensory stimulation triggers their memory of the past, introspection of the present and contemplation of the future. Proust's obsession with the taste of Madeleine cake is a process of linking the individual's sensory stimulation with his memory and emotion. Under this Proust Effect based on object stimulation and memory aesthetics, the sensory map of the two protagonists is shown, and their indescribable feelings and evoked perceptions of ethnic identity and cultural identity are highlighted. Olfactory, auditory and visual memories, while evoking Ifemelu's and Obinze's strong emotional memories of special moments in the past, also make their minds cleansed in Nigerian culture contained in hair and food. The pictures of hair, as a memory trigger, can stagnate time and bring the viewers into an event-memory system of individual experience and national history in an instant. Therefore, there is an intrinsic connection between sense and memory, with the protagonists' emotional representation gives new insights into their live, identity and national history.

**Keywords:** Adichie, *Americanah*, the Proust Effect, sensory memory, identity

### 1. Introduction

The movie *Babie* triggers the discussions on female emotions and value as well as on identity and race. The director Greta Gerwig

once says, the humanistic concern conveyed in the film comes from some novels written by female authors, including Adichie's *Americanah*<sup>1</sup>. She commends that what the book really explores are topics such as race, history,

<sup>1</sup> See also  
<https://ginzamag.com/categories/interview/407435>

and religion. Michiko Kakutani, the former chief reviewer for the New York Times, also states that the old-fashioned love story reveals the writer's shrewd meditation on race, immigration and identity in the globalized world (10). It should be said that the novel stands out for its cultural and national topics that spark discussion around the world, which has been examined over years.

As an outstanding Nigerian female writer, Adichie always focuses on the issue of the Nigerian development. Her novels have a profound influence because they "contain the themes of globalization and cross-cultural communication" (Arabian and Vida 28), which has been greatly shown in *Americanah*. The novel tells the story that how Nigerian girl Ifemelu and boy Obinze enhance their identity and national self-confidence in their experience in America and Britain respectively, and return to Nigeria to make contributions to its development. Foreign scholars mainly focus on the analysis of the cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, feminism and trauma experience in this novel, but fail to analyze the connection between sense and memory, which is the reason leading to the shifted notion of the two protagonists for their identity and national history.

In *Americanah*, Adichie pays attention to how senses trigger individual memory. It is in the sensory memory that Ifemelu and Obinze experience the important past moments, which are evoked accidentally and give their new insights into national issue. However, the

previous researches about sensory memory are relatively insufficient. The French writer Proust is the first to emphasize the triggering role of senses for memory, which is exemplified in his *In Search of Lost Time*. In the book, Proust describes his recollection of childhood at the moment of tasting a Madeleine cake dipped in lime-blossom tea. During the whole process, he realizes that sensory memory can push people to generate the deepest memory and further reflect on their own identity (Campen 200). Proust highlights "the connection between time and self-consciousness", which places the moment of events, narrative time, and reflective writing in a state of confrontational (Currie 86). Without the sensory stimulation, there is no subsequent emotional experiences and recollection. The "Madeleine experience" that olfactory and auditory can evoke emotional representations of the related experience is known as Proust effect<sup>2</sup>. Its essence lies in the interactive effect of sensory stimulation for emotion, time, and memory. Therefore, to delve into what causes the sensory stimulation is particularly important for explaining the relation of the three elements. Considering that sensory stimulation are generated by certain objects, Proust effect in this paper is defined as the process of sensory experience: initially, when people encounter pictures, texts, smells, touches and otherwise, the relevant senses offer people different sensory feelings, and then people may have a slightly blurry sensation, and finally they gain an overall experience of the past feelings within minutes to several hours (Howes 121). It should be noted that Proust

<sup>2</sup> Originally, as a neurobiological term, it refers to the phenomenon where sensory stimuli, such as smells or tastes, evoke vivid memories and emotions, often from the distant past. Later, the term was used in literature and closely related with memory, sense and body. It should be emphasized that the sensory basis of memory lies in vision, taste, touch, hearing and smell. Body is integral in the formation of memory, serving as the essential foundation for retrospection, while the senses switches

memory and emotions. See also Herz, Rachel S., and Schooler, Jonathan W. "A naturalistic study of autobiographical memories evoked by olfactory and visual cues: Testing the Proustian hypothesis." *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol.115, no.1, 2002, pp.21-32.; Van Campen, Cretien. *The Proust Effect: the Senses as Doorways to Lost Memories*. Oxford University Press, 2014.; Dancy, Jonathan. "New Truths in Proust?" *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1995, pp. 18-28.

effect is a sensory experience composed of mental and physical feelings, rather than the complete representation of the past feelings (*ibid*).

Apart from triggering memories, sensory stimulation promotes the emotional construction and reveals "identity in terms of gender, class, culture and otherwise" (Drobnick 2). What triggers the visual, olfactory and taste memory of individuals in *Americanah*? What emotional experience do the sensory memory bring? What is the effect of these sensory memory on individuals? With food, smells, pictures of hair in the novel as the focus, this paper will examine how sensory stimulation triggers memory to explore the connection between the past and the present, as well as the impact of sensory memories on the African American diaspora in the aspect of their identity and national confidence.

## **2. Pictures: The Reproduction of Memory, Feelings and National History**

As a vital form of artistic representation, pictures trigger the memory in the way of reproducing past personal experiences and events, which can evoke the re-experience of special moments in the past events, scenes and emotional experience. Moreover, pictures play an important role in sparking off imagination and reflection, engaging individuals in related imagination even without direct personal experiences. In the whole process of viewing, individual thoughts, memories and imaginations intervene to guide and reconstruct the visual experience of individuals, which means that what the individual sees is an "image", not merely the picture itself (Walton 107). Thus, the act of viewing involves the recollection, contemplation and reconstruction of the content behind the picture in the way of imagination.

Thus, imagination and cognition play an important role in visual memory, in which the process of viewing reflects the relation between the subject and the external world. Specifically,

the viewed object serves as a reflection of the subject to figure out his or her identity in processing the visual information. It can be said that the essence of "viewing" is the introspection of subjects following the visual memory evoked by pictures, which pushes the subject to reflect upon their own behavior, minds and thoughts. Viewing pictures encompasses the initiative of the subject to imagine the social history and national culture, the process of which can promote the understanding of the past, the contemplation of the present and the anticipation of the future (*ibid*). Thus, pictures reflect the object in specific conditions, trigger individuals' related imaginations and reproduce the history. It is through the imagination and speculation of the national history that the subjects can gain the comfort in reality, and all of these is achieved through the act of "viewing". Although there is no direct touch with pictures, pictures projected onto the retina can stimulate the imaginative processes related to the pictures and trigger associated memories and emotions. In the novel, the pictures of hair in women's magazines construct a memory system of personal and racial history for Ifemelu. This visual presentation influences the interactive relationship between Ifemelu's past and memory. Through recollections of past experiences and imagination of national history, she draws spiritual strength and reshapes her identity.

Hair, as a part of body, functions as a trigger of visual memory with its visibility. Merabti and Benzoukh mention, "the body records the traces of memory; the body is memory itself" (279). For African American women, hair embraces the cultural and racial significance (Sieber and Herreman 200). It is "a crucial element of African women" and represents "society, class, gender and culture" (Caldwell 365), which means that hair can reproduce the national history.

Unlike the "straight and swingy hair" praised highly in the white society, Ifemelu's

hair is described as “dense, kinky and hard” (Adichie 223). Before going to America, Ifemelu prefers her original state of hair for her happy memory of childhood. However, in America, Ifemelu finds that, the women’s magazines force images of white women’s hair “on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate” (196) and the black hair in the pictures are stigmatized as “bad things” (Byrd and Tharps 66). The contrasts of hairstyle in these pictures trigger Ifemelu’s intense sensory experiences and push her to think about the national history of Africa. As Gombrich has said, the act of viewing pictures possesses socio-historical significance (195). What pictures represent are particular events, phenomenon or traditions, which, in the novel, implies the historical memory about the racial oppression. Through the act of viewing, people can know the culture, values, ideological concepts and social development of a nation in the specific historical period. Body images and facial expressions depicted in the pictures are configured as a “memory system” of racial discrimination and ethnic history (Rezaie 19), ingraining the historical humiliations in Ifemelu’s memory deeply.

Chapman once remarks, “the standards of beauty are used for control” (207). The discrimination for African women’s hair in the novel represents the “aesthetic control” (*ibid*) imposed by Western capitalist countries. Due to her curly hair, Ifemelu are subjected to unfair treatment in the competition for job, the memories of which instills fear in Ifemelu. In order to get a job, she has to straighten hair with chemical relaxers, which causes her hair to fall out and become infected. In the novel, Wambui says to Ifemelu, “relaxing your hair is like being in prison” (229). In Africa, the curly hair symbolizes “passion, freedom and nature” (Tate 309), while straightened hair represents the submission to the western discrimination. The American society inflicts the painful memories upon Ifemelu, transforms her into a “docile” person and leads her to lose herself (*ibid*).

What prompts the transformation in Ifemelu’s thoughts and emotions are the photos posted on the “HappilyKinkyNappy.com” (231), a website African American girls built. Nigerian diaspora girls share their photos on the website and appreciate each other. “They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat” (233-234). “They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal” (216). These photos of hair directly trigger Ifemelu’s memory of her childhood: she “grew up in the shadow of her mother’s hair. It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon” (49), and it is “free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration” (*ibid*), which pushes her to remember the hairstyle “the Afro” of African girls, which are “thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair” (225). These sensory memories offer Ifemelu a triple sensory perception associated with vision, smell and touch. The happy memory of childhood inspires Ifemelu to cut off her straightened hair to keep it free once again, which shows that she “resists against beauty standards, challenges the definition of the black in western hegemony” (Patton 104). Adichie endows hair with the symbol of Nigerian culture of “freedom, equality and enthusiasm” (Yates 874). With the inspiration of national culture and spirit, she successfully maintains her ethnic and cultural identity.

On the American magazines, the pictures of images of the black female and their hair trigger Ifemelu’s visual memory and control her emotions, values and mentality. While on the “HappilyKinkyNappy.com”, pictures of Nigerian hair evoke Ifemelu’s childhood memories, which brings forth her reflections on Nigerian culture of freedom and passion, and finally promotes the reconstruction of her ethnic confidence and identity. In the digital age, pictures on magazines or websites can evoke visual memory, akin to the reproduction of

emotions, feelings and memory inspired by the taste of a Madeleine cake.

### **3. Smell: Olfactory Memory, Emotional Experience and the Sensory Map**

The pervasiveness and longevity of smell can trigger sensory experiences and spark different olfactory memories, which can foster intimacy and build communities (Groes and Francis 34). Classen Constance points out, smell could either strengthen or destroy social structure, unite or separate groups, confer or strip away power (3), which shows that, smell can not only evoke physical sensation, but also show the social history, politics and culture. In America, Ifemelu had to use chemical relaxer to straighten her hair for the request of white society in employment. The smell of the chemicals touches off Ifemelu's "emotional memory" (Shulman 412), which brings her back to the past experience with her families. In addition, the smells emitted by certain objects gives Obinze the feeling of familiarity, which evokes Obinze's complex olfactory memory and offers him a sense of home belongings. The different kinds of smells in the novel form a sensory map, prompting readers to delve into the underlying racial issues.

Ifemelu's curly hair costs her job opportunities. To apply for a position, she uses chemical relaxer to straighten her hair. The smell of relaxer triggers recollections of past experience when she is in the middle school: mother always touch Ifemelu's hair to comfort her whenever Ifemelu complains the school schedule; Obinze often keeps her company...(233-235). Besides, the pungent smell also makes her recall the painful experiences that the middle school suppresses her with norms and prejudices, which raises a feeling of being confined and discriminated. On the influence of emotions and memory, Ifemelu realizes that regulations and prejudice are ubiquitous, regardless of time or place. In the age of globalization, the white people describes the body of Nigerian girls as "passive,

acquiescent, lifeless and tamed" (Owens 194), which also shows that "olfaction is the means to corporealize dislike and a prominent excuse for expressions of racism, sexism, classism and xenophobia" (Drobnick 14). Ifemelu's compromise with white culture reveals the control and discipline exerted by colonial empires in terms of culture and thought in the post-colonial era. Thus, the olfactory memory can not only trigger "the emotional experiences" of individuals (Campen 201), but also reflect the relation between nations.

Compared with the single sense, the combination of senses can do better in evoking memory, which is understood as the effect of synesthesia (Cytowic 192). According to Baudelaire, it involves the interconnection and interplay between auditory, visual, and olfactory sensations and evokes a variety of complex emotions. In the novel, it is within the influence of the collaboration between olfactory and other senses that Obinze have a new understanding of racial identity. In Britain, class is in the air that people breathe (279), and "the cold startled Obinze with its weightless menace, drying his nostrils, deepening his anxieties" (248). The racial discrimination from white society forces him to assume a person's identity to apply for a job, which leads to his imprisonment. Many years later, about the memory of his life in Britain, Obinze merely remembers "the dim walls, the cold floor, the damp hard bed and the foul smell rising from the sewer" in the prison (236). The combination of smell and colors initiate his olfactory memory, which not only records Obinze's experience but also forms the sensory experience with his tactile perception of the prison, which "link(ed) the environment, sensory stimuli and emotional experiences, further stimulate(d) certain cognitive memory in the brain (Cytowic 92). Synesthesia pushes Obinze to realize that the global development strengthens the national superiority of Western capitalist countries. The awareness has a great influence on the ideological, values, and

behavior of white people, which puts much more oppression on the Nigerian diasporas. At the same time, the intense emotional stimulation enhances Obinze's appreciation for the inclusiveness and affinity of Nigerian culture heritage.

In addition, Obinze's nostalgia is evoked by the familiar smell of certain objects. Olfactory experience is sensual, pervasive and intertwined with memory, which can be extracted from recollection and resonates emotionally with the individual (Douglas 56). Obinze frequently recalls the smell of Nigerian spices and butter; at the end of the day finishing his work cleaning toilets, he always goes to the same coffee shop to buy coffee, because the coffee aroma could trigger memories of his past life with his mother (260), through which he tries to gain inspiration and comfort from his past memory in homeland, which shatters his disguised strength and solidifies his determination to return Nigeria.

The olfactory experience triggered by the chemical relaxer, the pungent odor of British urban air and the smell of hometown food constitute a sensory map in the novel. Synesthesia formed in the combination of touch, vision and smell stirs up the yearnings for home and nation in the subconsciousness. With the guidance of the sensory map, readers could experience pains of Ifemelu and Obinze and the traumatic fate of the Nigerian diaspora community they represent.

#### **4. Food: Taste Memory and Cultural Connotation**

As a cultural symbol, food functions to "define individual identity and differentiate groups" (Parasecoli 73). The taste of food sparks off individual emotions and related memories, which refers to "taste memory" (Fischler 281). What's more, it can construct one's identity and strengthen his or her sense of belonging to a certain group. In *Americanah*, taste memory enhances the emotional bonds of Ifemelu and Obinze with their families, as well as connect them with the Nigerian diaspora in American

through the sharing of traditional food. Ifemelu and Obinze recall the joys of their past through food and gain comfort and inspiration. Additionally, based on "the cultural attribute and social functions" of food (Paul 56), Obinze and his friends, who share the similar diaspora experiences, form a small diasporic community, and build a community with their homeland.

Food, the "taste signifier and non-textual symbol" (Parasecoli 73), evokes emotional and spiritual resonance from memory and comforts people at the present. Ifemelu shows attachment to Nigerian culture and her childhood experience contained in food, which triggers her "sense of belonging to home" (Katrak 102). Whenever cooks with her Aunty Uju, Ifemelu always follows her mother's cooking method, dipping wraps in spicy sauce or preparing hummus and coconut rice "with spices" (332). As John Egerton says, food is the single element in culture that can integrate all five senses to have a profound influence on consciousness, which will always remain in memory to evoke the longing for home among the diaspora from time to time (49). Thus, food, endowed with the feeling of nostalgia, can be regarded as a medium for people to gain the sense of home belonging and their cultural identity (Katrak 270). The taste of wraps, hummus and coconut rice gives Ifemelu "familiar feelings" (313), and then she seems to hears the music and dances to the rhythm in her childhood memory. When tastes Nigerian food in America, Ifemelu's inadvertent actions illustrates how food connects the senses of taste, touch and hearing, which brings together all sensory memories to create a sense of familiarity and happiness. This feeling of familiarity and happiness comes from the joyous moments that she learns to cook with her mother, and enjoy the delicious food in her weekly visits to Obinze. When the sense of familiarity intertwines with the happiness from families and friends, different memories are drawn. This integration of sensory experiences and involuntary memories will be preserved in the taste of food forever (Priscilla 24).

In the process of preparing and enjoying food, the taste memory not only serves as a means for Ifemelu to alleviate homesickness but to establish a sense of belonging through "confirming and maintaining identity" (Fieldhouse 76). In America, Ifemelu tries "the McDonald's hamburgers with the brief tart crunch of pickles", but it is "a new taste that she liked on one day and disliked on the next" (126). In fact, what she really dislikes is the impact of McDonaldization which emphasizes utilitarian, indifferent and non-inclusive fast-food in many aspects of the society<sup>3</sup>, the cultural values of which permeates various aspects of the society and influences the cognition, psychological emotions and moral pursuits of most Americans. The American food at the church bazaars doesn't bring Ifemelu happiness, instead, it "reminds her of Nsukka and brought with it a sudden stab of homesickness, so sharp and so abrupt that it filled her eyes with tears" (147). When eating traditional Nigerian food, Ifemelu consciously reflects on her present life experiences. The sensory stimulation of food triggers her memories and pushes her to contemplate how the African diasporas who adhere to their own cultures find way out faced with the ideological control of western culture in face of cultural conflicts. She draws strength from the past memories to examine the present, and restores confidence in her identity and the Nigerian culture.

Another protagonist Obinze build friendships with other Nigerian diasporas who share the similar experiences through eating the Nigerian food in Britain, which highlights the close connection between taste memory and national culture. Sociologist Paolo Corvo contends that "food can affiliate individuals with certain social groups" (20). Food functions

<sup>3</sup> "McDonaldization" refers to a societal process characterized by the features of fast-food restaurants, a term coined by sociologist George Ritzer. Its typical features include efficiency, predictability, calculability and non-human technology. With the progress of globalization,

as a crucial trigger for collective memory, the same as "a communion ritual that promotes emotional connection among individuals cohabiting" (Paz 145). It should be noted that what strengthens the cohesion among the diasporas is the sensory experiences that food evokes, which also awakens the collective memory of people and enhances their emotional and spiritual connections through their engagement in practicing culinary traditions. Nigerians prefer "thick soups with spices", pair "bananas with peanuts" (114), and "put cloves in eggs", which are the unique "way of eating in Nigeria" (ibid). Just as Arabian and Vida have said, ethnic food continues to exert influence over successive generations within ethnic groups, even when people leave their homeland (35). Thus, for the diaspora, ethnic food and its cooking methods have great significance: for those who leave their homeland, taking the traditional cooking methods is a crucial way to relieve their anxieties, maintain the belief in keeping connection with hometown relatives and construct a sense of community with their homeland. It can be said that food can fosters unity for it carries the rich cultural connotation (Mannur 29). When individuals taste their ethnic food, the shared memories associated with their family and homeland are triggered, so that they strengthen connections with each other based on the collective affection for their traditional culture.

That food highlights the collective culture plays an important role (Montanari 231) in reinforcing interactions between Obinze and his Nigerian friend Iloba. When they eat eggs seasoned with cloves and hand-ground soy milk together, Obinze recalls his homeland and generates a sense of homesick because the taste of the food gives Obinze and Iloba a sense of

"McDonaldization" increasingly becomes a symbol of American societal culture and influences other parts of the world, permeating various aspects of social life. See also Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society: Into the Digital Age*. Paperback, 2018.

familiarity, which further triggers a “restoration of emotional memory” (Campen 29). Within the shared memory based on Nigerian culture, they maintain the precious friendship for over a decade in America. Each time they meet, “Iloba placed bottles of beer and a small plate of fried chin-chin on the table. It seared a sharp homesickness in Obinze” (271-272). Facing the ritual of hospitality, Obinze “was reminded of going back to the village with his mother at Christmas, aunties offering him plates of chin-chin,” (272) which provides Obinze a sense of home belonging. For the diaspora, home involves both their own home with families and the nation they belong to. Although the concept of nation is abstract, “the disperse and concrete practices in every day are the specific representation of the idea of nation” (Martin 89), which means that the sense of home belonging can be generated through performativity in the way of the repetition and the invocation of paradigms (Bell 3). It is in the taste memory that Obinze performs the sense of home and sticks to his cultural identity. For immigrants, repeating cultural customs from their homeland constructs a sense of belonging that includes an attachment to their family and a feeling of security within the influence of their cultural heritage, all of which shows that what Obinze experiences is the representation of the Proust Effect. Sharing national food with friends in a foreign land generates Obinze’s memory of the past gatherings with loved ones. Carrying his sorrows, longings, and reflections, food strengthens Obinze’s emotional ties with Nigeria. Moreover, as Obinze enjoys his meals, he recollects various sensory impressions to form the memory of happiness in the past with families and friends, which makes him gradually feel regret on his impulsive decision to leave Ifemelu and his mother. Beside of sparking off memories of his happy life with Ifemelu, food also prompts him to reflect on his reckless decisions. Obinze recalls the scene that, when Ifemelu talks at the most happiest moment, “she would shout with extreme excitement and tightly hug him, and kiss on

him” (268). His reflections involves laughter, kisses, hugs and other sensory expression, which turns him into an observer of his own life to contemplate the past, present, and future.

The taste memory triggered in the process of cooking and eating Nigerian foods enable Ifemelu and Obinze to construct sensory impressions of self, others, and national culture. Simultaneously, it shows the complex emotions the two protagonists experience in the face of ethnic cuisine, which process is closely associated with the cultural significance and social functions of food. “The transnational nature of food” (Bell 6) also facilitates emotional connection with homeland and loved ones for Ifemelu and Obinze in different environments, conducive to forming a community constituting the Nigerian diaspora and their homeland based on culture contained in food to convey emotions.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Americanah*, pictures record time and evoke intense emotional memories of specific moments as well as motivate the imagination and recollection in the brain. The sensory memory triggered by smell and touch reproduce the past experience and evoke the related emotions. Besides, food generalizes the individual experience of the Proust Effect and abstracts it into a process of sensory triggers and responses in memory. In the novel, Ifemelu and Obinze, through triggers such as hair, hair relaxer, and food, recall respectively their memory concerned with vision, olfactory and taste and then awaken their emotions. Their experience vividly portray the collision of race, identity and culture across nations. Under the influence of visual, olfactory and auditory memories, the protagonists reflected on their own lives, national belonging and ethnic identity, ultimately finding their own ways for future.

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