



Racial consciousness and self discovery in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Americanah'

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Abstract:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie may be referred to as actually the voice of a twenty first century Nigerian girl and is placed by critics as the third-generation African ladies' writers. Adichie was born in Enugu, African nation on September fifteen, 1977. She spent her childhood in university city of Nsukka, where her father worked as a Deputy Vice-Chancellor and a academic whereas her mother was the university registrar. Growing up within the university atmosphere had a clever impact on her delicate mind. While she was still studying medicine at the University of Nigeria she edited The Compass, a magazine run by the university's Catholic medical students, then moved to the US for further study. Through Americanah Adichie portrays a different picture of what America is to a Nigerian and how it dwindles into something else. While the narrative deals with a Nigerian woman's encounter with America, it also has undertones of love and deception, race and colour, up rootedness and desperation to move back to one's homeland. Ifemelu and Obinze are star crossed lovers who were companions since high school but life decides a different destiny for both. Americanah unravels the grim side of their great American dream and how an Igbo Nigerian woman metamorphoses herself into an American citizen but that longing for home and her old flame brings her back to her roots in Lagos.

Keywords: Identity, Immigration, Race, Belonging, Discrimination

The novel *Americanah* has been described by the author herself as an “unapologetically old-fashioned love story” Adichie has also described her writing within the tradition of social realist fiction. Her claim is justified by the fact that she was decided to view aspects of the immigrant reality that do not only include the economic side, but also discuss a description of the attitudes in the United States towards issues such as race, immigration and beauty, and the impact that such nations have on the psyche of the protagonist, Ifemelu. The novel focuses on the construction both individual and social of identity in the context of immigration, but also on economic status, skin colour, hair, education, and blogging. In the very first chapter of the novel she stated,

“Race is totally overhyped these days; black people need to get over themselves, it is all about class now, the haves and the have-nots,”

Ifemelu's experience in the America undoubtedly helps to views all these different issues while made a cross-cultural conversation about what it means to be black and African black in America. The protagonist of the novel, Ifemelu, an undergraduate student who move to 3. America to finish her degree, she must learn how to live in a society with a racial reality that was completely unknown to her in Nigeria. She was interested in a writing a blog her blog titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* in order to view the daily routine and some of the racial issues that still very much affect the African American community, and the impact of these on other non-white minorities, as it will be commented on later. *Americanah* is a clear statement that race still matters in now a day's America. While the novel is fiction, it should be stated that some of the issues, especially those related to being black in America, somehow shows the personal experience that writer Adichie lived in the United States as a black person

and explore the notion of race as a socio-cultural construct as evidenced in the novel, and it will aim to account what “being black” really means, and the effects and consequences that race may have in re-shaping a person’s identity. The interesting thing about Ifemelu is that whenever she visited to salon, she keep the comb along with her because the salon’s combs doesn’t work on her hair. when the worker of salon touched her and said why don’t you moisturize it properly and she replied,

“ I like my hair the way God made it”³

Ifemelu writes a lifestyle blog titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. The very title of the blog, even though quite long for a blog and not very catchy, already reflects some of the topics related to race that will be dealt with in the story. The fact that terminology such as African American and American African exists can be used to prove that skin colour and other physical features are not enough in order to divide a country’s population into clear-cut divisions due to appearance. At the same time, their existence also proves that race in America is indeed a socio-historical construct whose effect sare felt across many different racial and ethnic groups, and even across immigrant minorities. Ifemelu comes from Nigeria, where social class is a relevant operating social category, but that is not the case with race. Nigerian history is marked by colonial struggles and tribal conflicts, but race is not an issue because the country has not experienced racial tensions in the same way other African countries, such as South Africa, have experienced racial discrimination.

Curt was a white boyfriend of Ifemelu he has the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete’s body, the sunny charm, and the smell, around him, of money. If he were fat, older poor, plain, eccentric, or dreadlocked, then it would be less remarkable, and the guardians of the tribe would be mollified, the fact that the United States is a self-proclaimed colour-blind nation. Race is an uncomfortable topic to deal with, but avoiding it is not going to make it disappear. Adichie has stated in numerous interviews that the problem of race in America could be better understood by having an honest conversation about race, and indeed this book is a perfect text to reopen such a debate. To talk about race is felt throughout many layers of American society, but it is urgent to start the dialogue to understand some of the issues that are still damaging and creating conflict within African American and other non-white communities in the US. Undoubtedly, one of the many arenas in which race is conflicting is the way in which beauty has been represented for centuries as being mainly a white domain. The people in white countries always trusted on white peoples the same situation arise when Obinze facing the difficulties by taking a loan from the bank his friend explain him the trick that,

“...you must find a white man. Find one of your white friends in England. Tell everybody he is your General Manager. You will see how doors will open for you because you have an oyinbo General Manager. Even Chief has some white men that he brings in for show when he needs them. That is how Nigeria works. I am telling you.”

While praising Adichie as “an extraordinarily self-aware thinker and writer, possessing the ability to lambaste society” (Peed). One of the most highlighted aspects of *Americanah* is the fact that, unlike most immigrant stories, the protagonist decides to return to Nigeria despite the success that she has achieved in America (Raboteau). The term “Americanah” is used in the novel in order to refer to those immigrants who have returned to Nigeria from the United States and have assimilated certain aspects of American culture (e.g., a new taste for food, wheather, the importance of customer service, a foreign accent). Ifemelu observed those different accents of American public which filled with holes, mangling words until they were impossible to understand. Ifemelu sensed, from his demeanor, a deprived rural upbringing that the person tried to compensate for with his American affectation, his gonnas and wannas. She does not know that why people felt jealous about each other’s of having being white and then afterwards she feels relaxed of having being black. Even though the protagonist points to a general tendency of avoiding discussions on race and to assert that the concept belongs to the past, there are

numerous statements found not only on the web, but also on the news and newspapers that prove that race still matters today. For instance, during the last couple of years, two big productions from hollywood have dealt with race and they have not escaped controversy. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2013) was severely criticised because of the way in which the film deals with slavery, and because a white director dared to choose such a sensitive event of America's history as a nation. In February, 2014, Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* was awarded the Oscar as Best Motion Picture, an incredible feat for the director and the cast that was not uncontroversial. While some criticized the fact that McQueen is not African American (he is Black-British), and showed a reluctance to face such a turbulent history, others claimed that the film was undeserving of such an award but, had it lost to the other nominees, the Academy would have been thought of as racist. So, *Americanah* continues the narrative of race in the US, this time in the twenty-first century, but it proves that the consequences of a racist past can still be felt today, and it also serves as an opportunity to reopen a centuries old conversation about race that is always left unfinished. By portraying the character of Ifemelu, Adichie does not focus only on race but she observed many things like teeth, clothes, food which differ from the non-blacks. Indeed, the novel can work in many levels as a key text in cross-cultural communications, because, even though the context of slavery and racial oppression is discussed in history books and the media, especially when referring to racial discrimination, there are aspects associated with blackness (e.g., colourism or the importance of hairdos) of which non-black people are usually unaware. This is precisely what this novel has done: it has opened the gates to many new realities which are usually ignored from a mainstream, Euro-American standpoint. Therefore, the novel's main focus is on topics such as skin colour, hair texture, race and beauty is the proliferation of stories related to all these aspects since women such as Michelle Obama and Lupita Nyong'o have gained presence in the media believe that their appearance is essential in order to revise, challenge, and redefine beauty and people's perception of it on a global scale.

Adichie showing the discrimination of languages like how Igbo and American languages are completely different she described this language problem in her protagonist Ifemelu. She always observed the accent of black peoples who live in America. *Americanah* defines an identity based on previous experience of living in America. Finally, Ifemelu and Obinze return to Nigeria and they meet up. They start seeing each other daily and rekindle their romance. They spend blissful weeks together, but then break up again in the face of his marriage. So Obinze tries to divorce Kosi, but she will not accept it. After seven months Obinze shows up at Ifemelu's door, saying he is leaving Kosi and wants to try again with Ifemelu. She invites him in and they build a life for themselves there. She encounters white privilege and how it can blind people to issues about race. In her blog mentioned with the title *So What is the Deal?*

"They tell us race is an invention, that there is more genetic variation between two black people than there is between a black person and a white person. Then they tell us black people have a worse kind of breast cancer and get more fibroids. And white folk get cystic fibrosis and osteoporosis. So, what is the deal, doctors in the house? Is race an invention or not?"

Ifemelu overcomes her initial insecurities and starts to celebrate her blackness and femininity. Her identity becomes a hybrid one: she no longer belongs to Nigeria, or to America. She belongs in the Nigerian diaspora, her identity open to change and re-inscription and perpetually in motion. Ifemelu manages to overcome the stereotypes: she becomes a successful writer by attacking racial issues, earns a scholarship, a return to her home country, where she continues to use her blogging skills for her new job.

"The first step to honest communication about race is to realize that you cannot equate all racisms."

The blog posts serve as a direct way of giving critique to racial and gender matters and adding to the conversation regarding those issues. Because *Americanah* is written from an outside perspective, the

perspective is unburdened by America's racial history. It can shed new light on what it means to be black in America and therefore contributes to understanding the notion of race and gender in African American literature. Perhaps it is not possible to write an honest novel about race as an American or African American citizen, but Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is neither. Her outside view gives *Americanah* an honest and refreshing perspective. Adichie's *Americanah* offers an outside perspective on what it means to be black in America and therefore contributes to understanding the notion of race and gender. Immigrants in literature written by or about Africans in west, aims to portray black characters in a realistic way in order to be able to identify with them. *Americanah* is filled with social commentary about race and modern representations of black characters. However, *Americanah* cannot be African American literature, since it is written by and features a Nigerian woman who has lived in America, but is not African American. She was invited by schools and companies for her talk. She often confused with the notion that why is it only black people that are criminals and why all the criminals are black people. Adichie major character in the novel Ifemelu always differentiate the life Lagos and New York she describes this in her blog that

"Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been undisputably itself, but you would not know this at the meeting of the Nigeropolitan Club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos had ever been close to being like New York. Full disclosure: I am one of them. Most of us have come back to make money in Nigeria, to start businesses, to seek government contracts and contacts. Others have come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country, but we spend all our time complaining about Nigeria.

Adichie aims to describe the experience of black immigrant women in the United States and to undo the double colonisation that black women suffer from. The novel reflects Adichie's views and her observations on the notion of race. Adichie was asked by an interviewer that you write with satirical precision about the way black people are patronised in the US and the UK – often in a well-meaning way. How widespread is this condescension? One of your characters – Kimberley – describes all black people as "beautiful".

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