

Culture and Identity Crisis in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Americanah"

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Abstract:

This article examines the individual identity crisis and cultural oppression in novel *Americanah* (2013), which reveals the white-privileging social system in America and Britain constitute a threat to the African immigrants' continued existence. Within the narrative, the various characters are confronted with the survival struggle occasioned by their conferred identity as blacks, irrespective of their skills and intellect. The Nigerian of migration which makes a person oscillates between two altered places. The novel describes the formative process of Ifemu and Obinze who fall in love in Nigeria and migrate to the west, and they eventually reunite in Nigeria after fifteen long years. The novel explores the intercession of cultural identity. The Protagonist and other minor characters questions identity, sense of belonging and they try being as positive models through a negative conventional society.

Further, it explains the psychological impenetrability that confronts African immigrants in their unremitting efforts at living their unique identity in western societies characterized by ethnic binary. The word "black" here, connotes a conferred uniqueness, a specific profile, and, of course, an obnoxious space in the American social hierarchy. Coming from African countries with the outlook that a life in the West offers the chance of choices, therefore, the African colonist contest the social coordination that corners them into, adopting a new "black" identity with little thoughtfulness for their peculiarity. This paper traces mirroring of the overshadowing power of the American and British race system on the African immigrant's identity, their trials, accomplishment, and failure under the engrossing claws of racial shortcoming.

Keywords: Identity, culture, Diaspora, Oppression, Race, language and Immigrant

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INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a well-known, award-winning Nigerian novelist and an engaging storyteller. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a rapidly increasing Nigerian writer who continually forges the link between the Nigeria's past and present. Her imaginative dexterity is referenced in her glance

backwards to the needless Nigerian civil war in her *Half of a Yellow sun* (2006). A further detection of this literary investigation is fore grounded in a very clever riff on her categorization of the plight of hapless Nigerians trapped in the miasma of revitalized America in *Americanah*(2013)). Suffice to state that Adichie's narrative trajectory somewhat

reflects Chinua Achebe's novelistic oeuvre. Achebe's artistic dedication derived from his social rendezvous with the Nigerian project. Adichie as a transcultural writer, superficially pushes forward the important plunge of worldwide inter-cultural affairs in *Americanah*.

Americanah presents the multi-perspective expedition of Ifemelu and Obinze, a young Nigerian couple growing up during a postcolonial, globalized world, where opportunity seem to concurrently expand and contract as they learn to acknowledge the communities that shape them and their identity during a world that constantly tries to tell them who they're . The narrative arrangement of *Americanah* jumps amid past and present. Adichie braids the voices of Obinze and Ifemelu at altered times in their lives to means how these many events lead them to their final decision to return to their relationship with each other. During this manner, Adichie addresses the importance of memories in determining identities. Both Ifemelu and Obinze question their identities and seek how of certainty. Their true self-actualization occurs as they replicate on memories and shape an overview of their experience.

From the book title, "*Americanah*", the reader (especially a Nigerian reader) immediately receive the text as one, that travels across nationwidelimitations. "*Americanah*" is a cynical word, teasingly used to refer to Nigerian returnees from America who have been influenced by aspects of the American culture that make them unable to fit completely back into the culture they left behind. "*Americanah*", as the book title here, however, represent a trope for a new identity; one conferred on the bearer by years of disturbing identity struggle in a society heroically blind to the existence of other cultures, tongues, and skin colours apart from those dictate by the white standard. From the points of view of both African American characters like Blaine and Shan, his sister, and non-American black characters- Ifemelu, Aunty Uju, Wambui, Ginika, and Dike-, *Americanah* enables a cross-cultural

discussion about what it means to be black and African black in America.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu works to shape a positive self image even though the racism she feels in common with black Americans and the pity and prejudice she experience uniquely as a Nigerian immigrant. Temporally situated within the historical period of military dictatorship in Nigeria and its characteristic obliteration of the country's institutions, the major characters in *Americanah* are victims of massive brain drain that ravaged Nigeria in the period when military rulers held forth in the country. Africans' emigration, in Adichie's artistic view, therefore, is knowledgeable more by a quest for better and/or faster education, as confirmed through Ifemelu's (the protagonist's) characterization.

The same socio-historical misery of institutional decay, which almost malformed the Nigerian education sector under military rule, also accounts for Ginika's exodus from the country. Ginika's professor father has to "...resign from the university and start over in America" having become fed up with the sad reality of unremitting industrial actions by university teachers over unpaid salaries and poor educational communications(65). Obinze, another major character in the novel, however, typifies the familiar emotion in post-colonial third world countries that some form of good life must be found exterior the boundaries of their corrupt, raped country, if possible in the supposed lands of plenty, that the West represents. Ifemelu's father vividly echoes this sentiment when he asserts, in his assured manner, that "America certainly creates opportunity for people to thrive..." (207). With the example of this characters, *Americanah* takes a shift from the narrative of excessive poverty and disaster as accounting for the mass emigration of Africans towards the West. Central to Adichie's *Americanah*, nonetheless, is the treatment of race and race relation as they affect African immigrants. Adichie sufficiently situates this motif within the struggles of Nigerian immigrant characters both in America and

in the United Kingdom. The text continues the description of race in the 21st century America, x-raying the unwillingness of Americans themselves (especially whites- the privileged group in the race dynamics) to discuss the social marker of the racial difference that exists at the different layers of the country's polity. In many instances, *Americanah*, exposes the many layers of racial prejudice in America and Britain.

Adichie takes a swipe at the American escapist temperament towards race and racism. An instance of this in the novel is the conversation between the "blond cashier" in a clothing store and Ginika. Though trying to get Ginika to identify the salesperson who had helped her in the store to determine who gets commission for helping customers, the cashier is reluctant to distinguish the salespersons by their different skin colours. Instead of asking whether it was the white or the black attendant who had helped them, the cashier asked, "Was it the one with long hair? the one with dark hair?" (127), even though both salespersons have long and dark hair. This example not only accentuates the delicate nature of the conversation (or lack of it?) surrounding race discourse among Americans of different colors, it also reveals the difference in response to signifiers of racism between African Americans and African immigrants in America. While the dialogue lasts between Ginika and the "blond cashier" Ifemelu irritatingly observes; and when they move out of the store, she blurts out sardonically: I was waiting for her to ask 'was it the one with two eyes' or the one with two legs?' Why didn't she just ask 'was it the black girl or the white girl?' (128). Ifemelu's reaction, here, is instructive of the meagreness of racial classification of African immigrants as 'black' in the way they relate with American race dissertation as African Americans. Although African Americans and "American Africans" (being the term coined to refer to African immigrants in the text) are racially classified as "black," they are not the same "kind" of black as Africans do not "have all those issues"

related to slavery and racism in America (168). The protagonist, Ifemelu, becomes a celebrity blogger and public speaker on race and identity later in the development of the story.

Through her blog, Ifemelu, armed with experience of cold response from white audiences after her speeches (and blog articles), would later hint that Americans prefer only a discussion of race that conform to their various group bias. She would argue that the essence of pervasive variety workshops, or multicultural talks in various American communes and agencies "was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves" (307). Beyond the investigation of how "American Africans" receive the white/colored binary of race relation in America, *Americanah* reveals how the white-privileging social system in America and Britain constitutes a threat to the African immigrants' survival. Within the description, the various characters are confronted with the survival struggle occasioned by their conferred identity as blacks, irrespective of their skills and intellect. According to Chude-Sokei (2014), because they are linked to the "brain drain" in postcolonial African nations, new immigrants tend to be better educated than most native-born Americans of any colour. Howard Dodson (2004) also confirms, "almost half of African immigrants in America arrive with bachelor's degrees- while only 26% of Americans have them- making them, "the most highly educated inhabitants in the United States" (13). Nevertheless, instance abounds in *Americanah* that explain that American Africans' academic and specialized status count for less in their quest for economic steadiness. They continue to be confronted with racial obstacles unless they associate with privileged whites. Thus, their Afropolitan quality would come forth here, as they under protest have to exhibit willingness towards cultural immersion to enable them meaningfully and indulgently engage with natives either in platonic or romantic associations. This is established in *Americanah* through the characters of Ifemelu and Emenike who dated and married white

American and British correspondingly. The characters of Aunt Uju, Bartholomew and Obinze exemplify this race-determined opportunity for economic advancement in America and Europe. Although she is a certified medical doctor, Aunt Uju has constraint practicing in every part of America because of her skin color.

She can only practice mainly in poor black neighbourhoods where she considers undesirable for bringing up her child, Dike. Bartholomew, a chartered accountant, cannot secure a loan to start a business despite that his white church mate with less credit secures same with ease. Other instances in the novel make obvious the denigration of African immigrants in racially segregated America. Aunt Uju's patients "would think they were doing her a favor by seeing her" (174). She also gets the "you people never do anything right" (184), comment from a librarian for forgetting to return a book rented from the public library. In another instance, Dike's teacher would "yell at her the way she would not yell at other white parents" (174). The London firm where Obinze works as a cleaner makes him clean toilets while his white cleaner colleague cleans offices (283). A white British waiter avoids serving Obinze and Emenike at a restaurant because "the Eastern Europeans don't like serving black people" (267). Dike's white teacher also profiles him as aggressive for doing things that other white kids of his age do. Dike's racial treatment in *Americanah* would lend legendary credibility to Derrick Bell's disagreement. In his book, *Silent Covenant: Brown Vs. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (2004), Bell argue that the Supreme Court ruling of 1954 against racially segregate school system in America achieved only representative gains as American schools are still exceedingly culturally constitute even in the 21st Century.

Ifemelu herself is a victim of the colourprofile in America. She loses a number of jobs, including a babysitting job, on account of her blackness. Laura, her boss' sister, assumes her unintelligent because

she is black. Moreover, when Ifemelu challenge Laura with case study arguments about the American race prejudice, Laura, in her characteristic air of white superiority, receives the challenge as rude (170). Similarly, Curt's mum, sister and niece finds Curt's relationship with her as "disgusting" (198). She is told "we don't do curly" (208) at a beauty salon, among other heart-rending racial treatment that she gets for being of a dark skin in America. For the African immigrant in *Americanah*'s America and Britain, the conflict of survival, maintenance of the African identity and/or creation of an entirely new identity lingers. Even though most of the characters would love to maintain their linguistic and socio-cultural identity, survival in America would require that they drop their "accent" and strive hard at adopting the "standard American English" which, of course, is racially determined. Securing corporate jobs in America would also insist that Ifemelu straightens up her natural, kinky hair. It could be argued here that through *Americanah*, Adichie positions herself as an advocate for an ideal globalization that respects identities of people wherever they find themselves in the world; a kind in which "All ethnic groups, be it so called majority or minority, easily identify their ethnicity by their cultural values which should be sacrosanct to them" (Dukor 2010: 140) It is significant that there is no African immigrant character in *Americanah* left out of suffering identity loss both at personal and socio-cultural level, in their quest for survival in societies defined by racial supremacy. It is as ironic as it is instructive that Adichie's protagonist opposes American racial injustice and advocates pride in individuals' racial and cultural identity through her blogging activities while she, at the same time, progressively loses her African identity. Similarly, while Obinze wonders how Emenike finds it easy to have fluidly lost his village Igbo Nigerian identity to the elitist white British alternative identity unwavering by his wife, little does he pay deliberation to the loss of his honest, idealistic and ideological personal identity. Here, *Americanah*

admits the reality of changeableness of identity at the instance of migration.

While Africans all over Europe and America celebrates their Africanness; the reality of cultural fascination into their host cities is foreseeable. Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel, unnecessarily resents herself at the point of her comprehension of how markedly different she has become, and how much of herself she has lost in her quest for visibility in a land dominated by phenotypical identity different from hers. Her parents' visit constitutes a catharsis for her; a moment of rediscovery and the beginning of her advancement towards home. On the day her parents left for Nigeria, she collapsed onto her bed, crying hysterically, and thinking: what is wrong with me? She was relieved that her parents had gone, and she felt guilty for feeling relief (303-304). Ifemelu dreams of when her parents would be able to visit her, and when they visit, she feels like she is no more the daughter she used to be.

This reveals to her how much of her identity she has lost and her inability to precisely relate to her root becomes traumatic for her. This also parallels with Obinze's solemn consciousness of the dishonour of his struggle for visibility in a country where socio-economic advancement is contingent upon the advantage of being white. Like Ifemelu, Obinze resolves to leave England to find the "self" back at home. At this point, Adichie's interest in problematizing the kind of continued continuationstratagem or self mobility that necessitate a pitiable loss of one's person and culture reflects the Afro-politeness admonition for home return. Americanahprovoke the question of how much of personal and racial identity one should concession in the interest of social-economic mobility. Most interestingly, both the protagonist and the deuterogamist in Americanah return to Nigeria from their various countries of immigration. Despite Ifemelu's financial and proficient success and Obinze's failure abroad, both characters suffer a common challenge- the interminable search for the

true self in a foreign land that must apposite the entirety of one's identity for one to survive.

CONCLUSION

Adichie demonstrates the power of literature to shape identity. She surrounds her characters with books and poems that influence their worldview and create a model for their own narratives. With Americanah Adichie successfully alerts would-be African immigrants on the cultural and political complexityconnected with immigration, race and identity. She takes the Afropolitanist discourse beyond the quality of gloss and all fascination that the forerunners of the Afropolitan theorists paint of Afropolitans. Americanah succeeds in foregrounding the terriblystormy waters that African immigrants have to navigate in their quest for self-finding and individual fulfilment; thereby revealing their real strength, which should unavoidably attract enjoyment from kinsmen back home and not derision. As a diasporic fiction, Americanah, exonerates African diaspora against the critical stance that accuses their intervention in African development and their employed means of celebrating Africa as routinelybig-headed and consumerist. With Americanah, Adichie makes a case for the celebratory attitude of Afropolitans towards African material culture as a strategy for self-assertion and a necessary gesture towards the advance of the continent. The narrative reveals the questionability of the "life" and "choices" elsewhere and questions the extent of Africans' willingness to lose the self to the social dictates of western race systems. Hence, this paper explores Adichie role in the Afropolitan politics of prioritizing return to homeland as the only option for African immigrants to retain and project their cultural and racial dignity in a pretentiously globalized world.

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