



## Self-Discovery and Identity : A Post Colonial Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah

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### Article Info

#### Article History

Accepted : 20 Sep 2024

Published : 05 Oct 2024

#### Publication Issue :

Volume 7, Issue 5

September-October-2024

Page Number : 72-76

### ABSTRACT

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is a deeply nuanced narrative that explores the complex dimensions of identity, belonging, race, and self-discovery through a postcolonial lens. Set between Nigeria, the United States, and the UK, the novel traces the journey of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman navigating foreign terrains both geographically and psychologically. This paper critically analyzes *Americanah* as a postcolonial text that reveals the interplay of personal and cultural identity within the broader frameworks of migration, colonial legacy, and racial politics. Many postcolonial writers have always been to help their people in regaining their lost confidence and validate their past glory. The colonial impact was so strong that it creates damage to the psyche of the colonised and the colonised were often left with losing themselves in the process. Search for Identity and Identity crisis have always been the major issues and themes in most of the postcolonial works and the eminent Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) deals with such issues.

The research paper is focusing on themes of identity, race, and immigration. Through the protagonist Ifemelu's experiences in America, the narrative explores the complexities of adapting to a new culture and the challenges faced by immigrants. The paper also delves into the postcolonial aspects of the novel, examining how colonial legacies impact identity formation and cultural assimilation. By tracing Ifemelu's journey and her interactions with race and racism, the paper brings out American society's racial dynamics and prompts to confront uncomfortable truths about belonging and identity in a racially stratified world.

**Keywords-** Postcolonial Literature, Gender, Racism, African Diaspora, Identity.

## Introduction:

Postcolonial literature often interrogates the remnants of colonial structures within the psyche of formerly colonized individuals. It examines how colonization impacts identity, language, history, and culture. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is a compelling narrative that captures this thematic richness. The novel centers around Ifemelu, whose migration from Nigeria to the U.S. catalyzes a profound journey of self-awareness. Her experience becomes a lens to view race, identity, and belonging in a transnational context.

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,"

Adichie employs a non-linear narrative structure, utilising flashbacks to unfold Ifemelu's story. The novel begins with Ifemelu in America, preparing to return to Nigeria after fifteen years. She is at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon in Trenton, New Jersey,

getting her hair braided before her departure. Ifemelu's background is revealed through her upbringing in Nigeria, characterised by her religious mother and intellectual father. A pivotal figure in her life is her Aunt Uju, who provides crucial guidance regarding her relationship with Obinze. Initially an aspiring physician, Aunt Uju becomes the mistress of a wealthy man known as the General, who supports her until his demise. Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship begins in high school and continues into their college years. However, persistent faculty strikes jeopardize Ifemelu's educational prospects, prompting her decision to move to America with Aunt Uju and her son, Dike. Upon her arrival in the United States, Ifemelu confronts the stark differences between her new environment and Nigeria, as well as the dissonance between American television portrayals and reality. She faces significant challenges in securing employment but eventually finds work as a nanny for a wealthy white woman named Kimberly. Kimberly's brother, Curt, falls in love with Ifemelu, and despite their stable relationship, their differing racial and cultural backgrounds introduce complexities. Ifemelu adopts an American accent as a strategy for assimilation. Concurrently, Aunt Uju completes her medical degree, marries Bartholomew, and grapples with her son Dike's identity struggles as the sole black student in his school. Curt assists Ifemelu in securing employment and her citizenship papers. During this period, Obinze relocates to England with his mother and resides there illegally, adopting a false identity to obtain work. After three years, Obinze returns to Nigeria, where he becomes a successful businessman working for a chief. Meanwhile, Ifemelu's romantic relationship with Curt ends, and she subsequently starts a relationship with Blaine, a Black American, which ultimately fails. Ifemelu then contacts Obinze to inform him of her return to Nigeria. Upon her

arrival, she works at a magazine but finds little satisfaction in her job. Eventually, Ifemelu and Obinze reunite, leading Obinze to confront a critical decision about whether to leave his wife, Kosi, and their daughter to be with Ifemelu. The novel concludes with Obinze visiting Ifemelu's apartment to inform her of his decision to end his marriage.

Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, is a young Nigerian woman deeply in love with Obinze. Their relationship is disrupted when Ifemelu moves to America with her Aunt Uju. Her American journey defies expectations, revealing significant cultural dissimilarities. The novel adopts an ethnographic perspective, exploring cultural issues and societal differences between America and Nigeria. Ifemelu initially views America as a land of freedom and opportunity, but her experiences challenge this idealised vision. Her friend Ranyinudo's remark, "Ifem, you know you'll have any kind of dress you want in America and next time we see you, you will be a serious Americanah" encapsulates this expectation (*Americanah* 123). The term "Americanah" itself refers to Nigerians returning from America with changed behaviours and manners, often seen in immigrants who have spent significant time abroad. African immigrants often seek better education, economic opportunities, or political stability. Ifemelu, coming from a predominantly black society, becomes acutely aware of her blackness in America. Coulibaly Aboubacar Sidiki and Coulibaly Zakaria, in "Immigration in the Confluence of Racial Implications in African Literature: A Reading of Adichie's *Americanah*," note that the novel highlights two main challenges for African immigrants, "the complex relationship with African Americans and the racial stigmatization from white Americans" (165). Ifemelu's immediate encounter with racism upon her arrival in the United States underscores this theme. Living with her Aunt Uju, she observes a neighbor's

discriminatory attitude: "We pay good money for her to go to private school because the public schools here are useless. Otherwise she will start behaving like these black Americans" (*Americanah* 137). This interaction reveals the pervasive racism and segregation in American society.

Displacement, defined as the movement from one's home country to another, often involves forced migration due to war, poverty, or other adverse conditions. Akram Al Deek, in *Writing Displacement: Home and Identity in Contemporary Post-Colonial English Fiction*, describes displacement as "encompassing, claustrophobic, estranging, ambivalent, multiple, and uprooting" (25). Displacement is not merely physical but also emotional, causing alienation and a profound sense of nostalgia. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back*, argue that displacement leads to a "post-colonial crisis of identity," eroding a valid sense of self through experiences of migration, enslavement, and cultural dislocation (8-9). Ifemelu's experience in *Americanah* embodies this crisis. Although she voluntarily moves to America, the consequences of displacement, such as racial discrimination and marginalisation, are severe. She poignantly notes, "I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" highlighting her awakening to racial identity (*Americanah* 359). Adichie also explores the strained relationship between African Americans and African immigrants in America. The novel illustrates how African Americans often blame Africans for their historical enslavement and deportation, reflecting deep-seated tensions. This sentiment is evident in a classroom debate: "A firm, female voice from the back of the class, with a non-American accent, asked, 'Why was 'nigger' bleeped out?'" (168). The African student's assertion that African Americans should not blame Africans for historical injustices underscores the

divide. Wambui's comment, "Well, if you all hadn't sold us, we wouldn't be talking about any of this" highlights the historical misperceptions and tensions between the two groups (170).

As a female, Ifemelu faces some experiences in the course of living in the community that are peculiar to her gender which cannot be shared by male postcolonial migrants. There are also experiences that she goes through that speak of her position as a black woman from Nigeria. Such experiences include her sexual exploitation by the Tennis coach when she goes job hunting, and her immediate understanding, and attraction to Wambui her Kenyan coursemate, and Boubacar the visiting Professor from Senegal, both of which happen because she is a black immigrant woman. These relationships cannot be appreciated by Blaine who, unlike Ifemelu, is an African American male, just as Ifemelu does not fully understand or appreciate the nuances that exist between him and his African American and white American friends. An instance is when she confronts him after attending one of his friend's surprise birthday parties: "The fried chicken you eat is not the fried chicken I eat, but it's the fried chicken that Paula eats" (330). In this regard, what Ifemelu means here is that she cannot relate fully to all of Blaine's situations because of her cultural and geographical background in the same way he cannot relate to hers.

Racial discrimination was prevalent in America in terms of people's appearances. When Ifemelu tries to find a job, she is forced to straighten her hair to seem professional and it has been said that most companies do not hire black women with curly hair. She was denied getting her eyebrows waxed at a salon and managed to get it done only with the intervention of her white boyfriend. Skin complexion as it relates to the perception of beauty is another question raised in *Americanah* which is a common issue of the postcolonial woman. The Western media's hype of fair

skin as the most beautiful skin accelerates the racist overtone among the people in the West. This is very clearly shown by Adichie in this part of the novel: Auntie Uju does skin lightening to appear more sophisticated and groomed for the General who keeps her. Not only women but a man like Bartholomew who moves in with Auntie Uju also bleaches his skin, "he uses bleaching creams...Couldn't you see? His face is a funny colour. He must be using the cheap ones with no sunscreen. What kind of man bleaches his skin, biko"(117). Even the African-American writer, Maya Angelou wrote in her autobiography that "the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white" (Collins 107).

The most painful effect of Colonialism is the loss of cultural identity and individual roots which ultimately leads to making race a marker of social hierarchy in America. Racist ideology tends to classify the levels of tasks or labours one needs to conform to. The blacks are considered to always be categorised under the working class. It is as if everything has been arranged for them naturally from the beginning. It is not expected for a black to be wealthy or work at any high-ranking jobs or businesses. This can be seen when the carpet cleaner is shocked at seeing Ifemelu at Kimberly and Don's place and mistakes her to be the homeowner and he begins to show hostility towards her. Later when he found out the truth his face turned into what seemed to be a grin, it was as if "The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (166). Ifemelu noticed this behaviour of the man and so she got to know that in America the Blacks are at the same level as the Poor Whites:

It didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites". Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites.

A curious thing indeed. (166)

This shows how the carpet cleaner thought about the blacks. The blacks as a whole had been looked down upon by the whites and this racial segregation didn't even spare the blacks with money. Race in this matter becomes a social construct and not biological and "In America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you" (337-338).

The African woman's hair plays a significant role in the novel. It acts as a metaphor for the race as Adichie puts it. The significance attached to hair results in the woman who is not of Western descent, feeling self-conscious and defensive until she gives in to relaxing her hair or wearing wigs which results in the placement of Western standards at the top in the aspect of hair. The Americans considered curly hair and braids as unprofessional but these are the natural traits and traditions of an African woman, a unique identity of being a black. In order to get a job in America black women had to relax their braids and straighten their hair otherwise they wouldn't be able to get hired for any jobs. Straightening their hair has not just become a way of life, but it has much deeper implications- the loss and severing of their cultural and traditional ties. Both Auntie Uju and Ifemelu had to succumb to this American tradition to survive. But the irony is that even after doing all such things in the hope of getting recognition, the blacks are still alienated by the whites and failed to be accepted by them as their companions. While trying hard to straighten her hair every day, Ifemelu's hair begins to fall out from all the chemicals being used. Her friend Wambui suggested she wear her natural hair but Ifemelu couldn't even think about what would happen if she did that and went to work. So she decided to take leave from work out of embarrassment. This situation where one tends to feel ashamed of their own culture and considers themselves to be inferior is the very product of colonialism that is still prevalent; the after-

effect of Colonialism, so to say. Ifemelu also patterns her speech to conform to the American speech or accent. This leads to the idea of 'double-consciousness' W.E.B. DuBois posited about the psyche of African Americans who were cast as the 'other' within the racially segregated society of America.

Also, Adichie has successfully crafted the danger of the single story of both Africa and America. In one of her TED Talks titled, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), Adichie describes the powerful impression the multitude of British stories made on her as a young girl growing up in Nigeria. She explains that if we only hear about people, places, or situations from one point of view, we risk accepting one experience as the whole truth. This is how Adichie puts it: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." (Adichie, 2009) The single story of Africa as a place where there is no educational institutes or proper hospitals or houses, no educated people but with full of diseases and poverty that many people outside of Africa have been imagining has been proven as wrong by Adichie through her novel. And the America that was always used to be a dream place for everyone full of good opportunities has turned out to be just a fantasy. Only those who have been to America would get to know what kind of a place it was and how different it was from what they had ever imagined. The main reason for the misconception seems to be the hidden truth of the people who have already been there. They left out all the bad things that happened and are there in America, maybe out of embarrassment or to maintain their self-esteem. Because they all went there thinking about all the good things that were about to happen to them and to say that they were suffering in such a place would be unbearable.

This shows that the reason for this construction of America is to be blamed on both the white Americans and also the Africans who already know about the truth but still choose to build a fake world of the West. The African's dream of coming to the West to prosper and become successful becomes nothing but remains an empty dream. This further affects the psyche of the people. And above all the social, political, and economic impacts that had been laid down upon by the colonisers, have also affected the colonised psychologically. And this has led to the loss of their self-confidence. The main motif of many of the postcolonial African writers has always been to help their people regain their lost self-confidence. And with no doubt, Adichie is one of them. She speaks to her people through the voice of her characters and makes them see the reality and helps them regain what they have lost. Through her novel, Adichie shows how believing in a single side of a story of something can lead to an unimaginable devastating situation and one should always try to perceive the stories from both sides. Hence, Adichie becomes a storyteller who has succeeded in making her readers change their views about how they should see the world..

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