

The Lost 'Africanah' in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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ABSTRACT

In the novel Americanah (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, looks into the Nigerian immigrant experience in the United States and Britain. The novel adopts a non-linear narrative structure focusing on the life of the protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze. The novel is a critique on the dependence of the Nigerian elite on overpriced American and European trends. The paper discovers the status of Lagos- whether it is a heaven of capitalist enterprising or an unequal city illustrative of the lack of equity wrought by capitalism's iron fist. The African and Nigerian nationalist sentiments are portrayed in the characters. Race and immigrant experience of poverty, xenophobia, and cross-cultural learning teach Ifemelu and Obinze to not place American lifestyles on a pedestal above that of their own local, Nigerian identities. The novel renders a sense of dislocation felt by both characters in two countries with wholly different histories and class structures.

KEYWORDS : Immigration, Dislocation, Identity, Race.**Introduction**

LAGOS, Nigeria —

The traffic is there, grinding life to a halt as the middle class pound out messages on BlackBerry mobile phones and worry about Facebook. The heat, the sweat and the daily tragedy of unclaimed bodies lying alongside roadways, passers-by hurrying past for fear of someone else's misfortune becoming entangled in their own.

This is modern life in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos, which becomes almost a character of its own in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, unveiling the story of Nigerian immigrants and their struggle to become American. *Americanah* is both intellectually expansive and urgently intimate, a story about the crushing experience of finding your way in a new land, and the physical and emotional lengths one goes to feel whole again.

Analysis

Adichie's main focus is on middle and upper class university-educated Nigerians. In *Americanah* the protagonist, Ifemelu, comes from a respectable middle-class Lagos family. Ifemelu is a young Nigerian, part of the metropolitan Igbo elite that grows up in Lagos, goes to graduate school in America and ends up staying⁹ Ifemelu is an immigrant who is mostly unbowed by the intimidating experience of trying to form a new life, and a new identity, in a society she scarcely understands, one that is run by white people. It is a familiar situation for most post-colonial third worlders, who believe that some form of the good life must be found outside the borders of their corrupt and backward birth country: preferably in the West, in the lands of plenty, where years of imperialism and colonialism have enabled its subjects to enjoy Freedom, drinkable tap water, and partake of a seemingly unlimited bounty of foodstuff in grocery stores and supermarkets.

Ifemelu and Obinze grew up together in Lagos, though their lives later took different paths. They fled political unrest in Nigeria as teens. Ifemelu wins a scholarship to do postgraduate work at Princeton. She settles on the East Coast of the United States and struggles to assimilate in a country where issues around blackness are treated quite differently than in her homeland, eventually starting a plucky blog about race. Obinze travels to London, where he ends up cleaning toilets as an illegal before returning to Lagos. The relationship founders under the pressure of emigration and broken dreams. But Obinze's life takes a turn for the better when he returns to Lagos, gets taken up by one of the city fixers and rides on his coat-tails to wealth of his own. He winds up back in Nigeria, married and wealthy.

Weaved into the dominant love story are the narratives of racism, displacement, migration, border-crossing and borderlessness, liberalism, Nigerian middle class apathy, Nigerian ruling class exploitation, colourism and, hairism, and white American do-gooders. The novel begins with Ifemelu's point of view, and later gives us a glimpse of Obinze's thoughts. When Ifemelu notices a fat woman in a miniskirt, she feels admiration. It is an admiration that would not have been there had it been a body that fit normative beauty ideals. "It was safe and

easy, after all, to display legs of which the world approved".

Ifemelu is a successful blogger who has achieved some amount of fame blogging about racism in America. Her blog is entitled "Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black". On the very first page she tells us that in "... this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else". It is, but, not really herself, the self that wears natural hair. Since she is on her way to Trenton to braid her hair because there are no braiding salons in Princeton.

Ifemelu turns a questioning eye on fellow Nigerian immigrants too, who chat too nostalgically on online forums about a homeland they do not really know anymore. These Nigerians save up for trips back home during the holidays, when they lavish their families with shoes and watches bought in the states in hopes of making their relatives look a little more American. Even sadder, she sees in Nigerians who live in the states, as she does, an over-willingness to embrace their new country's standards, particularly regarding race and ethnicity.

When Ifemelu's Auntie Uju, who has just received papers to practice medicine in the United States, says she needs to unbraid her hair for her job interviews so that American employers will see her as more "professional," Ifemelu asks whether there are no doctors with braided hair in America. Auntie Uju snaps right back: "You're in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed." Black women's hair perplexity play a huge role in this novel. The discourse on "racism" pertains to the American experience, exported globally like Coca-Cola and military weapons. This raises some troubling moments, not just between Ifemelu and racist white Americans, but also between her and black Americans, particularly her boyfriend Blaine and his sister, Shan. In a conversation about how American white men and European white men view black women differently, Ifemelu tells Shan she gets "a lot more interest from white men than from African-American men". Shan tells her it is probably because of Ifemelu's "exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing". This statement leaves Ifemelu angry, but not exactly in full disagreement.

Americanah lays bare all the hypocrisies of the liberal American elite. When she starts dating a wealthy, attractive white man, Curt, she takes note of his mother's disapproval and the looks directed her way from other white women, the look of people "confronting a great tribal loss". As Ifemelu explains, it is not just because Curt was white. It was "the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete's body, the sunny charm and the smell, around him, of money", that seemed to be the problem. Why would a white man like that date a woman like her? Curt, while he loves Ifemelu for who she is, who she is is also part of the allure. Cocooned in white male privilege and wealth, he, a free-spirited and do-gooder white American presumably well aware of his country's history, asks Ifemelu "Why do you have to do this?" when she comes back after a hair-relaxation treatment with a singed scalp.

Ifemelu is a rare woman who does not hide that she is quite secure

in her own sense of attractiveness and worth. She knows she is beautiful, but Adichie deftly shows how racism works to undermine even Ifemelu's sense of confidence with all the dullness of the everyday comments and stares about her hair and what people take to be her projection of Africanness. Adichie superbly depicts the variables in migration narratives along gender lines: how monstrous the situation can be for black and brown men travelling to the US or Europe.

Obinze is the most America-obsessed among Ifemelu's crew of high-school and college friends. He is the one who does not get to go to America when she does. It can be regarded as a twist of fate, which can be known as politics and the consequence of 9/11. While black and brown women may be privileged with money and some connections, post 9/11 is never a good time to be a man of colour, and so Obinze ends up in London, trying desperately to avoid being deported, only to end up being deported. Working class white British men note how Obinze speaks "African posh". Obinze spells it out for himself and for us when he attends a dinner party filled with his Nigerian cousin's white friends: he knew "they understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness", why people like him end up in London in a deportation holding cell, people like him "who were raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look inwards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else."

Obinze, back in Nigeria and newly-wealthy, notes the contradictions of Nigerian life under capitalism and legacy of an artificially imposed time-lag of modernity that was the gift of colonialism. "Remember this is our newly middle-class world. We haven't completed the first cycle of prosperity, before going back to the beginning again, to drink milk from the cow's udder". Obinze tells Ifemelu, explaining to her why restaurants in Lagos preferred to serve "imported frozen fries" out of a bag instead of fries made out of freshly-cut and fried "real potatoes".

Adichie criticizes the Nigerian returnees who spent many years abroad in the civilised West, only to return to Nigeria and find the roads full of potholes and the restaurants devoid of vegan dishes. When Obama wins the election and she and her boyfriend and their circle of friends celebrate, she touches upon a truth that resounded with many people across the globe in the significance of seeing a black man as the President of the United States. As her cousin American cousin Dike puts it, "My president is black like me."

Adichie brings the novel's ruminations on race and desire to its fulfillment. While some white American men might find her intelligent, funny, and beautiful, they do not really see her, do not allow themselves to see her, do not desire her, because identity has shaped and disciplined their sense of desire. The novel stretches into a scalding assessment of Nigeria, a country too proud to have patience for "Americanahs"; who return from abroad to belittle their countrymen and support foreign values. Of the winter scenery in a school's Christmas pageant, a parent asks, "Are they teaching children that a Christmas is not a real Christmas unless snow falls like it does abroad?"

Conclusion

Americanah questions the boundaries we draw between races and genders and nations. It is set not entirely in Nigeria during the early postcolonial decades, but it focuses on two Nigerian experiences in a transnational, global world shaped by immigration, race, love, Westernization. The characters strive to create their own identities instead of imitating western styles and definitions of urban space and life. The novel examines race, identity and belonging in the global landscapes of Africans and Americans, across different continents.

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