



Unmasking Racism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

KEYWORDS

Racism, immigrants, African-women authors, white people, hairism

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ABSTRACT

The title of the novel refers to the nickname given to Nigerians who move to the US then back to their native soil, taking back with them an array of affectations and snobberies about Nigeria and its differences with the West. Ifemelu, the lead protagonist of the novel, is herself an 'Americanah'. Beginning when they are a teenage couple in Nigeria, we follow the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze across three countries, taking in the US and UK when the characters move there respectively. Middle class and well-educated, each find their relocation is a shock to the system when they are confronted simultaneously by the differences in culture and values, and also the fact that in the West, status and class is tied to nationality and skin colour. 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 its cousin, hairism, and white American do-gooders. The novel begins with Ifemelu's point of view, and maintains it save for a few sections that allows us a glimpse of Obinze's thoughts

Introduction

The study of African literature has long been the treasure of male writers. Since time immemorial, the African women writers were denied a space in the literary scenario. Several reasons have been offered to justify the absence of female writings. People believed that African women were forced to restrict themselves in household activities and seldom found time to come to the threshold of creative writing. The African women writers undergo gender discrimination and are forced to take up traditional roles assigned to them within patriarchal society. Yet, we find that women are now writing about women exploring their own lives and breaking silences. The women translate their "cry" or "drumbeat" into a universal war-cry. African women writers probe into their experience of identity, sexual and racial differences and subjectivity.

Analysis

"Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care."

The lines quoted above clearly convey the phenomenon questioned in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel *Americanah*. *Americanah*, is about race relations in America and Britain, immigration from Africa to the global North, the systemic division between the global North and global South. It is a novel about living in the margins, of an America and Britain observed from the margins, survived by staying in the margins, and escaped or ejected from as the margins become increasingly narrowed. It presents the picture of a failure to create a life—not as an immigrant failure but as a failure of the American project and the American dream. It is a novel about the movements one makes to access privilege.

In *Americanah*, Race-in-America is as much a character as Ifemelu and her first love, Obinze. Made up of seven parts, *Americanah* begins and ends as a love story, but it's a love story that travels and migrates and sees and learns. The main character in *Americanah* is Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman. The novel takes us through her childhood in Nige-

ria, to her enrolment in a Nigerian university, the interruption of her education by an academic strike, her departure for the U.S. in order to advance her education, her success there, and her eventual voluntary return to Nigeria thirteen years later.

Ifemelu's story is animated by her writing of a blog on race in America entitled "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black", and by her love for Obinze, her high-school sweetheart, whom she leaves in Nigeria and who endures a life of hardship in Britain before returning to Nigeria. Equally important is her Aunt Uju, with whom she lives when she first arrives in America, and who settles permanently in the U.S. Aunt Uju, has a major role in moulding Ifemelu. Ifemelu witnesses the growth of Dike, her aunt's son. His troubled development hints at the terrible difficulty of raising a young black man-territory in America.

Ifemelu's story begins with a description of the unique pleasures of Princeton: It has "no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here [...] This place of affluent ease." Immediately there is a negation in the scene, "She could pretend to be someone else". With that, she launches a catalogue of all that she finds unpleasant, the things or feels that are denied to anyone of colour. The discomforts accumulate and become particularly pointed when she recounts a man telling her, "Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don't want them." Later, her cousin Dike attempts suicide. Ifemelu merely receives a phone call from Aunt Uju, telling her what has happened. Then, "she took him to Miami and they spent two days in a hotel, ordering burgers at the thatch-covered bar by the pool, talking about everything but the suicide attempt." America does not want black babies; black babies growing up in America see that they are not wanted. If America somehow manages not to annihilate them, they are compelled by America to annihilate themselves.

Ifemelu arrives in the United States without a concept of race. Immediately, she became black. Ifemelu's blackening

occurs as a result of the covert and overt racism she witnesses and experiences. Her blog is informed by her daily encounter with racial difference, encounters which form the titles of her articles: "American Tribalism," "What Do WASPs Aspire To?," "Travelling While Black," "What Academics Mean by White Privilege." On one occasion, Ifemelu wanting to get her eyebrows waxed is informed that they do not work upon curly hair. She notices that blacks in general are unable to talk with whites about these issues due to a respectability politics which ensures that racism is an extinct phenomenon. Her experiences work not only against her sense of self but against her sense of community. When her black American boyfriend, Blaine, organizes a protest against racism in front of a library at Yale, she instead attends a party, already executing her escape from a racial struggle of which she realizes she wants no part.

Indeed, the opening pages of the novel show Ifemelu as let down and uneasy, stifled by the world she inhabits. Ifemelu, becomes nameless, only a colour, a generic type: merely a coloured girl, no longer herself but a coloured girl-thing. Frustrated, Ifemelu says, "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America." She experiences an unsettling discontinuity: she was "myself"; then, suddenly, she was black. In becoming black, the self is subsumed in blackness. She falls a victim in America.

Ifemelu cannot imagine authentic love across racial borders in America. African blacks in America and American blacks are also separated by racial barriers. She applies a lot of energy in her blog detailing the differences between "American blacks" and "non-American blacks." Because these romantic failures are not attributed to any clearly defined schisms that are common to failed relationships everywhere.

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's 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? Ifemelu takes note of the easy kind of subjectivity well-off white Americans are allowed to slide into, "all easy limbs and white teeth... people whose lives were lived always in flattering light, whose messes were still aesthetically pleasing". And 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 notices daily, casual racism while Curt does not. Curt only notices blatant racism, such as when a spa attendant refuses to wax Ifemelu's eyebrows. At moments such as that one, he rallies to her defence, oblivious that his white, male, always-effective, always-authoritative defence only underscores and re-inscribes the racist structure in which they live. When they walked into a restaurant with linen-covered tables, and the host looked at them and asked Curt, "Table for one?" Curt hastily told her the host did not mean it "like that." And she wanted to

ask him, "How else could the host have meant it?" When the strawberry-haired owner of the bed-and-breakfast in Montreal refused to acknowledge her as they checked in, a steadfast refusal, smiling and looking only at Curt, she wanted to tell Curt how slighted she felt, worse because she was unsure whether the woman disliked black people or liked Curt. But she did not, because he would tell her she was overreacting or tired or both. Ifemelu, recounting her break-up with Curt, says, "And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved." The proliferation of radical love across racial borders might make racism collapse of its own weight.

Ifemelu is unused to the concept of racism. This raises some troubling moments between Ifemelu and racist white 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", and Shan tells her it's probably because of Ifemelu's "exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing", a statement that leaves Ifemelu angry, but not exactly in full disagreement.

Ifemelu is that rare thing: a woman who doesn't hide that she's quite secure in her own sense of attractiveness and worth. She knows she's beautiful, but Adichie deftly shows how racism works to undermine even Ifemelu's sense of confidence with all the banalities of the everyday comments and stares about her hair and what people take to be her projection of Africanness. When Ifemelu writes on her blog, and announces at a dinner party, that "the simplest solution to the problem of race in America" is "romantic love", not the "kind of safe shallow love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable", but "real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved",

Political exclusion is the way in which racism is practiced; economic exclusion is the way in which it is enforced. Living in the U.K. illegally, Obinze's prospects are severely constrained. In order to work and earn a living, he has to borrow a National Insurance card from another slightly better established immigrant. To do so, he has to part with a percentage of his salary or lose everything altogether. Because he is undocumented, he cannot travel out of Britain for fear of being apprehended by immigration authorities. Because he is designated as "illegal" he is consigned to only the lowest paying jobs where the surveillance technologies of the state are permissively applied. His life is one of imperilled, involuntary immobility.

Conclusion

Americanah works as an intervention, a welcome caesura in a dirge of immigrant abjection often made inaudible or incomprehensible by the continuous popular urging that the world is post-race. It provides a measured story neither too violent nor too relentless as to be unreadable. The novel serves a gentle reminder that racism is very much alive and growing stronger. It is a book that describes the unliveable nature of the American (and British) dream for minorities and the unwelcome status of such people in Britain. It proposes a strong consideration of return as the only recourse when the inevitable, sustained, and intractable strangle of anti-black racism becomes unbearable. No amount of desire enables a black immigrant or a black

American to settle into the American polity without continually experiencing rejection. This process of becoming black, of being marked and cast in shadow, is experienced by both the American black and the non-American black, the imperial subject and the colonial subject.

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