



RACE AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

M. YAZHER ARAFATH

Assistant Professor,
Jay Shriram Group of Institution,
Avinashipalayam,
Tiruppur. (TN) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel Americanah mainly focuses on the African immigrants and racial problems. Americanah is a narrative of two Nigerian immigrants who love and lose each other in the mighty flow of time and distance. This book speaks about the struggle to survive within the background of identity crisis including racial discrimination, skin colour, and hair politics. Americanah is perceived through the eyes of a Nigerian and has attempted a revolutionary act of writing. The protagonist here is trying to locate herself within the aura of closely knit, painful, and tender relations, interlocking her with various contemporary social happenings. Adichie employs migration as the window through which these issues are projected. She is aware of how race and gender work alongside each other and shape someone's experience. By analyzing the different experiences of the African immigrants the novel exposes how their immigrant status affects them through gender, race, as well as economically and culturally.

INTRODUCTION

Americanah is the story of Ifemelunamma, a Nigerian girl who migrates to America on a student visa for university education. As a student at Nsukka University, Ifemelu has her studies constantly interrupted as a result of chronic lecturers' strikes under Nigerian government riddled with corruption. In order to solve the problem of missing out on her studies her aunty Uju based in America arranges for her to get a scholarship and she therefore leaves Nigeria for America with the hope of better education prospects. Upon arrival, Ifemelu encounters an alien culture and is faced with a myriad problem from financial constraints to racism, which results in a total sense of alienation. She suddenly belongs to the underprivileged group because of her skin colour and because she is not as wealthy as she used to be. She encounters racism during her stay in America, something that she never was aware of in Nigeria. Back in Nigeria Ifemelu was oblivious of her black colour and it is only upon arrival in America that she becomes aware of her blackness. She 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

M. YAZHER ARAFATH

1P a g e



I came to America” (Americanah 290). This statement by Ifemelu shows that race is a significant factor in America. The novel highlights a series of episodes of a racist nature in the experiences of the female African immigrants. Ifemelu’s story is one of a female African immigrant who lands in America and struggles to fit in. However in the long run she is integrated into American culture by adopting certain aspects she deems necessary while at the same time retaining strong aspects of African culture.

The protagonist Ifemelu and Obinze are high school friends whose lives take different turns when fate separates them to different worlds, America and Britain respectively. Through Ifemelu, Adichie projects the African woman’s challenging moments encountered in an alien land either by being side lined as an African or a woman for that matter. However, by resisting and overcoming these challenges, the subject promotes self-assertion. Obinze on the other hand encounters racism in which whites display their superiority making him an unwelcome visitor. When the law enforcers catch up with him as an illegal immigrant he opts to return home than exploit the services of a state lawyer to appeal his case. Destiny brings the two characters together when they relocate to Nigeria; ironically the success which Obinze sought in Britain is achieved to the optimum in their homeland. Here Adichie overturns tables by demystifying America as a place that need not be glorified, for what it has to offer can be found back home in Nigeria. The success achieved back in Africa replaces the high sense of disillusionment experienced by Obinze in Britain.

As characters migrate to developed countries it is out of the conviction that these lands have much to offer in terms of opportunities. Contrary to this, when they arrive in these countries the first challenge they encounter is racism. Racism which is not experienced among Africans in Africa is encountered in America. For the new arrivals it is a strange experience that becomes a form of oppression. Most of the African characters in the novel encounter racism in the West as will be proven in this discussion. However, one aspect that is also highly important when thinking about identity is gender. The experiences of female and male immigrants are undoubtedly different from each other.

Identity is an important issue in the novel, as the plot follows Ifemelu and Obinze growing up and finding their place in the world. Because of their life situations, identity as a person is inextricably linked to racial and national identity for both these main characters. When they are teenagers Ifemelu is already smart and outspoken, and Obinze is calm and thoughtful, and as they grow up these qualities are then affected by outside cultural forces. In America, Ifemelu must struggle with her identity as an American-African, or someone seen as an outsider. When Ifemelu arrives in America she stays in Brooklyn for the summer with Auntie Uju and her son Dike. Uju gives Ifemelu a fake identity card to look for work, as she only has a student visa and Ifemelu goes to Philadelphia for school. Ginika, her friend from Nigeria, helps introduce Ifemelu to American culture and its racial politics. Ifemelu can’t find a job, and she starts using an American accent. She makes friends with some African

students. First she deals with this by taking on an American accent and straightening her hair, seemingly giving in to a new identity as an American. Later Ifemelu gains confidence and comes to embrace her Nigerianness, even as she adapts more easily to American culture and finds success there.

Hair politics is another major issue that Ifemelu experience in the novel. She reluctantly travels to a low-income area in order to find a salon that can ‘work’ with her kind of hair. This, itself, is a commentary on the enforced economic divides that separate those with ‘normal’ i.e., white hair from those with kinky/curly/‘weird’ hair, the latter of whom are ignored by so-called mainstream beauty parlors. This will be one of many examples of the lived experience of racism that Adichie demonstrates throughout her book. Ifemelu’s hair is a perfect metaphor for her experiences in America. During Ifemelu’s seemingly unreal relationship with the wealthy and white Curt, a man whose affection constantly surprised her. Ifemelu chemically relaxed her hair. This was the beginning of Ifemelu’s hair journey, so to speak. As she grew more accustomed to America, she allowed her hair to grow naturally. After disastrous experiments with chemical relaxers and alarmingly accelerated hair loss, Ifemelu visited a natural hair website set up specifically for black women.

Happilykinkynappy.com had a bright yellow background, message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They called relaxers ‘creamy crack’. They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They complimented each other’s photos and ended comments with ‘hugs.’ They complained about black magazines never having natural-haired women in their pages, about drugstore products so poisoned by mineral oil that they could not moisturize natural hair. They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, happy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude. (Americanah 212)

Ifemelu as a female African immigrant is exposed to economic pressures, which eventually alienate her from herself and others. Initially as a new arrival in America she is unable to get employment and with payment of rent overdue, she resorts to a sexual encounter with a white man. The end result of this encounter is that she ends up in a state of depression because she feels she has not fulfilled her self-expectation as well as her boyfriend Obinze’s expectations. This humiliating experience bears heavily on their relationship since Ifemelu cuts off ties with Obinze, her roommates and the outside world. This form of alienation resulting from economic constraints makes her weak. And at last after a long struggle she gets a job as a babysitter in a wealthy, liberal white woman named Kimberly who is charitable and friendly but very privileged. Kimberly and Ifemelu become friends. Ifemelu starts dating Kimberly’s

cousin Curt, a rich, handsome white man. Curt takes Ifemelu on many trips and helps her get a good job and a green card.

Ifemelu, feeling the pressure of her interracial relationship, cheats on Curt and he breaks up with her and she gets depressed again. Ifemelu starts her race blog and it gets very popular. An important part of the novel is Ifemelu's blog, "*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) by a Non-American Black*", of which various posts follow chapters throughout the novel. The posts range from subject as Michelle Obama and WASPS, to American tribalism, racism and hair products. The blog quickly becomes successful, receiving comments and even donations. Ifemelu is invited to speak at various events and paid for it. The blog helps her to make a living, to become successful. Ifemelu's racial awareness is the main subject of the blog. The blog functions as a way of giving direct critique to matters of race, without being disguised as fiction. Ifemelu is able to write her blog because she is an outsider. She is African, not African American, which gives her a certain privilege. Shan, an African American girl in the novel, says about Ifemelu:

She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she'd just be labelled angry and shunned.(*Americanah* 336)

Americanah is an in depth and intriguing presentation of immigrant experience. By narrating the story in a parallel manner Adichie addresses the challenges African women face as immigrants at the same time presenting the experience of male-female African immigrants. Adichie's writing about male and female African immigrants experience in *Americanah* will provide an opportunity for future comparative analysis of her work as well as those of other African writers writing about immigrants such as Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale* (2000), No Violet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), and Bolaji Olatunde's *Straw Dogs* (2011) among others. Literature on African immigrant experiences has received little critical attention in contemporary criticism and so the study may increase our knowledge on the nature and experiences of the lives of Africans in the West. The study of writings on female immigrants is of importance for they address key issues that concern women affairs like oppression through racism and economic exploitation.

In the United States, the term 'black' encompasses all of those with darker skin, irrespective of origin or nationality. It is a catch-all term, an inherently racist term that categorizes people based solely on their position on the light to dark scale. And thus, Ifemelu exposes the ridiculousness of the concept, which has no meaning apart from that which is assigned to it socially. In another one of her posts, Ifemelu asserts:

But race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is

M. YAZHER ARAFATH

4P a g e



phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it's about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair. (Americanah 337)

The novel also depicts a certain tension between Africans and African Americans. Before Ifemelu came to America, race never existed for her. It had never been a barrier in Nigeria, and only when it became a barrier, she noticed its existence. She grows to be very conscious of race and makes a living writing about it, but she is not burdened by America's racial history in the same manner as African Americans. Much like Ifemelu is able to write about race because of her origin, Adichie is able to write *Americanah*. She is able to observe and write about race because she knows what it is like to be treated differently because of her skin colour without it being complicated by her being African American. This is why a lot of people in America, when thinking of race and class, instinctively speak of blacks and poor whites. She posts one incident: "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class"

In America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites." Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed. (Americanah 166)

Indeed, race is not a problem in Nigeria. Despite its spectacular economic gains, or perhaps because of them, American culture and society has failed to cultivate a sense of equality that transcends racial boundaries. After moving to the United States, Ifemelu has an extremely difficult first few years, during which she suffers from a loss of identity, the result of a social construct that paradoxically denies and emphasizes race. In one of her spirited blog she states,

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. So what if you weren't 'black' in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. (Americanah 220)

Institutionalized racism is also experienced by Ifemelu during the school career fair where she hopes to be recruited for a job. The contrary happens and her explanation for this is that the recruiters upon realization that she is non-American but African end up being noncommittal. According to her their main fear is that if they hired her they would have to "descend into the dark tunnel of immigration" (Americanah 201). This is a clear indication that the female African immigrant is placed in a precarious situation if processing her documents is viewed as a complicated process not worth undertaking. In this case such bureaucracy systematically ensures blacks are cut off from receiving certain benefits. Through her blog posts Ifemelucumments on the delicate issue of institutionalized racism. One of her posts reads:

M. YAZHER ARAFATH

5P a g e



...but racism is about power of a group and in America it's the white folks who have the power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans and mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they are not smart enough to be doctors... (Americanah327)

The economic exploitation is a challenge faced by female immigrants and is a result of institutionalized racism. The American system is based on stringent laws on immigrants. Lack of proper documents brands one an illegal immigrant which leads to deportation. By avoiding the long arm of the law most immigrants end up with jobs of low status in miserable environments. The three African women braiders in the novel Halima, Aisha and Mariama best portray economic exploitation although most characters are faced by this challenge. They are deprived of proper facilities demonstrated by how they are settled in neighborhoods of low socio-economic condition. In order for Ifemelu to have her hair braided she has to travel by taxi for miles from the plush white-owned suburbs of Princeton to Trenton which she describes as “a part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people.” (Americanah 9)

Meanwhile Obinze moves to England and he stays with friends but can't find a good job, and his visa expires. He rents an identity card and finds menial work. He makes friends with a boss and coworker, but then is turned in as an illegal immigrant. Obinze borrows money from Emenike, an old friend who has gotten rich in England, and pays for a green-card marriage with a girl named Cleotilde. But on the day of his wedding, though, Obinze is arrested and sent back to Nigeria. Now Nigeria Obinze has gotten rich selling real estate and he is married to the beautiful Kosi and has a daughter.

Initially when settling to immigrant life in the West, both male and female characters share the same work-related experience. Due to race being a factor that comes into play the characters find themselves holding low status jobs like being a nanny, waitress, a delivery boy, toilet cleaner or security guard. However men's conception of themselves is challenged when there is upward mobility in the professions held by women. The male and female experience of African immigrant characters has a lot in common. The main similarity is in regard to race and class whereby both genders are discriminated against on account of their colour and restricted to low status jobs.

The newness of the path of *Americanah* as a migration story becomes even more conspicuous

M. YAZHER ARAFATH

6P a g e

in the decision of Ifemelu to return to Nigeria after spending thirteen years in the United States not because she is a failure, but out of a strong desire to return home. With Ifemelu's deliberate return migration to Nigeria, her homeland, she chooses to be identified as an 'Americanah' rather than as an American, as her friend said, "next time we see you, you will be a serious Americanah" (Americanah 100). For many migrants, the term "American" indicates the privileged possession of the nationality of that enormous world power nation that many immigrants are desperate to acquire, while 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 won't 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.

Ifemelu is discriminated against and thought of in Orientalist attitudes. She encounters white privilege and how it can blind people to issues about race. 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 and returns to her home country, where she continues to use her blogging skills for her new job. 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 is able to 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 Chimimanda 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 considered to be African American literature, since it is written by and features a Nigerian woman who has lived in America, but is not African American. 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.



WORK CITED

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. London. Fourth Estate, 2013. Print.

---. *Americanah*. 2003. London. Fourth Estate, 2014. Print.

---. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. 2006. London: Harper Perennial, 2007. Print.

---. *Purple Hibiscus*. 2013. London: Harper Perennial, 2003. Print.

Ann, Ibeku Ijeoma. "Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the Issue of feminism in African Novel." *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 5.6 (2015): 426-437. Print.