

# **Race and Gender in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah***

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most powerful, successful and internationally rewarded African authors of twenty-first century after Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. Adichie was born as the fifth of sixth children and raised in Nsukka, Nigeria. Her father was a professor at the University of Nigeria and her mother was the university's first female registrar. Adichie studied medicine at the university and then moved to the United States at age 19. She received master's degrees from Johns Hopkins and Yale, and she was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship "Genius Grant" in 2008. She has published poems, short stories, a play, and three novels - *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *Americanah*. Her third novel *Americanah* won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and was selected as one of the ten Best Books of 2013 by the editors of the New York Times Book Review. Adichie is currently married and divides her time between Nigeria and the United States.

This paper investigates the race and gender aspects in *Americanah*. Race and gender present a major threat to female African immigrants in the U.S. Since Adichie divides her time between Nigeria and the United States her novel *Americanah* does not only project love and romance, hair politics, or shifting meanings of skin colour, but also employs as a diasporic writer the colonial tendency of racism and sexism and the migratory theories. "Beyond Adichie's juxtaposition of binary migratory terms of "Americanah" and "American" and her protagonist's choice of the former, the novelist's preoccupation is to critically engage international migration theories, and to

chart a new migration story, where return migration is the quintessential closure” (Oluwafunlola 24). It also explores the inferiority of the black races as opposed to the superiority of the white races projected generally in American society.

The analysis of race and gender in *Americanah* does not only allow for the opportunity to delve into the minds of female immigrants but also to examine this inevitable interconnectedness existent between race and gender, a communion that unjustly surrogates black women to the lowest position in society.

Adichie notes, “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” (Adichie, *Americanah*, 359). Through these words she portrays the hardships African immigrants and their adaptation and acculturation processes in America. Through the exploration of racism and sexism in America, Adichie exposes many factors that agree on people’s lives through their skin colour, the biological status or their birth of origin.

Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who has lived in the US for thirteen years, goes to a hair braiding salon in Trenton, New Jersey to have her hair braided in preparation for her return to Nigeria. The narrative flashes back and forth between her afternoon in the braiding salon, her childhood and adolescence in Nigeria, and her adult years in America. As teenager in a Lagos secondary school, the protagonist of the novel Ifemelu fell in love with Obinze. At that time Nigeria was under military dictatorship, and people were leaving the country. Ifemelu, a beautiful, self-assured, competent, courageous girl departs for America to extend her study. She suffers defeats and triumphs, finds and loses relationships and friendships, all the while feeling the weight of racial discrimination and gender bias in America. On the other hand Obinze, a quiet and thoughtful son of a professor, had hoped to join her in America, but post-9/11 America did not let him in, and he plunged into a dangerous, undocumented life in London. Thus the story spread over three continents and projects the struggle of the Ifemelu and Obinze in their adopted land and find meaning only in their return to their homeland.

One can analyse *Americanah* as a novel full of social commentary on race and how it affects the lives of black immigrants, especially female immigrants. Adichie is aware of how race and gender work alongside each other and shape someone's experience. As Aimable Twagilimana argues, black women writers battle two types of discrimination: "Black women writers, who have to deal with the affliction of both racism and sexism, use traditional strategies to undo this double reduction. They strive to invent a new language to talk about their experience and their lives as black and women" (Twagilimana 4). Adichie, therefore, aims to battle stereotypes about black female immigrants to show the realistic experience of these women. *Americanah* is a novel written by a Nigerian woman about the experience of a fictional Nigerian woman. It cannot be called African American literature, but by writing about race and gender in America, it offers an outside perspective on these matters.

Regarding racist tendency in America, Adichie depicts vividly in her saying, "When you make the choice to come to America, you become black" (*Americanah* 220). Ifemelu says on her blog, implying that her skin colour only became an issue when she left Nigeria. It is important to realise here that race is a social construction and not a biological given. McLeod gives the example that people with different eye colours are not thought of as fundamentally different, and eye colour is just as biologically determined as someone's skin colour (132). Racism sprouts from this idea and refers to "the ideology that upholds the discrimination against certain people on the grounds of perceived racial difference and claims these constructions of racial identity are true or natural" (McLeod 132). As Adichie herself puts it: "Racism, the idea of the black race as inferior to the white race, and even the construction of race itself as a biological and social reality, was of course used by Western Europeans to justify slavery and later to justify colonialism" ("African Authenticity and the 'Biafran' Experience" 43).

*Americanah* is about "love, race and hair" (Adichie, Kellaway 2013). Adichie reflects on her own experiences with race in the US without sticking to the stylistic rules that exist according to her opinion: "I have written about race in a way that is in your face. I know how I am supposed to write about race in literary fiction. I know the rules and the tropes. I just chose not to

follow them. Writing about race should be lyrical and poetic and never quite definite. Very Proustian. And at the end the reader should feel exactly the same as they felt at the start” (Adichie, Ramaswamy 2013).

It remains an autobiography of Adichie as she struggles as immigrant in America. Just like Ifemelu, the female protagonist of the novel, Adichie left Nigeria and went to the US for her studies. And just like Ifemelu, Adichie started to “discover” (*Americanah* 405) race and one of the most important markers for race, which is hair, only when she came to the US. In an interview Adichie explains: “I wasn’t [aware of race before I came to the US]. [...] [In Nigeria] I didn’t really think of myself as black. [...] It’s something one learns when one comes to America. [...] For Ifemelu and for me – we had to learn race” (Adichie, Desser 2013). In *Americanah* Adichie traces this learning process which leads to a “critical consciousness regarding race and her own position as a Black woman through the character of Ifemelu” (Frank 9). By describing the life of a central character who grapples with her social surrounding and thereby develops an active consciousness and reflectivity (Frank 24), the novel stands in the tradition of the bildungsroman.

Racial discrimination is such even today in America as the Africans face. Adichie describes this aspect as, “And after you register your own company, you must find a white man. Find one of your white friends in England. Tell everybody he is your General Manager. You will see how doors will open for you because you have an oyinbo General Manager. Even Chief has some white men that he brings in for show when he needs them. That is how Nigeria works. I’m telling you” (*Americanah* 27). In the ninth chapter one finds Auntie Uju speaking, “Dike, put it back,” Auntie Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back*. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing” (*Americanah* 108).

Afro Americans were discriminated not only on the basis of colour, but also the hair syndrome was another platform for subjugation in America. “Just a little burn,” the hairdresser said. “But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (*Americanah* 203). Her hair was hanging

down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss” (*Americanah* 203). “Especially for Black women and women of colour living in a white majority society like the US, the process of becoming a subject includes the development of a critical consciousness concerning social values and norms, since their reality is shaped intersectionally through sexism and racism” (Hooks 11).

Black women and women of Color living in the US are not exclusively affected by racism or exclusively by sexism, but by both forms of oppression at the same time. Patricia Hill Collins observes that “racism and sexism are deeply intertwined [...]. African American men and women both are affected by racism, but in gender-specific ways” (Collins 5). For Collins, further states that “in this process [of self-definition] Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (Collins 125).

Racism was felt so much that Ifemelu starts a blog devoted to race in America. In America, bored with her public relations job, Ifemelu quits and starts a blog, explaining her unique perspective as a non-American black person discovering race for the first time. Her blog becomes popular, and she accepts many invitations to speak at conferences and events. Uju says to Ifemelu, “You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (*Americanah* 120). Ifemelu writes in her blog that “black people are not supposed to be angry about racism” because their anger makes whites uncomfortable (*Americanah* 223). Kilomba observes, “It is here that oppressive boundaries set by ‘race’, gender, sexuality and class domination are questioned, challenged and deconstructed” (Kilomba 37).

Black feminists argue that gender is inseparably linked and even determined by racial identity. The black feminist movement has aimed to combine to fight against sexism with the fight against racism since the early-twentieth-century, but gained ground in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and early 1970s (James 17). Ifemelu’s blog is a venue for expressing her

experience as an African immigrant and for provoking a conversation about race and migration. She says, “I discovered race in America and it fascinated me” (*Americanah* 406). She asks, “How many other people had become black in America?” (*Americanah* 298). Ifemelu indeed comes back to Nigeria as a different person and with a new consciousness because “she does understand now how structures of domination work in her life and did develop critical thinking and a critical consciousness” (Hooks 15). For herself, she invented “new, alternative habits of being as shown by the element of hair as an example of her resistance against white beauty norms” (Hooks 15).

Chimamanda Ngozi 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 in African American literature. Political discourses and racial discrimination are prominent themes in African American novels. African American literature, literature written by or about African Americans, 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.



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