



Navigating Racial Realities: Identity, Racism and Resistance in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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ABSTRACT

The research paper delves into Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*, 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, Racism, Cultural Identity, African Diaspora, Colonialism

Analysis

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born on September 15, 1977, in Enugu, Nigeria, spent her formative years in Nsukka, where she completed her primary and secondary education. Adichie's literary vision was profoundly influenced by Chinua Achebe's portrayal of African, and particularly Nigerian, societies. In 2013, Adichie published her critically acclaimed novel, *Americanah*. The novel draws from Adichie's own experiences, paralleling those of her protagonist, Ifemelu, as both navigate their identities as black individuals in the United States. Prominent authors, including Colum McCann, author of *Let the Great World Spin*, have recognised the novel as a significant literary work. Adichie's narrative style is distinguished by its meticulous attention to detail and nuanced character development.

Americanah, Adichie's third novel following *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), was released on May 14, 2013. Written in English, the novel spans 55 chapters and 608 pages. It has achieved international acclaim for its incisive exploration of contemporary issues such as race, immigration, love, and the American dream. The narrative centres on two young Nigerian lovers, Ifemelu and Obinze, whose intense relationship is disrupted by external circumstances leading to their separation. Ifemelu, depicted as an academically ambitious and successful young woman, relocates to the United States to pursue her education, leaving Obinze behind in Nigeria. Post-9/11 immigration policies prevent Obinze from joining her in America, compelling him to live an undocumented life in London. Both characters endure significant hardships and racial discrimination as black Africans in predominantly white societies. The novel primarily examines Ifemelu's journey and the identity crises she faces upon her arrival in America.

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.

Identity encompasses the unique qualities and beliefs that distinguish an individual from others. It can be shaped by family, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and race. While identity can change or be lost, such transformations are uncommon due to the complexity of the process. Francis Deng defines identity as "the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (1). Essentially, it answers the question, "Who are you?" Immigrants often face identity crises as they adapt to new countries, grappling with changes that challenge their core values and beliefs (Sidiki and Zakaria 169). Martin Sökefeld, in his article "Debating Self, Identity, and Culture in Anthropology," notes that the concept of "identity" has evolved significantly. Initially associated with "sameness" in psychology, identity was considered a stable set of personality traits formed in childhood. Inconsistency in these traits was seen as a psychological disturbance (417). Thus, identity, which encompasses traits inherited from parents and shaped by the environment, reflects thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. According to Jane Kroger in *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance Between Self and Other*, identity development continues through adolescence, influenced by significant relationships and social settings (ix-x).

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's struggle with identity is a central theme. In Chapter 11, while at a hair salon, Ifemelu learns from the hair braider Aisha that Americans often disregard the specific African countries from which black individuals originate, focusing only on their skin colour:

"Where is she?"

"In Africa."

"Where? In Senegal?"

"Benin."

"Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?" Ifemelu asked.

Aisha clucked. "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, your country in Latin America?" Aisha resumed twisting, a sly smile on her face... (*Americanah*, 18).

Ifemelu's identity crisis is further highlighted when she changes her appearance to conform to American professional standards:

'Later,' she said, 'I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair... If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional.' 'So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?' Ifemelu asked.

'I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed'" (146).

This shift in identity of the people migrating from the countries that were once colonised by the white masters has been a central concept in the postcolonial thought. Postcolonialism refers to the period following Western colonisation, marked by significant cultural and political impacts on formerly colonised nations. Postcolonial literature explores the interactions between colonisers and the colonised, addressing issues pertinent to those from colonised countries. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin assert in *The Empire Writes Back* that "more than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1). Colonialism's effects extend to culture, politics, and economy, often forcing colonised people to adopt the coloniser's culture. Postcolonial literature, exemplified by writers like Salman Rushdie and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, addresses the struggles of colonised people, including identity crises. Saman Abdulqadir Hussein Dizayi in *The Crisis of Identity in Postcolonial Novel* notes that the postcolonial novel has evolved to address issues such as resistance, nationalism, diasporas, and identity (1001). These novels depict the conflicts faced by colonised people as they navigate between their native heritage and the dominant culture imposed by colonizers (1002). The postcolonial novel addresses various issues, particularly those concerning colonised individuals who experience identity crises resulting from Western domination and power. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, articulates this dynamic as he notes "the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth" (46). This highlights how Western hegemony shapes and constrains the identities of colonised people, often leading to profound internal and external conflicts.

Identity is one of the most crucial and debated matters in postcolonial literature, particularly in African postcolonial literature. The urgency for colonised peoples to resist Western power stems from the perceived threat to the core elements that define their identity. Dietmar Rothermund, in *The Routledge Companion to Decolonization*, asserts, "the 'post-colonialists' paid attention to the new African, Asian and Caribbean writers who expressed the quest for an identity which had been submerged by the colonial impact" (31). This highlights the emergency for colonised individuals to reclaim and assert their identities, making their suffering, including issues of racism and discrimination, visible to the world. Western colonial powers targeted African nations by undermining their original culture and identity, positioning Western culture and identity as superior. The colonisers aimed to strip away the identity of African people and impose a Western identity instead. Colonialism disrupts the lives and cultures of colonised peoples, often through the imposition of language. Language, a key cultural element, was used by colonialists to convey their culture, thoughts, and beliefs. Mohammad Khosravi Shakib, in "The Position of Language in the Development of Colonization," argues: "During colonization, colonizers usually imposed their language onto the peoples they colonized, forbidding natives to speak their mother tongues. In some cases, colonizers systematically prohibited native languages" (117). This imposition was a strategy to eliminate the identity of the colonised; students were often humiliated or punished for using their native languages instead of the colonial language. Education systems were overhauled to assimilate colonised people into European culture, leading to a loss of original identity. Adichie illustrates similar effects on her protagonist, Ifemelu, in *Americanah*.

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 Auntie 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 Auntie 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). African Americans often hold Africans accountable for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade, despite historical evidence that African societies valued human life over material gains (Sidiki and Zakaria 165).

The issue of identity is a central concern in *Americanah*, affecting both Africans and African Americans. The novel portrays the divide between Africans and African Americans, even within university student associations. Sidiki and Zakaria note that Africans typically join the African Students Association, while African Americans belong to the Black Student's Union (166). This division underscores the complexities of identity within the black diaspora. Ifemelu faces challenges as a black African in America, encountering both acceptance and hostility. Wambui advises her on navigating the complexities: "If an African American calls you a Mandingo or a booty scratcher, he is insulting you for being African" (*Americanah* 173). This highlights the varying attitudes toward Africans within the black community. Ifemelu also confronts discrimination in the job market, as American employers prefer less-educated black employees (171). These experiences reflect the struggles of black immigrants in America.

Racial identity is a pervasive theme in the novel, with the term "Nigger" used to refer to Africans, highlighting the enduring legacy of racism. Sidiki and Zakaria emphasise how *Americanah* portrays the racial realities faced by black people in contemporary America, where they experience discrimination and stigmatization (166-7). Ifemelu's blog, *Raceteenth*, serves as a platform to express her experiences as a black immigrant in America. It provides a voice for her and others facing similar challenges, offering a space to discuss racial issues that are often silenced in real-life conversations (Hidalgo 13). Ifemelu's interactions and observations in America inform her blog posts, where she candidly discusses race and racism. Despite facing backlash, she continues to speak out against racial injustices, highlighting the systemic racism ingrained in American society. Her experiences underscore the pervasive nature of racism, challenging the notion that race is no longer an issue in America (*Americanah* 377). In a poignant exchange at a dinner party, Ifemelu articulates the complexity of interracial relationships and the silence around racial issues: "The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie" (359-360). She exposes the discomfort around discussing race, even among liberal circles, where acknowledging racial disparities may disrupt the status quo.

Adichie's portrayal of race and racism in *Americanah* is a searing critique of American society. Through Ifemelu's experiences and blog posts, she confronts the pervasive nature of racism and challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about identity and belonging in a racially stratified society. Her journey from her home country to the United States, all of the hardships and the discrimination she faces due to displacement, results in significant changes in her identity. Not only that but her relationships with the people she is close to play just as much of a big role in the person she finally becomes.

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