

Cultural Biases against Black Women and the Quest for Self-Discovery in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)

التحيزات الثقافية ضد النساء السود والسعي إلى التمكين الذاتي في رواية "أمريكانا"

(2013) للكاتبة تشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي

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Abstract:

This study attempts to investigate the challenges and hardships lived by the protagonist who is purely a female African immigrant as narrated in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013). In her third novel *Americanah*, Adichie tackles certain themes like racism, diasporic issues, identity crisis, immigration and inequality. She fearlessly tackles weighty themes of race and identity, ably challenging the West's wrong perceptions of African life and culture. In *Americanah*, the heroine 'Ifemelu' shifts to America for pursuing her higher studies; along the story, she presents a journey to self-empowerment and discovery by rejecting fiercely the cultural biases American society has tried to put upon her. What is more, alongside the novel – Ifemelu and other female characters were facing racist incidents because they were only a black woman. Nevertheless, these female characters transgressed over these situations and ended down by gaining their dignities and identities.

Keywords: America, Black women, Culture, Immigration, Self-discovery.

ملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة استقصاء التحديات والمصاعب التي تعيشها بطلة الرواية التي هي مهاجرة أفريقية بحتة كما ترويها رواية تشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي "أمريكانا" (2013). تتناول أديتشي في روايتها

الثالثة "أمريكاناه" مواضيع معينة مثل العنصرية وقضايا الشتات وأزمة الهوية والهجرة وعدم المساواة. وتتناول أديتشي في روايتها الثالثة "أمريكاناه" مواضيع العرق والهوية الثقيلة بلا خوف، وتتحدى باقتدار تصورات الغرب الخاطئة عن الحياة والثقافة الأفريقية. في رواية "أمريكانا"، تنتقل البطلة "إيفيميلو" إلى أمريكا لمتابعة دراستها العليا؛ وعلى طول القصة، تقدم رحلة إلى التمكين الذاتي والاكتشاف من خلال رفضها الشديد للتحيزات الثقافية التي حاول المجتمع الأمريكي فرضها عليها. والأكثر من ذلك، وعلى طول الرواية - إيفيميلو وشخصيات نسائية أخرى كانت تواجه حوادث عنصرية لأنها امرأة سوداء فقط. ومع ذلك، فقد تحدثت هذه الشخصيات النسائية هذه المواقف وانتهى بهن الأمر إلى اكتساب كرامتهن وهويتهن

كلمات مفتاحية: أمريكا، النساء السوداوات، الثقافة، الهجرة، اكتشاف الذات.

1. INTRODUCTION

Americanah, a postcolonial novel written by the Nigerian female outstanding author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published officially 2013. *Americanah* has been welcomed among the readership and its reception was a positive one especially that it deals with universal themes and it deals with global issues across different societies and nations. *Americanah* depicts the heroine's life Ifemelu in both respectively Nigeria and the host country USA- the United States of America, since she moved from Nigeria to USA to fulfil her studies. In America, Ifemelu struggles with different awful experiences in the American culture, and she witnessed bitter various racial discrimination. Via Ifemelu, Adichie voices the African woman in general and the Nigerian one in specific, she did by shedding light to the challenging incidence/s lived by Ifemelu, literally she encountered them in the alien land of America where she has been marginalized for two min matters, as an African and often as a woman. However, this matter was resisted and overcome turning into self-assertion.

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discrimination. Via Ifemelu , Adichie voices the African woman in general and the Nigerian one in specific , she did by shedding light to the challenging incidence/s lived by Ifemelu , literally she encountered them in the alien land of America where she has been marginalized for two min matters , as an African and often as a woman . However, this matter was resisted and overcome turning into self-assertion.

The study employs the feminist literary theory as it addresses key issues related to women for instance, how female fictional characters are treated in any given culture. It examines how any piece of literature attempts to cover feminism as it is the core of resisting constraints and challenges as well. The present paper uses African feminism in particular as far as it validates the life experiences of both African women and women originally they belong to the African land.

2. Title Interpretation – *Americanah*

Americanah, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is labelled as “*materials concerning or characteristic of America, its civilization, or its culture.*” In the Nigerian context , the word *Americanah* is by origin Nigerian and it is used to describe any person who just came to Nigeria but with American qualifications including culture , language . Adichie employs the term to prove her African origin in narration too. Choosing *Americanah* as a title of the novel shows how Adichie cherishes her identity as African no matter how inferior is Africa; instead it is superior to its citizens and elites.

3. Discrimination

Racism does not exist in Africa and Africans do not experience racial issues in their homelands, yet, from the first times of Ifemelu’s migration for a student visa to USA, she has become aware of a thing called racism. It was only when Ifemelu arrives to America, she knew that she is black; in this point, Adichie narrates in *Americanah* that in Nigeria race is not an issue and she had never thought of herself as black (290) .

Ifemelu exhibits that race is a key notion in American space and American culture. Reilly et al claim ‘race is intended as a category to be used in

distinguishing different human groups on the basis of physical appearance.’ (16). From their perspectives, further features as hair, eyes, nose besides to colour skin define race too. That is to say these elements denote inclusion or exclusion. In other words, being white indicates a normal matter whereas being black may result exclusion. In the novel, the word “curly”, and in an American cultural context, it is used to project black or African people men or women. What is even more, hair in *Americanah* is used as another form or shape of discrimination. Kinky hair represents the African female community culture, i.e. In many hairdressers salons, curly eyebrows and kinky hairs are not allowed to be done.

With regard to the black community intimate relationships in America, Ifemelu encounters racism from white American women because her boyfriend was a white American male. White women were astonished when Curt introduces her to the white ladies as his girlfriend. Adichie projecting Ifemelu writes in the novel that they looked at her in surprise questioning “why her?” (290), this tells nothing but how these white women are racists towards black women, girls and females, thinking too that they are superior to them. In the white community perceptions, it is worthless for black women to get into any relationship with white man.

In a conversation of Ifemelu with Kimberley, Kimberley calls black skin colour people ‘beautiful’, this linguistic term is used to consider them as ‘othering’ avoiding the concept of black. Other forms of racism that has been experienced too by Ifemelu is institutionalized racism, Ifemelu in her academic career, she hoped to get a job, the opposite happened instead, her exclusion from getting a job was that because she is not American but African. In this sense, it is understandable that African migrants are often regulated into lower positions and situations. (327”).

4. Cultural Clashes

Ifemelu encounters an alien culture once she arrives to America. Adaptation is a useful technique for her to fit in and to suit the host culture; Ifemelu’s observations drive her to be perplexed between two different cultures. This was clear in language, names as well as lifestyle. Ifemelu’s aunty Uju, in Africa represents the typical image of what is an African woman but

upon meeting her later on in USA, Ifemelu is surprised to discover that the American culture and context has completely changed her. She was shocked to hear her aunt represent herself in the phone by uttering her name as you-joo instead of oo-joo (9).

In addition, Auntie Uju switches from her accent to a new one to impress the whites. Ifemelu identifies her new acquired linguistic accent as "...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" (108). Ifemelu notes too "And with the accent emerged a new persona..." (108). The same can be perceived in a Guinean braider who addresses Ifemelu "Ama like, Oh Gad, Azsomeh" (9) that is to say Oh my God I was so mad in standard English.

The receptionist at the International Students Office Cristina Tomas had a prejudicial attitude towards Ifemelu by accusing her she is not fluent in the English language; the fact pushes her to make pauses after every word. This is well portrayed when she tells Ifemelu: "I.Need.You.To.Fill.Out.A.Couple.Of.Forms.Do.You.Understand.How.To.Fill.These.Out. (133) . Cristina's mode of communication tells that the white man's language is of high status rather than the one of the Africans which is a land devoted for poverty, disease and lack of education. Incidents of these statements told by the whites are "You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? (133). The latter reflects some of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's events when she attended for the first time the university in America.

5. Oppression against African Women

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* offers a fertile study with regard to feminist perceptions, particularly the ones correlated to African women experiences and oppressions. A remarkable aspect of the experience of the three African braiders workers including Halima, Aisha and Mariama is that gender and class are intertwined. The more they work hard on their feet all day long they still unable to progress either economically or financially, i.e. their jobs are paid lowly.

Just like Halima, Aisha and Mariama, Ifemelu as an African

immigrant woman character ; she was exposed too to economic failure and misbalance , at first when she comes to USA, as a new comer Ifemelu was unable to get a job, as a consequence , she involved into a sexual encounter with a white man. The case was ended up with a state of depression since she thought she was not enough.

One main shape that has been narrated throughout the novel to exhibit women's oppression in *Americanah* is male dominance over females/women and girls. Male domination was portrayed via different characters, taking the case of Auntie Uju for example , she experienced terrible oppressive acts from Nigeria to America. Auntie Uju was in relationship with The General, a wealthy man, a father and married man, yet, he considers women as sexual objects , he enjoys women sexually shamelessly , he even compares his women according to his nights with them. He was so into Auntie Uju , since she was submissive for she takes everything he asks for easily . One can read here how women have a low self-worth.

Auntie Uju's oppression does not end only in Africa, but she has lived so even in America, she met Bartholomew who is a Nigerian man living in America. Bartholomew is a controlling and masculine man by nature in that he tries to confine Auntie Uju's space by dictating that she should not send home any money. He exploits her and took advantage of her financially, he is fully dependent on her, pays no attention to her son Dike and even does not show affection towards her despite the daily pressures of immigrant life far from home living melting pot country called America . Bartholomew practices his traditional patriarchal authority over Auntie Uju. (*Americanah* , 217) .

In Great Britain, Chimamanda introduces us to a female character called: Ojiugo; a highly educated woman, but she occupies most of her time as a housewife. Ojiugo gives up on her education satisfying her unqualified husband sir Nicholas needs and lack of education, preserving his dignity as a boss and breadwinner of the family. Patriarchy is well read in this case, where man's place is the head of the household whereas woman takes the role of a wife and a mother (*Americanah*, 243).

6. Sexuality Norms

Sexuality is considered as a taboo theme in Ifemelu's world especially that the topic is related to the Christian faith. Ifemelu's mother introduces sex to her as a need of what is called "virtue", so she did not offer detailed information about sexuality but rather she delayed it to her marriage. Ifemelu's mother taught her about virginity and how to be pure towards God. For Ifemelu to avoid confrontation with her mother, she relied on her Auntie Uju to learn more about her body. She hides the matter that she has a boyfriend and even he has been driven to practice in secrecy to avoid clash with her mother. Since Ifemelu's mother dislike very often to talk about sexuality, her Auntie Uju instead knows about her feelings towards Obinze.

Auntie Uju has a vital role in teaching Ifemelu about sex and sexuality, she narrates that she can kiss and touch but never ever put inside (Adichie ,43). Yet ,Ifemelu still does not understand fully what is intercourse and sex until Obinze's mother teaches her about responsibility of pregnancy after having sex .

The teenagers, Obinze and Ifemelu started dating each other. For that, Obinze's mother wanted to meet her son's girlfriend; Ifemelu was somehow surprised to find her boyfriend open to their relationship. Ifemelu deduces that what is called sex is neither shameful nor prohibited but she becomes aware that both she and Obinze are responsible of their own deeds and engagement.

Obinze's mother on the other hand in the process of teaching Ifemelu sex, she asked her to let her know about their sexual relationship whenever they intend to do. Not only for the matter of trust, but rather also to have a control over both of them. Ifemelu's mother and Obinze's mother education about sex illustrates how sex is perceived in the Nigerian and African communities. For this, Ifemelu took in charge the responsibility to learn more about sex. The case was clear when she asks Obinze to kiss her "Aren't we going to kiss?" (Adichie, 49). Obinze was surprised to hear this from her , where generally men ask for and initiates sexual encounter. Ifemelu confirms her wants and desires to Obinze "[w]hat about what I want?" (Adichie,49). Again , Ifemelu does not obey gender expectations that the society put upon her and them instead she expresses freely her

sexual needs and that is what makes her boyfriend Obinze admire her more and more (Adichie, 20).

7. Maturity and Pan Africanism through Education

Blaine shows up the savior in Ifemelu's life, being the Yale Professor, he is aware enough about basically all the black community issue in USA, Ifemelu owes him of being an activist. Nevertheless, Blaine assuming that he is the Mr. Know it all takes another form of racism against African immigrants since he is an African American intellectual elite. Ifemelu recognizes later when events went in progress that Blaine is more into Africans born originally in USA, but not aware enough about the issues of the African immigrants in America. This denotes the hypocrisy of the Afro-Americans towards the pure African immigrants. That is to say Africans and African Americans often engage into good relationships, they may blame very often too their ancestors, ethnic and cultural grounds

“Try and make friends with our African-American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective. [...] The African Americans who come to our meetings are the ones who write poems about Mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian queen. If an African American calls you a Mandingo or a booty scratcher, he is insulting you for being African. Some will ask you annoying questions about Africa, but others will connect with you”. (Adichie, 106).

8. Love Ideals

Ifemelu is a powerful protagonist in the story; Obinze has been presented as an affectionate character filled with tenderness. Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship was a romantic one and it works really nice until she moved to America. Ifemelu's stay in the USA has affected her somehow in a negative sense for all the experiences and racial events she witnesses. In such case, Obinze was the source of support and love for her as he was the only one he could understand her since he went basically through the same incidents as a black man in Great Britain (Adichie, 99).

In Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the black man argued that there are two positions when it comes to possessions, firstly with his black fellow, the second one with the white ones. In his philosophy, black people treat their community differently from dealing with the white community (Frantz, 1). This certainly the outcomes of colonization where whites are considered superior than the blacks. Ifemelu's status illustrated well the philosophy, Obinze feels well his girlfriend Ifemelu as a sort of kindness, sympathy as well love and the fullest understanding. Getting back to Nigeria, her homeland, Ifemelu gains back her relationship with Obinze in the final station of her journey as she moved and lived various struggles in the process of finding her own identity as a 'whole' woman.

9. Black Women Self-Empowerment

For the African woman in America, the land imposes a need to balance between the other identity and one's identity and origins. Ifemelu fights to fit in, the issue in the long run ahead pushes her to get integrated into the American Culture by adopting certain elements, features and aspects they were necessary to belong to the host culture and at the meantime, she preserves strongly her original African culture. Ifemelu longs a sense of the Africanness spirit even in America; to illustrate; she refuses to communicate using her fake American accent and determined to speak the pure Nigerian West African English.

To vanish racial discrimination faced by black people community in USA, Ifemelu creates a blog. The blog has become the most powerful mean to confront racism resisting all the stereotyping towards the Africans. The blog is considered as a space of discussion among black Africans to resist racial issues in America; in other words, the debates among Africans play a therapeutic mission for them, they analyse posts, they share experiences from discrimination to hair issues and mainly they express their thoughts, anger and sometimes disappointment. Ifemelu finishes down gaining a voice of the voiceless black Africans especially women. She echoes the voices of the marginalized African women and speaks in the behalf of them depriving the white women from doing so.

In addition to this, Chimamanda Adichie broke the myth of African kinky hair and she built new ideas instead. Wambui a fellow African student and classmate to Ifemelu advises Ifemelu to cut her hair and go original taking pride in that hair style. Furthermore, Ifemelu responded to racial discrimination in job opportunities due to her immigrant status by excelling in her studies, she ended getting a fellowship at Princeton and appears very successful both in her profession as well as her blog. In reply to the stereotyping by Cristina Thomas, when she accuses Ifemelu and others for their low level in English language, Ifemelu deconstructs the stereotype that English mastery is meant only for the natives. After an effort to practice and to perfect the American accent, she started using her fake American accent, her American accent drives people to recognize her as a true American native, and she gets comments as 'You sound totally American.' (175), Ifemelu feels a pride of winning leaving Christina Thomas like a defeated animal (*Americanah*, 175)

For Ifemelu, she had an attitude of victory for proving Cristina Thomas wrong. Her victory has been doubled when she decides to speak in her mother language Nigerian English. That is to say, it is needful very often to retain your original identity and features. Therefore, by sticking to her natural language, Ifemelu is proving her Nigerian background of origins. Aunt Uju who in her residence at Warrington and typically in her profession as a doctor witnessed racism. In the town of Willow, Aunt Uju and her son Dike decided to stay there denoting that people round Willow are not racists, besides, Aunt Uju volunteered by joining Africa Doctors for Africa and she was in charge for take two weeks medical missions to the African land as Sudan. This would bring the tie to her origins as an African woman where her services and help are needed.

Man superiority is shaken off when Aunt Uju decides to end her relationship with Bartholomew. Aunt Uju resisted exploitation by Bartholomew and she has been transformed from being passive, docile into a full potential lady and mama. She was able enough to speak up and broke up with Bartholomew and she was engaged into a new relationship with Kweku, a Ghanaian doctor, who Ifemelu describes as "a gentleman

and a gentle man” (299).

10. CONCLUSION

By interpreting *Americanah*, readers can know the different hard and harsh experiences against African women. With a close reading of the novel and relying on the feminist theoretical framework with a lens from an African angle, it is relevant that oppression was pervasive against black women in both their respective context either in Nigeria or America as the foreign one. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recites for the readership the various hardships of the African women in America. All these women no matter their class faced oppression and authority, however, the protagonist turns up the situation from worse to a better one, she confronted racism and women hatred furiously, ending down winners and survivors defending their rights and defining their existence and dignity for women over the world in general and the African one in specific.

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