



UNCOVERING RACISM IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH

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Abstract:

The title of the novel refers to the term given to Nigerians who move to the United States and then back to their home country, bringing with them a slew of prejudices and snobberies about Nigeria and its contrasts with the West. Ifemelu, the novel's main character, is a 'Americanah'. Beginning with Ifemelu and Obinze as a teen couple in Nigeria, we follow their lives across three nations, including the United States and the United Kingdom when the characters migrate there. Middle-class and well-educated, they each experience a culture shock when confronted with variations in culture and beliefs, as well as the fact that in the West, position and class are related to nationality and skin color. Racism, displacement, migration, border-crossing and borderlessness, liberalism, Nigerian middle-class apathy, Nigerian ruling-class exploitation, colorism and its cousin, hairism, and white American do-gooders are all woven into the dominant love story. The narrative begins and ends with Ifemelu's point of view, with the exception of a few portions that give us a glimpse of Obinze's thoughts.

Introduction:

Male writers have always prized the study of African literature. African women writers have been denied a place in the literary world since time immemorial. Several explanations have been advanced to explain the lack of female texts. People believed that African women were constrained to limit their domestic activities and rarely had time to experiment with creative writing. African women authors face gender discrimination and are compelled to fill traditional roles allocated to them by patriarchal culture. Women are now writing about other women, investigating their own lives and shattering silences. The women's "cry" or "drumbeat" becomes a global war cry. African female writers delve on their identities, sexual and racial diversity, and subjectivity.

The lines stated above effectively reflect the phenomenon that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel, *Americanah*, questions. *Americanah* is about race relations in the United States and the United Kingdom, immigration from Africa to the global North, and the systemic divide between the global North and the global South. It's a novel about living on the outskirts, about an America and Britain seen from the outskirts, endured by staying on the outskirts, and escaped or ejected from when the outskirts become increasingly tight. It depicts a failure to build a life, not as an immigrant failure, but as a failure of the American mission and the American dream. It's a story about the actions people take to get access to privilege.

Race-in-America is as much a character in *Americanah* as Ifemelu and her first love, Obinze. *Americanah*, a seven-part film, begins and concludes with a love story, but it's a love tale that travels, migrates, sees, and learns. Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman, is the main character in *Americanah*. The novel follows her from her childhood in Nigeria to her enrollment in a Nigerian university, her education being disrupted by an academic strike, her departure for the United States to further 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 titled "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. Her Aunt Uju, with whom she resides when she first arrives in America and who eventually settles permanently in the United States, is equally essential. Aunt Uju plays a significant part in shaping Ifemelu. Ifemelu observes the development of Dike, her aunt's kid. His tumultuous development foreshadows the terrifying challenge of parenting a young black man territory in America.

Ifemelu's narrative opens with a description of Princeton's particular pleasures: It has "no odor." She enjoyed taking deep breaths in this place of rich leisure." The scene begins with a negation: "She could pretend to be someone else." With that, she begins an inventory of everything she considers disagreeable, the things or feelings denied to anyone of colour. The discomforts mount and become more acute as she recalls a man telling her, "Ever written about adoption? Nobody in this country wants black babies, and I don't mean biracial babies. Even black families are opposed to them." Dike, her cousin, later attempts suicide. Ifemelu just receives a phone call from Aunt Uju informing her of what has occurred. "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 except the suicide attempt," he writes. America does not want black babies, and black children growing up in America see this. If America does not annihilate them, they are forced by America to exterminate themselves.

Ifemelu arrives in the United States with no understanding of race. She instantly became black. Ifemelu's skin darkens as a result of the prejudice she witnesses and encounters, both hidden and overt. Her blog

is informed by her daily interactions with racial difference, and the titles of her pieces reflect this: "American Tribalism," "What Do WASPs Aspire To?," "Travelling While Black," and "What Academics Mean by White Privilege." When Ifemelu goes to get her brows waxed, she is told that they do not work on curly hair. She notes that blacks in general are unwilling to discuss these issues with whites due to a respectability politics that ensures racism is extinct. Her experiences undermine not only her sense of self, but also her feeling of community. When her black American boyfriend, Blaine, organizes a protest against racism in front of a Yale library, she instead attends a party, already planning her escape from a racial conflict in which she understands she has no desire to participate.

Indeed, the novel's early pages depict Ifemelu as disappointed and restless, suffocated by the world she lives. Ifemelu loses her name and becomes only a colour, a generic type: just a coloured girl, no longer herself but a coloured girl-thing. Ifemelu expresses frustration, saying, "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 has an uncomfortable discontinuity: she was "myself" and then she was black. The ego is swallowed in blackness as it becomes black. In America, she becomes a victim.

Ifemelu can't envision genuine love across racial lines in America. African blacks in America and American blacks are also divided by race. She expends a lot of effort in her blog to differentiate between "American blacks" and "non-American blacks." Because these romantic failures are not attributable to any clearly defined schisms that are frequent in unsuccessful partnerships throughout the world.

When she begins seeing Curt, a wealthy, gorgeous white man, she notices his mother's disapproval as well as the looks directed her way by other white women, the look of individuals "confronting a great tribal loss." According to Ifemelu, it wasn't just that 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 issue: why would a white man like that date a woman like her? Ifemelu observes the easy form of subjectivity afforded to well-off white Americans, "all easy limbs and white teeth... people whose lives were always lived in flattering light, whose messes were still aesthetically pleasing." And, while Curt adores Ifemelu for who she is, she is also part of her allure. When Ifemelu returns after a hair-relaxation treatment with a singed scalp, he, a free-spirited and do-gooder white American apparently well aware of his country's history, asks her, "Why do you have to do this?"

Ifemelu witnesses casual racism on a daily basis, whereas Curt does not. Curt only detects obvious bigotry, such as when a spa employee refuses to wax Ifemelu's brows. At times like this, he rallies to her defense, completely unaware that his white, male, always-effective, always-authoritarian defense just reinforces and re-inscribes the racist system in which they live. When they stepped inside a restaurant with linen-covered tables and the host asked Curt, "Table for one?" Curt quickly informed her that the host did not intend it "like that." "How else could the host have meant it?" she wondered. She wanted to tell Curt how slighted she felt 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, made worse because she wasn't sure whether the woman disliked black people or liked Curt. But she didn't because he'd tell her she was being overly dramatic, exhausted, or both. "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," Ifemelu adds of her break-up with Curt, "the problem of race in America will never be solved." The spread of radical love across racial lines may cause racism to collapse under its own weight.

Ifemelu is unfamiliar with the concept of racism. This creates some uncomfortable situations between Ifemelu and prejudiced white Americans, particularly her lover Blaine and his sister Shan. Ifemelu tells Shan that she gets "a lot more interest from white men than from African-American men" in a conversation about how American white men and European white men view black women differently, and Shan tells her that it's probably because of Ifemelu's "exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing," a statement that makes Ifemelu angry but not completely disagree.

Ifemelu is that rare thing: a lady who doesn't disguise her confidence in her own attractiveness and worth. Adichie masterfully depicts how racism works to undermine even Ifemelu's sense of confidence with all the banalities of everyday comments and stares regarding her hair and what people believe to be her projection of Africanness. When Ifemelu writes on her blog and declares at a dinner party that "the simplest solution to the problem of race in America" is "romantic love," she means "real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved," not "safe shallow love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable."

Racism is practiced through political exclusion, and it is enforced by economic exclusion. Obinze's potential are severely limited due to his unlawful status in the United Kingdom. To work and earn a living, he must borrow a National Insurance card from a little more established immigrant. To do so, he must either give up a portion of his wage or lose everything. Because he is undocumented, he is unable to leave the country for fear of being detained by immigration authorities. Because he is classified as "illegal," he is limited to low-wage

employment where the state's monitoring tools are permissively used. His life is marked by perilous, involuntary immobility.

Conclusion:

Americanah functions as an intervention, a welcome caesura amid a lament of immigrant angst that is frequently rendered inaudible or incomprehensible by the constant popular insistence that the world is post-race. It tells a calibrated story that is neither too brutal nor too persistent to be unreadable. The tale serves as a gentle warning that racism is alive and well, and only getting stronger. It is a book that exposes the unlivable nature of the American (and British) dream for minorities, as well as their undesirable status in the United Kingdom. It advocates for a substantial consideration of return as the sole option when the unavoidable, ongoing, and incurable stranglehold of anti-black racism becomes unbearable. No amount of ambition allows a black immigrant or black American to integrate into the American political system without constantly facing rejection. This process of becoming black, of being marked and placed in darkness, is shared by both American and non-American blacks, imperial and colonial subjects.

References:

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