

# RACE AND CASTE IN CHIMAMANDA NAGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVEL "AMERICANAH"

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Literature is usually the creative works of the best brains in a particular language and culture. The usefulness of Literature as can be seen in the light of the foregoing has first to do with the study of a language as a medium of communication which brings us into contact with the world. This is necessary for both our physical and spiritual world, because language touches on both. Secondly, Literature has a civilizing value, opening before us a vista into the universal human experience as opposed as opinion or assertion by scholars with non - literary background, who conceive Literature as mere story telling medium. Thirdly, Literature can create a better citizen because of its salutary influence on our psyche and attitude to life. This is greatly in a way that it can train our minds to receive opposing values. It is basically on this platform that Literature has become a veritable element for cultural globalization, especially for Africa whose Literature has been denigrated and repudiated by Western critics all along, on the claim that African Literature does not aspire to ideological universalism which they claim to be peculiar reserve of the Western works, to the exclusion of works from other races. After all, western literary works, like the African, emerged from the pre – literate western cultures to what they later on become in the Middle - age.

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 analysing the different experiences of the African immigrants the novel

exposes how their immigrant status affects them through caste and race and the condition of economic and cultural facts in African and American society.

*Americanah* is a 2013 novel by a Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie for which Adichie won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Fiction award. *Americanah* tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who immigrates to the United States to attend university. In the novel *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a wide approach to the intricate relations between blacks and whites. She expands her boundaries into portraying the relationship amongst blacks in different parts of the world. Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, is a powerful character with different prospects and objectives in life affected and influenced by her race. She becomes a famous blogger and goes through several romantic relationships which affect her personality and shapes her identity.

The novel traces Ifemelu's life in both countries, threaded by her love story with high school classmate Obinze. In Nigeria, Ifemelu doesn't really think of herself as black. There is still a racial hierarchy in Nigerian culture, however, as light-skinned or mixed-race people are considered more attractive, and people use products to make their skin lighter. But when Ifemelu and Obinze go to America and England respectively, they find that racism is a much more pervasive part of life. Ifemelu first truly discovers race and starts to consider herself as a black woman only when she is forced to adapt to America's complex racial politics. Adichie gives many examples of racist incidents, like Obinze being mocked for scraping his knee because he's a "knee-grow. Ifemelu then starts a blog about race, and Adichie scatters blog posts throughout the novel. Through these posts Adichie is able to be most outwardly critical of racism in America: Ifemelu describes many micro aggressions, incidents, and assumptions she has experienced that many whites wouldn't always notice or understand, and she is able to do so bluntly and humorously. Many of these posts involve navigating the differing experiences of African-Americans and "American-Africans," or Africans who come to live in America and experience racial prejudice for the first time.

Her blog became very popular, but Ifemelu has recently decided to quit writing it. She wonders if this was a good decision. As the train leaves Princeton and arrives in Trenton, many more black passengers get on. She noticed something similar when she took the New York Subway system, how some places were full of slim white people and others with "fat" black people. Ifemelu thinks about how she has stopped saying "fat" since living in America. Recently a man at the grocery store called Ifemelu fat, and later she looked in the mirror and accepted that this was true. In her novel, Adichie is clear about colorism and understands in both America and Nigerian context. The novel is ultimately a love story, and the main characters each spend significant time in America or England, issues of race and colorism are frequently brought to their attention while the reader goes through the novel.

After moving to the United States, Ifemelu has an extremely difficult period for the 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.

Adichie allows us to see racism as people's biases about skin color and hair texture of the protagonist but she doesn't resort to the typical girl fight between the dark skinned Ifemelu and the light skinned Ginika. Instead Adichie shows that close friendships can exist across the color spectrum. Adichie also shows that race doesn't always play out when and how we think it will, because despite what other characters expected and wanted, the dark skinned friend ends up dating the popular guy. And he treats her well.

Adichie also portrays the practice of skin bleaching among some Nigerian women. In describing Ifemelu's boss, the narrator says, "it was easy to tell that she had not been born with her light complexion, its sheen was too waxy and her knuckles were dark, as though those folds of skin had valiantly resisted her bleaching cream."

In her American setting, Ifemelu writes a blog post titled: "Why Dark-Skinned Black Women Both American and Non-American Love Barack Obama." In the post, Ifemelu explains how light skin is valued above dark skin in many contexts, but especially in America. So of course the main argument of the post is that dark skinned black women love Obama because he loves a dark skinned black woman. She says, "He knows what the world doesn't know: that dark black women totally rock." And in the typical humor of Ifemelu's writing she tacks on a last sentence that says, "Oh, and dark black women are also for cleaning up Washington and getting out of Iraq and whatnot."

As a narrative, the novel *Americanah* helps readers, whether black or white, American or non American, to discover a side to the immigrant's experience in America and racial issues that still exist today. Furthermore, Ifemelu's blog has been carefully threaded into the overall narrative structure, and it is used as an outlet by the main character in order to share her experience of blackness and race in the US, which eventually results in self-discovery and a reshaping of her identity. Even though the protagonist points to a general tendency of avoiding discussions on race and to assert that the concept belongs to the past, there are numerous statements found not only on the web, but also on the news and newspapers, which proves that race still matters today.

Adichie points out in the novel that, in the United States, individuals with a dark complexion are thought to experience racism all the same. Mainly, there is an issue of imposing one identity on the other, an identity that is not perceived as a good thing. From this point, Ifemelu searches for a black identity, since her experiences as a Nigerian Igbo are unknown or ignored by the average American. In the West, the idea of black achievement is a remarkable thing, but in Nigeria, this is a norm. Nigeria is the most populous country in the second biggest continent. One in five Africans is Nigerian. However, cultural divisions in Nigeria are ethnic and religious.

“...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)

Ifemelu struggles in the search for an identity, an identity that goes through a lengthy process of adaptation as a consequence of the changes that she withstands. Her life is altogether normal when she lives in Nigeria. She goes to school, she has a family and a boyfriend. She does not feel the burden of racism since everyone is like her, black. When she moves to America she uncovers the ways in which whites surrogate black people because of their skin colour.

Through the exploration of the novel, the reader can split the two way relation of shaping black women identity and adapting the American culture. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader encounters several situations when the protagonist is exposed to various types of discrimination such as cultural background, gender, ethnicity or racial group and economic position. The significance of these diverse discrimination is profoundly harming the black women, as they are dragged to the bottom of the society.

Adichie’s novel *Americanah* offers an outside perspective on what it means to be black in America and therefore contributes to understanding the notion of race and class. 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. 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.

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