

Rethinking Globalisation through Afropolitanism in Chimamanda Adichie’s Americanah

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ABSTRACT:

The quest of this paper is to illuminate and celebrate Adichie’s *Americanah* as a text that opens our eyes to the challenges of African Diaspora in America. The need to offer different latitude of identity is aptly captured in Taya Zelase’s 2011 essay titled *Afropolitanism*, which has become a daring resurrection of debates that surrounds the ambiguity of contemporary African Diaspora. The need to analyse and interpret Afropolitanism as an emerging diaspora theory, which speaks to Africans diaspora was best located in the works of Adichie Chimamanda titled *Americanah* (2013). Indubitably, Adichie rebukes the dilemma of African Diaspora while at the same breath celebrates Africa as the ultimate space of identity and belonging. Locating itself within Afropolitanism theory as an emerging theory is a robust yardstick of interpreting textual response to the ambiguities of contemporary African Diaspora, the paper uses a close reading of *Americanah* to identify diasporic experiences, and how the characters negotiate them. By opening an honest conversation around the questions of belonging and identity, this study is instrumental in shedding light on the opaque sense of identity and the need for examining how modern African Diaspora negotiates the dehumanising aspect of Racism.

Key Terms: Afropolitanism, Emigration, Mimicry, Postcolonialism

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Introduction

The strength of the literary artist to represent social events as they are was and remained the critical role of an artist. Globalisation as both a scientific and social revolution has attracted intense debates within literary circles. The attendant frustrations and the liminal possibility of economic and racial equity have remained an elusive reality despite the promise of fair, economic level ground. The advent of globalisation has been begged by financial experts and scholars of Diaspora to be a new economic and social frontier for both the Africans and Oriental worlds. These expectations have not been a reality but somewhat elusive. The opaque sense of identity and the quest for an honest conversation around the questions of belonging and identity has confounded contemporary African Diaspora. Confronted with the brutal reality of symbolic Racism located subtly and covertly bring an urgent raw desire to examine how modern African Diaspora negotiates the dehumanising aspect of Racism.

Diaspora theories continue to shape the literary scene. Baldwin, in his seminal 1962 essay titled “The Fire Next Time” explores the conditioned racial violence and separatism. Baldwin, in the article, acknowledges with optimism the challenges of the American Negroes and revision triumph over Racism. The hallmark of Baldwin’s theory is the need for racial tolerance and the need for justice to the black people. Smith (2008) offers a critical evaluation of subtle and covert Racism and demonstrates the hierarchal organisation of Racism in America. He courageously confronts the hypocrisy of White American who preaches racial equity but beneath the surface supervise and celebrates the ghost of slavery (Smith,

2008). Koser (2003) provides a more profound and harsh reality of the blight of African Diaspora in America. He succinctly observes that the allure of a prosperous America that is often constructed by the western media as a citadel and paragon of justice is inherently weak and that Africans are discriminated and suffers trauma because of racial prejudice (Koser, 2003).

The delusion and stark reality of American hypocrisy are best captured in the murder of Floyd an American black. The heartbreaking and cruel picture of a white cop pressing his knees on the neck of Floyd is a potent symbol of a racist American nation which is controlled by the American White extremist society. Floyd’s death has opened a raw wound of Racism which is oozing with puss. It demonstrates a trigger happy American society which has replaced lynching with guns corked at mere suspicion. Indeed, a better location of the complexities of African Diaspora in the 21st century is to locate within the Afropolitan theory espoused by Taya Selize. The dominant strand of this movement is a departure from post-colonial and race theories that mourns Racism to an embracement of more robust thoughts and celebration of vibrant African cultures. The paper asserts that Adichie *Americanah* brings a refreshing reconstruction of contemporary African Diaspora in America and Europe.

Globalisation and Afropolitanism in Adichie’s *Americanah*
Americanah the title of Adichie’s text carries a sarcastic tone which ridicules Nigerian returnees from America who suffers from neo colonisation. They have adopted an American. A closer critical interrogation of the novel *Americanah* reflects a text emboldened with the need for a

new cultural identity. Adichie exposes the traumatic identity struggle in an American society dominated by subaltern philosophy that elevates the America culture over any other religion. The text breathes new meaning to Bhaba's concept of cultural repression and dominion. The depicted American culture in the book is that which is blind to the existence of other religions other than that which is dictated by the white standard. Characters like Blaine and Shan, his sister, and non-American black characters- Ifemelu, Aunt Uju, Wambui, Ginika, and Dike-, *Americanah* enables a cross-cultural conversation about what it means to be black and African black in America.

The text is situated within the historical phase of the military dictatorship in Nigeria. It epitomises the chaos that defines a militarised institution. The lead characters in *Americanah* reflect the post-colonial brain drain in Africa. Africans' emigration, in Adichie's artistic view, therefore, is informed by the raw desire to escape from the ulcers of lousy leadership and poverty. Ifemelu's relocation is motivated by the urgent need to flee from perennial university strikes. The same institutional decay, which almost collapsed the Nigerian education sector under military rule, also accounts for Ginika's movement from the country. Ginika's professor asserts that he had resigned from the university and start over in America because he was disillusioned with the reality of consistent and predictable industrial actions by the university lectures over poor wages. Obinze, who is also a lead protagonist in the text, represents the familiar struggles that characterise oriental worlds. This group of millennials reflects an emerging group of African diaspora elites that seek for a better life outside the borders. Ifem's father reinforces this

echoes this assertion when he observed that "America certainly creates an opportunity for people to thrive..." (Adichie, 2013: 207). From the discourses of Obinze and Ifem father, the paper asserts that the budding African writer has moved away from the predominant themes of surreal poverty and bad leadership.

Adichie's *Americanah* breathes fresh air to discussions race relation and identity among African immigrants. Adichie indicts this motif within the struggles of Nigerian immigrants in America. The text gives meaning to the 21st-century race narrative. It exposes the covert racial tension that thrives among the American whites- the privileged group. *Americanah* faithfully illuminates and critic the multilayered sense of racial prejudice in America.

Adichie indicts American symbolic Racism. The interlocutions of Ginika and the cashier in a clothing store speaks to the covert form of Racism in America. The cashier distinguishes the salespersons by their skin pigmentations. The cashier would have simply inquired if it was the white or the black attendant who had helped Ginika, but the cashier asked, "Was it the one with long hair? The one with dark hair?" (Adichie, 2013: 127) even though both salespersons have long and dark hair. This discussion typifies example of the delicate nature of the racial conversation among Americans of different colours. The discourse further reflects the markers of the racial signification of Racism between African Americans and African immigrants in the West. Ifemelu shouts out sarcastically: "I was waiting for her to ask 'was it the one with two eyes' or the one with two legs?' Why didn't she just ask 'was it the black girl or the white girl?'" (128)

Ifemelu's observation reflects the psychological trauma of covert racial proliferation of African immigrants and how they relate with American Whites. Ifemelu becomes a leading blogger and public speaker on the subject of race and identity as the plot thickens. Ifemelu pours out her accumulated experience of racial injustice in America. With her accumulated experiences of rejection in the American mainstream society, her blog creates a platform of racial discussion. She observes that an analysis of race must centre on the dictates of White supremacist. She would argue her public speaking on the subject of multicultural and transnational configuration.

Adichie attacks the white-privileging racial, social system in America and Britain as constituting a threat to the African immigrants' survival. She constructs characters that are confronted with the need to negotiate their imagined identity as blacks irrespective of their skills and intellect. According to Koziel (2015), African immigrants in America are better educated than most native-born Americans. Adichie reconstructs the question of Black identity that academic competence of Africans in Diaspora does not count in the employment market. Still, instead, it is the colour that dictates the kind of a job that one can access. Adichie's characters confronted with racial prejudices and only negotiate the racial space when they associate with privileged white. Adichie leads aspects to adopt an Afropolitan philosophy as a means of settling their cultural identity.

They achieve a sense of Afropolitanism through mimicry and cultural hybridism. Adichie demonstrated the concept of a new negotiated Diaspora space in *Americanah* through

the characters of Ifemelu and Emenike who married white American and British, respectively. Adichie constructs the characters of Aunty Uju, and Obinze to objectify the question of economy and racial survival. The frustrations of Aunty Uju, who is a certified medical practitioner and who encounters numerous constraints practising in every part of America because of her skin colour. She is only accepted in poor black neighbourhoods, where she considers undesirable for bringing up her child. Aunty Uju is a voice of frustrations enveloped in attendant racial discrimination.

The text unmasks and attacks the subtle instances of racial segregation in America. Aunty Uju's bemoans her patient's attitude, who would think that they were doing her a favour by seeing her (Adichie, 2013: 174). She also observes that Dike's teacher would "yell at her the way she would not yell at other white parents." (Adichie, 2013: 174). Obinze, in a strong sense of poetic parallelism, narrates the racial horrors he encounters in England. He observes that the London firm where he works as a cleaner makes him clean toilets while his white cleaner colleague cleans offices. In another ugly incident, a white British waiter avoids serving Obinze and Emenike at a restaurant because as Adichie puts the Eastern Europeans don't like helping black people.

The lead character in the text Ifemelu is also a victim of racial prejudice in America. Her blackness is enough reason for discrimination in the workplace. Adichie illuminates this sense of racial discrimination through Laura, her boss' sister, who often profiles her as intellectually inferior because of her blackness. Moreover, Curt's mum, sister and niece find Curt's relationship as strange and

unacceptable. Ifemefula rejects American racial prejudice and call for a negotiated hybrid identity. Through her blogging activities, she can create an identity space that embraces her new culture. Obinze, on the other hand, is shocked on Emenike total immersion to the elitist British identity dictated by his British wife. Ironically as he condemns Emenike, he fails to acknowledge the death of his honest and idealistic character. Adichie, therefore admits the fluidity of identity that characterise modern African Diaspora.

Ifemelu and Obinze towards the end of the text resolved to return to Nigeria, respectively. Ifemefula decision to throw away that entire she has invested emotionally in America reveals the much of her identity she has lost and her inability to relate to her root properly becomes a traumatic psychological journey for her. In the same vein, Obinze's realisation of the unworthiness of his struggle for acceptance in a country where socio-economic advancement is anchored on colour creates a sense of urgency for a return to his roots. Obinze also resolved to return home in a quest to find "self" back at home.

Adichie's *Americanah* exposes the brilliant survival strategy and African travelling that necessitates the destruction of African culture. Adichie's *Americanah* is a text of self-discovery which details the journey of Afropolitanism. The book foregrounds the fluid question of personal and ethnic identity an individual should compromise in the interest of social-economic. The return of Ifemelu and Obinze both the protagonist of the texts reflects the emerging voice of new Afropolitans. The return to home despite Ifemelu's financial and professional success is the unchallenged

destiny of the diaspora elites that retain their Africaness in the face of globalisation.

The question of Africaness has always been an elusive concept in terms of what constitutes African literature. Adichie, in her TED talk on the danger of a single story, destroyed the Western hegemonic narrative of a deprived African continent. She breathes a new voice to the opportunities that exist in Africa as a continent in the right trajectory for success. *Americanah* faithfully provides a fertile ground for rethinking the question of African literature.

Adichie's Ifemefula continues to exemplify the tragedy of being an African in America. Having arrived in America with new hope that she will graduate from the university and acquire wealth, she is soon confronted with the reality of being a black person in America. Her concerns are replaced with the disillusionment that arises from the fact she can't get a decent job. She worked for aunty Uju as a maid and subsequently raped by a coach who needed somebody to make him relax (Adichie, 2013: 89). Adichie's generous construction of Ifemefula's problems in America helps to raise pertinent identity questions. She exposes and attacks the racial markers in America that determines who to get a job and what kind of job will non-America whites can acquire in America. The texts illuminate the fallacy of America as heaven and destroy the hegemonic narrative that it is a land of opportunities.

Adichie continues to poke holes on the American racial system. She uses the character of Dike, who is a young child in junior school to expose the ethnic roots that define

American society. Through Dike, the author narrates racial injustices in America using the voice of innocence, which has been raped by the American white supremacist. Dike is subjected to ridicule in school and is often viewed as a thief by the school authorities. Adichie narrates an incident where some items have been stolen in school and Dike had to suspend for the crime. The writer, in situational irony, reveals to the reader that on the material day of the crime, Dike was sick at home (Adichie, 2013: 120). Adichie, the ugly mishandling of Dike, mourns the pretence of American Whites. She deconstructs the question of Symbolic Racism that presents to the world a false perception of racial equity. Adichie succeeds in destroying the fallacy of African emigration and calls for a return to negritude philosophy which Afropolitanism manifests.

Adichie further deconstructs the politics that define Racism in terms of colour and physical orientation. She exposes the alienation that sums Africans emigrants in a conversation among the Saloonists and Ifemefula in Princeton. The politics of hair dominated their conversations where a sense of Africaness is destroyed at the Altar of a struggle for acceptance. Aisha is shocked that Ifemefula's hair is kinky and therefore betrays her African heritage. She says "She touched Ifemelu's hair 'why don't you have a relaxer?'" (Adichie, 2013: 2). Aisha's perception of Ifemefula's hair indicates the need for belonging and acceptance to the American culture. Hair, in the text, represents a contested space of the struggle to adjust to the American culture.

Selasi (2011) in *Ghana Must Go* espoused the mental fallacy that Africans suffers from. She attacks the post-colonial

sense of African emigration which characterise the West as a haven of green pastures. Adichie seems to reinforce Taya's concept of Afropolitanism, which describes a new breed of African emigrants. The writer in a stream of consciousness narrates the mental allure of America as a land of opportunities in the mind of Africans. While Pan Africanists rooted for a complete discard of Western ideologies, a concept that post-colonial theorists sustain in their discourses, the Afropolitanist seems to differ from the later. Afropolitanists argues for a cyclic emigration which celebrates purposeful movement to the West.

Adichie reinforces the concept of Afropolitan in the discussion of youthful college students at Ibadan. Constant lecturer's strikes confront the youths as constructed by the author due to poor wages. The perennial strikes have disrupted the learning calendar in the universities prompting students to apply for foreign scholarships. She described Obinze to have always fantasised about America. She says "He was fluent in the knowledge of foreign things, especially of American things. Everybody watched American films and exchanged faded American magazines, but he knew details about American Presidents from a hundred years ago" (Adichie, 2013: 71). Obinze in the text epitomises the emerging cohort of African elites who in the words of Bhaba (1994) mimicry the Western culture (Bhaba, 1994). He suffers from a neocolonial perception of America as a paradise. Obinze's fallacious construction of America is equally criticised by his mother, who is a professor at the university. She says "It is a wise book. The human stories that matter is those that endure. The American books you read are lightweights. "She turned to Ifemefulu "This boy is too besotted with America"

(Adichie, 2013: 74). Obinze's mother from the conversation above is in binary ideological opposition with the son. Obinze in Adichie's lens represents the African single narrative story which considers Africa as a barbaric continent. Obinze's mother, on the other hand, represents the destruction of the Western hegemonic concept of Africa. She posits that America is not the future for disgruntled Africans but in an actual Afropolitan tone rally against brain drain.

Obinze is the text progress eventually immigrated to London. He had wished to have migrated to America, but he couldn't have obtained a visa. I find the writer's choice of England as a setting to be a deliberate attempt of juxtapositioning and situating of African emigrants in Europe and America. I posit that Adichie intends to expose and critic the inherent subversion of African culture globally. The writer eventually killed Obinze's dream when she decisively deports Obinze (Adichie, 2013: 2). She portrays the challenges of being an illegal immigrant in England. Obinze is forced to have a false wedding in an attempt to dodge the law while at the same time; he adopts different names for survival (Adichie, 2013: 219). Obinze represents an aborted sense of identity in a foreign plan which is a painful, surreal reality for African Emigrants. Perhaps a heartbreaking reality is that despite Obinze coming from an affluent family in Nigeria, he was forced to negotiate his identity and search for belonging through engaging in illegal activities. The anticlimax his short touristic journey was his arrest and eventual deportation (Adichie, 2013:270). I posit in my analysis of Obinze's character that Adichie succeeds in deconstructing the fallacy that situates the West as a land of opportunities.

She further prosecutes in an implicit and smart strategy the question of Afropolitanism.

In the construction of the lead protagonist Ifemefula and Obinze, the novel blatantly exposes the new crop of African emigrants. For Adichie, the work of cultural representation takes on an instinctively political edge, directly confronting decades of negative stereotyping as a counter-discourse of Eurocentric discourses. Their shared frustrations in England and America depict the collective pain of African emigrants. Ifemefula, despite running a successful blog and having acquired a good measure of wealth, suffers from an empty self. Her eventual decision to return home reflects the Afropolitan celebration of African culture. Obinze having failed to make a life in England, eventually returned home where he acquired wealth and comfortable experience. The writer from this context destroys the post-colonial fallacy that the West is a land of opportunities. She acknowledges that tribalism exists in the West and is more vicious than Africa. She asserts that as a result of increasing migration in the contemporary global dispensation, individuals must lay aside stereotypical ideas and be open to the reality of multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Adichie's *Americanah* is a perfect debrief of would-be African immigrants on the socio-cultural and political complexities associated with new immigrants. It lays down an honest discourse on race and identity in America and Europe. Adichie creates a path for an active literary discussion on Afropolitanism as a tool of negotiating identity among the African elites in Diaspora. Adichie through the characters of

Ifemefulu and Obinze succeeds in foregrounding the intrigues that African immigrants in Diaspora have to navigate in their quest for self-identity. The characters in the text create a latitude of identity which differs from predominant pan African philosophies. It constructs an image of African travelling immigrants who are more informed and are willing to come back home while at the same time support their home countries through diaspora remittances. As a diasporic fiction, *Americanah* reconstructs and illustrates the African Diaspora as key in the development and celebration of celebrating Africa as a continent of high economic potential. Adichie makes a strong case for the need of Afropolitans in celebrating African material culture as a strategy for self-identity and a

necessary a strong gesture towards the development of the continent. Adichie handles in an assertive and bold tone the question of identity within a globalised post-colonial world. It explores the question of “life” and “choices” in an elsewhere home and interrogates the subject of the home as a fluid concept. The text in a right Afropolitan tone mirrors the extent to which African Diaspora can travel to lose the African self in favour of the Western race culture. Indeed, Adichie in *Americanah* breathes fresh air to the question of identity and the need for Afropolitanism as a theoretical concept of negotiating the diasporic space among the African immigrants in Diaspora.

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