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A life Elsewhere?: Afropolitanist Reading of Race Struggle, Identity and Home in Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah

Hammed Adejare

Introduction

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 am Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't black in your country? You are in America now. We all have our moment of initiation into the society of former Negroes... (*Americanah*, 222)

The above excerpt from Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* explicitly underscores the complex race politics in western societies. Further, it explains the psychological complication that confronts African immigrants in their continuous efforts at living their unique identity in western societies characterized by racial binary. "Black", in this context, possesses interpretations beyond skin pigmentation. The word "black" here, connotes a conferred identity, a specific profile, and, of course, an undesirable space in the American social hierarchy. Coming from African countries with the mindset that a life in the West offers the opportunity of choices, therefore, the African immigrant contests the social system that corners them into adopting a new "black" identity with little consideration for their peculiarities. This paper traces Adichie's *Americanah*'s mirroring of the consuming power of the American and British race system on the African immigrant's identity, their trials, triumph, and failure under the gripping claws of racial disadvantage.

The novel, *Americanah* (2013) has attracted a considerably huge, topically wide-ranged conversation among literary scholars. Expectedly, the narrative has been a subject of diverse interpretations within the literary, historical and sociological academic spaces. Koziel (2015) and Kabore (2016) read the text as Adichie's literary tool for asserting her African identity being an

immigrant in the West. However, these critics only concentrate their analyses on Adichie's preponderant use of Igbo language in the text to foreground her Nigerianness. There are also the novel-as-social-commentary interpretation of the text; a critical stance that stylizes Adichie's characterization of her work's protagonist, Ifemelu, as a blogger, as a means of authorial intrusion. (Guarracino, 2014) Relatedly, Maslin (2014) describes the plot of *Americanah* as "an excuse for the venting of opinions". In Maslin's view, the opinions expressed in text carry far more conviction than the storytelling, itself does.

One argument dominant in the conversation surrounding *Americanah* is the discourse of the text as remarkably concerned with immigration and densely narrating the dynamics of same in Europe and America. (Chude-Sokei, 2014) What is conspicuously missing, however, in the discussion of the text's examination of race relation in America and Britain and how the racial system constitutes a stormy water that African immigrants must either successfully navigate, or get consumed by. In this paper, therefore, I explore how *Americanah* problematizes how the racial system in America and Britain complicates the characters' African identity, and redefine them to become what Selasi (2005) would term Afropolitans. Through dense textual analysis, the paper examines how *Americanah* represents aspects of the African immigrant reality that expose British and American prejudices against immigrants and the consequences of those prejudices on the psyche of immigrants.

Towards a New Race Discourse: Between American Race Theories, Afropolitanism and the Place of "New" African Immigrants

Literature is awash with theoretical essays on race and race relation in modern America and Europe. These essays critically examine the racial tension in the various countries with huge

multi-racial and multicultural presence (especially America) and postulate different strategies for equal cultural recognition and racial justice. Baldwin, in his seminal essay, *The Fire Next Time* (1962), not only attempts a preservation of the experience of being a black man in America in the 1960s for the next generation of black people; he also condemns racial violence and separatism. Baldwin argues that only the acceptance and tolerance of racial differences could ensure justice for the American black people. Mark Smith's *How Race is Made* (2008) provides a historiography of American race relations, leaning the cultural symbols of the colored people in America towards slavery. These essays, however, seem to assume that all American blacks are products of the experience of slavery in the 18th and 19th century America. Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) recognizes migration across the Atlantic of Africans, Americans, and the Caribbean as necessarily contributory to the contemporary racial configuration of America and the Europe. The need to configure a black cultural identity that moves away from absolutism to the inclusion of all colored people sharing the same diaspora history of movement through the Atlantic slave ships therefore inspires Gilroy's Black Atlantic culture theory. What is problematic in these race theories is the exclusion of the new wave of colored immigrants, who have no direct connection with the history of slavery.

Koser (2003) comments that, in the context of the new African migrations, particularly to the United States, there is no evidence, whatsoever of a Pan-African movement, ideology, or even sensibility attempting to unite them. Koser insists on the inevitable plurality of differences at work in the contemporary deployment of black Diaspora against a largely First-World history of insisting on a singular one. According to Roberts (2005), since 1990, more blacks have arrived in America from Africa than did during the slave trade. Surprisingly, most "Black Atlantic" or "Diaspora" scholarly texts have failed to take into account, the staggering implications of this

fact. Nevertheless, the fact has stimulating effect on scholars who feel that there is urgent necessity for a “New African Diaspora” interpretive framework, as a corrective to a “Black Atlantic” framework in which Africa exists only as ghostly evocations of slavery, and to a “Black Diaspora” defined and delimited by the ideological preferences and experiential priorities of African Americans.

This necessity has informed the imperativeness for diaspora Africans to work out new theoretical postulations, that must inevitably accommodate the interest of new voluntary African immigrants in America and Europe. This intellectual movement has birthed many important recent theoretical essays with the deliberately disruptive and necessarily critical articulation of “newness” in the discussion of the African Diaspora. Such include Kwado Kondadu-Agyemang, Baffour K. Takyi, and John A. Arthur (2006) and Gillian Creese (2011). A number of others that share the context include John Arthur’s earlier *Invisible Sojourners* (2000), and Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch’s *The Other African-Americans* (2007). It is within this framework that Selasi’s popularized Afropolitanism stands out. In her essay, *Bye-Bye Babar* (2005), Selasi declares a name for the unnamed generation of voluntary African immigrants who she describes as:

Afropolitans— the newest generation of African emigrants coming soon, or collected already, at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You will know us when you see us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics... there is at least one place on the continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city, (Ibadan)... then there’s the G8 city or two or three that we know like the backs of our hands... We are Afropolitans- not citizens, but Africans of the world. (36)

For Selasi, Afropolitanism is an identity theory as well as a movement that must unapologetically communicate pride in the Africanness of immigrants in other cities of the world and negotiate an identity for new African immigrants with the peculiarity of either being

offsprings of African parents who left emigrated from Africa in the 60s and 70s, “bred on African soil and shipped to the West for higher education” or bring born abroad and sent back home for cultural reintegration”. Afropolitanism as a theory attempts identity definition, cultural redefinition, and Afropolitan consciousness- a refusal to oversimplify the efforts to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is unique and, essentially an advocacy for home return for African immigrants to contribute to efforts at developing the continent. (Selasi, 2005:37-38)

Contemporary African immigrant fictions have also recently been thematically concerned with this intellectual trend of re-negotiating the African immigrant identity beyond the inaccurate, oversimplified framework of diaspora or blackness itself. The urgency of identity formation for the new wave of African immigrants in America and Europe has made a pathway for a new class of modern and outward-looking African writers who have been tagged the “Afropolitans” (Donaldson, 2014). It is within this group that writers like Igoni Barrett, Nnedi Okorafor, Teju Cole, Taye Selasi, and Chimamanda Adichie, and others have been categorized. Essentially, Adichie’s *Americanah* typifies such literary effort at recreating the new African Diaspora Identity and a literary voice for the Afropolitan sentiment.

***Americanah*, the Complexity of Race and Identity, and the African Immigrant**

From the book title, “Americanah”, the reader (especially a Nigerian reader) immediately receives the text as one, that travels across national boundaries. “Americanah” is a sarcastic word, teasingly used to refer to Nigerian returnees from America who have been influenced by aspects of the American culture that make them unable to fit perfectly back into the culture they left behind. “Americanah”, as the book title here, however, represents a trope for a new identity;

one conferred on the bearer by years of traumatic identity struggle in a society determinedly blind to the existence of other cultures, tongues, and skin colours apart from those dictated by the white standard. From the points of view of both African American characters like Blaine and Shan, his sister, and non-American black characters- Ifemelu, Aunty Uju, Wambui, Ginika, and Dike-, *Americanah* enables a cross-cultural conversation about what it means to be black and African black in America.

Temporally situated within the historical period of military dictatorship in Nigeria and its characteristic destruction of the country's institutions, the major characters in *Americanah* are victims of massive brain drain that ravaged Nigeria in the period when military rulers held forth in the country. Africans' emigration, in Adichie's artistic view, therefore, is informed more by a quest for better and/or faster education, as demonstrated through Ifemelu's (the protagonist's) characterization. The same socio-historical misery of institutional decay, which almost collapsed the Nigerian education sector under military rule, also accounts for Ginika's exodus from the country. Ginika's professor father has to "...resign from the university and start over in America" having become fed up with the sad reality of incessant industrial actions by university teachers over unpaid salaries and poor educational infrastructure. (65) Obinze, another major character in the novel, however, typifies the familiar sentiment in post-colonial third world countries that some form of good life must be found outside the borders of their corrupt, raped country, preferably in the supposed lands of plenty, that the West represents. Ifemelu's father vividly echoes this sentiment when he asserts, in his assured manner, that "America certainly creates opportunity for people to thrive..." (207). With the example of this characters, *Americanah* takes a shift from the narrative of excessive poverty and disaster as accounting for the mass emigration of Africans towards the West.

Central to Adichie's *Americanah*, nonetheless, is the treatment of race and race relation as they affect African immigrants. Adichie sufficiently situates this motif within the struggles of Nigerian immigrant characters both in America and in the United Kingdom. The text continues the narrative of race in the 21st century America, x-raying the unwillingness of Americans themselves (especially whites- the privileged group in the race dynamics) to discuss the social markers of the racial differences that exists at the different layers of the country's polity. In many instances, *Americanah*, exposes the many layers of racial prejudice in America and Britain.

Adichie takes a swipe at the American escapist disposition towards race and racism. An instance of this in the novel is the conversation between the "blond cashier" in a clothing store and Ginika. Though trying to get Ginika to identify the salesperson who had helped her in the store to determine who gets commission for helping customers, the cashier is reluctant to distinguish the salespersons by their different skin colors. Instead of asking whether it was the white or the black attendant who had helped them, the cashier asked, "Was it the one with long hair? the one with dark hair?" (127) eventhough both salespersons have long and dark hair. This example not only accentuates the delicate nature of the conversation (or lack of it?) surrounding race discourse among Americans of different colors, it also reveals the difference in response to signifiers of racism between African Americans and African immigrants in America. While the dialogue lasts between Ginika and the "blond cashier" Ifemelu irritatingly observes; and when they move out of the store, she blurts 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 reaction, here, is instructive of the inadequacy of racial classification of African immigrants as 'black' in the way they relate with American race discourse as African Americans

are. Although African Americans and “American Africans” (being the term coined to refer to African immigrants in the text) are racially classified as “black,” they are not the same “kind” of black as Africans do not “have all those issues” related to slavery and racism in America. (168)

The protagonist, Ifemelu, becomes a celebrity blogger and public speaker on race and identity later in the development of the story. Through her blog, Ifemelu, armed with experiences of cold response from white audiences after her speeches (and blog articles), would later hint that Americans prefer only a discussion of race that conforms with their various group bias. She would argue that the essence of pervasive diversity workshops, or multicultural talks in various American communities and agencies “was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves” (307).

Beyond the exploration of how “American Africans” receive the white/colored binary of race relation in America, *Americanah* reveals how the white-privileging social system in America and Britain constitutes a threat to the African immigrants’ survival. Within the narrative, the various characters are confronted with the survival struggle occasioned by their conferred identity as blacks, irrespective of their skills and intellect. According to Chude-Sokei (2014), because they are linked to the “brain drain” in postcolonial African nations, new immigrants tend to be better educated than most native-born Americans of any color. Howard Dodson (2004) also confirms, “almost half of African immigrants in America arrive with bachelor’s degrees- while only 26% of Americans have them-making them, “the most highly educated population in the United states.” (13) Nevertheless, instances abound in *Americanah* that explain that American Africans’ academic and professional status count for less in their quest for economic stability. They continue to be confronted with racial obstacles unless they associate with privileged whites. Thus, their Afropolitan quality would come forth here, as they

compulsorily have to exhibit willingness towards cultural immersion to enable them meaningfully and tolerantly engage with natives either in platonic or romantic relationships. This is demonstrated in *Americanah* through the characters of Ifemelu and Emenike who dated and married white American and British respectively.

The characters of Aunt Uju, Bartholomew and Obinze exemplify this race-determined opportunity for economic advancement in America and Europe. Although she is a certified medical doctor, Aunt Uju has constraints practicing in every part of America because of her skin color. She can only practice mainly in poor black neighborhoods where she considers undesirable for bringing up her child, Dike. Bartholomew, a chartered accountant, cannot secure a loan to start a business despite that his white church mate with less credit secures same with ease.

Other instances in the novel demonstrate the denigration of African immigrants in racially segregated America. Aunt Uju's patients "would think they were doing her a favor by seeing her." (174) She also gets the "you people never do anything right" (184) comment from a librarian for forgetting to return a book borrowed from the public library. In another instance, Dike's teacher would "yell at her the way she would not yell at other white parents." (174) The London firm where Obinze works as a cleaner makes him clean toilets while his white cleaner colleague cleans offices. (283) A white British waiter avoids serving Obinze and Emenike at a restaurant because "the Eastern Europeans don't like serving black people." (267) Dike's white teacher also profiles him as aggressive for doing things that other white kids of his age do. Dike's racial treatment in *Americanah* would lend literary credence to Derrick Bell's argument. In his book, *Silent Covenant: Brown Vs. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (2004), Bell argues that the Supreme Court ruling of 1954 against racially

segregated school system in America achieved only symbolic gains as American schools are still highly racially constituted even in the 21st Century.

Ifemelu herself is a victim of the color profiling in America. She loses a number of jobs, including a babysitting job, on account of her blackness. Laura, her boss' sister, assumes her unintelligent because she is black. Moreover, when Ifemelu challenges Laura with case study arguments about the American race prejudice, Laura, in her characteristic air of white superiority, receives the challenge as rude. (170) Similarly, Curt's mum, sister and niece finds Curt's relationship with her as "disgusting" (198). She is told "we don't do curly" (208) at a beauty salon, among other heart-rending racial treatments that she gets for being of a dark skin in America.

For the African immigrant in *Americanah's* America and Britain, the conflict of survival, maintenance of the African identity and/or creation of an entirely new identity lingers. Even though most of the characters would love to maintain their linguistic and socio-cultural identity, survival in America would require that they drop their "accent" and strive hard at adopting the "standard American English" which, of course, is racially determined. Securing corporate jobs in America would also demand that Ifemelu straightens up her natural, kinky hair. It could be argued here that through *Americanah*, Adichie positions herself as an advocate for an ideal globalization that respects identities of people wherever they find themselves in the world; a kind in which "All ethnic groups, be it so called majority or minority, easily identify their ethnicity by their cultural values which should be sacrosanct to them" (Dukor 2010: 140) It is significant that there is no African immigrant character in *Americanah* left out of suffering identity loss both at personal and socio-cultural level, in their quest for survival in societies defined by racial supremacy.

It is as ironic as it is instructive that Adichie's protagonist opposes American racial injustice and advocates pride in individuals' racial and cultural identity through her blogging activities while she, at the same time, gradually loses her African identity. Similarly, while Obinze wonders how Emenike finds it easy to have fluidly lost his village Igbo Nigerian identity to the elitist white British alternative identity determined by his wife, little does he pay attention to the loss of his honest, idealistic and ideological personal identity. Here, *Americanah* admits the reality of fluidity of identity at the instance of migration. While Africans all over Europe and America celebrates their Africanness; the reality of cultural immersion into their host cities is inevitable.

Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel, needlessly resents herself at the point of her realization of how markedly different she has become, and how much of herself she has lost in her quest for visibility in a land dominated by phenotypical identity different from hers. Her parents' visit constitutes a catharsis for her; a moment of rediscovery and the beginning of her advancement towards home.

On the day her parents left for Nigeria, she collapsed onto her bed, crying uncontrollably, and thinking: what is wrong with me? She was relieved that her parents had gone, and she felt guilty for feeling relief. (303-304)

Ifemelu dreams of when her parents would be able to visit her, and when they visit, she feels like she is no more the daughter she used to be. This reveals to her how much of her identity she has lost and her inability to properly relate to her root becomes traumatic for her. This also parallels with Obinze's solemn realization of the unworthiness of his struggle for visibility in a country where socio-economic advancement is contingent upon the advantage of being white. Like Ifemelu, Obinze resolves to leave England to find the "self" back at home.

At this point, Adichie's interest in problematizing the kind of survival strategy or self-mobility that necessitates a pathetic loss of one's person and culture reflects the Afropolitanist admonition for home return. *Americanah* provokes the question of how much of personal and ethnic identity one should compromise in the interest of social-economic mobility. Most interestingly, both the protagonist and the deuteragonist in *Americanah* return to Nigeria from their various countries of immigration. Despite Ifemelu's financial and professional success and Obinze's failure abroad, both characters suffer a common challenge- the unending search for the true self in a foreign land that must appropriate the totality of one's identity for one to survive.

Conclusion

With *Americanah* Adichie successfully alerts would-be African immigrants on the cultural and political complexities associated with immigration, race and identity. She takes the Afropolitanist discourse beyond the quality of gloss and all glamour that the forerunners of the Afropolitan theorists paint of Afropolitans. *Americanah* succeeds in foregrounding the dreadfully stormy waters that African immigrants have to navigate in their quest for self-finding and individual fulfillment; thereby revealing their real strength, which should necessarily attract appreciation from kinsmen back home and not derision. As a diasporic fiction, *Americanah*, exonerates African diaspora against the critical stance that accuses their intervention in African development and their employed means of celebrating Africa as characteristically arrogant and consumerist. With *Americanah*, Adichie makes a case for the celebratory attitude of Afropolitans towards African material culture as a strategy for self-assertion and a necessary gesture towards the development of the continent. The narrative reveals the questionability of the "life" and "choices" elsewhere and questions the extent of Africans' willingness to lose the self to the social dictates of western race systems. I conclude that Adichie plays the Afropolitan politics of

prioritizing return to homeland as the only option for African immigrants to retain and project their cultural and racial dignity in a pretentiously globalized world.

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