

## RACE AND GENDER INEQUITY IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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### **Abstract:**

*The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie. 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 - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in Americanah*

*The above lines in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah depict the sufferings that African immigrants face in acclimatizing and adjusting to American culture. This statement implies that several people do not view themselves as blacks until they shift into a cultural territory where their "race" decides the quality of their lives and makes them stand apart in the perspective of others. Americanah examines the hardships of a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who shifts to the United States for higher education. In a quest for her identity, Ifemelu had to face discrimination on the basis of her "race" and gender. In this paper, I aim to explore how "race" and gender pose a major challenge to female African immigrants in the US and how Ifemelu overcomes these hurdles and establishes herself in the American society.*

**Key Words:** Race, immigrant, culture, education.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* predominantly concentrates on the African immigrants and issues related to race. The novel is narrated in the perception of a Nigerian and has endeavoured a fresh and unconventional initiative of writing. The issue of migration is a means through which Adichie presents concerns of race and gender. She discerns that race and gender operate very close to each other in the process of moulding a person's experience.

*Americanah* unfolds the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelunamma, who in pursuit of higher education migrates to America on a student visa. Ifemelu's studies at Nsukka University were persistently disturbed by faculty's strikes under Nigerian government which was infested with corruption. Her aunt Uju who is located in America makes preparations for Ifemelu's scholarship and the latter leaves for America with high aspirations of receiving qualitative education. Once she sets her foot on the American soil, she faces an alien culture and is encountered with various problems ranging from financial deficits to racism, which ultimately lead to an absolute sense of isolation. In no time, she realizes that she is made to 'belong' to the disadvantaged group on account of her skin colour and as she is not as rich as she was earlier. At home (Nigeria), she was unaware of her black colour and it is only after she reaches America she becomes conscious of her blackness.

The novel foregrounds a chain of events of a racist nature which female African immigrants encounter. Ifemelu is one such immigrant who tries to grapple with the situation and tries to be a part of the mainstream society. Nevertheless, over the years, she strikes a fine balance between the cultures by acknowledging a few features of the American culture which she considers essential and simultaneously preserving strong characteristics of African culture.

The novel recounts the story of Ifemelu, the protagonist and her high school friend, Obinze who part ways to diverse lands, America and Britain respectively. Adichie, through Ifemelu, portrays how African women immigrants are forced to take a back seat in a foreign land, either because of their

blackness or being a woman. Ifemelu exhibits toughness of character while overpowering these challenges, eventually emerging self-independent. Obinze, on the contrary, experiences racism where whites are dominant making him an unsolicited visitor. Obinze decides to return home when caught by the authorities as an illegal immigrant rather than utilizing the services of a lawyer to plead with in his case. Finally, both of them return to Nigeria. Obinze, in search of greener pastures lands in Britain but ironically achieves success in his motherland, Nigeria. At this point, Adichie drives home the point that the kind of success one aspires to achieve in America can be achieved in Nigeria too.

The characters in the novel migrate to prosperous countries with a hope of better prospects but as soon as they land their first confrontation is with racism. Unlike in America, Africans in Africa do not undergo racism. The immigrants find it an unusual experience which takes the form of repression. There are several episodes in the novel where the Africans experience racism in America. Gender plays a crucial role when one thinks of self-identity. Ifemelu as an African-American has to face several challenges. In the beginning, Ifemelu stays with her Aunt Uju and her son, Dike at Brooklyn. Ifemelu has migrated to America on a student visa and her aunt gives her a fake identity card so that she can search for work. Her school friend, back at home, Ginika, introduces her to American culture and its racial politics. In an attempt to secure a job, Ifemelu adopts American accent. She changes her hairstyle so as to suit the dominant culture. In the end, she retains her black culture and at the same time transforming herself to suit to American culture.

As a female immigrant, she has to face money constraints, which finally result in total estrangement from herself and others. At first, she fails to secure a job and when she fails to pay her rent in time, she resorts to a sexual confrontation with a white man. As a consequence, she becomes desolate as she has neither accomplished anything worthwhile in life nor stood to her boyfriend, Obinze's anticipation. This mortifying encounter affects their relationship as she distances herself from Obinze, her roommates and the outside world. This isolation is the result of the pressure she undergoes due to limited financial resources. Ginika helps her to secure a job of a babysitter at the house of a rich, broad-minded white woman, Kimberley, benevolent and warm. Ifemelu and Kimberley get along very well with each other. Ifemelu starts seeing Kimberley's cousin, Curt, an affluent attractive white man. They go on several trips and he helps her in securing a job and a green card. "She was lighter and leaner; she was Curt's girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favourite, flattering dress." Though Ifemelu is free, when she is introduced by Curt to his family and friends, she observes biased remarks which imply feelings of dominance on the part of white women. In fact, their relationship is ideal but his white privilege is always a source of constant bewilderment and concealed embarrassment that reminds her of the dissimilarities between them.

After she is separated with Curt, she is disheartened again. She questions herself if 'race' is one of the reasons that affected her relationship with Curt. She launches a blog: *"Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) by a Non-American Black"*. In a short span of time, this blog gains popularity and finds a large number of followers. The blog carries several posts that portray the experiences of African immigrants in the US. Her blog is a platform where she renders her opinions of 'race' candidly. The blog serves double purpose Ifemelu is able to convey her emotions without any inhibitions; guide others who are in a similar position by sharing her experiences. Furthermore, this blog is the best option for Adichie to come up with some of the most pertinent observations in the novel; by merging Ifemelu's critiques on affected superiority and discrimination with her experiences as an immigrant, she succeeds in passing a fierce criticism on the contemporary society.

*Americanah* is a comprehensive and absorbing tale of immigrant encounter. Adichie depicts the opposition that African women confront as immigrants and also portrays the experience of African men-women immigrants. In the US, the term 'black' refers to everyone with darker skin, regardless of the country they come from. It is an intrinsically racist expression that rates people on the basis of the shade of

their skin light and dark. Ifemelu condemns the absurdity of the idea, devoid of any sense besides that which is earmarked in the social context.

The novel also displays an undisputed anxiety between Africans and African Americans. At home, Ifemelu never had an awareness of race which is not the case in America. It was not an obstacle in Nigeria, and only when it became a hindrance, she observed its presence. She becomes aware of race and earns a livelihood by contributing articles on it, nonetheless, she is not worried about America's racial history as African Americans. During the initial years of her stay in America, Ifemelu is depressed as her identity is threatened which is an outcome of a social construct that conflictingly opposes and highlights race.

Economic victimization is another issue experienced by female immigrants as a consequence of systematized racism. Laws pertaining to immigrants are rigorous in America. If an immigrant is found without authentic documents, he or she is stamped an illegal immigrant and in turn results in his or her deportation. In a bid to escape from the eyes of the law, a majority of immigrants settle in menial jobs in miserable conditions. Halima, Alisha and Mariam, the three African women braiders in the novel are victims of financial oppression. They are denied of minimum comforts; their homes are located in areas where they are neither socially nor economically decent. When Ifemelu wished to get her hair braided, she had to travel by taxi for a long distance from the posh white-owned outskirts of Princeton to Trenton which she explains as “a part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people.” (9)

In the meantime, Obinze migrates to England and stays with his friends but fails to secure a decent job, and his visa lapses. He hires an identity card and obtains low-grade, unskilled work. He is amiable with his boss and fellow worker, but sent back as an illegal immigrant. Obinze borrows money from his childhood friend, Emenike, who becomes wealthy in England, and pays for a green-card wedding with Cleotilde. However, on the day of marriage, Obinze is arrested and sent back to Nigeria. In Nigeria, Obinze flourishes in real estate business and is married to the charming Kosi and has a daughter.

The uniqueness of *Americanah* lies in the fact that Ifemelu decides to return to Nigeria after spending thirteen years in the US not because she could not establish herself, but for a strong desire to return home. With Ifemelu's intentional return to Nigeria, she prefers to be recognized as an 'Americanah' rather as an American, as her friend commented, “next time we see you, you will be a serious Americanah” (100). For several migrants, the term “American” specifies the most favoured guardianship of the nationality of that vast world powerful nation that many immigrants crave to earn, while *Americanah* stands for a recognition built on earlier encounter of living in America.

On their return to Nigeria, both Obinze and Ifemelu meet every day and revive their love for each other. They spend a few weeks happily but part ways when Obinze's marriage looms a shadow on their relationship. Obinze attempts for a judicial separation from Kosi but she refuses to leave him. After seven months, he is at the doorstep of Ifemelu, declaring that he is separating from Kosi and wishes to stay with Ifemelu. She allows him in and starts a new life together there.

Adichie's *Americanah* provides an external view on what it means to be black in America and hence provides a perception of race and gender. Adichie's external viewpoint provides *Americanah* a genuine and novel standpoint. She seeks to present an account of the experience of black immigrant women in the US and to unfasten the twofold colonization that black women suffer from.

## References

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