

The Black Woman in America: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's quest for identity

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Abstract

The term “postcolonial literature” is a kind of writing that aims to challenge and dispel the stereotype that the colonized are savage and barbaric, and that the colonizers have introduced them to the light of civilization. Helping their people regain their lost confidence and validate their former glory has always been the central theme of many postcolonial writers. The primary concerns and themes in the majority of postcolonial writings, like the renowned Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), have always been identity crisis and the search for identity. Colonialism produces a negative energy that goes well beyond accelerating change. As Kenyan author Ngugi correctly puts it, colonialism is a “cultural bomb” that destroys an individual’s own essence, creating a hybrid man with a deeply wounded and confused mind. The current paper is an effort to comprehend the difficulties faced by Africans who move to the United States in search of better lives and futures, as well as the effects of colonial structures. A number of subjects are covered in the book, such as the difficulties of believing in a single story, race and gender concerns, and identity struggles. Adichie makes an effort to concentrate on the lives of her fellow Nigerians who immigrate to the United States in the hopes that it will improve their lot in life. America’s reality turned out to be very different from the world it was lead to think.

Key Words: Race, Gender, Identity, Single-story.

Introduction

In the modern world, postcolonial literature is a rapidly growing area of literary studies. In an effort to comprehend the circumstances of the so-called “common wealth” nations, many have begun to acknowledge numerous postcolonial works. The term “Commonwealth” refers to a collection of countries that were formerly British colonies. However, post-colonial writing differs from commonwealth literature in that the former emphasizes anti-colonial resistance, whereas the latter entails a sentimental exaltation of colonialism’s legacies. There is more to postcolonial literature than just the collection of works that have come from the colonies. It is a collection of works of literature that aim to challenge and reverse the impacts of colonial brutality as well as the Western stereotypes of the former colonized nations as primitive and savage.

The concept of the West's binary opposition to the East and other non-Western cultures and people was influenced by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. It demonstrates how the colonized people have been portrayed as barbaric, bestial, and beneath the superior West. The West needed to develop a binary that would oppose it, one that would portray itself as superior, logical, hardworking, and tolerant. However, this has caused the colonized to denigrate their cultures and themselves. As a result, even after colonization ended, this mindset is still maintained today, and many once colonized nations still adhere to the Western legacy.

Many postcolonial writers began as protest writers to demonstrate that this mindset is merely a Eurocentric construct and that the colonized had their own culture and traditions prior to the colonizers' arrival on their territory. People worldwide have benefited from the rise of postcolonial writers by becoming more aware of the realities of colonization. Homi K. Bhabha characterizes all cultures as hybrid cultures in *The Location of Culture*. Accordingly, the third space, called the space of enunciation, is traversed by the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized throughout their encounter to produce a whole new culture that is neither of them.

...the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*...it is the 'inter the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves." (56)

This third area is what gives rise to hybridity. Additionally, this hybridity might have a negative impact because it renders the colonized man incapable of identifying with either the East or the West. Hybrid guys frequently find themselves in a situation where they are partially westernized and completely detribalized. An obvious example of a hybrid guy is Obi, played by Achebe in *A Man of the People*.

When it comes to identity, women in Third World countries suffer the most. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses the issue of whether "people in subordinate, colonized positions are able to achieve a voice" in her well-known essay "Can The Subaltern Speak" (Habib 748). She contends that the subaltern as a woman is doubly oppressed if she is repressed or ignored in the postcolonial discourse as a result of homogenization. "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1982). Through their writings, some black feminist critics have also discussed what it's like to be a postcolonial woman. Ida B. Wells-Barnett describes how the hanging of her friends affected her life in her book. She dedicated her remaining years to the anti-lynching movement because she was so overcome with passion (Collins 41). Through her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker has demonstrated the value of preserving the writings of earlier generations of Black women writers and assisted women in recognizing the creative minds of their female forebears. The term 'womanism' was eventually created by her to distinguish between black and white feminism (Plain and Sellers 169). The first American woman to address the public with a political lecture was Maria Stewart. She "challenged the African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty" (Collins 18). Collins added, "Stewart wasn't satisfied with identifying the cause of Black women's subjugation. She encouraged Black women to define themselves in terms of independence and self-sufficiency (18).

Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* is another outstanding work that highlights the difficulties African Americans endure. The book "traces the history of American literary and cultural stereotypes of black women and demonstrates the ways in which nineteenth-century African American writers responded to these stereotypes" (Plain and Sellers, 171).

Intellectuals were not the only people who practiced black feminism. The Sojourner Truth serves as an example of this because she could express herself in her own manner, a former slave, never learned to read or write. She eventually turned into a Black feminist activist, and she asked, "Ain't I a Woman?" in one of her lectures. Sojourner Truth "exposes the concept of woman as being culturally constructed" through the contrasts between her existence as an African American woman and the attributes associated with women. Truth demonstrated her ability as a powerful thinker by dissecting the idea of a woman (Collins 32). "The overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme" (Collins 116) is fundamental to Black feminist philosophy. Through all of life's challenges, the female lead in Adichie's *Americanah* eventually overcame her anxieties and insecurities and discovered who she was. Adichie illustrates how race, class, and gender connect in African Americans' daily lives in her book.

In the novel *Americanah*, Ifemelu, a bright and independent Nigerian lady, travels to the United States in pursuit of better educational and professional prospects. But when she began to encounter racial

discrimination in America, it turned into a terrible nightmare for her. Her struggle to live in the harsh reality of both America and Nigeria after her return is shown in the story. Along with Ifemelu's romantic interactions with several other men throughout the book, it also recounts the tale of Ifemelu and Obinze's love. Despite its romance-like appearance, the book describes Africans' experiences in the postcolonial world. Along with Ifemelu's romantic interactions with several other men throughout the book, it also recounts the tale of Ifemelu and Obinze's love. Despite appearing to be a romance, the book describes Africans' experiences in the postcolonial world. The African characters' struggle to survive in a place like America is explored in the book. Once Ifemelu arrives in America, identity becomes a significant problem. She even discusses how, while in Nigeria, she never gave her skin tone any thought, but as soon as she arrived in America, she was labeled a Black person. After visiting, the America she had previously imagined has completely transformed. In her mind, America was a paradise where people were happy and wealthy and had no troubles. However, she had only seen the filthy streets and poverty of Auntie Uju's area since she arrived. The America in her imagination seemed to be a mirage, while the real America was much different. People used to talk about how wonderful American society was and how it was a place of opportunities back when she was in Nigeria. In actuality, this was merely a fabrication and a celebration of America by its citizens. Adichie might be explaining this to African parents who, in the past, portrayed America as a place of opportunity and dreams while undervaluing their own country, which can be seen when Ifemelu's father tells her: "America creates opportunities for people to thrive. Nigeria can indeed learn from them" (438). Ifemelu had to work because her scholarship was insufficient to cover all of her tuition costs. However, her student visa prevented her from working at any employment, so she had to work illegally under someone else's name.

Being a woman, Ifemelu encounters some gender-specific experiences during her time in the community that male postcolonial migrants are unable to share. She also experiences several things that relate to her status as a Nigerian black lady. As a result of being a black immigrant woman, she has had experiences such as being sexually exploited by the tennis instructor when she goes job seeking and being immediately attracted to and understood by Wambui, her Kenyan classmate, and Boubacar, the visiting professor from Senegal. In the same way that Ifemelu does not really comprehend or value the subtleties that exist between him and his African American partner, Blaine, who is an African American male, is unable to appreciate these relationships. "The fried chicken you eat is not the fried chicken I eat, but it's the fried chicken that Paula eats" (330) is one example of how she confronts him after he attends one of his friends' surprise birthday parties. Ifemelu is implying that, due to her cultural and geographic heritage, she is unable to completely relate to all of Blaine's experiences, just as he is unable to relate to hers.

A person who battles the fundamental postcolonial problems and the expectations this new society places on her as a woman is known as a postcolonial woman,

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an Indian post-colonial critic, contended that white women had formed Third World women as the other to themselves, just as males had reduced women to the other. As a result, the 'typical Third World woman' was perceived as being mistreated, poor, ignorant, and religious. (Waugh 606).

In her reflections on the subaltern, Gayatri Spivak asserts that the postcolonial woman experiences double oppression as "a postcolonial subject and secondly, as a woman" (Habib 2005). The characters in the book were greatly impacted by racial prejudice in America. The African American woman in this work has been subjected to western ideals of beauty. "African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty.- standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another" (Collins 106). According to Collins, Skin color, hair color, and body size are all factors that contribute to the concept of femininity and beauty, and these aspects of beauty are viewed from a Western or Eurocentric standpoint. When attempting to fit in with these ideas, the postcolonial woman who is not born with these characteristics suffers greatly. This entails favoring a slender build, a pale complexion, and non-kinky hair—which might be straight or wavy—over larger, fuller bodies and darker complexions. "Everything Counts" by Ama Ata Aidoo can be mentioned here. The female protagonist of Aidoo's novel saw the female pupils lightening their skin tones and wearing wigs to class. Working in an office herself, she witnessed firsthand how the wig has nearly entirely destroyed the women's cultural identity: "...from the air-stewardesses to the grade-three typists in the offices, every female just wore a wig". (Audio 3)

Nearly all of the female characters in this book have experienced sexual dissatisfaction at some point. These women no longer like the way they look because they no longer believe that their appearance is beautiful or acceptable. This is not because of any “body” abnormality, but rather because of social assumptions that impact their self-perception. One such instance is Ginika, Ifemelu’s childhood buddy who now lives in the United States. She loses weight after arriving in America and enrolling in a high school in order to conform to the beauty standards of her new town, where she is referred to as overweight. Ginika almost becomes anorexic from starvation to get the slender figure that is preferred in her new society.

Racial discrimination was prevalent in America in terms of people’s appearances. When Ifemelu tries to find a job, she is forced to straighten her hair to seem professional and it has been said that most companies do not hire black women with curly hair. She was denied getting her eyebrows waxed at a salon and managed to get it done only with the intervention of her white boyfriend. Here, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes* can be referred to where the eleven-year-old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, “internalizes the negative images of African-American women and believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her “ugliness”. Pecola cannot value her Blackness – she longs to be White so that she can escape the pain of being Black, female, poor, and a child” (Collins 110). Skin complexion as it relates to the perception of beauty is another question raised in *Americanah* which is a common issue of the postcolonial woman. The Western media’s hype of fair skin as the most beautiful skin accelerates the racist overtone among the people in the West. This is very clearly shown by Adichie in this part of the novel: Aunt Uju does skin lightening to appear more sophisticated and groomed for the General who keeps her. Not only women but a man like Bartholomew who moves in with Aunt Uju also bleaches his skin, “he uses bleaching creams.... Couldn’t you see? His face is a funny colour. Bleaches his skin, biko” (117). Even the African-American writer, Maya Angelou wrote in her autobiography that “the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white” (Collins 107).

Every colonized people in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality-finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his black- ness, his jungle (9)

There are characters in the book that attempt to assimilate into America by completely rejecting their own traditions and embracing American culture, in contrast to Ifemelu, who accepted her hair and accent. When Aunt Uju converses with white Americans, she can be heard using an American accent. She constantly straightens her curly hair since she can’t accept it. If she has straight hair, she thinks she’s attractive; if not, she thinks she’s hideous. This demonstrates how her views of American living standards have completely transformed. Due to her inability to completely integrate, Uju feels insecure and alienated after moving to America. It is Uju’s awareness of how she is viewed as different and ‘other by the white Americans, her double consciousness, that makes her mimic the majority culture and manner of speech while trying to be as cordial as possible. She even bleaches her skin to make it fair. Even the man she was dating, Bartholomew uses bleaching cream to make his skin lighter. Aisha, the girl in the salon tries to improve her American accent and she has also adopted the American ignorance regarding Africa which can be seen when she mentions only the continent and doesn’t even bother to name the specific countries. Aisha also disapproves when Ifemelu wants a more natural hair colour. This shows how colonialism had inflicted unimaginable violence on the people of the colonised land that they started thinking of themselves and their own cultures to be inferior and not valuable. It made them think to be not worthy of themselves and can only become one by putting on a mask. They need to pretend to be someone they are not. But what they don’t realize is that they can never become fully white as they cannot change their skin colour and would only become what Fanon referred to as the black skin under the white mask. Thus, they remain as nothing but just a mimic man whom the whites couldn’t accept as their equals and just someone who copies them. Mimicry for Bhabha involves the imitation of the coloniser by the colonised, having been socialized to aspire to the more powerful, ‘better’, and ‘superior’ culture of the West. Bhabha argues in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man”,

.....the colonial system required that the colonized aspire to re- make themselves in the image of the European, to become at once secondary to the colonizer, and also (necessarily) other to what they were before. Yet, as they

were not in fact European, or indeed white, there was always a slippage or hybridization, however subtle, in the meanings that they thus worked to reiterate. (Waugh 648)

This act of mimicry is desired by the West to establish their authority: “the black man stops being an actional personal for only the white man can represent his self-esteem.” (Bhabha 126)

Adichie also shows the hypocrisy of the white people in how they negate the fact about the existence of racism in America. Once when Ifemelu was helping Ginika to shop for a dress, the cashier asked Ginika which sales-girls had helped her to which Ginika replied that she couldn't remember. But this was confusing for Ifemelu since there were only two sales-girls and it was very easy to differentiate between the two since one was black and the other was white. Ginika and the cashier both acted as if they didn't notice the colour difference. Later when Ifemelu asks Ginika she replies: “Because this is America. You're supposed to pretend you didn't notice certain things” (127). At their party, Kimberly and Don display art-work from minority cultures in their home, and Kimberly used to say how people of colour possess rich heritages. Even the guests talked about their charity works in Africa and were very happy and proud while praising their selfless contributions. While in fact, they were all taking pleasure in playing the role of the white saviours. They acted as if they were kind and wanted to help the poor people of other races but in reality, they are the ones who created this binary and continue to do so even when the blacks came to their land.

According to Collins, the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself:

An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice. Like Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, some women write themselves free. Sexually, physically, and emotionally abused, Celie writes letters to God when no one else will listen. The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence with language, eventually moves her to the action of talking with others (Collins 136).

Likewise, Ifemelu gained her confidence through sharing her experiences with other black women in her online community. In the later parts of the novel, Ifemelu accepts her own culture which can be seen when she begins to embrace her natural hair and stops speaking with the American accent. She had earlier migrated to America for educational purposes which in turn improved her social and economic status in society. However, after a while, these achievements are no longer enough for her. She wants to stop feeling self-conscious, always on guard, thinking of what she says, what others think of her, and how she ought to present herself. “She had ignored, too, the cement in her soul... Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil.” (6) In America, Ifemelu couldn't become fully American as the people there didn't accept her as one of them and she decided to follow her Nigerian tradition even though the whites expected her to follow them. When she returns to Nigeria, her friends tease her by calling her “Americanah” which is a term used to represent those Africans who used to stay in America, adopt the American culture while staying there, and act like Americans when they visit their homeland. Even though Ifemelu doesn't act like them the people around her aren't able to see her as the same person she used to be before she went to America. They saw something that had changed in her and wasn't able to accept her as fully Nigerian.

A postcolonial subject's Identity is most of the time described as conflicted. This is because they try to fit in both cultures where there is no meeting point at all- their indigenous culture and the culture handed down by the colonisers. So, to balance between both cultures becomes a problem, and to blend in both societies they somewhat stay in the in-between state, this is the sad predicament of the ‘been-to's’. Thus, Ifemelu's identity becomes a hybrid which in the words of Bhabha is ‘cultural hybridity’. For Bhabha, hybridity is not a negative outcome of colonization but rather a subversion of colonial authority. As colonial identities are always marked by flux and transition, there raises a question surrounding the authenticity of colonial discourse:

Hybridity is therefore the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its coherent grip on meaning and opens itself outward to the trace of the language of the other... Domination within the colonial situation is, in short, subverted through the hybridity of colonial discourse. This is because hybridity under-

mines the single voice of cultural authority and foregrounds a double-voicing process that includes the trace of the other. (Edwards 141)

And if this is to be accepted, then it immediately breaks down the binary of a superior culture of the coloniser and an inferior culture of the colonised. However, the colonisers cannot admit this fact because they need to create the others and the binary to construct themselves as the centre. Therefore, Adichie, by making her character Ifemelu embrace her hybrid identity is challenging and questioning the Western ideology and discourse of the East. Adichie indeed proves the idea that a hybrid identity can exist and as a novelist, she makes her readers aware of what the truth is all along.

Also, Adichie has successfully crafted the danger of the single story of both Africa and America. In one of her TED Talks titled, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), Adichie describes the powerful impression the multitude of British stories made on her as a young girl growing up in Nigeria. She explains that if we only hear about people, places, or situations from one point of view, we risk accepting one experience as the whole truth. This is how Adichie puts it: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." (Adichie, 2009) The single story of Africa as a place where there is no educational institutes or proper hospitals or houses, no educated people but with full of diseases and poverty that many people outside of Africa have been imagining has been proven as wrong by Adichie through her novel. And the America that was always used to be a dream place for everyone full of good opportunities has turned out to be just a fantasy. Only those who have been to America would get to know what kind of a place it was and how different it was from what they had ever imagined. The main reason for the misconception seems to be the hidden truth of the people who have already been there. They left out all the bad things that happened and are there in America, maybe out of embarrassment or to maintain their self-esteem. Because they all went there thinking about all the good things that were about to happen to them and to say that they were suffering in such a place would be unbearable.

Conclusion

This shows that the reason for this construction of America is to be blamed on both the white Americans and also the Africans who already know about the truth but still choose to build a fake world of the West. The African's dream of coming to the West to prosper and become successful becomes nothing but remains an empty dream. This further affects the psyche of the people. And above all the social, political, and economic impacts that had been laid down upon by the colonisers, have also affected the colonised psychologically. And this has led to the loss of their self-confidence. The main motif of many of the postcolonial African writers has always been to help their people regain their lost self-confidence. And with no doubt, Adichie is one of them. She speaks to her people through the voice of her characters and makes them see the reality and helps them regain what they have lost. Through her novel, Adichie shows how believing in a single side of a story of something can lead to an unimaginable devastating situation and one should always try to perceive the stories from both sides. Hence, Adichie becomes a storyteller who has succeeded in making her readers change their views about how they should see the world.

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