

Immigration in the Confluence of Racial Implications in African Literature: A Reading of Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract— *The paper is based on the issue of immigration in Adichie's Americanah and its various racial implications in the multicultural context of America. It accordingly decodes and explains the multifaceted relationships that African immigrants have with African Americans and white Americans. The results indicate that race is still a major problem in contemporary America in spite of all the democratic laws that guarantee equality and equity between all races in America. They showed that African immigrants are sometimes discriminated on the basis of their skin color. On such basis, they are victims of stigmatization and racism on the one hand. On the other hand they are blamed and hated by African Americans for the supposed role that a minority of Africans had played during the Atlantic slave trade. The study thus revealed that immigration could negatively impact on the psychology and behavior of many African immigrants. It generally leads to assimilation, mental complexes and identity loss as seen through the character of aunt Uju and her date. However the paper concluded that Adichie's Americanah is a novel which advocates a Homi Bhabharian Third Space of Enunciation wherein cultural and racial differences could therefore become added values of complementarity, of reinforcement and acceptance instead of stigmatization, rejection and assimilation.*

Keywords— *Immigration, race, stigmatization, assimilation, African immigrants, America.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a young prolific African female writer. She is also a writer who has more or less gone in the ways of Chinua Achebe in the struggle to promote African identity and preserve the dignity of the African regardless of the gender considerations only. She belongs to the third generation of the postcolonial African generations of asserted and committed writers. However, her pen seems to be more of a femininely engaged than a merely gender-blind and generalist novelist. Her first

novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, heralds and confirms such a feminist engagement of her pen and style. This does not mean that she is not as well concerned with other important issues related to mother Africa and the African in general such as race, culture, politics, economy, education and many other highly important postcolonial concerns.

It is in regard to the foregoing that she has written *Americanah*, a novel, primarily based on the issue of immigration towards the North and its racial implications and ramifications once in such a displaced cultural and racial location. This novel is a trailblazing and an inclusive literary narrative, written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which gives us insights into the life of African immigrants in general, and that of Nigerians in particular, in western countries, namely in North America. It is convenient from this point to specify that the term "Americanah" is a neologism coined and used by local Nigerians to refer to those nationals who return to Nigeria after a stay in the United State of America. Since this novel raises the issues of immigration, race and identity which underlie American society, the objective of the study is therefore to shed light on the way the concept of being an African or a colored immigrant in America is encoded and explained through Adichie's *Americanah*.

In order to attain the above objective, the research data are collected through reading Adichie's *Americanah*. They are also analyzed and interpreted within the theoretical contexts of cultural studies and postcolonial theory. The latter means that terms like alienation, the self and the other (otherness), binarism, assimilation, cultural difference and diversity and others are utilized to better underscore the implications of race in the American socio-cultural and political context. In addition and to guide the implementation of the study, the following research questions are thus formulated:

What are the different connotations of blackness in the novel? What are the challenges faced by African immigrants in the American society? What are the

impacts of racial prejudices on the African while in America? And what is the message that Adichie actually intends to convey through her *Americanah*?

Methodologically the study first focuses on the identity and racial stigmatization that Africans face in America. Then, it explores and explicates the meanings of racial implications in the American society and its prejudices on African immigrants while in America. It finally explains how cultural and racial differences could become positive forces for making America greater again instead of being perceived as negative forces.

II. STIGMATIZATION FACING AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

The novel, *Americanah*, is a literary text deliberately devised by Adichie to account for the different hindrances generally encountered by immigrants on the basis of race in American society, namely when colored people from Africa migrate to such a socio-cultural location for economic, political or education purposes. In *Americanah*, the novelist strives to depict the life of black Africans and what it entails to be a black man and an African immigrant or an African American. It may be grasped that he is always-already interpellated and judged by the significance and perception of his skin color by *White America*¹. Thus, our data collection through the scrutiny of the main issues raised in the novel enabled us to identify two hugely important challenges faced by African immigrants when they migrate to North America. The first is their tough and complex relationship with African Americans or black Americans and the second related to the racial stigmatization that they are subjected to from White Americans. These two challenges constitute the main sources of the predicament of the African immigrants in the United States of America. The upcoming sections thus provide literary explanations on such salient challenges developed in Adichie's *Americanah* in order to understand the significance of race in contemporary America.

1-1- Relationships between African immigrants and African Americans

Being African in America is a huge task and a multi-complex equation for African immigrants because it is synonymous of diverse confusing mixtures of perceptions, considerations, and interpretations. It is as well tantamount to marginalization, discrimination, and hostility in a multifaceted cultural and racial America. That is the reason why the Nigerian novelist, Adichie, wrote *Americanah* to show how African Americans and African immigrants differ in behavior, in thinking, and in tolerance and forgiveness in the North American context.

As demonstrated by Adichie in *Americanah* through the narrative voice, the reader could carefully comprehend that some African Americans still take their African brothers and sisters responsible for their enslavement and deportation to America. For instance during a class a Kenyan student named Wambui raises the debate about the term 'Nigger' and its stereotypical connotations in America and implicitly in reference to the western world in general. The raising of such a sensitive and delicate issue by the African girl and in the presence of several African Americans does not suit the African Americans. Clearly they did not appreciate it and the situation is illustrated through the following passage:

A firm voice from the back of the class, with a non-American accent, asked, "Why was 'nigger' bleeped out?" and a collective sigh, like a small wind, swept through the class... "thing is each time you say it, the word hurts African Americans", a pale, shaggy-haired boy in front said" (Adichie, 2013, p. 137).

The debate went on with the exchanges of words between the Kenyan girl and the African Americans. Each side was defending its views and an African American girl vehemently defends that all the Africans were accountable for their deportation to America and their enslavement as well as all the prejudices that they are victims of including Wambui in the like words: "Well, if you all hadn't sold us, we wouldn't be talking about any of this", a gravelly African American girl said" (p.138). This passage better illustrates the extent to which African Americans have had a very bad perception of their African ancestors. However, the problem that is at stake in the foregoing is due to the falsification of the history of slavery in Africa. This falsification takes its buds from the fact that those who mostly wrote about the practice of slavery in Africa or the Atlantic slave trade were nearly all partisan white proslavers and Eurocentrists. They, instead of taking the blame, had charged native Africans for being responsible for the selling of their own blood into bondage for materialistic purposes. If we refer to the history and the socio-cultural organization of Africa, we could figure out that Africa used to be indeed culturally a non-materialistic society. It signifies that Africa was a place where human life was sacred and valued more than the material (gold, money, copper, etc). In other words, African societies have always favored human relations

¹ This term is used in the text to refer to all non-Africans or non-black Americans.

and protected human life at the expenses of the material². Besides, most of the Africans taken into bondage were taken by force from African villages through white proslavers night raiders' attacks and kidnapping:

I can recollect of these battles, they appear to have been irruptions of one little district on the other to obtain prisoners or booty. Perhaps they were incited to this by those traders who brought the European goods I mentioned amongst us. . . Such a mode of obtaining slaves in Africa is common, and I believe more are procured this way and by kidnapping than any other.

(Equiano, 1996, p.8)

The above excerpt from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* written by himself unambiguously shows that European merchants had used materialist baits in order to tempt and lure not all but some native Africans into doing slave trade with them. It means that those Africans who were involved in the trafficking of their kinsmen were either forced or manipulated into doing so and not all Africans were actually involved in such a horrendous business. The same excerpt implicitly reveals that the European capitalist institution of slavery was mainly based on kidnapping and deceiving Africans rather than Africans selling their brothers and sisters into bondage willingly³. This is to remind that what Westerners generally say about slavery, by taking Africans responsible for capturing and selling their kinsmen willingly, is not actually entirely founded, for Africans were either brainwashed by European tricks that made them accept to act accordingly or forced into doing so.

The second reason why many African Americans, like the American girl in Adichie's *Americanah*, still blame their African brothers for their deportation and enslavement in America could also be explained. The explanation is that those African Americans who generally hate and admonish Africans are mentally

influenced and interpellated into accepting the Eurocentrists' ideological propagandas against Africans. Some of them have also received a Eurocentric oriented education in American schools where night raids and kidnapping as the major modes of capturing Africans by white slave traders and accomplices are not taught and popularized as actually the main modes.

1-1-1-Identity and Acceptance of African Immigrants in America

The issue of identity is another serious challenge that Africans are confronted with. For instance in the novel, it is highlighted that this issue of identity is not only a core challenge that opposes African immigrants and white Americans but also African Americans particularly. Even at the university, the issue of identity existed. African students and African American students do not generally belong to the same student association in spite of their common and sharing blackness. As illustrated in *Americanah*, African Americans usually attend Black Student's Union. There are some African Americans who are hostile to Africans, but others are sociable with Africans: "If an African American calls you a Mandingo or a booty scratcher, he is insulting you for being African. Some will ask you annoying questions about Africa, but others will connect with you". (p.140). All these situations make Africans' life difficult in America. Through *Americanah*, we can see that black Africans and some African Americans did not have a good relationship. The gap that exists between African immigrants and black Americans can be explained by the fact that some African Americans hold Africans accountable for the sufferings they met through the triangular slave trade. This situation thus creates an *in-betweenness space of attraction, rejection and connection* with African immigrants among white and black Americans. It entails that African immigrants are caught between three fires which are attraction, rejection and connection. Attraction refers to those African Americans and white Americans who are attracted by Africans for a mere curiosity. Rejection refers to those African Americans and white Americans who totally hate and discriminate against African immigrants either on the basis of their blackness or by blaming them for their accountability in the deportation and the enslavement of their African American brothers and connection.

1-2- African Immigrants Facing Racial Prejudices

Although Adichie's *Americanah* is a literary text, it is sometimes referred to as fiction, she actually brilliantly succeeds in showing through the character of Ifemelu the racial realities in contemporary America. For example when Ifemelu leaves Nigeria for America, she realizes that black people are victims of racial stigmatization. The perceptions of Americans about Blacks and Africans in

² See the 44 articles of the Mandigo Kurukan fuga charter promulgated by Sundjata KEITA in 1235 to better understand the humanism of the African and the insignificance of money or material in precolonial Africa before the coming of Arabs and Europeans in Africa.

³ See Achebe, Chinua. (2009). "Africa's Tarnished Name", in *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. New York: Alfred A.Knopf to understand that the King of the Kongo in 1490s, M'bemba Nzinga fought against the practice of slavery in his kingdom.

particular are negative and prejudicial. In western countries mainly in America black people undergo all sorts of discrimination just because of their skin color. In the views of some Americans being black is an abomination or *nothingness*. As illustration, during a conversation between Ifemelu and a white man about her lifestyle blog, the white man made Ifemelu understand that Blacks are not wanted in the American society even for adoption in the like terms:

“even write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don’t mean biracial, I mean black. Even the families don’t want them’. He told her that he and his wife had adopted a black child and their neighbours looked at them as though they had chosen to become martyrs for a dubious cause”. (Adichie, 2013, pp.4-5).

This racism is manifest even at the employment level in the American society as well as in the rest of the western world. Such a racist mentality exists even among the black people in general and African Americans chiefly. Those who are darker are generally not well considered or accepted by other Blacks. Tyon (2007) brought shed on this situation in his *critical theory today* on the chapter ‘African American Criticism’: “Internalized racism often results in intra-racial racism, which refers to discrimination within the black community against those with darker skin and more African features”. (p. 362). The ideology or belief of white superiority upon blacks is what we call “Internalized racism”. It was difficult for black people to find jobs especially the non-American blacks due to their identity. Ifemelu as well as her aunt had difficulty in finding jobs because of their identity and skin colors. These two characters in fact symbolize and reveal the predicament of African immigrants when they migrate to the western world, specifically in the United States of America. This illustration is indeed a way for the Nigerian novelist to put the finger at the pitfalls of the American society.

III. IMPACTS OF RACIAL PREJUDICES ON AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS

This second part focuses on the behavioral changes that African immigrants frequently encounter or undergo due to racial discrimination. Also, it accounts for how the American life may push or entice many African immigrants into assimilation, identity perversion or mental colonization.

2-1- Behavioral and Psychological Changes

As related in the text when Africans leave Africa for America or for any other European nation, they generally comply with certain situations. These situations can have psychological impacts upon their feelings, way of thinking and personality. For example, Ifemelu was surprised at her aunt Uju, because in Nigeria she was called Uju but she accepted different pronunciation of her name by Americans. This is shown through the following statement by Adichie: Aunt Uju’s cell phone rang. ‘Yes, this Uju’. She pronounced it you-joo instead of oo-joo. ‘Is that how you pronounce your name now?’ Ifemelu asked afterwards. ‘It’s what they call me’. Ifemelu swallowed the word ‘well that isn’t your name’. (p.104). It shows the extent to which some African immigrants may accept any kind of appellation from Americans even if it is not their real names because of their incapability to assert their *Africanity*. The situation is part of their life in America and can be explained through the new feeling that they bear against their own culture, identity and *Africanity* because Africa is also synonymous with savagery and backwardness. Ifemelu has also acknowledged that once she arrived in America all the intimacy between her and aunt Uju had disappeared. Uju became impatient with her and her behaviors had completely changed towards Ifemelu:

There was a small blob of face cream on her hair, caught at the root of a braid, and Ifemelu was going to tell her to wipe it off but changed her mind, saying nothing, watched Aunt Uju hurry to the door. She felt stung by Aunt Uju’s reproach. It was as if, between them, an old intimacy had quite suddenly lapsed. Aunt Uju’s impatience, that new prickliness in her made Ifemelu feel that there were things she should already know but through some personal failing of hers, did not know. (Adichie, 2013.p.107)

The novelist evidences through the statements above that America can change the personalities of Africans. America thus becomes a new mussel which metamorphosed aunt Uju into a new person different from the traditional Nigerian aunt that Ifemelu had known while in Nigeria and before her departure to America. In other words, she notices that her aunt has become a stranger to her, because of her new character on the

American soil. This situation is due to the American life, and the ideology of capitalism, which is also part of the American identity. She was shocked and surprised because African civilization is mainly based on patience, communalism and solidarity instead of the American individualism, a derivation of capitalistic life as in the American society. This shows how American ways of living could negatively or positively impact on African immigrants. Elsewhere, we can see that racial discrimination and the fact of considering minorities' cultures as less important can also have psychological impacts on the African immigrants. Bobo and Fox (2003) demonstrate how racial discrimination can reduce the minorities' children's ability in school in the following words: "Extensive research on schooling, performance, and achievement has shown that negative cultural stereotypes about racial and ethnic minorities can exert debilitating effects on minority youths' academic achievement" (p.321). The foregoing excerpt on race shows how harmful racial stigmatization can negatively impact on African immigrants who live under such a situation. Stigmatization consequently engenders a network of binarism, *the center* and *the periphery* and those who are non-Americans like Africans eventually become seen as *the other*⁴.

Also, Adichie evokes and criticizes another degrading and humiliating practice that is frequent among the black people in America, this practice is related to the use of skin lightening creams to change the color of their skin. The man aunt Uju was dating was one of those Africans who bleach their skin to look like white because he thinks that whatever is white is therefore beautiful. But this attitude is criticized by the novelist in her text in the following words:

"After he left that Saturday, Aunt Uju asked Ifemelu, 'what do you think?' 'He uses bleaching creams.' 'What?' 'Couldn't you see? His face is a funny colour. He must be using the cheap ones with no sunscreen. What kind of man bleaches his skin, biko?'" (Adichie, p.117).

We could offhandedly grasp that immigration does not only change the behavior of people but also their psychological state. This African character in the novel is the representative of all those Africans who are mentally colonized due to displacement and they are also the expression of all the complexes that the mentally colonized black man bears since the periods of slavery

and colonialism. That is, the color of their skin becomes the sign and the proof of their inferiority and ugliness. Most of them think in such a way and shows their affected psychological state which calls for a treatment. By evoking such an important mental pathology of some African immigrants as reflected through aunt Uju and her date, Adichie indirectly seeks to use literature as an efficient psychological therapy to diagnose and to help warn and treat the different complexes of inferiority which may drive Africans into self-negation and autophobia, especially when they migrate to a racially and culturally diverse society like that of North America.

2-2-Assimilation of African Immigrants

As in the above the American lifestyle can also lead Africans into assimilation. In the novel, it can be construed that they behave so in order to be accepted in the American society. For instance when Ifemelu and her aunt were in a grocery store, she notices that her aunt Uju always changes her accent when talking to white Americans: " 'Dike, put it back,' Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans." (p.108). She probably does this to hide her connection with Africa due to her low-esteem for her African origin. Assimilation is common among the African immigrants in the US as part of their daily routine. In the public life of American society, in order to be accepted, many Africans thought that adopting American ways of life is the right way of integration. According to Belton (2013): " racism has played some pretty horrible tricks on black people but the worst is the one that teaches you that if you modify your behaviour, the doors will be open and the prejudices will melt away" (P.N.). Although Belton in his magazine stresses that several black people do assimilation just in to have job opportunities and also to escape from Americans racism, through his judgment about assimilation, we cannot actually associate the metamorphosed or *americanized* attitude of Ifemelu's aunt whenever she has to speak to white Americans. Adichie also points out, through the example of Aunt Uju, how some African immigrants could be plunged into assimilation practices mainly African women when they arrive in America. The transformation of their (African women) hair so as to comply with American hairstyle is explicit in *Americanah*. Contrary to aunt Uju, Ifemelu is an illustration of what Belton has said about the assimilation of African immigrants. For instance, when she was about to sit for a job interview, a friend told her to change her braids: "when she told Ruth about the interview in Baltimore, Ruth said, 'my only advice? Lose your braids and straighten your hair. Nobody said this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get the job'" (p.202).

⁴ It means the unfit, the marginalized and the non-American or western being.

Through this statement, Adichie substantiates that assimilation was conceived and understood by a certain category of African immigrants like Ifemelu as a way out and as a right path to the success. In other words, this way of imitating American ways of living by African immigrants becomes an efficient strategy of negotiating around the different operating racist networks at play in the American society. In order to become a fully integrated and accepted American citizen without any major prejudices, most African immigrants eventually prefer assimilation which results in losing their African identity and values as seen through the character of aunt Uju. She hence becomes an alienated African woman who neither sees and comprehends things through an African eye nor behaves like an African lady on a foreign soil.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we may say that Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* is a testimony which highlights the realities of race and identity alteration in America. The racism and the identity loss that African immigrants are subjected to are the results of racial stigmatization and prejudices. They actually undergo all sorts of experiences in their relationships with African Americans, white Americans and within their own black communities. They are thus trapped between three fires: stigmatization, racism and assimilation. The latter although a strategy adopted by some African immigrants to be accepted or to integrate the American society, the two others refer to the delicate and difficult relationship that they have with some black and white Americans. This pushes and influences many of them into psychological and behavioral changes leading to assimilation in such a racially problematized American society. But it is pertinent to point out that some also do assimilation out of necessity because in their mind this is actually the right thing for them to succeed in a *hostile* American society.

Besides, the first didactic lesson behind Adichie's *Americanah* is to highlight the consequences of immigration on displaced Africans if it is not done in a cautious manner. The second one is a sensitization about race which may imply different things in the American society of today where race still matters as exemplified in the novel. This sensitization is a direct call from the novelist. She does this for a change of behavior and in the way the American society perceives race and confines colored people in a space of their own, especially when they want to integrate or look for a job. At the same time, she criticizes those Africans who unconsciously become assimilated and stopped being African by behavior and identity. The title *Americanah* is also indicative and could be interpreted and construed as no matter how long a piece of wood may stay in the water, it would never ever

become a crocodile in allusion to the *Americanized* Africans like aunt Uju and her date. However, she also calls for a *Homi Bhabharian Third Space of Enunciation* wherein cultural and racial differences therefore become an asset of complementarity, of reinforcement and acceptance instead of stigmatization, racism and assimilation. That seems to be the major ultimate message that is conveyed through Adichie's *Americanah*.

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