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Race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the award winning author of *Purple Hibiscus*, and *Half of a Yellow Sun* took five years to write *Americanah* after the publication of her short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The short stories had already indicated her new preoccupations in America. It is true that Adichie discovered her vocation as a storyteller in America through her imaginative engagement with Nigeria and the life she had left behind. In a state of exile from her own country she focused on life in Nigeria, continuing a tradition of storytelling in English which had such illustrious predecessors like Achebe and Soyinka. But *Americanah* is her first extended work of fiction that deals powerfully with the complexity of being a Nigerian in America and succeeded in highlighting racism as a prickly social issue through the innovative use of blogs. In a very short time the novel has gained wide acclaim for the critical issues it has placed before the American reading public, apart from its favourable reception in Nigeria and other parts of English-speaking world.

Keywords: race, America, black, white, Nigeria.

In a globalised world where boundaries of nations merge in the name of economic development, the concept of people feeling free to move anywhere in the world, getting equal treatment seems very normal and predictable. But in reality the whole concept does not operate in an error-free way. There are many barriers in it. One such barrier is race. According to Hazel Rose Marcus and Paula M.L.Moya, race is not simply a designation for a group based on some physical attribute, but entails:

a doing—a dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that

- Sorts people into ethnic groups according to perceived physical and behavioral human characteristics that are often imagined to be negative, innate, and shared.

- Associates differential value, power, and privilege with these characteristics, establishes a hierarchy among the different groups; and confers opportunity accordingly.
- Emerges when groups are perceived to pose a threat (political, economic, or cultural) to each other's worldview or way of life; and/or to justify the denigration and exploitation (past, current, or future) of other groups while exalting one's own group to claim an innate privilege (p. 21).

Race, then, is a social construct. In the context of American society race has played a key role in inflecting the relation among different social groups and impacting individual lives. Narrative art bears testimony to this socially contested issue. Through the life of Ifemelu and characters related to her in America and Obinze and others in London, we can see how race affects individuals.

It is race which suddenly constructs class in the novel. When Ifemelu leaves Nigeria to study in a school in Philadelphia she becomes a "bourgie Nigerian" (177) because she belongs to the privileged middle class in Nigeria. In the absence of Kimberly, the white lady for whom Ifemelu babysits, a carpet cleaner comes and assumes Ifemelu as the owner and replies in a hostile way. When he knows the truth his hostility disappears. She observes his changed behavior, "The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (166). So later she writes a blog "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class" (166). In the novel two instances of powerful black people who no longer remain black are Oprah and Obama. According to Grace, one of the friends of Blaine, "Although if he wins, he will no longer be black, just as Oprah is no longer black, she's Oprah,.. [h]e'll no longer be black, he will just be Obama." (356) But the kind of racial identity Obama possesses is defined in a very problematic manner. He is presented as a different kind of black person:

If Obama didn't have a white mother and wasn't raised by white grandparents and didn't have Kenya and Indonesia and Hawaii and all of the stories that make him somehow a bit like everyone, if he was just a plain black guy from Georgia, it would be different. (356)

So this concept and perception of black identity does not operate in a uniform way. One group is African blacks who are originally from Africa and migrated to America. But more substantial in number is this other group - African-Americans who have no contact with their mother country now and are closer to the mainstream American life. Soon after Ifemelu joins her school she comes to know about the differences among Africans and African-Americans. The president of African Students' Association, Wambui prevails upon the African students to attend African Students' Association meetings but if they want they can also attend Black Students' Association. Wambui adds more for the information of the students that Black Students

Association is for African-Americans and Africans go to African Students Association. Ifemelu's black racial identity is given stress by Shan, sister of Blaine (the black boyfriend of Ifemelu) who says Ifemelu is able to write her blogs, "Because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff [...] If she were African American, she'd just be labelled angry and shunned." (336) Shan is a non-American black who advises her Nigerian friend who is a writer to write on "terrible things about his own people" (318) so that he can be famous. In his writing he needs to praise Europeans in helping Africans and blame Africans for their problems.

Her theory on race is really slanted. She herself has written a book in which she presents a Gambian woman who feels bad for her husband because he is having an affair with a black woman. Hence, the editor comments it as a book about race. Shan represents the complex predicament of the writer dealing with the race issue in America:

You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too *obvious*. Black writers, who do literary fiction in this country, all three of them, not the ten thousand who write those bullshit ghetto books with the bright covers, have two choices: they can do precious or they can do pretentious. When you do neither, nobody knows what to do with you. (335-6)

Shan has all kinds of problems with her white editor and somehow cannot ensure any "nuance" (335) in her representation of Americans as individuals without the coating of race.

It is Ifemelu's encounter with different groups of black people that provides content for her blogs. In a blog she writes on Obama she makes the statement: "In America you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you." Racial perceptions congeal into stereotypes, a fact corroborated by Marcus and Moya:

...People in the United States collectively perpetuate sets of ideas and practices about what it means to be white, Latina/o, black, Asian American, or American Indian. Sometimes people actively and intentionally devalue and treat people associated with groups other than their own as if they are lesser or unequal. (Moya, 25-26)

In this novel the readers can identify two concepts which define how race matters set against changed locations. "I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (290). In another instance, "Race doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (447). It is interesting to note that Ifemelu feels like a black and underprivileged in America and her own country gives her a sense of security where normal processes of life matter, not perceptions of race. So while living in America she starts writing the blog posts and on her arrival in Lagos her blogs speak on Nigerian life. She encounters racism during her stay in America, something that she was never aware of in Nigeria. Ifemelu's first job in America is babysitting the two children, Taylor and Morgan, of Kimberley,

a rich white woman. When she first meets her, Kimberley says: “What a beautiful name [. . .] Does it mean anything? I love multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures” (146). From her statement it is clear that she associates alien culture with exoticism, and she does not consider white culture to be alien in that sense. Here, culture is associated with race.

Kimberley is full of good intentions but she treats black people differently from white people, thereby still, although unintentionally, establishing white people as the norm. She calls every black woman beautiful, until Ifemelu points out: “No, she isn't [. . .] You know, you can just say ‘black’. Not every black person is beautiful” (147). Kimberley's friends think about African women in the same manner as Kimberley. At a party in Kimberley's home, a man tells Ifemelu that she is beautiful, that all African women are beautiful. Another episode in the novel reminds us of a similar attitude when Curt, the white boyfriend takes Ifemelu to meet his aunt, Claire. She makes appreciative remarks about the Kenyan safari, Mandela's grace and Harry Belafonte. Ifemelu is not impressed and tells Curt that his aunty should not reassure her that she likes black people rather she would be pleased with her if she had behaved in her natural way.

What Ifemelu considers a matter of race Curt calls “difference” (293). The matter of race is always shown as matter of differences by the white characters in the novel. Kimberley's sister Laura says that the African doctor that she knows is more professional than the African American doctors. Ifemelu replies: “I just think it's a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history” (168). Laura storms off and ignores Ifemelu at the party the next day, not wanting to face the fact that perhaps race is a more complicated issue than she thinks.

After coming to America Ifemelu first develops a relationship with a white man, Curt. She starts dating Curt, the uncle of the children that she babysits. He is a white man who is seen by his mother as someone who picks up non-American lovers: “He was her adventurer who would bring back exotic species – he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl [. . .]” (198), but Ifemelu is the first black girl that he has dated. Curt considers the blackness or being African of Ifemelu as exotic and hence he is interested in her. He disapproves of Ifemelu straightening her hair because she thinks it will improve her chances of getting a job. He says: “Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided. And when you took out the braids the last time and just kind of let it be? It was even more gorgeous, so full and cool” (204). Ifemelu's wild hair accentuates her foreignness on the American soil.

Curt is protective towards Ifemelu in a race-divided society. He arranges a job interview at an office in Baltimore for her by making some phone calls. She is glad, but feels “in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (202). She thinks of her friends Wambui and Mwombeki who have not succeeded in the job market despite trying hard. But Curt is able to

arrange and achieve things that would have taken Ifemelu more time and effort, because he is white and, therefore, privileged.

This white privilege somehow leads to different standards for blacks and whites which play out in the life of Curt and Ifemelu. When they tell the children whom Ifemelu babysits about their relationship, the oldest child, Morgan, says that it disgusts her. Morgan is not the only one who finds it hard to understand why a white man would date a black woman. It reminds Ifemelu of a guy in her ethnic class and of Kimberley's husband: "Don't thought she was attractive and interesting, and thought Curt was attractive and interesting, but it did not occur to him to think of both of them, together, entangled in the delicate threads of romance" (195). This same question "why her?" (292) occurs to the guests in the wedding party of Curt's cousin Ashleigh, when he introduces his black girl friend to the guests. The question and surprising look that was on the faces of the guests is also marked by Ifemelu on the faces of white women, strangers on the street.

Tensions cannot be avoided in their relationship because of race. People stare when they are walking across the street, holding hands. When they arrive at a restaurant, a waiter asks Curt if he wants a table for one, as if Ifemelu is not there. Once, a parlour refuses to offer her service (shaping of eyebrow). Curt intervenes, threatens the manager to shut down the parlour and move for the cancellation of license. It is only then only the parlour management relents and agrees to serve Ifemelu. Sometimes Curt stands up for Ifemelu, but at other times he fails to see that race is an issue. He is ignorant about some race matters because he is white. But still at times he understands, "And it was not that Curt pretended that being black and being white were the same in America; he knew they were not" (291). As Ifemelu later writes in a blog post titled "What Academics Mean By White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White": "...that is exactly what white privilege is. [. . .] Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never been a barrier" (346). Race cannot be wished away in the relationship between Curt and Ifemelu and is the primary reason they break up. Once he says that *Essence* magazine is "racially skewed" (294) but she shows him a two-thousand page women's magazine which has only three black women, that too biracial. Again, the cosmetic products for which they carry advertisements are not meant for blacks like Ifemelu.

An important part of the novel is Ifemelu's blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) by a Non-American Black", of which various posts follow chapters throughout the novel. After her arrival in America Ifemelu learns race etiquette by and by. Auntie Uju tells her once, "I've told you that you don't have to say everything. You have to learn that. You don't have to *say* everything." (53) Ginika, the school friend of Ifemelu living in America also deploys a strategy of evasion in race matters, "Because this is America. You're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things" (127).

The posts in the blog range from subjects such as Michelle Obama and WASPs to American tribalism and hair products. The blog quickly becomes successful, receiving comments

and even donations. Ifemelu is invited to speak at various events and gets paid for it. The blog functions as a way of giving direct critique to matters of race, without being disguised as fiction. In her blog she asserts that race is a social construct. In her first blog she says, "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'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now". (220) In the US race becomes the primary factor to inflect one's identity. If a person is black, it does not matter where he or she is from. This idea of a black identity is repeated by aunty Uju when Ifemelu uses the work permit of someone else who even does not look like her. She says, "All of us look alike to white people" (120). All persons of colour and the places they come from are generalized by Americans – put in one basket. In the parlour Ifemelu asks Aisha where her sister sells clothes. She simply says Africa instead of telling Benin because, "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, where is that?" (15) So Africa becomes a short hand for eliding cultural differences of a large group of people whose only common attribute is that they are black.

The novel also deals with biracial issues. How half-caste or bi-racial origins inflect identity issues in America. A man in the flight tells Ifemelu that he and his wife have adopted a black child and their neighbors look on them as though they have chosen to become martyrs for a dubious cause. Ginika too suffers from such a problem after coming to America – she who was considered as the most beautiful girl in her school in Nigeria. She expresses her experience, "I've met a lot of people here with white mothers and they are so full of issues, eh. I didn't know I was even supposed to *have* issues until I came to America. Honestly, if anybody wants to raise biracial kids, do it in Nigeria." (124)

A problematic racial issue faced by one character in the novel is symptomatic of the broader malaise in American society. Dike's situation has ominous racial overtones. Born in Nigeria of black parents Dike arrives in America as a little kid. Among the white Americans in school as well as in his social life he faces racial discrimination. At school he is suspected of hacking the school's computer network because of his skin colour. Being black he invites suspicion, although he is not good at computers. He is denied sunscreen by his teacher in a picnic. Because his teacher considers that black people do not need sunscreen. Not only the school environment is a sort of discriminatory environment but also his social surrounding is apathetic towards him. In the church the pastor, a white lady says hello to other kids where as asks him "what's up, bro?" (349). In his consciousness he tries to grapple with the racial issue. But he is unable to bring things to a normal state. He wants to be treated as normal like others. When he fails in his attempt he tries to commit suicide.

The novel is set in three different locations - Nigeria, the UK and the USA. It has already been discussed how race operates in different places. Obinze in the novel has a great fondness for America. It is his dream place where he fails to go. By reading lots of fiction and poetry on this place he has acquired a lot of knowledge on the place. But when due to misfortune he fails to

go there he goes to London and his observations show how race is perceived in a different way in London. The white drivers for whom he works they consider the black people as “labourer” (251). And when he jumps from the truck his knee is affected; so the white driver teases him, “His knee is bad because he’s a knee-grow” (252). He also experiences how black people are not at all noticed by the waiters in hotels, “These Eastern Europeans just don’t like serving black people.” (265) A friend in Ennike’s party holds London to be “an iniquitously racist country” (274) Obinze replies that when both black and white grow up together it becomes a primary thing in America, whereas it becomes secondary in London. But it must be pointed out that it is America that largely engages Adichie’s fictional imagination. If she also includes Obinze’s abortive trip to the UK it is by way of supplementing and counterpointing the main narrative of Ifemelu’s journey to America.

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