Migration and Realism in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract
Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah uses realism to explore the question of diaspora in the contemporary context of migration and globalization. In literature realism aims at the reproduction of objective reality with emphasis on the portrayal of everyday, quotidian activities and life, primarily among the middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization. This paper examines how Americanah raises a plurality of themes and subthemes: studies in Philosophy, psychology, Politics, Race, Gender, etc. Globalization occasions Migration. Chimamanda's perspective articulates the experience of Ifemefelu, a migrant that is a template at once particular and universal. Americanah collides the histories of race and colonialism. This paper shows how this collusion enriches Anglo-American experiences of racial formation and can be an invaluable tool for the archeology of race, gender and normative performances. In Americanah Adichie characterizes the global society as a multi-voiced body, a unity composed of differences.

1. Introduction

Realism is the attempt to represent reality as subject matter truthfully, without artificiality and avoiding artistic conventions, implausible, exotic and supernatural elements. As a movement in literature realism aims at the reproduction of objective reality. It lays emphasis on showing everyday, quotidian activities and life, primarily among the middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization.

Realism may also be regarded as the general attempt to depict subjects as they are considered to exist in third person objective reality, without embellishment or interpretation and in accordance with secular, empirical rules. As such, the approach inherently implies a belief that such reality is ontologically independent of conceptual schemes, linguistic practices and beliefs, and thus is knowable to the artist. And the artist can in turn represent this 'reality' faithfully. Modern realism's premise is that the individual, through the senses, can discover truth.

Adichie's *Americanah* is an excellent exercise in literary realism where she explores a constellation of thought through the immigration experiences of an African woman, Ifemelu. This experience though particular in perspective is strong enough to bear the weight of universality in a global world.

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homelessness, the rejection of home or the longing for home become motivating factors in this form of writing. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it. Still home is contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation. We find a redolent precursor reflection of this in Heidegger's 1943 lecture on Holderlin's elegy *Homecoming*. Homeland is thought in an essential sense, not patriotically or

nationalistically, but rather in terms of the history of being. The essence of the homeland is thinking the homelessness of contemporary man from the essence of being's history. (Heidegger; letter on Humanism 241) In the discourse of the West, Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world (243).

As Heidegger interprets it, *Homecoming* for Holderlin expresses a concern for his people to find their essence, not in a self-centeredness of his nation but rather in the context of belongingness to the destiny of the West. The West, not merely as Europe, or as it's opposite the Orient, but rather as closeness or proximity to the source. Nearness to being is the homeland of the historical dwelling (242). In homelessness, not only man but the essence of man tumbles around endlessly. It is the symptom of the oblivion of being. It is the coming to be of the destiny of the world. It is necessary to think that destiny in terms of the history of being. The estrangement of man has its roots in the homelessness of modern man.

Marx through Hegel recognized in an essential and significant sense the estrangement of man as being rooted in the homelessness of modern man. [see *Entfremdung,* see first Paris Manuscript, ppxxiiff *Werke Erganzungsband* I, 510-22. The relation of this *Entfremdung* to world historical developments that Heiddegger stresses is perhaps more clearly stated in Marx-Engels, *The German Ideolology*, *Werke*, III 34-36 ed. In the face of the essential homelessness of man, man's approaching destiny reveals itself to thought on the history of being in that he finds his way into the truth of being and sets out on this find (244). Every nationalism is metaphysically anthropologic, and as such subjective. The ongoing work of diaspora studies has to be a continuing rethinking of being, time and space, alongside a reassessment of nationalism and Pan-Africanism and the excavation of histories long

suppressed. How might such discussions of slavery intersect with the legacy of colonialism, for instance, or with heritage tourism, or as part of a discussion of globalizing notions of race? Prominent African writers like Zakes Mda, Zoe Wicomb, Teju Cole and No Violet Bulawayo are engaged in complementary projects about history, memory, and territory and perhaps a global memory of slavery and historical violence may begin to emerge in such transnational conversations. How may we think of diaspora not only as a description of people and worlds generated by displacement, but as a concept, method, and reading practice?

New African writing circulates in a changed climate of migration and class, an intense and intensely scrutinized literary prize culture, and the impact of social media and threats to print culture. Adichie's *Americanah* is an excellent exercise in literary realism where she explores a constellation of thought through the immigration experiences of an African woman Ifemelu. This experience though particular in perspective is strong enough to bear the weight of universality in a global world. How we understand history and its relation to now, how we interpret the presence of the past, its ghostliness, or its reification by capital leads directly to how we conceive of our present and future. In doing so, the rubric of diaspora can offer a useful conceptual node around which discussions of various comparative racial and national formations may cohere, without claiming either immutable difference or simple analogy. *Americanah* her recent novel, issues a challenge to scholars of race and post colonialism to more fully analyze the workings of race in global contexts.

Opening with the pitch perfect observation that "Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing" (3), *Americanah* navigates the spaces of Philadelphia, New Haven, Baltimore, and Brooklyn, all mentioned at the beginning, but also moves out and away from

America to Lagos, Nsukka, and London. Exploring how migration shapes racial identity, the novel shows how racial formations like blackness refuse to travel and translate even as they are globally mobile. While the novel wittily undermines American perceptions about Africa, and exposes African immigrants' bewilderment at normative race-speak in the US, reading the ways in which Adichie challenges conceptions of migration (particularly those anchored in the memory of slavery) offers a fresh conception of diaspora and of the politics of comparison. Since it is still relatively uncommon to think seriously about race in a global context, the novel inaugurates an important and long overdue conversation about the challenges of a Nigerian experience of racialization in the US and the UK, tying it firmly to both class and gender.

As a field, post colonial studies has been marked by an inability to take into account first world minority texts as well as the study of race. Without collapsing the two spaces of the US and Nigeria, it should still be possible to articulate historical legacies of race with those of empire, even more so in the era of neoliberal globalization. The new visibility of African writing in the US has prompted some to label it an African literary renaissance, or the boom of global novel, in response to the literary debuts of Taiye Selasi and No Violet Bulawayo, among others.

2. Theoretical Framework

The reception of *Americanah*, in the US is instructive. Most reviewers in the US debate whether this is, in fact, the great American novel for which we've all supposedly been waiting (and to their surprise, it's about hair, not baseball). Along with the predictable sense of wonder that a Nigerian woman has thoughts on race in America, and the sense of disbelief that Ifemelu would

choose to go back to Nigeria (and not under duress of any kind), there is an acknowledgment that what the novel calls "American tribalisms" (184) are being held up for ridicule, as Adichie reflects back to American readers their own prejudices and defamiliarizes their sense of themselves as the norm.

Kathryn Schulz rightly notes, that the novel isn't actually exotic, but endotic (meaning familiar), revealing to American readers what they sound like. In so doing, the novel may, in fact, be placed within a larger tradition of postcolonial writing reversing the heart of darkness narrative, where rather than Europeans or Americans going to Africa to find themselves, an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there. A classic instance of this genre, and in many ways an important precursor to *Americanah*, would be Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*. As readers debate whether *Americanah* is an American novel or an African one, or a global one, they often seem to miss its rebuke to the unworldliness of the American novel. Adichie echoes and amplifies this critique of American fiction, gently situating her own novel as simultaneously more playful and more serious than its American counterparts. So when Schulz concludes that, "In *Americanah,* Adichie is to blackness what Philip Roth is to Jewishness: its most obsessive taxonomist, its staunchest defender, and its fiercest critic," the comparison seems somewhat forced. Similarly, when Mike Peed also states, "*Americanah* examines blackness in America, Nigeria, and Britain, but it's also a steady handed dissection of the universal human experience a platitude made fresh by the accuracy of Adichie's observations," the crux of the universal as a measure of literary merit is striking.

When Ifemelu explains to a clueless white woman in the hair braiding salon in Trenton the difference between Chinua

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, the woman responds, "I see why you would read the novel like that." And Ifemelu says, unmasking the woman's claim to her own neutral, universal, unmarked status, "And I see why *you* would read it like you did" (190). In this way, the novel reveals to American readers their obsession with blindness to race and its pervasive presence in all interactions between people. Unmasking their idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies and, above all, their insistence that race doesn't matter, the novel also challenges the conventions of the typical immigrant novel, where no alternative to life in America is entertained, as Ifemelu chooses to return home not under any kind of compulsion, but just because she wants to be in Lagos. Obinze says to Ifemelu early in the novel, "you think everyone is like you. You think you're the norm, but you're not"(92).

In some ways, that's what the novel achieves as well, easily claiming the normative status that African fiction is often denied. All these questions about reading and reception are themselves staged in *Americanah*, which embeds an ongoing critique about books, and other texts, how they're read, and what they do or fail to do in the world. This is akin to the deconstructive enterprise Jacques Derrida embarked upon in *Of Grammatology*.

It is striking how wholly readers have tended to accept the novel's realism as simply real and to collapse the gap between the protagonist, Ifemelu, and the author, on the one hand, and between the blog and the rest of the narrative, on the other. Since the novel is punctuated with regular discussions of other novels reading them, hiding letters in them, disputing their merit, aligning them to national characteristics, it invites the reader to weigh its own claims to merit, relevance, and pleasure by embedding a debate about the act of reading, writing, and interpretation, both of novels

and other forms of social media. An exercise at once originally Adichie's but also Foucaultian in the inscription, interpretation, and deployment of power and textuality.

At the beginning, Adichie distinguishes her novel from the rest of American fiction, noting that Ifemelu's lover, Blaine, read "novels written by young and youngish men and packed with things, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music, and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness" (12). For Ifemelu, they were "like cotton candy that so easily evaporated from her tongue's memory" (12). Each of her romances, with the wealthy white American, Curt, the earnest African American professor, Blaine, and her childhood love, Obinze, is mediated by a set of reading protocols. Her first lover instructs her to learn to read proper novels, not romances, only to become, by the end of the book, the object of its own nostalgic romance and to recognize the value of Ifemelu's writing style.

Shan, Blaine's formidable sister, feels that "You can't write an honest novel about race in this country" black writers can either do "precious" or "pretentious" (336). Moreover, she feels that "You can't even read American fiction to get a sense of how actual life is lived these days" (336). And it is on this basis that *Americanah* succeeds well, giving a clear sense of how actual life is lived. Zadie Smith notes, Adichie's writing feels so real that there seems to be nothing between the characters and the reader. This is why the novel's observations about America seem to be incredibly astute and somewhat obvious at the same time.

Although they are being read as startlingly new, they work because they are so familiar. But to assess the novel's realism as a craft, and not simply a given, it's necessary, to track a distinction between the claims of the race blog and those of the narrative

itself. Ifemelu's upward mobility in America (following a year of student poverty and depression) is fueled by her anonymous blog, "*Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*" (4). Some are didactic, explaining what Hispanic means, why it matters that Obama is married to a dark skinned woman, why non-American blacks must be offended when watermelon or fried chicken is mentioned, and why they must tip well (to represent the race and overcome the black gene that prevents tipping) and do the secret nod when they see another black person anywhere. She explains, "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby" (220).

Others are more amused and exploratory: "White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think" (5), "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class" (166), "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism" (184), "Hair as Race Metaphor" (296), and "Thoughts on the Special White Friend" (361). The blog is, thus, both more didactic and more humorous, capturing the rhythms of the prose of Internet chatter accurately, as an engine for constant outrage, even if expressed with wit and the perfect turn of phrase.

3. Discourse and Analysis

The blog is a manual for how to think about racism. The novel itself is more ambiguous and layered. Blaine's critique of the blog as more oriented toward entertainment than education helps clarify this, since even as the blog evinces the kind of politicized consciousness in which he is invested, the novel undermines his perspective by contrasting its own greater depth and insight to his somewhat flat conclusions. In doing so, the novel offers a critique of the blog as form. Implicitly, then, the novel's clever comparison

between the two genres and what they make possible ends up rendering the novel triumphant over the blog. Along similar lines, denaturalizing the novel's realism also means realizing that Ifemelu is not always a mouthpiece for the author. The novel offers numerous critiques of Ifemulu as well, perhaps most clearly and self consciously when Shan says that Ifemelu can write that blog "because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about" (336).

Obviously, the same thing could be said about the novel itself, which refuses to either accept the primacy of American models of race as normative or to shield its fiery protagonist from critiques of being enabled by the distance of an immigrant identity from US racial attacks. That is to say, the novel self consciously foregrounds its own reception as a new kind of black novel, an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma, but focuses on romantic love, hair, and nostalgia. Perhaps the most moving sections of the novel are those that recount Obinze's struggles as an undocumented immigrant in London, his struggle to find jobs, a green card via a marriage set up by some Angolans with a woman with a European Union passport, and, ultimately, his humiliating deportation back to Nigeria. Obinze navigates all the layers of stratified class privileges among Nigerian migrants as they shift and adjust overseas.

At a dinner party hosted by a friend from home who has made it, Obinze notes how the liberals all understood escaping from war, abuse, and poverty, but not from "the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. . . . They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, . . . were now resolved to do dangerous things, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but

merely hungry for choice and certainty" (276). In excavating with care the delicate subjectivities of middle class Africans, Adichie challenges the association of Africa with trauma, torture, and politics, bringing into view non-Afro-pessimist representations of Africa. As one of her characters says of a Nigerian friend who's a struggling writer, "he needs to write terrible things about his own people if he wants to do well. He needs to say Africans alone are to blame for African problems, and Europeans have helped Africa more than they've hurt Africa, and he'll be famous and people will say he's so *honest*!"(318).

In colliding the histories of race and colonialism, the novel situates African migrants within a particular history that is often ignored in canonical accounts. It, thus, adds to influential black British and African American experiences of racialformation as intellectual genealogies for contemporary diaspora studies. It is all too easy to romanticize certain iconic moments in the black diaspora, the 1955 Bandung Conference or the 1959 Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers but here, Adichie uses realism to explore the question of diaspora in the contemporary moment, in contrast to what is elsewhere called the tendency toward the "romance of diaspora."

While most canonical accounts of diaspora have prioritized the Middle Passage and Atlantic slavery as the point of origin, recent studies have called for a more expansive and sometimes fractured understanding of transnational black culture. Taiye Selasi and Minna Salami have offered the term "Afropolitan" to describe young, creative, cosmopolitan African immigrants to the West. When Ifemelu returns home, she is seen both participating in the discourse of Afro politanism and mocking its pretensions to an identity based in style, attitude, and consumption rather than the political consciousness of pan-Africanism.

In the discourse of the Afro politan, Selasi, in her 2005 essay "Bye Bye Barbar," upholds the notion of the Afro politan as a rootless, mobile identity, both linked to Africa and able to detach from stereotypical notions of the continent as a possible locus of critique, Binyawanga Wainaina would rather continue as a Pan-Africanist. Critics of the Afropolitan worry that it proffers elite identity as a kind of cultural capital, style without substance, commodifying a newly exotic cosmopolitan identity as a claim of difference that cannot be sustained. But Selasi, the blogger Minna Salami, and scholars like Mbembe wish to claim the value of an Afro politan consciousness as a refusal to over simplify and a willingness to complicate existing portraits of Africa.

Americanah further complicates the possibilities opened up by the Afro-politan, both mocking it as a stylish identity for the global elite and nuancing its paradoxical claim to visibility within a finely calibrated nexus of class and privilege in contemporary Lagos. Adichie has said that she is "given to unnecessary nostalgia, the longing for what isn't there." Back in Lagos, Ifemelu has to reckon with the fact that she now acts with "the haughty confidence of a person who recognized kitsch" (393) and has "learned to admire exposed wooden rafters" (433). But she is also judged by her friends, her former love Obinze calls her "self righteous" (435), her coworker Doris "a judgmental bitch" (419), and her friend, Ranyinudo accurately diagnoses her superiority and judgmental attitude on her new blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. Ifemelu has to learn to write more lyrically, about the view from her bedroom window, about fashion shows and radio accents, before she can feel that she "had spun herself fully into being" and "discovered Lagos again" (475). Her mocking of Nigerian expatriates, who form the Niger politan club and lament their inability to get crisp vegetables or artisanal bread has to give way

to a deeper discovery of the rhythms of life in the city to earn the anonymous comment on her new blog, likely from Obinze, that "*this is like poetry*" (474).

Americanah often repeats the idea that race is an American obsession. Ifemelu, the protagonist who migrates to the US for a college education, says, "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" (290). When she returns home toward the end of the novel, she feels, "Race doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (476). To claim that race is American and that Ifemelu became black in America is to both comment on and reiterate US concepts of race as normative and hegemonic. But the novel doesn't stop there and goes on to denaturalize the category of "blackness," refusing to locate it outside of history. That Nigerians and African Americans have different histories of colonization and enslavement matters. As do differences between South Africans, Kenyans, and Nigerians.

4. Conclusion

Americanah, thus, encapsulates key aspects of contemporary African literature in relation to discussions about diaspora and the global turn. As *Americanah* takes on the charged questions of race, travel, and migration, it shows how black concerns and American conceptions of race are reshaped and transformed in relation to the history of the postcolonial state and its own itineraries of hope and despair, migration and return.

Adichie being herself, and reiterating Heidegger, shows more readily accessible than him that in the face of the essential homelessness of man, man's approaching destiny discloses itself to

thought on the history of being in that he finds his way into the truth of being and sets out on this find. Indeed, every nationalism being metaphysically anthropological subjectivism cannot be overcome through mere internationalism; but can, instead be expanded and elevated into a system (244).

Exposure to differences produced a novel voice [Ifemelu] one which makes African, Nigerian, continue to contest with each other for increased audibility. The people of the world should welcome and nourish the creative interplay among cultural and other differences. The interplay among diverse voices is always the most salient aspect of any place.

The prevalence of capitalistic globalization, ethnic cleansing and other forms of political and social exclusion suggests that difference is dismissed by many powerful forces as either an encumbrance to their goals or, much worse, as something to be feared and hated. This situation needs to be comprehended and responded to. For this, the dilemma of diversity, the false choice between unity and heterogeneity, identity and difference; a new view of society needs to be elaborated. It is communication and Justice. Society, as Fred Evans observed, is characterized as a multi-voiced body, a unity composed of differences.

Our age is one of diversity. Diversity transcends a plurality of functions or outlooks. It is at once a value to many and an apparent threat to others

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