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Exploring Black Consciousness in the Journey of Motherhood in Adichie's Novel "Americanah"

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* spans three continents and dissects the modern perception towards race. *Americanah* is essentially a story centered around its protagonist, Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who moves to the US for better fortune. The paper offers an insight into the psychological aspects of being a migrant and implores the sense of dislocation of being inhabitants of countries with wholly different histories and class structures through critical reading of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*. Also, how the people of black consciousness start impersonating the colonizer's language and mannerisms to become a part of the white society. Adichie is a popular Nigerian writer and is known for writing novels like *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013), the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), and the book-length essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). Her most recent book, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, was published in March 2017. Ngozi grew up and studied in Nigeria and went to America to complete her higher education. On her arrival in America, she, for the first time, realised what it meant to be a person of color in the US. Ngozi once recounted in her TED talk how her roommate had a one-dimensional view of Africa, seeing only stories of catastrophe. This perspective left no room for recognizing Africans as equals or understanding feelings beyond pity. Ngozi confronts this issue of under-representation and stereotyping of blacks in her work *Americanah*, whereas In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon combines autobiography, case study, philosophy, and psychoanalytic theory to describe and analyse the black psyche in a white world. The aim is to explore psychological feelings of inferiority among blacks, particularly of black mothers who want their child to be brought up and considered as one of them, not the "other", in American society. The paper also revolves around the desires of natives to become white through impersonating white men and finally, the acceptance of themselves as-Black through Adichie's novel *Americanah*.

Keywords: Black consciousness, identity, dislocation, language, motherhood.

Introduction

Adichie's main concern in her novel *Americanah* is to depict the life of black Africans and what it entails to be a black man and an African Immigrant or an African American in American Society, who indeed are colonised as well, not in the physical sense but are mentally colonized. They deem themselves as inferior and the whites as superior. That is, the colour of their skin becomes a sign of inferiority and ugliness. In the novel, it can be constructed that they behave in such a manner in order to be accepted in American society. For instance, when Ifemelu and her aunt are in a grocery store, she notices that her aunt Uju constantly changes her accent when talking to white Americans: "'Dike, put it back,' Aunt 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." (Adichie 108). She probably does this to hide her connection with Africa due to her low esteem for her African origin. Assimilation is common among 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 was the right way of integration. The transformation of their (African women) hair to comply with American hairstyle is explicit in *Americanah*-how women are expected to relax their natural curls to conform to white norms. For instance, when Ifemelu is about to sit for a job interview, a friend tells 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'"'. (Adichie 202). In fact, much of the novel is recounted by Ifemelu while she is sitting in a New Jersey Salon getting her hair braided. Hence, assimilation is a product of the inferiority complex of the black consciousness and can be understood as a way out or as an alternative path towards success in the white society. But it also causes a sense of alienation where the blacks cannot sympathise with their African roots, nor do they have the freedom of being African on foreign soil, as can be seen in Aunt Uju. This ambivalent identification of the racist world represents the idea of Man as his alienated image, that is, the "otherness of the self" (Satre) as understood by Fanon. He also puts across

two different dimensions of being black-one with fellow companions and the other with white. There is a change of behaviour when a Negro interacts with the other Negro than when he interacts with the white man. This can be substantiated through an example when Obinze, Ifemelu's childhood sweetheart, meets his childhood Negro friend Emenike in England. Emenike, who has become pretentious and patronizing Negro. Obinze notices a complete change in his behavior in front of his British wife.

The black man wants to be like the-white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. (Fanon 228). In the beginning of the novel, Obinze and Ifemelu represent the Africans who believe that America is superior because it is the cradle of civilization, modernity, and humanitarianism. For Toni Morrison, such a narrative is:

[t]he flight from the Old World to the New, is generally understood to be the flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility...from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined...[from] poverty, prison, social ostracism, and not frequently death. (Playing in the Dark 1793).

The blacks are mostly fascinated towards white society and deem them superior just because they are white in colour. It is reflected in the perception of America by young Obinze, similar to what other Africans believe. Obinze's obsession and fixation on America and his ever-longing interest in all aspects of life there reflect the fascination of many Africans. Obinze, who is "besotted with America", intensely admires America and its achievements. This admiration is tagged along with the belief that America is one of a kind among Western countries. To Obinze, the United States is divine a powerful First World country that is remarkable with its literary, political, and economic strength. Obinze, who is "fluent in the knowledge of foreign things, especially of American things" (Adichie 67), believes that the "proper books" are only "the American ones" and is certain that "America is the future" (Adichie 70). And in order to become a part of this society, the blacks undergo dislocation of identity. They start putting on "white masks". And an inevitable pathway to do is to adapt coloniser's language.

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 blackness, his jungle. (Fanon. 18). Adichie depicts this dilemma through her protagonist, Ifemelu.

Professor D. Westermann, in *The African Today* (p. 331), says that the Negroes' inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly. Their way of doing so, he adds, is frequently naive: "The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements." We can see this fascination and truly want to be considered one of them in Ifemelu. The need for assimilation arises not only from a desire to see oneself as equal to one's colonial counterparts but also as a necessary

step toward progress and creating a successful future for individuals like Ifemelu.

Good afternoon. Is this the right place for registration?" Ifemelu asked Cristina

Tomas, whose name she did not then know.

"Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?"

"Yes."

"You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office."

Ifemelu half smiled in sympathy, because Cristina Tomas had to have some sort of

illness that made her speak so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering, as she gave

directions to the international students office. But when Ifemelu returned with the letter,

Cristina Tomas said, "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You.

Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?'" and she realized that Cristina Tomas was

speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a

small child, lazy-limbed and drooling.

"I speak English," she said.

"I bet you do," Cristina Tomas said. "I just don't know how well."

Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's

before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken

English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the

American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in

the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an

American accent. (Adichie 133).

In one of his chapters, "The Negro and Recognition", Fanon talks about how the history between white men and black men needs to be forgotten or rejected. Also, one must stop putting masks on to hide one's real identity. White society should not be considered idealist by the Blacks. Instead, he agrees that black people should accept their Black Consciousness and look forward to a new world. A world where he is not a man of colour but a man of questions who does not accept injustice or any subjugation by others. This rejection of power can be seen in Americanah when Ifemelu decides to return home and settle in Nigeria. During her thirteen years of strangeness and homesickness in America, she was burdened by 'cement in her soul'. This is depicted through how Ifemelu comes to realise that she is not being true to her authentic self by being "Americanized" in her behaviour.

All these challenges that blacks face are amplified in the experience of mothering; this can be seen through the relationship of Aunt Uju and his son Dike. In a society where babies are rejected based on color, what is left for adolescents like Dike and adults like Ifemelu is to struggle to fit in a society that rejects them or considers them as some outsiders imposing and unwanted in the social space. For most of their lives, they struggle to make their presence known, eager to let people know that they exist. Identity struggle is why Aunt Uju doesn't validate her son's emotions about feeling like an outcast, fearing that acknowledging his roots will prevent him from being considered English. Aunt Uju believed that

perhaps her denial would make Dike conform to society; she wished that her son would eventually be accepted as one of “them”, even if she failed to reach that social milieu. To avoid the rejection she suffered, she does her best to educate her son, as American as possible, denying his origins,

“Dike, I mechago?” Ifemelu asked.

“Please don’t speak Igbo to him,” Aunt Uju said. “Two languages will confuse him.”

“What are you talking about, Aunty? We spoke two languages growing up.”

“This is America. It’s different.” (Adichie 104).

Aunt Uju deeply cares about Dike, but most of her actions throughout the novel are guided by her selfish motives and probably in the interest of Dike, but according to her whims, undermining her son’s feelings.

"Americanah" is a term used by locals to describe those who return from abroad and belittle their fellow countrymen or promote foreign values. In her novel, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a fresh perspective on Western culture and Africa, emphasizing that it liberates Black individuals from Western dominance. Adichie presents Africa as a place of potential and aspirations, highlighting the uniqueness of African consciousness in pursuing national, economic, literary, and political progress.

Conclusion

To conclude it is observed that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* depicts the struggle of how the black perceives themselves, go through behavioural and psychological changes in desire of being accepted by the whites especially Black mothers, but finally gain consciousness of-being Black and accepting it together with their culture and Integrity of their homeland. Adichie's novel reflects the sentiments of what Fanon perceived as the want of a man of colour. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever, that is, of one by another.

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man. (Fanon 231)

The ideal conditions for the state of existence in the human world are devoid of Inferiority and Superiority. Furthermore, it is a state of existence where one can understand others. Adichie draws on Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, where cultural and racial differences serve as assets for complementarity, reinforcement, and acceptance rather than stigmatization, racism, and assimilation.

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