



POSTCOLONIAL TO TRANSNATIONAL: TRANSFORMATION IN LITERARY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

*Having come into prominence in the last decade of the twentieth century, disrupting accepted Euro-American norms of writings, dismantling literary canon, postcolonial literatures gave voice to the once colonized, marginalized, and oppressed groups across cultures. Almost after twenty-five years of its inception, from a very seminal point of time in the twenty first century, post colonialism has slowly given a way to transnationalism, which can be described as a beginning for the Transnational Literature. Transnationalism in literary and cultural studies is a vital tool for unravelling the profound yet still unexplored implications that derive from the vast movement of people, texts, languages, translations, art forms and objects across the world. This study attempts to explore the theme of double-consciousness in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* published in 2013 as perfect example of transnationalism, focusing on blackness and racism in America, Nigeria and Britain resulting in identity crisis in black characters – Ifemelu, Uju and Aisha; living in American society. It also examines various issues like relationships, community, politics, ethnocentrism, migration; thus provides a steady-handed dissection of the universal human experience in contemporary world filled with the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness and offers the discomfiting realities of our times fearlessly before us and holds a mirror to transnationalism.*

Keywords: *Double-consciousness, lethargy of choicelessness, National boundaries, Racism, Transnationalism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. A Fascinating Romantic Story

Americanah is a 2013 novel by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for which she won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Fiction award. *Americanah* is set in today's globalized world tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who emigrates to the United States to attend university. The novel traces Ifemelu's life in both countries, threaded by her love story with high school classmate Obinze. She suffers defeats and triumphs, finds and loses relationships and friendships, all the while feeling the weight of something she never thought of back home: race. Whereas Obinze - the quiet, thoughtful son of a professor - had hoped to join her in America, but post-9/11 America will not let him in, and he plunges into a dangerous, undocumented life in London.

Years later, Obinze is a wealthy man in a newly democratic Nigeria, while Ifemelu has achieved success as a writer of an eye-opening blog about race in America. But when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, and she and Obinze reignite their shared passion - for their homeland and for each other - they will face the toughest decisions of



their lives. Through this fascinating romantic story it dissects modern culture and unveils layers of racism, and sexism. journey to discover her individuality in a new culture, struggles to establish herself financially, and strives to make sense of her new-found racial identity through a blog revealing the immigrant's quest of self-invention.

II. DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS AND XENOPHOBIA

Americanah highlights the existence of xenophobia and double-consciousness, which is the conundrum experienced by blacks in America in which they are cognizant of the duality of their existence: They are at once living life according to the standards of the white, dominant society while also maintaining the values and beliefs of the black experience. Both of these lives are constantly opposed to each other. This study attempts to analyse in *Americanah* the double-consciousness of three characters, Ifemelu--the story's protagonist, Aunt Uju-- Ifemelu's aunt, and Aisha--the hair braider. Adichie paints a duality with all three characters in which they all try to achieve the ideals of white America while also maintaining the values and belief systems of their home countries. The double-consciousness in *Americanah* is compounded by the immigrant status of Ifemelu, Aunt Uju, and Aisha. Before coming to America, none of these characters considered themselves black. Living in America forced them to confront the realization that in the eyes of white America, they are black--devoid of any cultural uniqueness that is part of their identities. Because Ifemelu, Aunt Uju, and Aisha are seen as black by white Americans, it would be appropriate to apply DuBois's notion of double-consciousness without amending it to address the issue of immigrant status, vocalizing the thoughts that women often keep silent. Through Ifemelu, Adichie offers a powerful commentary on romantic relationships that champions partnership over ownership.

Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, encapsulates the double life that is experienced by blacks in America. She poignantly captures her double life in her blog that is based on her observation of race relations in America. What Ifemelu comes to realize after a relatively short time in America is that the dominant white society, categorizes all blacks as one group based solely on phenotypical likenesses. Lombardi speaks to this point: "The acculturation experiences of West Indians and new-wave Africans have proven more difficult than those of non-black immigrants because of American social perceptions and understandings of blackness" [1]. No consideration is given to the plethora of cultures and nationalities that are embedded in this broad, amalgamated category of blacks. Therefore, Ifemelu finds herself navigating not just the double-consciousness of being black in America but also being a Non-American black in America. Through Ifemelu, Adichie also offers a powerful commentary on romantic relationships that champions partnership over ownership.

Adichie captures the double-consciousness of Black America particularly well and expounds on it through the character of Ifemelu. Adichie continues to frame her work using a binary opposition that pits the dominant white society in direct contrast to blacks in America. It subverts double-consciousness that has definitive meaning that places whites in a superior position to blacks. Aisha, Ifemelu's Senegalese hairstylist, engages Ifemelu in numerous questions ranging from Nollywood films to the marrying practices of Igbo people. Though Aisha is fully aware that Africa is comprised of multiple countries, peoples, cultures, languages, belief systems, etc., she nonetheless alters the ways she refers to the continent. She acquiesces to the ignorance of the dominant society, and begins to essentialized people from Africa. However, her explanation to Ifemelu about why she essentializes



Africa implies that she at once sets herself apart from dominant society while acting in a way that is consistent with its beliefs. When Aisha says, “You don’t know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, where is that” [2]. She uses the term American in a way that suggests her exclusion from the group. However, the contradictory action of using Africa as a blanket location for all African countries evinces the double-consciousness that characterizes Aisha. She understands that she is seen as the “other” in American society, but she still admires American culture and most likely longs for success by American standards. Aisha is impressed when Ifemelu tells her that she has been in America for fifteen years. More telling of Aisha’s reverence for American culture is the fact that she cannot understand why Ifemelu wants to return to Nigeria. Similar reverence is also seen in Ifemelu’s aunt, Aunt Uju. She is an important example of the impact that double-consciousness has on Non-American black immigrants. The summer that Ifemelu moves to America, she stays with Aunt Uju and Dike in New York. Immediately, Ifemelu notices differences in her aunt’s personality. As they are driving in the car, Aunt Uju mispronounces her own name when she takes a call. Adichie continues this scene with an exchange between Ifemelu and Aunt Uju: “Is that how you pronounce your name now? It’s what they call me” [3]. Just as we see with Aisha, Aunt Uju appears to give in to the American perception of who she is. Because she is traveling the road to American success, she chooses to make her travels smoother by ignoring bumps along the way--namely, the correct pronunciation of her name. Just as with Aisha, we also see Aunt Uju simultaneously acknowledge her otherness while submitting to the identity that the dominant society has created for her. Aunt Uju’s response to Ifemelu’s questioning of the mispronunciation is “It’s what they call me” [4]. Using the term “they” suggests that Aunt Uju knows she is an outlier in American society, but her choice to accept the dominant society’s perception of her shows that she considers the dominant society to be superior to her.

Aunt Uju again shows her willingness to bend to the ways of the dominant society when she, Dike, and Ifemelu are at the grocery store. Ifemelu observes the way Aunt Uju speaks when she engages in conversations with 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. *Pooh-reet-back*. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing” [5]. Ifemelu who is unschooled in the nuances of racial politics in America, observes, through unfiltered eyes, the double-consciousness that pervades Aunt Uju’s personhood. It becomes clear in Chapter 9 that Aunt Uju has fallen prey to a self-consciousness that is the by-product of systemic racism. In the voice of Stuart Hall, Aunt Uju has been made to see herself as “other.” One possibility for this is that Aunt Uju does not achieve immediate success in America despite her training and expertise as a physician. Considering she has the knowledge and skill to perform the duties of a physician, what she likely internalizes is that she is not “American enough” to be a physician in America. DuBois speaks to this point when he says, “...from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence” [6]. As Aunt Uju attempts to hold on to parts of her identity--dignity, belief systems--she simultaneously tries to mimic the dominant society. What results from this duplicity is a degradation to the self that, ironically, keeps Aunt Uju in a subordinate position. It does not take long for Ifemelu to acquiesce to the same state of double-consciousness as Aunt Uju. In Chapter 14, Adichie describes Ifemelu’s encounter with Cristina Tomas on her first day at college. Cristina Tomas patronizes Ifemelu because of her Nigerian accent, and this becomes



Ifemelu's first encounter with feeling like the Other. Adichie writes, "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... And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent" [7]. In this scene, Ifemelu goes from a self-assured, assertive individual to an insecure subordinate. There are several levels of power imbalance in this scene. First, Adichie gives a detailed description of Cristina Tomas's whiteness: "Cristina Tomas with her rinsed-outlook, her washy blue eyes, faded hair, and pallid skin... Cristina Tomas wearing whitish tights that made her legs look like death" [8]. Adichie firmly establishes that Cristina is white, and this careful characterization cultivates a dichotomy that contrasts whites and blacks. Second, within the context of this scene, Adichie positions Cristina in a place of authority: It is Cristina from whom Ifemelu needs information and assistance. Ifemelu is decidedly at a disadvantage in this scene. This scene can be magnified so as to examine the symbolism that makes it more than an uncomfortable and condescending encounter between a white student and a black student. In fact, Cristina symbolizes America for Ifemelu. At this point, Ifemelu already realizes that America is not all glitter and gold and high-gloss as she had imagined. Similarly, Cristina is characterized as rinsed-out and faded. Cristina's ignorance becomes representative of many encounters that Ifemelu has with American whites, so Cristina's behaviours can be taken as representative of white America as it is portrayed in the novel. With Cristina being a symbol of white America--the dominant society--Ifemelu is immediately placed in a subordinate position. Ifemelu needs Cristina's (America's) help in order to gain entry into her college life (American life). Moreover, Cristina (America) has relegated her to a position of inferiority based on her otherness. Ifemelu's subsequent remedy for her subordinate position is to practice her American accent, which is the beginning of her journey into the double-consciousness that absorbs the lives of blacks in America.

Hair is a motif that Adichie uses to solidify the concept of the double-consciousness. In *Americanah*, systemic racism is camouflaged in superficial ideals (e.g. standards of beauty, skin complexion, hairstyles). All members of American society strive for these ideals, but Adichie illuminates the particular struggle of black women in America to adhere to superficial ideals. What she reveals is that for black women superficial ideals can decide the fate of one's success in America. Ifemelu realizes this when Curt, her well-connected white boyfriend, uses his connections to secure her a job in corporate America. Ifemelu informs her career counsellor, Ruth, about the job prospect in Baltimore. Ruth's advice to Ifemelu is to "[l]ose the braids and straighten your hair" [9]. Having already felt the sting from mainstream America because of her appearance, Ifemelu immediately agreed to straighten her hair. After walking away with a job offer, Ifemelu wonders "if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro" [10]. Adichie's handling of Ifemelu's suspicion about why she got the job mirrors reality. In many cases, blacks and other minorities can only suspect that they have been discriminated against. However, it does not matter whether or not Ifemelu's suspicions are correct. What is of concern is that the suspicion exists in the first place. The fact that Ifemelu has to wonder about whether or not her assimilated looks are what landed her a job is the fundamental issue at the core of the double-consciousness of blacks in America. In describing the tension of the double-consciousness, DuBois writes, "...this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment" [11]. The "peculiar sense of doubt" is pervasive in the psyche of blacks in America



because always underscoring their lives is a lingering doubt of whether or not enough has been changed of their natural essence to gain access into the dominant society.

IV. RACE RELATIONS IN AMERICA

Adichie uses Ifemelu's blog as a platform for critiquing race relations in America. Scattered throughout the narrative, Ifemelu's blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, allows us to understand racial politics from the point of view of one who considers herself an outsider-- whether or not Ifemelu is an outsider is debatable given the essentialization of all blacks (American and non-American alike) by the white, dominant society. Adichie uses Ifemelu's blog posts to essentially echo the position of DuBois regarding double-consciousness. In the blog post titled, "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire to," Adichie writes, "So whiteness is the thing to aspire to... many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness" [12]. Earlier in this post, Ifemelu explains that each minority group in America believes it occupies the lowest rung in America's societal hierarchy. In response to Professor Hunk who argued that no one's oppression is worse than anyone else's, Ifemelu retorts, "But there IS an oppression Olympics going on" [13]. She goes on to say that blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews are all marginalized groups but "[e]ach believes that it gets the worst shit" [14]. Looking at this excerpt through the lens of double-consciousness, Adichie is suggesting that while minority groups are aware that their oppression can be "traced back to whiteness (and all of the systemic racism that comes with that term), they nonetheless, aspire to achieve the privileges of whiteness. In other words, there is a duality in the consciousness of blacks in America—they loathe the whiteness that oppresses them, but they want to be part of that whiteness and receivers of the appurtenances of white America.

IV. ETHNOCENTRISM AND MIGRATION

Ethnocentrism according to an American sociologist William Graham Sumner is an individual's tendency to see his own group or culture as central or most important, relating all other groups to his own and a belief that one's own culture or group is superior to others [15]. Most social scientists believe that some degree of ethnocentrism is unavoidable in humans; it is inherent in how people see and organize their concept of the world [16]. In *Americanah* both the protagonists - Ifemelu and Obinze have been shown to be the victims of ethnocentrism in the USA and the UK respectively as they migrate to these places due the lack of economic opportunity. She also presents another cause of migration that is new to international migration theory. In fact, one of the peculiarities of Adichie is that in addition to these two main causes of migration, through the characterisation of Ifemelu, she makes it possible for readers to take notice of another reason: choicelessness or the unavailability of choice. In fact, the protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze migrate to the USA and the UK because they are fleeing from what they call the "oppressive lethargy of choicelessness" [17]. Ifemelu was "guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay." [18]. Through the powerful juxtaposition of guilt and gratitude, the author makes the readers take notice of the situation of unease in which Ifemelu's quest of freedom of movement leads her. Her being guilty refers to the illegal way she managed to obtain the visa; yet she is thankful because it enables her to always move;



without it, she has no choice but to stay. The passport is synonymous with choice and freedom of movement. The battle against choicelessness is presented to the reader through Obinze's mind while attending a dinner in a friend's house in Britain. Alexa and Georgina were some of the guests. When Alexa commends Blunkett's intention to transform Britain into a refuge for survivors of wars, Obinze agrees with her. Yet, she is ill at ease because the motivations behind her own migration story are different: Alexa, and the other guests, and perhaps even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape 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, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. Adichie is using contrast with words and phrases such as "but", "understand/not understand" to vividly introduce readers into a new phenomenon, choicelessness, which is presented as a metaphysical means of oppression. Both Ifemelu and Obinze belong to the Nigerian middle class. They do not suffer from poverty. Their migration is not induced by poverty but by the need to experience choice and something new somewhere else.

V. CONCLUSION

Americanah dissects modern culture and unveils layers of racism, and sexism. It is through the main character Ifemelu, a bright and outspoken young woman from Nigeria, who has the chance to study in the United States, that the reader is made aware of societal norms that inhibits the lives of young women, and particularly African American or Non-American Black women in the United States. This blend of cultural identities seems healthy and natural for Ifemelu, but it then means that she inhabits a kind of in-between place, where she is neither wholly American nor (when she returns home) wholly Nigerian: she is an "Americanah." Obinze has a more difficult experience adapting to a new cultural identity in England. His visa expires and he is forced to take on other people's identities to find work, and to buy into a green-card marriage. Everywhere there is a fear of immigrants, and Obinze feels invisible and worthless. He is finally caught and deported back to Nigeria and then sets about building a new identity for himself, having been forced to give up his old dream of America. The new Obinze makes lots of money, marries a beautiful but uninteresting woman, and becomes a Nigerian "big man." He is seen as a huge success by his peers, but it all feels slightly false to Obinze until Ifemelu returns. Ifemelu, having her own identity crisis in returning to Nigeria and feeling out of place, then reconnects with Obinze and the two begin to work toward reconciling the differing identities they have constructed in their separation. Adichie examines the racial inequities that plague the collective consciousness of blacks in *Americanah* using the postcolonial reading of the text which brings to the fore the fluidity of identity. However, the text perpetuates the very binary opposition that it seeks to counter. Implicitly the study shows identity crisis as baseless concept that is trapped in a referential network of meaning in transnationalism. Emphatically the study brings to the fore the sufferings of migrated men and women from not so developed countries in the so called developed countries which is one of the many issues in transnational literatures. This research paper dealing with many new problems in contemporary global societies inspires further research in diverse areas of world literature in English.

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