

Gender and Ethnicity in Diaspora: The Multi-Cultural Trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract:

In the new millennium, African authors tend to modernize their creative writings and cast light on the new challenges that confront Africans with preserving the label of African culture and traditions. The idea of gender and ethnicity in Diaspora is one of the significant challenges that face African immigrants in the West. It illustrates the multi-cultural conflicts between the dominant group (the White) and the other ethnic groups due to both gender and race. For that reason, the present paper aims to analyze the different features of multicultural trauma in Diaspora when gender and ethnicity are presented in African fiction in English.

To accomplish the work's aim, the two researchers selected Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* as a corpus of the present study since this novel introduces an image of African black women's struggle in multi-ethnic community (USA) that is dominated by the White. The novel's discourse depicts the multicultural trauma in Diaspora as a result of the hierarchal social reality in which the White underestimate the Black and males control females.

Key-words:

Gender, ethnicity, multicultural trauma, African fiction, Diaspora.

1. INTRODUCTION:

African novel as a dominant genre in African literature is the picture of Africans inside and outside the Dark Continent. It creates a bridge between African communities and the world via describing the cultural diversity in Africa. However, in the half of the 90_s with the increasing of immigration to the West, African authors shifted to cast light on the life of African immigrants in Diaspora. The so-called African literature in Diaspora is a new genre in African literature that aids in unmasking different issues concerning the African migration as a result of the post-independence reality. In this era, instable political and socio-economic conditions in the continent push Africans to escape towards USA, Britain and other developed countries to seek better high education and life (Osirim, 2008).

Meanwhile, Western world is not the Promised Land as Africans imagine; there, they confront the marginalization reality. The latter is depicted by gender, racial and ethnic discriminations in which African immigrants are considered as a minority. In this sense, new voices of writers in African fiction probe the core of those issues and count their social and cultural results. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as a feminist contemporary African author asserts the concepts of marginalization, rejection and stigmatization of immigrants in her third novel *Americanah*. In this novel, Adichie deals with the issue of African immigration to the West and describes the cultural trauma in a multi-ethnic society that existed between the dominant group and other minorities regarding the difference in gender, race and ethnicity. As an African immigrant in Diaspora, she depicts the socio-cultural track that is created due to the racial and ethnic discrimination in western societies and its social and psychological disastrous consequences on minor groups. Regardless of the feminist nature of the story, Adichie portrays the struggle of Africans, both men and women, in Diaspora to adapt with an intolerant new community that rejects, stifles and

refuses them. She features different aspects of African immigrants' life and their relation with the whites, African Americans and other Africans. This issue is a corner stone in the new Diasporic literature since it depicts the cultural conflicts between different racial groups that affect directly the life' stability of minor communities. For that reason, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the multicultural trauma in a multiethnic society as a result of immigrants' marginalization in Diaspora due to gender and ethnicity.

2. The New African Diaspora in Adichie's *Americanah*

The presence of Africa in other continents was the result of the considerable migration during the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The latter creates a dispersion of black people or Africans in the Americas and Europe which is considered today as a relevant African Diaspora. Africa, in this sense, remains a homeland for blacks that inspires the identity of blackness and builds Pan-Africanism (Falola, 2003). Feldner (2019) states the following:

'Diaspora' typically refers to a collective living outside its homeland, a displaced population. This is also what the etymological meaning of the term indicates, which consists of the prefix dia- ('through', 'over') and the verb sperein ('sow', 'scatter'). Usually, there are cultural (and religious) connections among the exiled and dispersed groups, which are linked to a homeland via a diasporic network. (p.14)

Besides its linguistic meaning, Diaspora is fused generally with different terms such as 'migration', 'exile', 'minority', 'race' and 'ethnicity' (Edwards, 2007). However, if the African Diaspora is a result of slaves' trade through the past decades, New African Diaspora is created to indicate the deliberate migration from Africa during the second half of the twentieth century. It is the outcome of the post-colonial circumstances in the Dark Continent in which Africans fled to the West to seek education, work and better opportunities (Falola, 2014).

Currently, African Diaspora studies have a significant place within Academia. In the context of Americas and Europe, the concept of Diaspora, in fact, forms a part of a necessary narrative of resistance where black communities are characterized by a long history of forced migration, the dominance of cultural marginalization, and the continuous struggle for citizenship (Davis, 2004). The New African Diaspora is a crucial theme in the new voices of African authors' creative writings. The majority of them live both in and outside Africa. They narrate and confront various issues that shape the contemporary African literature regarding immigrants and immigration such as racism, identity, gender and ethnicity (Foster, 2015). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the brilliant African authors in the new millennium that fosters and sustains African identity and dignity regardless of gender. She belongs to the third generation of African writers in the post-colonial era. Her writings target the issue of African immigrants and their struggle with racial and ethnic discrimination in the West (Coulibaly & Coulibaly, 2019).

In her third masterpiece, *Americanah*, Adichie casts light on the migration to the United States of America as a major phenomenon in Nigeria and other African states, and portrays different issues that are related to race, gender and ethnicity. In doing this, she determines that gender and race are two crucial factors in fashioning the person's experience (Ghantasala, 2018). In this sense, different researches are

conducted to shed light on African migration and its socio-cultural issues in *Americanah*. Amonyeze (2017) analyzes the liminality and bicultural identity in Adichie's novel. He examines her characters as positive models of Nigerian immigration responding to racial stereotypes. Also, Thampuratty (2019) explores migration, racism, gender discrimination and cultural identity in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and Adichie's *Americanah*. He identifies how social, political and historical contexts affect the racial boundaries in the two novels. Furthermore, Khan, Afzaal and Naqvi (2019) study the construction of Diasporic female identities in *Americanah*. They focus on how Ifemelu constructs her homeland and abroad identities via her relation with the three men, Obinze, Curt, and Blaine in the novel.

The present paper is in fact an endeavor to highlight African migration to the West in contemporary African fiction. It discusses gender and ethnicity in Diaspora in Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* as the main issues that confront African immigrants abroad and it tackles their multicultural conflicts and traumas as a result of Africans' stigmatization in multi-ethnic communities.

3. Multicultural Trauma in Adichie's *Americanah*

Americanah is a literary work willfully conceived by Adichie in order to treat different issues that confront African immigrants in multi-ethnic communities such as USA where people think that multicultural coexistence is a stereotype and America is a promised land. However, the author in her novel reveals the true face of White America where immigrants are neglected, prejudiced and categorized due to their race and ethnicity. *Americanah* narrates the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who migrates to USA to complete her higher education. However, when she puts her foot on the American land, she collides with the reality and encounters many financial, social, and cultural pitfalls as an African immigrant black woman. Ifemelu forgets about her blackness till she reaches America where she discovers the hierarchal features of American society that rejects and underestimates her because

of her skin colour. She manages to adapt with the cultural mainstream to overcome constraints in USA and to preserve her African identity. On the other hand, Adichie recounts the story of the male protagonist, Obinze, Ifemelu's boyfriend who is submitted to different kinds of racism from the Whites in Britain as an illegal immigrant who needs any paper of residency. However, on the contrary to Ifemelu, Obinze's experience does not last long since he is caught by authorities and he returns to his homeland where he becomes a famous man in Nigeria.

Adichie's *Americanah* portrays different factors that lead to the multicultural trauma in the novel's storyline. These factors are represented by the linguistic variation between American English and Nigerian English. Also, they can be shown by various relationships in this multi-ethnic community, a range of differences between Africans and Afro-Americans, distinctions among Africans immigrants, conflicts between the White and the Black, and gender issues.

3.1 Linguistic Variation

The first constraint that faces Ifemelu as any other immigrants in USA is the language variation. Even though she has got good English, she discovers that Americans obtain their own English dictionary. Ifemelu finds difficulties to adapt to these cultural variations:

'If you see how they laughed at me in high school when I said that somebody was boning for me. Because boning here means to have sex! So I had to keep explaining that in Nigeria it means carrying face. And can you imagine 'half-caste' is a bad word here?' "Americans say 'thin.' Here 'thin' is a good word." (*Americanah*, p. 93)

This linguistic variation creates a kind of cultural trauma to Ifemelu who thinks that English is the same everywhere. She is obliged to remove some vocabularies from her dictionary and even to change her accent to avoid being a strange in the American community. In this case, the author explains that preserving cultural and linguistic identities is a challenging task for immigrants in any supremacist community such as the American one.

3.2 Africans vs. Afro-Americans

Even though they are regarded as brothers and they share apparently the same circumstances, Africo-Americans tend to behave differently with African immigrants, and their relation is marked by a kind of restraint and ascendancy which creates racial and ethnic divergences. Adichie casts light on this phenomenon through *Americanah*'s storyline and represents the fitful relationship between the two paradigms. This can clearly appear when Mwombeki, African Students' Association president, teaches Ifemelu how to deal with her Afro-American fellows:

‘Try and make friends with our African-American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective’“ The African Americans who come to our meetings are the ones who write poems about Mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian queen. 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. Mwombeki said’ (*Americanah*, p.106)

Afro-Americans refuse to be comparable with African immigrants as they are American citizens who were born in the United States of America and have got the same rights as well as the White. For that reason, it is not appreciated for him to use such terms like 'Nigger' in public since it reminds them of their roots. This is what happens in Ifemelu's class when this word is discussed:

'Why was 'nigger' bleeped out? I mean, 'nigger' is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out.' (*Americanah*, p.104)

Ifemelu also experiences the arrogance of African-Americans with Shan, the black American writer and Blaine's elder sister, who has a cold relationship with her. Ifemelu recognizes the feeling of underestimation when she meets Shan:

'You know why Ifemelu can write that blog, by the way?' Shan said. 'Because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she'd just be labeled angry and shunned.' (*Americanah*, p. 245)

Shan intentionally reminds Ifemelu about her Africanness and she excludes her from the discussion about American matters. In her view, Ifemelu is merely an African outsider who cannot comprehend the American mentality. In this sense, Shan, as white Americans, portrays the supremacy of African Americans over their African immigrants' fellows. This uneasy relationship between the two groups forms a shock to new African immigrants who expect empathy from their Afro-American brothers as they share blackness and Pan-Africanism. In portraying this issue, Adichie reveals another multicultural matter that faces African immigrants in the

American society. She conveys a message that sharing blackness in America does not always maintain solidarity and sympathy, but sometimes it may increase antipathy and intolerance.

3.3 African Immigrants in the United States of America

Americanah highlights how Africans themselves coexist and deal with each other in USA with a difference in states and nationalities. Adichie depicts this relationship in the hair braider salon when Ifemelu talks with Aicha, the Senegalese hair braider:

‘You Igbo? I think you Yoruba because you dark and Igbo fair. I have two Igbo men. Very good. Igbo men take care of women real good. I want marry. They love me but they say the family want Igbo woman. Because Igbo marry Igbo always.’ (*Americanah*, p. 16)

Aicha, as an African immigrant from Senegal, surprises Ifemelu about discussing different ethnic groups’ marriage among Africans in USA. She insists that Igbo people (Ifemelu tribe) prefer their girls and refuse other people even in America. This situation is a cultural issue that migrates with Africans abroad and creates cultural conflicts between African immigrants who also tend to underestimate each other as what happens in the same salon between Ifemelu and the South African woman:

‘I can’t watch that stuff. I guess I’m biased. In my country, South Africa, Nigerians are known for stealing credit cards and doing drugs and all kinds of crazy stuff. I guess the films are kind of like that too.’ (*Americanah*, p.139)

This incident reveals clearly the relationship between Africans and clarifies somehow the mentality of prejudice of some African immigrants that may be acquired from the long contact with Americans. Adichie attempts to explain that the relationship between Africans in Diaspora comes with cultural or national conflicts which accompanied immigrants from their hometowns.

3.4 The White vs. the Black

One of the major themes of *Americanah* is the relation between blacks and whites in America. This issue is the corner stone in African writers' narratives. Adichie as a contemporary author in Diaspora tends to depict different kinds of marginalization and stigmatization that are applied on Blacks in a community that pretends equality between its members. *Americanah* succeeds in portraying the racial reality in contemporary America. Adichie depicts the negative and prejudicial perceptions of Americans about Blacks and Africans. This view increases the gap between the two ethnic groups. Ifemelu as an African immigrant experiences this issue when communicating with the Whites:

'But you couldn't even have this business back in your country, right? Isn't it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and now your kids can have a better life? Are women allowed to vote in your country?' (*Americanah*, p.141)

This kind of stigmatization and prejudice does not exclude African children who are victims of racial discrimination. Dike, Unty Uju's son, faces such a kind of racism in his school: 'I don't even know how to hack' Dike said drily 'You have to blame the black kid first, he said, and laughed' (*Americanah*, p.254).

Adichie tends to portray all types of supremacy, arrogance and transcendence that can be shown by white Americans when they deal with black Africans. In the same line, Obinze who plans to a sham marriage with a British woman in order to get the residency paper is submitted to the exploitation from turncoats. Those features increase the cultural gap between black immigrants and whites and make the multicultural coexistence a hard challenge.

3.5 Gender Relations

Since Adichie is a feminist African author, it is clearly that her writings focus on women identity and the topic of gender. In *Americanah*, she describes the struggle of an African black immigrant woman in Diaspora where racism is a predominant issue. Ifemelu experiences the fake face of America, which pretends gender equality, with the tennis coach. The latter is an example of the white American man who looks to women merely as a way to fulfill his carnal desires: 'Just come here and lie down,' he said. 'Keep me warm. I'll touch you a little bit, nothing you'll be uncomfortable with. I just need some human contact to relax.' (*Americanah*, p.116).

Ifemelu who is under a hard financial situation accepts reluctantly this abuse, but she cannot complete till the end since she feels a strong humiliation from a strange man in a strange land which pushes her to enter in a traumatic depression. As Ifemelu, Auntie Uju who is more experienced than her niece in America loses confidence in her husband, Bartholemow, who becomes a careless man and demands her salary:

'He wants me to give him my salary. Imagine! He said that it is how marriages are since he is the head of the family, that I should not send money home to Brother without his permission, that we should make his car payments from my salary.' (*Americanah*, p.160)

The relation of Ifemelu with the two American men, Curt and Blaine, helps in creating her new abroad identity and managing her relationships with other men in the American society. Curt as a white American represents her first attraction to a man except Obinze. However, this relationship starts as a *fait accompli* since she is pushed to accept to be his girlfriend due to Curt's continued flirting and insistence. It appears to the whites as the key of happiness to Ifemelu, the black African woman, who is blessed to be the lover of Curt the rich white man:

'When Curt said, "This is my girlfriend, Ifemelu," they looked at her with surprise, a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not, and in their expressions was the question "Why her?" It amused Ifemelu It was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete's body, the sunny charm and the smell, around him, of money.' (*Americanah*, p. 214)

This perception is still a stereotype in the American community and it increases the cultural gap between different ethnic groups in the case of gender relationships. However, the relationship with Blaine, the African American professor, seems more mature. Ifemelu's relationship with Blaine is characterized by intimacy since he changes her reflection about racism. Meanwhile, Blaine is still an Africo-American man who feels such supremacy and considers an African immigrant woman as a stranger. This happens in the first meeting after ten years: 'Hi! he said, peering at her name tag. "So you're the Non-American Black? I love your blog.'" (*Americanah*, p. 224).

Though Blaine is an academic and shows a flexible view towards race and ethnicity, he underestimates Ifemelu's blog about race to change the American mentality. He reveals his reaction in the first dispute with her:

'How is this lunch suddenly so important? You hardly even know this Boubacar's colleague!' he said, incredulous. "You know, it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don't really take seriously, it's like choosing an interesting elective evening class to complete your credits.' (*Americanah*, p. 251)

Blaine's reaction opens a gap in his relation with Ifemelu and reveals his condescending view to her as a non American black woman with a low status in comparison with him. He does not only underestimate her work as a race blogger, but also he intends to prompt her African origin. She is convinced that his behavior seems to be more American and creates a certain smirk relationship. This is due to the distant position Blaine puts himself in as an Afro-American. This behavior shows to Ifemelu a kind of racism and supremacy. Thus, she concludes that their relationship is weak since he cannot tolerate her as an African black immigrant woman.

4. CONCLUSION

The present paper was an endeavor to cast light on the issue of gender and ethnicity in Diaspora and their multicultural conflicts in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. The novel is a picture of African immigrants' struggle in a multiethnic and racist community that is represented by the United States of America. The paper depicted the sufferance of African black immigrant woman in America in completing her higher education and adapting with the dominant culture preserving her African identity. It showed various features of multicultural traumas as a result of different aspects in the American society, such as linguistic variations, relationships between Africans and Afro-Americans, among Africans themselves and between Whites and Blacks, and gender. These factors increase cultural conflicts between minor ethnic groups on one hand and with the dominant group or white Americans on the other. Adichie's *Americanah*, in this sense, unveils the true face of USA and erases the notion of 'Promised Land' where equal opportunities and multicultural coexistence are basic concepts. In her novel, Adichie lastly concludes that Blacks forget about their blackness till they reach America.

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