

“Americanah” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie — The Novel That Made Me and Many Black People Feel Understood

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of my favourite contemporary authors. For me she embodies a powerful, immensely intelligent, attentive and woke black woman.

As she was born and raised in Nigeria, as I was, it was very easy for me to relate to the characters that she portrays in the novels *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*.

I literally had several moments, while reading the latter, when my mind went: “Oh my God, exactly”. This does not only refer to the fact that she is from the same county as I am, but to the way she describes the experiences that people with black and brown skin might experience when living in a place with a majority white population. I believe that black and brown people living in the US — regardless of whether they are African-American or came to the US from other countries — might even have more and stronger moments of recognising the described situations and emotions from real life experiences. The novel is full of truths worth quoting.

Americanah is a complex novel revolving around difficult themes as race and racism, cultural criticism and identity, but it encompasses these topics in a gripping love story, spanning over three continents. As the characters of the story move from Nigeria to the US, respectively

to the UK, and then back to Nigeria, Adichie gets to analyse and comment on the various issues black people face in these countries. The author’s critique is sometimes harsh, yet oftentimes spiced with just enough humour so that it is still easy to digest, yet it remains thought provoking.

The story pivots around the characters Ifemelu, who is the heroine of the novel, and the love of her life, Obinze. The third person narrator tells their life stories in alternating turns, limited to their individual point of view. This pattern is occasionally interrupted by longer quotes from Ifemelu’s blog posts.

The couple grows up in Nigeria’s former capital, Lagos, where they attend the same school and later go to the same university. When the situation under Nigerian military dictatorship becomes an ever harder struggle and universities strike, Ifemelu decides to study in the US, as she is granted a scholarship for the university in Philadelphia. Obinze is not as lucky and finds himself sliding into illegal dealings when he stays in England after his visa has expired.

Both characters embark on a journey through life’s difficulties, with changing partners, problems due to their skin colour and intercultural misunderstandings. It is a fascinating and eye-opening tale worth reading for everyone, which is why I do not want to spill out the complete plot here.

I would instead like to share a few passages of the story that made me really relate to the character of Ifemelu. She reflects on issues that I have struggled with myself, and she states her thoughts

on these openly in her blog. The novel touches on many aspects regarding the experience of non-violent racism that manifests in tiny micro-aggressions or presents itself in the disguise of curiosity. These are largely overlooked by people who do not experience them. Oftentimes this type of racism is belittled, when mentioned, and discarded with the notion that the incident is being exaggerated and was not that bad or that it used to be a lot worse in former times. Adichie's way of using "hair" as a symbol to speak about race throughout the novel, was absolutely astonishing to me. She explains how, for black and brown women, their natural hair is often regarded as a defect that needs to be fixed in order to fit in.

For the longest time, I also felt that I needed to have straight, long and flowing hair in order to look good. When I was younger and we moved to Germany, my German classmates always wanted to touch my hair and made fun of it, saying it was like straw or it looked funny. Definitely it was a constant reminder that I was different. This was also always evident when looking at beauty magazines, as they never featured any black or brown women, there were never tips or cosmetic samples for people with darker skin, and certainly never any advice for women with kinky curly hair.

Here are some quotes from the novel, focussing on the themes of race and identity.

The first few passages I am quoting are instances in which Adichie uses hair as a symbol to make a point.

Ifemelu's aunt Uju, who had just gotten the acceptance letter from the "United States

Medical Licensing", is worried about her appearance at upcoming interviews:

"Later", she said, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair... If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."

"So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" Ifemelu asked.

"I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed."

There it was again, the strange naïveté with which Aunt Uju had covered herself like a blanket. Sometimes, while having a conversation, it would occur to Ifemelu that Aunt Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. Obinze said it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity."

(Americanah, Chapter 11, p. 119)

In another instance the protagonist tries to use a relaxer to straighten her hair with a do-it-yourself package at home. But as she fails to achieve the promised result, she goes to a hairdresser. There the relaxer does its job, but leaves her with burns.

"Just a little burn," the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!"

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the

salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss.” (*Americanah*, Chapter 19, p. 203)

When asked by her boyfriend on her reason for straightening her hair and enduring the pain of burns instead of leaving her hair natural, she replies:

“My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky.” (*Americanah*, Chapter 19, p. 204)

After relaxing her hair for a while, Ifemelu’s hair starts to fall out and her hairline withdraws further back. Her friend persuades her to stop relaxing her hair and to cut it short.

“Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn’t go running with Curt today because you don’t want to sweat out this straightness. You’re always battling to make your hair do what it wasn’t meant to do. If you go natural and take good care of your hair, it won’t fall off like it’s doing now.” (Chapter 20, p. 208)

The dry, matter of fact way, in which Adichie sometimes provides insight to the difficulties of trying to have more “European hair” can be really funny,

especially if you recognise the kind of situation. In chapter two she mentions Obinze’s friend who is wearing a weave (attached hair, sowed onto braids that are plaited along the head):

“Later, Nneoma sat on her bed, excited for him, giving him advice while smacking her head from time to time; her scalp was itchy beneath her weave and this was the closest she could come to scratching.” (*Americanah*, Chapter 2, p. 26)

In addition to the focus on hair, race and racism are very prominent themes in the plot of *Americanah*. The character of Ifemelu is very outspoken and can rarely contain comments that are burning on her lips. At a dinner party, for example, she calls out a woman on her lie, because from her own experience she cannot believe that this black woman has never had issues with her white boyfriend regarding race.

“The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. 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. When you are black and fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don’t talk about it. We don’t even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we’re worried they will say we’re overreacting, or we’re being too

sensitive. And we don't want them to say, Look how far we've come, just forty years ago it would have been illegal for us to even be a couple blah blah blah, because you know what we're thinking when they say that? We're thinking why the fuck should it ever have been illegal anyway? But we don't say any of this stuff. We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable." (*Americanah*, Chapter 31, p. 290–291)

The protagonist of the story also frequently uses her blog in order to tell her truth about race and racism.

In a blog entry called "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness" she makes several points on how best to behave. Her last point being:

"Finally, don't put on a Let's Be Fair tone and say "But black people are racist too." Because of course we're all prejudiced (I can't even stand some of my blood relatives, grasping, selfish folks), but racism is about the power of a group and in America it's white folks who have that power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for

driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they're not smart enough to be doctors and black politicians don't try some tricks to reduce the voting power of white folks through gerrymandering and advertising agencies don't say they can't use white models to advertise glamorous products because they are not considered "aspirational" by the "mainstream". (*Americanah*, Chapter 36 p. 327.)

In another blog entry titled "What Academics Mean by White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White" she remembers a conversation between a student and his professor:

"Why must we always talk about race anyway? Can't we just be human beings? And Professor Hunk replied — that is exactly what white privilege is, that you can say that. Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks don't have that choice." (*Americanah*, Chapter 38, p. 346)

Adichie's sharp commentary regarding cultural criticism is very on point and sometimes takes the reader by surprise. In a conversation between Ifemelu and her employer/friend's sister, Laura, who comes across as a very judgemental character, an important issue comes up, regarding the differing experiences of None-American Blacks and African-Americans:

"In graduate school I knew a woman

from Africa who was just like this doctor, I think she was from Uganda. She was wonderful, and she didn't get along with the African American woman in our class at all. She didn't have all those issues."


"Maybe when the African American's father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan's father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford," Ifemelu said.

Laura stared at her, made a mocking confused face. "Wait, did I miss something?"

"I just think it's a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history," Ifemelu said.

(*Americanah*, Chapter 16, p. 169)

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 [ashinedu-art-advocate.medium.com/americanah-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-the-novel-that-made-me-and-many-black-people-feel-b6c2b33eb6ba](https://www.ashinedu-art-advocate.medium.com/americanah-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-the-novel-that-made-me-and-many-black-people-feel-b6c2b33eb6ba)