

Americanah

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a contemporary Nigerian novelist who has won many awards for her earlier books. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), is a coming-of-age story set in post-colonial Nigeria. This novel focuses not only on the social upheaval of those times, but mirrors it with the domestic violence found in the upper-class home of her 15-year-old protagonist. *Purple Hibiscus* was longlisted for the Booker Prize.

Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) takes place in Nigeria during the Nigerian-Biafran War, 1967-1970. This was a civil war following Britain's departure in 1960 and the formation of Nigeria as an independent country. Britain, like other colonial powers, failed to consider ethnic differences and already established territorial monarchies when they imposed colonial rule in 1912. Thus when they left, the southeastern provinces attempted to secede and form the Republic of Biafra. Adichie writes compassionately about the impact those events had on her four main characters--a noted political hero, a professor, a British citizen, and a servant. She won the coveted Orange Prize for this book.

Now with her third novel, Adichie takes on an entirely different theme. In *Americanah*, she explores the experiences of an educated Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, in the racially-charged United States. The time frame is very contemporary, discussed in flashbacks during and including the 13 years prior to the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

We first meet Ifemelu in a beauty shop getting her hair braided. She has just taken a long train ride from Princeton, where she has a post-graduate fellowship, into a seedy area of Trenton, New Jersey--about 13 miles away. This is the location of a run-down hair salon that caters to black women. Ifemelu is preparing to return home to Nigeria despite her apparent success and United States citizenship.

The book weaves back and forth through time. We come to know Ifemelu as a teenager falling in love with Obinze. Both are in high school.

Obinze's mother is a professor-- beautiful, and forward-thinking. He is a bright and considerate adolescent whose relationship with his mother is very close. Ifemelu's mother, by contrast, suffers from depression and searches for relief through a variety of churches. Her father has lost his job on the grounds of insubordination and he has been unemployed for some time. Family life is not pleasant and Ifemelu is determined to succeed.

Before graduation, she applies to a university in the United States and is accepted. There she struggles to supplement her scholarship with employment but is met with one rejection after another. Is it her race, her Nigerian accent? We never know for sure but the reader is led to suspect her "otherness" might be the cause. Her white roommates are portrayed as self-absorbed and trite.

Desperate, Ifemelu accepts a sexual job--one that robs her of her self-respect and throws her into a year-long depression. She now drops all contact with the devoted Obinze, throwing him into a tail-spin of worry and

confusion.

From here, Ifemelu's life improves. Through the help of a friend, she secures a job as a nanny and meets a wealthy, white young man, and eventually, lives with him. Adichie uses this relationship as a vehicle to highlight Ifemelu's sense of alienation in upper class white society. She finds even well-meaning people making careless and ignorant remarks.

Obinze, now in England doing menial jobs, is having a similar experience. He is not as lucky as Ifemelu. She has found a sponsor and has a green card. He is scrubbing toilets and trying to get an illegal national security number. This will allow him to work legally and get health insurance. He is also trying to get an arranged visa marriage through shady brokers. Adichie depicts this nether-world with its inherent terrors.

Both characters, although in different countries with far different histories, have similar experiences as middle-class, educated immigrants. When Obinze meets an old college chum who has married a Brit and become a citizen, he is invited to a party at his home. It is there that Obinze, perhaps speaking with the author's voice, feels especially alone.

(All the guests) understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape the ominous lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction...were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving or raped...but merely

hungry for choice and certainty.

During her relationship with a white boyfriend, Ifemelu starts writing a blog about race. This blog becomes successful and eventually, earns her money and enhances her reputation. It is through this blog that Ifemelu connects with an African-American professor. Yet another layer of complication ensues with this relationship--namely, an assumption that an African should completely understand and empathize with issues of race.

Americanah is an issues driven book with good characters and an interesting plot. Ifemelu is as full of contradictions as is society itself. She is arrogant and prickly and seems unable to truly grieve or to truly love. And she suffers because of these very traits. It is a bold step for an author to create an unlikeable main protagonist. But create her she does in this epic tale of love across continents, of race, and finally, of hair.

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