

TRANSCENDING THE SINGLE STORY: A STUDY ON CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Abstract: This paper excavates the racialization of the Black body and demystifies the stereotypes propagated through 'single stories.' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks of the dangers of these single stories that become social excuses for racial and gender misrepresentations and erasures of Black bodies.

Key Words: Race, Representation, Stereotyping, Identity

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most celebrated writers from the African continent. Hailed as the progeny of Chinua Achebe, she is one of the most successful African anglophone writers belonging to the third and contemporary generation of Nigerian writers. Adichie garnered international acclaim with her 2009 Ted Talks titled "The Danger of a Single Story", which is a clever and intuitive piece of oratory. She speaks about the tendencies of the white world to erase anything non-white and, how as a child Adichie had grown up reading and imagining about white skin, ginger ale and blue eyes. She explains how native writers like Chinua Achebe redeemed her from this labyrinth of the single story. "The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete; they make one story become the only story" (Adichie, "Danger").

Africans have long suffered from stereotyping by the white world, right from the days of the first slave trade ship docking in. African hair is a prime example of this racial profiling. Hair has an overwhelming presence in the African identity. Hair is an integral part of any culture, and for Africans, hair attains multiple connotations that remain inherent to their racial and cultural existence. Right from the early 15th century, African hair has attained social significance that runs deeper into their cultural consciousness and is much more than mere aesthetics. Hair is loaded with cultural meanings that pertain to one's social status in an African society. Thus, hairstyles are crafted not only for their beauty but also for their social significance. Stuart Hall known for his theory on cultural identity, claims that Black hair is deeply connected to black racial and political spaces (Hall). One can understand the trauma of colonial experiences through the study of how domination influences representation. Race developed into corporeal politics through the inscription of Black bodies with a set of meanings, favouring the dominant racial ideology. Europeans who visited the African continent were duly impressed with the African wealth and their hairstyles. When the slave trade began, these hairstyles were destroyed as an attempt to abolish the African identity. This act of forcefully shaving off of their heads were perceived as an act of insult and violence by the Africans. Thus, to affirm the white racial superiority and thereby to justify political imperialism, the tendency to ascribe racial inferiority to the image of blackness and black people began. "The shaved head was the first step the Europeans took to erase the slave's culture and alter the relationship between the African and his or her hair (Byrd & Tharps 22)".

Down the timeline, both slavery and mass media became the prime culprits behind the racialization of Black body and the heralding of European features as a hallmark for beauty and acceptance. The stereotypes so generated to support these standards of beauty, have completely erased, side-lined or misrepresented, everything non-white from the purview of popular culture, mass media and general social acceptance.

Adichie's speech "The Danger of a Single Story", ignited discussions on the process of stereotyping, that has always adversely affected the African male and female psyche. She quotes from Kipling and John Locke as examples to validate the European bias. She declares that Locke's writing "represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West, a tradition of sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness" (Adichie, "Danger").

Popular culture has been wrought with images of both African men and women, stereotyped into derogation. Images of Jezebel, Sapphire, Sambo, Jim Crow, the Savage, Aunt Jemimah and Mammy may not be present today but they are very much alive in the African psyche. The very continent of Africa itself is underestimated and often referred to as one single nation despite housing over fifty nations. Hence, dispelling stereotypes is a constant endeavour undertaken by each African writer, aimed at transcending the single story. To quote, Adichie, "Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie, "Danger").

Americanah is not Adichie's first novel, however, *Americanah* has increased Adichie's readership manifold globally. The novel tackles issues on race and identity and makes bold observations on both, through the experiences of two young teenage Nigerian lovers, Ifemelu and Obinze. The novel breaks more than a few stereotypes and the novelist unapologetically reveal the sheer hypocrisies of the white world when it comes to dealing with issues of race. Both Ifemelu and Obinze, migrate to the white world of America and Britain respectively, and finally both of them unite back in Nigeria. This coming-of-age story, deals with the issues of migration and assimilation amidst the chaos of identity crisis that both these characters undergo in their respective immigrant nation. Inspired from Adichie's own immigrant experiences, *Americanah* is primarily a love story, with a bold take on various issues that are still plaguing migrant communities in the west. This explains both, the growth in number of scholarships in the novel and Adichie's worldwide popularity as a writer.

Adichie does a deep excavation in to the immigrant situations of Africans in America and the white perceptions on such African immigrants. She also cleverly interweaves issues of inter-racism, one that exists between Africans in western societies, into the main plot of the novel. Candie Watts Smith explains "...that because Black people in the United States do not compose a monolithic racial group but instead make up a diverse pan-ethnic group, we should expect similarities and unity as well as differences and discord" (16). Thus, these interethnic interactions further open up avenues for discussions and basically drives in the point that humanity across borders and beyond racial differences, are similar. "An uncanny similarity that she exposes in *Americanah* is that many humans, even those sharing racial backgrounds, are susceptible to stereotyping" (Brooks 30). Through characters like Jane and Aisha, Adichie reveals the rampant attitude of bias that exist within African communities. Adichie however, provides platforms for resolving such inter-biases within communities. She explains how organizations like African Students' Union, works towards dissipating such American stereotypes about Africa. When students from different African nations like Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Congo and so on, come together with their different cultures and backgrounds, there evolves a platform for educating both immigrants and natives. The acceptance of difference is a prime procedure in dissipating misconceptions. Bonding with fellow Africans, helps Ifemelu overcome her immigrant crisis. Obinze too suffers from inter-racism from a fellow Ghanaian female colleague, who refuses to greet him as she recognizes herself in him. This ineptitude of the African communities to acknowledge and accept each other in immigrant white societies, is a prime reason for identity crisis amongst African immigrants. Thus, through the broad generalizations on Africans, Adichie tactfully deals with stereotypes and disrupts the idea put forth by the single story on African immigrants.

Americanah is also a novel on hair and Ifemelu calls hair a perfect metaphor for race in America. Hair like race is common and yet seldom understood for its complexities. Black kinky hair is massively side-lined in America and is often stereotyped with negative connotations. One of the prime techniques of assimilation amongst African immigrants is to straighten their kinky natural hair, since natural hair is often met with negativity. This bias is so deep-rooted in the American psyche, that its effects permeate through job markets, social gatherings and even personal spaces. Law suites have been filed in America, by African female employees against their employers for discrimination based on their hair types. The black African kinky hair is often connoted with being uncouth and unkept. Ifemelu undergoes a series of identity crisis based on her hair and she attempts to assimilate it to the white societal expectations. However eventually, she stops this process and embraces her natural curls in companionship with similar fellow natural-haired African women. Ifemelu, also goes on to break such African hair stereotyping through her blogs, wherein she criticises the American society for harbouring such extreme biases. Auntie Uju however, bears the brunt of this hair -stereotyping. Despite being a doctor, she is seldom taken seriously and many times abused and insulted by her white patients due to her skin colour and hair. Uju is often found panicking about her hair, since her natural curls are in direct conflict with her chance for livelihood in America.

Americanah also speaks about racial profiling within relationships, especially in interracial romances. Ifemelu's relationship with her white boyfriend Curt is rampant with racial undertones. Curt treats Ifemelu's body as an exotic conquest and their love games are most often rife with racial undertones. Ifemelu's body is sexualized, both, in the social space through a society that sexualizes black female body, and in her private space by Curt. Ifemelu breaks off from these sexual assumptions by cheating on Curt, with her black neighbour. She reclaims her agency from Curt and puts off his anguish by asserting her will in her actions. Further, Adichie also addresses the issues of sexual frigidity in women, a stereotype associated mostly with women and generated by patriarchy. In her relationship with Blain, Ifemelu is more active and seeking whereas Blain is sexually frigid. Adichie hence debunks the stereotype of sexuality, wherein men are always shown as virile.

Adichie successfully demystifies various stereotypes about Africans and debunks them by providing the other side of the story. *Americanah* is a novel ostensibly dedicated to exposing the single stories that generate bias against people of colour within white societies. African writers are most often engaged with dispelling such stereotypes about their continent, nations and people. Adichie concludes her Ted talk with her revelation on what one gains when one rejects a single story, “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we gain a kind of paradise” (Adichie, “Danger”). This paradise is the sense of self-awareness and self-pride that is attained through an acceptance of one’s differences. Danai Gurira, surmises this process of self-attainment through the impact that her movie *Black Panther* (2018) has on Black people, “We have to encourage and edify as people are feeling the resonance in this film that’s telling them to be proud of who they are and not believe the lie that they’re deficient because they’re different” (McCarthy).

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