

Aesthetic of Loss and Cultural Bereavement : Identity Crisis in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Introduction

« Americanah » is the name given to those that left Nigeria for America and finally came back. It reveals the essentialist conception that one cannot revert back to their original state but is now rather altered, different, because of their life abroad. Ifemelu, the main character, is an Americanah. Choosing such a title is a testimony to the novel's themes. Indeed, the main storyline is that of Ifemelu and how she struggles to work through the many identities she's given as a cross-cultural subject. Being an immigrant, she copes with her ambiguous status as she navigates through different social circles and tries to find cultural congruity (Bhugra & Becker, 2005) in a racialized world. Not only that, but the plethora of characters partaking in that liminality allows for many subplots and an abundance of outcomes, in accordance with the author's fear of the single story (Adichie, 2009). "*Americanah* is a contemporary fiction of migration that emphasizes the fact that alterity can be sought out and imposed at the same time" (Berning, 2015). The tension between identity and identification enforced by stereotypes and racism makes it difficult for the characters to feel comfortable in the United States and accepted from their families that often bestow upon America eschatological dimensions. The urge to adapt to find solace and acceptance creates a precarious headspace for the subject that suffers many a degradation. Those hardships are shown through the instability of the diegesis, the text is indeed pervaded with analepses and sometimes even the narration turns away from Ifemelu to depict the life of Obinze, her first love. It's only when opening a dialogue and having a critical outlook on her life that Ifemelu manages to evade slipping into submission to the narratives she's given while pacifying her inner turmoil. Though the novel starts with her love story with Obinze and is rhythmized by her unsuccessful relationships, still Ifemelu manages to find true love.

The names we forsake

When Ifemelu comes to the United States, she's faced with financial issues. In order to be able to work she has to take on a new identity, that of Ngozi. Ngozi is also a name of the author, playfully associating herself to her character. The symbolic forsaking of one's identity, most conspicuous through the name, propels Ifemelu in the migrants' liminality as she navigates two identities. When handed the social security card she states that they don't look alike at all, to which Aunty-Uju answers that all black people look the same to White people. The sudden erasure of her culture, confused in a mass of nationalities, degrades her identity a second time. She even relishes when she receives junk mail addressing her true name. That initial submission to the immigrant's precarious status is only the first step towards the assertion of her true self.

Obinze experiences something quite similar when he lives in London after his mother managed to get him into the country. He made a deal with Vincent Obi to use his national insurance card against a portion of his salary so that he can work illegally. Going through the same precarity and forced alienation, Obinze feels lonely. The process of committing an illegal green card marriage, also mentioned by Aisha, Ifemelu's hairdresser from Senegal, creates a new fiction that would invade the subject's personal life as they would concede their intimacy to fit social narratives enforced by legislation. When he is eventually reported because he doesn't want to give a higher percentage to Vincent Obi, he complies and goes back to Nigeria. Obinze's narrative of the immigrant's failure showcases the resistance of his initial identity and his unwillingness to stoop too low. The return to Nigeria allows him to become his true self again, rid of the illusions of a better life abroad. He even achieves financial success there.

The language we forget:

Aunty-Uju, Ifemelu's aunt, is also a liminal character. Back in Nigeria, she had a relationship with a powerful and rich general that was killed. Pregnant, she fled to the United States to pursue a medical career. When Ifemelu moves to the United States and visits her, she realizes how much she has changed. Aunty-Uju works three jobs to survive with her son, Dike. Her liminality appears in her willingness to reach cultural congruity. To have a situation, she rushes into a marriage with Bartholomew, a lazy misogynistic man that won't adapt to the United States nor look after Dike. Ifemelu feels estranged when she sees what has become of Aunty-Uju, thinking she's not Nigerian anymore. Many episodes show that urge : she forces Dike to wear tight shirts to go to Church, she lets him have "weak kicks", and moreover she won't teach him Igbo. She stops Ifemelu from speaking Igbo to him saying they are in America now. The erasure of the mother tongue enhances the instability of Dike's identity, he only experiences a loss in his heritage. With Aunty-Uju, the "entire nation of Nigeria serves as a means to threaten Dike" (Schultz, 2020) and the Igbo language is only used to reprimand him. Aunty-Uju even says he isn't black. The antagonization of the culture he longs to know and has the right to claim places him in front of an ontological void, a growing uneasiness that eventually triggers his suicide attempt as it remains unaddressed. At the crossroad of conflicting identifications, Dike's tragic storyline relies not only in the fact that he suffers from an insidious racism in the social space, characterized by racial profiling, racial prejudice and marginalization, but even more so because it invades his privacy as Aunty-Uju offers him no ground to develop a confidence in what he is. The process of healing does not happen through learning Igbo, though he states he would like to, but going to Nigeria visiting Ifemelu ends the bastardization of his identity and allows him to come to terms with his status of first generation Black American.

The truths we hide

As Ifemelu's identity is hidden, so often are her thoughts. Learning to negotiate relations in a newfound racialized space, she kept a lot to herself and often resorts to lies. Indeed, when she went to the hair salon to get her hair braided, she kept a lot to herself and suspected lies. The owner told her that the air conditioner was broken but she "knew the air conditioner had not broken yesterday, it had been broken for much longer, perhaps it had always been broken". Again, when told her hairdresser doesn't understand English very much. The omnipresence of lies that pervade interactions is symptomatic of the performative attitudes one puts up when entering social space, again to reach a cultural congruity. The discrepancy between cultural congruity and genuineness annoys Ifemelu though she herself lies and cheats, as she did with Curt, her White American boyfriend. As she cultivates a critical point of view thanks to her liminality, she gains a sort of lucidity regarding others' behaviours but not her own. She lied to Blaine, her Black American boyfriend, when explaining why she did not partake in the protest against the University's racial prejudice. To overcome this never-ending failure of speech, she starts writing her own blog. The metatextual nature of this *mise-en-abyme* shows how writing can help coming to terms with oneself. This breaching of social taboos allows her to address the political issues of race, racism, and identification, often erased or disregarded through euphemistic forms. She also lies about the number of years she's been in the United States to ease her interactions. In the end, even in Nigeria her honesty makes her look uncouth but Obinze welcomes the bluntness of her words. The identity crisis isn't over now that she's an Americanah. She realizes with a critical eye the flaws of her country and the performative attitudes dictated by social conduct, how women look for a rich man that will take care of them, for instance. Ifemelu despises that relation of dependence and refuses the money Obinze offers her, in an attempt to stay honest with herself and her beliefs. The novel ends on Obinze being true to his feelings despite that dictat of social conduct and his sense of duty. Therefore, their relationship becomes the only space for honest social interactions.

The signs we conceal

The series of changes that the African immigrants go through in the novel doesn't stop to their names. Indeed, as Ifemelu goes to the hair salon in the incipit of the text, she is confronted with a politicized battle by Aisha. Ifemelu refuses to use chemicals relaxers but rather keeps her natural hair. This importance of hair is shown by her confusion when Aunty-Uju once told her she was going to use relaxer because it looked more professional. Even hair is bestowed upon a social repercussion, and though she initially is against wearing her hair like this, she starts doing it when offered a position. However, the relaxers give her chemical burns and she has to cut her hair, she hates it. It's only after being recommended a blog about natural hair that she starts accepting her hair. The safe space and constant validation she's immersed in makes her fall in love with her hair. From then on, she keeps it natural. She wears her hair as a political statement to give representation and empowerment. Reclaiming her appearance and wresting her hair out of a disapproving social commentary makes her feel better and builds up her confidence.

Accent is also a key element to facilitate one's acceptance in a society. The speech easily betrays one's foreigner's or immigrant's status. This explains why Ifemelu tried to erase the Nigerian speech patterns and intonations of her voice. The need to find a job and improve her financial situation makes her lose her Nigerian accent. This erasure allows her to blend in easier. However, when she's being complimented on faking a great American accent, she first experiences a sense of pride. But "her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers." The compliment on her accent, integrated as common to her, triggers a realization and allows her to be aware of her willing submission. From then on, she keeps her accent. Aisha again questions it. Being one of the first characters in the story, she appears as a counterpoint to Ifemelu's progress. She embodies the complying immigrant that, as Ifemelu once did, seek social approval. She compares Ifemelu to another woman in the hair salon, questioning why she doesn't have as good of an accent as she does though Ifemelu has been a resident for more years. The accent and hair, as signs of her resistance against racist tropes, make Ifemelu peculiar in the eyes of Aisha. This alludes to another form of crisis between migrants for "accent triggers intergroup discrimination only among prejudiced individuals because they evaluate native accents as being qualitatively better than accents of immigrants, thereby legitimizing ingroup bias" (De Souza *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, Obinze first suffers a form of rejection from his old friend Emenike now married to a white woman. Having completed his transition across class and countries, Emenike still shows a lot of resentment against the lack of equity and feels the need to flaunt his success, expressing therein the paradox of the immigrants who have been assimilated and think of themselves as superior. Similarly, while he is detained in a cell after being reported, Obinze is visited by his friends, the couple Nicholas and Ojiugo, and can't but feel a disconnect when he's asked if he's being treated well. They are oblivious to what puts them ill at ease, the fact that he's being deported.

Conclusion

Americanah epitomizes cultural bereavement as a series of liminal characters successively suffers isolation, precarious financial situation, suicide attempts and depression. The aesthetic of loss is cultivated as a preliminary step towards acculturation, erasing the cultural distinctive features to better blend in and be, be it partially, accepted. However, Ifemelu and Obinze are drawn as figures of resistance against that willing submission through their journeys, negotiating their multiple identities. Refusing identification, Ifemelu disavows the narratives and fictions enforced by stereotypes. "Adichie's novel advocates the protection of the immigrant's cherished values and reassessment of his bicultural fix at the liminal threshold of social assimilation » (Chinenye, 2017) and reiterates the need for representation. That aesthetic of loss is in the end broken by Ifemelu in so far as she embraces herself and becomes unapologetic. The love story that initiated the novel ends it too in a specular composition. The topos of the American dream is countered by the triumph of the "Nigerian dream" (Hallemeier, 2015). It is in this space that Dike reconciles with his ambiguous identity, that Obinze meets success, that Ifemelu is at peace and feels free to be honest. The valorisation of the land of

origin where she longed to return brings about a new narrative. As much as *Americanah* is a novel addressing many political issues with its rich material, it is also a beautiful love story. Her relation to Obinze, to herself and to Nigeria has very much changed throughout the story that dramatically shown a culmination in hardships. The ontological dissatisfaction Ifemelu bears finally vanishes as Adichie writes an end marked by love's triumph.

Works cited :

Adichie, C. N. (2013) *Americanah*, New York: Knopf.

Adichie, C. N. (2009) "The Danger of a Single Story." TED: Ideas Worth Spreading,

Berning, N. (2015) "Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.5, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, (December 2015), Vol. 17, Issue 5, Article 5.

Bhugra, D., Becker, M. (2005) "Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity", *World Psychiatry*, Naples, Vol. 4, pp. 18-24.

Chinenye A. (2017) "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*", *Journal of Black Studies*, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Hallemeier, K. (2015) "To Be from the Country of People Who Gave": National Allegory and the United States of Adichie's *Americanah*" *Studies in the Novel*, Johns Hopkins University Press, (Summer 2015), Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 231-245.

Schultz, M. (2020) "Language of Blackness: Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" ; in *Sigma Tau Delta Review : Journal of Critical Writing*, Emporia State University, Emporia, Vol.17, (2020), pp 184-191.

De Souza, L. E. C. *et al.*, "The legitimizing role of accent on discrimination against immigrants". *European Journal of Social Psychology*. (August 2016), Vol. 46 Issue 5, pp 609-620.