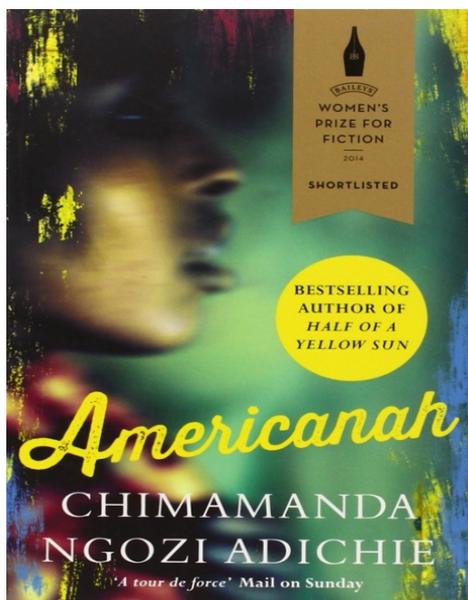


Longing to belong

The struggle to belong in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*: Cultural identity, the effects of immigration on personal growth and finding love.

'In *Americanah*, we closely follow Ifemelu's journey as she moves to America to receive an education and improve her quality of life. We also follow the effects of immigration on many of the other characters identities, some changing themselves radically to try to fit into their new lives. Ifemelu's character changes vastly over the course of the novel, as she adapts to American culture, learns the importance of race in America and builds a life in America through several serious relationships and a successful blogging and academic career. However, she eventually moves back to Nigeria, suggesting her home country is where she feels she belongs. Yet after living in America for so long, she does not seem to belong in Nigeria as she used to, she seeks this belonging in a passionate love affair with her unhappily married high-school sweetheart Obinze. In this article, I am going to explore the effects of immigration on cultural identity and personal growth and also the importance of romantic love in a story largely about immigration and belonging.'

By Hannah Watson



THE STRUGGLE TO BELONG IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*:

CULTURAL IDENTITY, THE EFFECTS OF IMMIGRATION ON PERSONAL GROWTH AND FINDING LOVE

Hannah Watson

Abstract:

In this article, I am going to explore the ways in which identity is portrayed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel, *Americanah*. In particular, the way in which the protagonist, Ifemelu struggles with her own cultural identity. I will be arguing that throughout the novel, the protagonist goes through a personal growth journey as she discovers what it means to be part of both American and Nigerian culture and also the struggles of being a black woman in America. Additionally, I am going to explore the romantic subplot between Ifemelu and Obinze, and the importance of love on belonging in the novel.

¹ H. Oby Okolocha, 'Negotiating Race, Identity & Homecoming in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* & Pedestal's *So the Path Does Not Die*', in *ALT 34 Diaspora and Returns in Fiction: African Literature today*, ed. by Helen

In *Americanah*, we closely follow Ifemelu's journey as she moves to America to receive an education and improve her quality of life.

Following the effects of immigration on the identities of other minor characters, some changing themselves radically to try and fit into their new lives. Ifemelu's character changes vastly over the course of the novel, as she adapts to American culture, learns the importance of race in America and builds a life there through several serious relationships and a successful blogging and academic career. However, she eventually moves back to Nigeria, suggesting her home country is where she feels she belongs. Yet, after living in America for so long, she does not seem to belong in Nigeria as she used to, she seeks this belonging in a passionate love affair with her unhappily married high-school sweetheart Obinze. In this article, I am going to explore the effects of immigration on cultural identity and personal growth and the importance of romantic love in a story largely about immigration and belonging.

Throughout the novel, the reader follows the protagonist, Ifemelu's, personal growth, as she alters her own identity in an attempt to belong in America, after migrating from Nigeria. This journey proves to be difficult yet eventually leads to Ifemelu finding self-love and peace with her new American life. A critic suggests that Ifemelu is 'sitting on the identity fence' and uses examples such as relaxing her natural hair and assuming an American accent as part of her 'identity crisis'.¹ The relaxing of her hair is very interesting as it causes lots of pain for Ifemelu and makes her feel unlike herself. 'Just a little burn,' the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got that white-girl

Cousins, Pauline Katiyo-Dodgson, and Ernest.N. Emenyonu (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2016), pp.143-163, p.157.

swing!’² Ifemelu decides to get her hair relaxed as she believes it will be more suitable for a job interview; interestingly the hairdresser compares her hair to white women’s, suggesting that their hair is more attractive than a black woman’s. I believe Adichie did this to highlight the racist beauty standards that black women face in America and all over the world. However, the examples given by Okolocha, such as, relaxing her hair and putting on an American accent are not a part of Ifemelu’s self throughout the whole novel, as she accepts herself and finds a way to live in America, which Okolocha describes as ‘her diasporic evolution’ which brings her a ‘sense of freedom’.³

Furthermore, Ifemelu’s character evolves into a new American version of herself. Yet she is able to accept herself and find success in America without having to completely lose her Nigerian identity. This can be seen through her choice to stop relaxing her hair and let it be natural. At first, she hates it and views herself as unattractive, until she finds ‘happilykinkynappy.com’ a website of a community of black women embracing their natural hair. She falls into this world with ‘tumbling gratitude’ and ‘she fell in love with her hair’.⁴ This self-acceptance is important to her growth in America and this is also represented by her blog throughout the novel, in which she writes about important issues such as race and being a Non-American black in America. Ifemelu, seems to have built a life in

² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (Great Britain:4th Estate, 2013), p.203.

³ H. Oby Okolocha, ‘Negotiating Race, Identity & Homecoming in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* & Pedro Hollist’s *So the Path Does Not Die*’, in *ALT 34 Diaspora and Returns in Fiction: African Literature today*, ed. by Helen Cousins, Pauline Katiyo-Dodgson, and Ernest.N. Emenyonu (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2016), pp.143-163, p.157.

America where she feels she can belong; however, she chooses to move back home to Nigeria for the last part of the novel. Goyal observes the reception Ifemelu receives by returning to Nigeria, in the novel and by American readers, suggesting that Adichie is acknowledging ‘what the novel calls “American tribalism’s (187)” are being held up for ridicule, as Adichie reflects back to American readers their own prejudices and defamiliarizes their sense of themselves as the norm’⁵. This suggests that Adichie is trying to make readers look at the way that they think about immigrants and although many people may consider themselves ‘liberal’, their attitudes may still be grounded in prejudice.

To elaborate on this point, when Ifemelu moves back to Nigeria after over a decade in America, she again does not feel like she belongs. She misses aspects of American culture and seems to look at her own country in a different light; her friend calls her “Americanah!”, Ranyinudo teased her often. “You are looking at things with American eyes”.⁶ Ifemelu is now the epitome of the title of the novel, she neither belongs completely in America or Nigeria with her mixed cultural identity. This urges her to join the ‘Nigeropolitan Club’, a group of returning migrants struggling to settle back into Nigerian society. This seems to suggest that her character is ‘afropolitan’ as a critic suggests that ‘Adichie’s is the age of the Afropolitan’⁷. This term is used to describe Africans with a world

⁴ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, pp.212-213.

⁵ Yogita Goyal, ‘Africa and the Black Atlantic’, *Research in African Literatures*, 45.3, (2014), (pp.5-25), p12.

⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, p.386.

⁷ Daria Tunca and Benedicte Ledente, ‘The Power of A Singular story: Narrating Africa and It’s

view, instead of just Africa, often used to describe Africans that have moved to other places in the world. Yet, Adichie does not view herself or her literature within this grouping, as she considers herself proud to be African. Her protagonist seems to share similar attitudes, as she expresses shame with herself for being a part of this group and feeling comfortable there. 'They have the kind of things we can eat, an unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here and wished she were not'.⁸ Ifemelu has turned into a person she does not feel happy with, yet she is brought back to the person she used to be through the reunion with her high-school first love, Obinze.

Interestingly, Adichie decides to reunite the lovers for the last part of the novel, as they engage in an extra-marital affair which forces Obinze to leave his wife due to his overwhelming love for Ifemelu. Throughout the novel, the readers have read through Ifemelu's romantic relationships in America, yet they did not seem to offer her fulfilment or she did not feel like she fully belonged, for example in her relationship with the white American, Curt, she feels like she is playing a role 'She was leaner and lighter, she was Curt's girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favourite flattering dress'.⁹ Even though she felt happy and loved in this relationship, and it was easy to play this 'role' as suggested by the word 'slipped' to describe how easy and comfortable it was to be in this relationship, she is still not completely herself. This contrasts heavily to the way Adichie describes Obinze and Ifemelu's relationship towards the end of the novel, as she describes Ifemelu's body 'suffused with peace' when

she's with Obinze.¹⁰ It is inferred that they are given a happily ever after ending, which is interesting for a book largely about race, identity, and immigration. Yogita Goyal categorises the text in a different light, as 'an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma but focuses on romantic love, hair and nostalgia'.¹¹ I agree that these are key themes of this text and that romantic love closely links to identity in this text, as Ifemelu is able to be herself completely when she is with Obinze. The novel ends with a sense of security for this relationship, as Obinze seems to be intent on not letting Ifemelu get away again, 'Ifem, I'm chasing you. I'm going to chase you until you give this a chance'.¹² Ifemelu ends by asking him to 'Come in', and the reader is left with hope for this relationship. The circular structure of the novel can be observed, as Ifemelu is brought back to where she was at the start of the novel, living in Nigeria and with her first love, Obinze. Perhaps the message of this text is that she feels she best belongs at home.

To conclude, throughout this essay I have explored the protagonist of Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu's personal growth and her journey of belonging both in America and back in Nigeria. Many elements seem to be important in this journey, such as race and cultural identity in America but also the romantic sub-plot that controls the whole novel, eventually leading Ifemelu back to her high-school love. This novel is powerful as it presents an African woman choosing to move back to Nigeria instead of the westernized world which is often romanticized in many stories about immigration. The return to Nigeria shows how Ifemelu is led back to her

Diasporas', *Research in African Literatures*, 46.4, (2015), 1-9, (p.3).

⁸ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.409.

⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.196.

¹⁰ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.447.

¹¹ Yogita Goyal, 'Africa and the Black Atlantic', *Research in African Literatures*, 45.3, (2014), pp.5-25, (p.14).

¹² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.449.

home-country, after a journey of self-acceptance, she can finally belong where she was at the start of the novel.

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