

AFROPOLITANISM IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Abstract

This paper applies the concept of "Afropolitanism" promulgated by Taiye Selasi in her essay "Bye-Bye Babar" (or: What is an Afropolitan?) in 2005, to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel Americanah. Selasi in her essay blends the words "cosmopolitan" and "Africa", and coins a new term "Afropolitan" which discusses the life of native Africans who live on various continents other than Africa. The novel deals with the life of two Nigerian teenagers Ifemelu and Obinze, who aspire to further their education in America. Ifemelu gets visa and goes to America, while Obinze is refused, he ends up going to England. Both of them struggle in the first world country to create an identity of their own in the midst of cultural and community clashes. All the characters of the novel, who have immigrated to the first world countries, adopt the new culture and new life style. This paper describes the national, cultural and racial identity of Afropolitans in relevance to the novel. It also examines the cultural hybridity seen in the new generation Africans settled in different urban centers. The study further states that despite hybridity of cultures, the Africans have strong bonding for their roots.

Keywords: afropolitanism, cosmopolitan identity, cultural hybridity, african bond.

The globalization of the world has brought about many changes in the life style of people. Immigration has extended the vision of people widely. The twenty first century immigrant Africans adopt the cosmopolitan life style of the first world countries. The new generation African is no longer one who cares about nationalism, but rather he/she is a cosmopolitan individual. Taiye Selasi describes these new Africans as Afropolitans. In her essay, "Bye-Bye Babar" (or: What is an Afropolitan?), she blends the words 'cosmopolitan' and 'African' and forms "Afropolitanism". By the term Selasi describes the new generation of Africa, the creative, politically aware, multicultural immigrant with roots firmly in Africa. One

of the reviewers says that, "Afropolitanism is a magazine article in 2005 to refer to a new generation of African immigrants, beautiful people who spin fusion music at Paris, night club, run banks in London and subscribe to Newyork fashion" (Bhutto).

The afropolitan writers write for and about Africa. They share their experiences of living abroad as well as in Africa. Among the afropolitan writers the most distinctive woman writer is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Being a Nigerian settled in America, Adichie regularly visits Nigeria. Her career as a writer began with the publication of a collection of poems *Decision* (1997), and a play "For Love of Biafra" (1998). She was shortlisted in 2002 for the Caine Prize for her short story "You

in America", in 2003 her short story "That Harmattan Morning" was selected as a joint winner of the BBC Short Story Awards and she won the O. Henry Prize for "The American Embassy". Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) was shortlisted for Booker Prize, The Orange Prize for Fiction (2004) and was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book (2005). Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) received The Orange Prize for Fiction (2007). Her work *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009) is a collection of short stories. In 2010 she was listed among the authors of *The New Yorker's* "20 under 40" fiction issue. Her story "Ceiling" was included in the 2011 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*. Her third novel, *Americanah* (2013) was selected by *The New York Times* as one of the Ten Best Books of 2013, and won The National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. Diana Evans speaks of Adichie thus: "Adichie writes superb dialogue straight from the mouths of her people, with idiom and colloquialisms; there are no apologetic italics. She brings to life the sycophants and social climbers" (7). As she is also an emigrant she has contributed her experience along with the story.

The novel *Americanah* is a love story of two Nigerian teenagers Ifemelu and Obinze, who aspire to further their education in America. But only Ifemelu gets visa and goes to America, while Obinze is refused. He ends up going to England with the help of his mother, hoping to join Ifemelu from there but his dreams don't work out. He struggles in England because he never gets citizenship or a proper job, works under another person's identity and is in the end deported to Nigeria. In America, initially Ifemelu struggles financially and

emotionally. She stops writing to and calling Obinze after an ordeal of exchanging her body for money out of desperation with a man she did not know. Ifemelu then becomes a baby sitter; she develops a relationship with a white American named Curt. But after a time, she gets frustrated by his inability to understand her racial struggles and cheats on him and they break up. Ifemelu quits her job and becomes a successful blogger, who blogs about race issues in America. Again she develops a relationship with a black American named Blaine, but she ends up that relationship along with her blog and decides to return to Nigeria. Obinze who has returned to Africa, has become a successful businessman and married an African woman named Kofi and has a daughter. After Ifemelu returns to Africa, they meet in Lagos, where they rekindle their love; Obinze breaks up with his wife and joins Ifemelu.

Americanah can be viewed as an Afropolitan novel, as it deals with the life of the new generation Africans living out of Africa. The present paper undertakes a study of Afropolitanism in *Americanah*; it deals with the benchmark themes of Afropolitanism like identity formation, cultural hybridity, and African bond.

The question of where you are from becomes a frequent one for the afropolitans. It questions the identity of a person where one was born, and where one currently lives. Selasi in her essay says that the Afropolitans need to craft an identity in three dimensions: national, racial and cultural. Most of the major characters presented in the novel are presented as examples of identity problems of afropolitans. When Alex Clark

speaks about identity problems in *Americanah*, he says, "What is real, what is fake, how many layers of history and culture it takes to construct a national or racial or personal identity, and how contingent that identity is on its immediate surroundings, are all questions that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie poses in her third novel" (34-35).

In America Ifemelu struggles with her identity, as an African, American, or someone seen as an outsider. To form her identity and get into a job she straightens her hair, she feels deprived of her own identity, as if it has been burned away, when her hair is burned:

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. (203)

Both Obinze and Ifemelu who once lived free, are forced to work under another identity by suppressing theirs in the first world countries. In America Ifemelu struggles to get a job as she is on student visa. To get a job she is forced to get into a new identity and searches for job under the name 'Ngozi Okonkwo'. She feels it as a heavy blow on her identity: "She repeated 'I'm Ngozi Okonkwo' in front of the mirror before her next interview, at the Seaview restaurant" (131). Since Obinze's visa has expired he has been illegally living in

England. In order to find work he is forced to pay a Nigerian man with English citizenship to use his identity card. He goes under the fake name Vincent Obi and feels himself as another man. He feels as an inanimate thing in England, and only after returning to Africa he feels free to breathe. Through the character Dike, Adichie expresses the identity quest of Africans in another country without personal history. All their quests come to an end after their visit to their homeland.

Exposed to the new cultures, Africans adapt with them and it results in cultural hybridity, an important aspect of Afropolitanism. The characters of the novel expose blend of both African and American culture. The Africans portrayed in the novel are willing to adopt the American culture; they see it as a promised land. They experience hybridity in the use of language, choice of career, their ideas, their dress sense, food habits and life-style. They follow the cosmopolitan life style and food habits, but at the same time they have the ethics of Africans. Most of the Afropolitans are multilingual; they know English, their native language and other vernacular languages. When Selasi speaks of this in her essay she says,

You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss: others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a romantic or two, we understand some indigenous

tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. (LIP)

Ifemelu has learned the American accent, cut her hair, eats American fast foods even after she returns to Africa and she expresses the American attitude: "She enjoyed the unfamiliar—the McDonald's hamburgers with the brief tart crunch of pickles, a new taste that she liked on one day and disliked the next..." (113). Adichie has also shown that the influence of American culture has made Ifemelu more health-conscious and to throw out the superficial beliefs. Obinze who has wide knowledge also follows this blend of cultures; he leaves his wife Kosi, a loyal woman, to live with his girlfriend.

The choice of career by the afropolitans too represents the blend of cultures. As they get exposed to the world of opportunities they adopt the jobs with which they feel comfortable. Ifemelu becomes a blogger of race; Nicholas's son expresses his wish to become a rapper. The afropolitans express their adopted culture in Africa too. Adichie has given the name "Americanah" to those immigrants from America, who pose themselves as if they are still in America. Another instance that Adichie uses to mark the cultural blend is the Nigerpolitan club of the returnees from other continents. Ifemelu who has returned to Africa has the influence of American culture, which Raniyundo points out: "You are looking at things with American eyes" (385). Apart from these characters, Ginika, Aunt Uju and Emenike are some of the characters who fit themselves to the culture of their host land. Mostly all the characters in the novel are portrayed as multilingual, which shows the hybridity of cultures.

Homeland is the country which a person belongs to by birth and heritage. People love their native land, because they are free there. It is a small world where one can live according to his/her own, but when these people are separated from their motherland they feel that they have lost their freedom and long for their native land. When Shukla speaks of home of immigrants in his book *Migrant Voices in Literatures in English*, he says as follows:

Home is a very complex and multivalent concept. What is home for one may be homelessness for another. For most people, migrant or in place, home is where they are themselves, where they are at home and where their heart is, not where only their feet are. Home is not just a building, a geographical location, a region, a religion, a nation, a cultural or spiritual or imaginative refuge. (8)

The afropolitans, who are away from their homeland, have a strong African bond. Adichie through the novel portrays the strong African bond of the afropolitans. Ifemelu in America longs to return back to Africa. She feels homesickness, longs to be in her home, so that thereby she can be in the land that gives her full freedom: It terrifies her, to be unable to visualize the future. When her parents call and leave a voice message, she saves it, unsure if that would be the last time she would hear their voices. "To be here, living abroad, not knowing when she could go home again, was to watch love become anxiety" (152).

In America they always try to keep in touch with the Africans. She joins the African Students Association; with them she smells

the essence of her land. She has the freedom of expression, which she had in her own land. She enjoys the sound of their different accents as well as how they mock Africa. Ifemelu's oneness with Africa is shown in her return to Africa. She feels at home after returning to Africa, and though she has lived an American life for years, at heart she is an African.

When Ifemelu meets Kayode, her African classmate in America, they both start to speak in loud voices without noticing others. Kayode expresses that it is like being back home to speak to people of their own land in a foreign country: "... I run into the grocery store and in the mall, everywhere. It's like being back home" (222). To feel her Africanness she gives up her American accent and returns to Africa. In Africa, she goes to the Nigeropolitan club and finds the returnees talking bad about their own country, which gives them full freedom to talk against it, and Ifemelu in her blog tells them to return to the place, where they come from. Similarly other diasporan writers too expressed this double personality of the diasporas. Robert S. Gnanamony is of the view: "Whenever they go, these migrants carry with them a profound sense of attachment with their former place of residence. According their souls are always found to be divided; in

other words they are neither nor here fully" (57).

Obinze is another example Adichie uses to show the African bond of afropolitans. He misses all the happy times he had in Africa, when he wanders in England. When a woman speaks ill about the education system in Africa, he questions her whether the Nigerians like she and himself haven't gone to the Nigerian primary schools and learned. Obinze would ordinarily not have said anything at all, just watched and listened, but that day, for some reason, he says that they all went to primary schools that taught the Nigerian curriculum. Thus the novel portrays that the afropolitans who have adopted the foreign culture too have a strong bond for their native land.

To conclude, *Americanah* may be described as an Afropolitan novel, as it exhibits the features of Afropolitanism. It revolves around the new life style of the immigrant Africans. The characters portrayed in the novel have a strong bond as well as a cosmopolitan life. The writings of afropolitans are not just events of Africa, instead they express global events. It is a sign that the world is getting more closer and no longer people stay as a citizens of the world instead of a particular continent.

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