

RACISM IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'NİN AMERICANAH ADLI ROMANINDA İRKÇILIK

Assistant Professor Dr. Gökçen KARA

Haliç University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of American Culture and Literature, Istanbul / Turkey
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6048-3644

Cite As Kara, G. (2021). "Racism In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah", International Academic Social Resources Journal, (e-ISSN: 2636-7637), Vol:6, Issue:23; pp:315-320

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses primarily on race as a social reality in the United States. It reveals that racism establishes majority and minority classes in American society, and that racism often retains white people's dominant roles in society for their own gain, a practice known as white privilege. White people retain their dominance through ethnic discrimination. Adichie's most recent book, *Americanah* exposes the reality of white privilege and shows how majority and minority communities respond to racism. *Americanah* investigates racial inequality, and white Americans' desire to perpetuate inequality. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie examines Nigeria's cultural and social dynamics and other issues such as immigration, racism and sexism and the search for identity.

Americanah focuses on main character Ifemelu and her relationships with family, friends, and lovers, but she also explores the story of Obinze, her beloved. In their early adult years, Ifemelu immigrated to America and Obinze to England. The racial inequality they experienced in these Western countries deeply affected both their identities. Adichie clearly describes the difficulties and struggles that Ifemelu faces only by becoming a black woman in a predominantly white society. Adichie also tells Obinze's story, which reflects the racial disparity of a black man living in England.

Key words: Americanah, racism, migration

ÖZET

Bu makale, öncelikle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki bir sosyal gerçeklik olarak ırk üzerine odaklanmaktadır. İrkçılığın Amerikan toplumunda çoğunluk ve azınlık sınıflarını oluşturmaması ve genellikle beyazların toplumdaki baskın rollerini kendi çıkarları için korumasını, ırkçılığın beyaz ayrıcalık olarak bilinen bir uygulama olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Beyaz insanlar, etnik ayrımcılık yoluyla egemenliklerini korumaktadırlar. Adichie'nin en son kitabı *Americanah*, beyaz ayrıcalığının gerçekliğini ortaya koymakta ve çoğunluk ve azınlık topluluklarının ırkçılığa nasıl tepki verdiğini göstermektedir. *Americanah* ırksal eşitsizliği ve beyaz Amerikalıların bu eşitsizliği sürdürme arzusunu incelemektedir. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nijerya'nın kültürel ve sosyal dinamiklerini ve göçmenlik, ırkçılık ve cinsiyetçilik ve kimlik arayışı gibi diğer konuları incelemektedir.

Americanah, baş karakter Ifemelu'nun ailesi, arkadaşları ve sevgilileriyle olan ilişkilerine odaklanır, aynı zamanda sevgilisi Obinze'nin hikayesine de yer verir. Erken yetişkinlik yıllarında, Ifemelu Amerika'ya ve Obinze İngiltere'ye göç etmiştir. Batı ülkelerinde yaşadıkları ırksal eşitsizlik her ikisinin de kimliğini derinden etkilemiştir. Adichie, Ifemelu'nun beyaz bir toplumda siyah bir kadın olarak karşılaştığı zorlukları ve mücadeleleri açıkça ifade etmektedir. Adichie ayrıca Obinze'nin hikayesine de yer vererek İngiltere'de yaşayan siyah bir adamın ırksal eşitsizliğini yansıtan hikayesini de anlatmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Americanah, ırk, göç

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of migration and the scattering of populations across the world is one of the key issues of the 21st century. As a result of the rise in migration, countries have been more multi-ethnic, posing the challenge of integrating citizens of various backgrounds, races, and languages. Addressing the fact of greater diversity requires seeking political, legislative, social and economic structures to ensure reciprocal recognition and to communicate with each other. However, xenophobia and racism have emerged in some countries that have received large numbers of immigrants, either as workers or as refugees. As governments struggle with the new challenges of their multiethnic communities, racism and brutality against minorities, immigrants and non-nationals has increased considerably in many areas of the world.

Slavery and segregation have long been synonymous with racial constructs. Prior to the 1950s, segregation highlighted the disparities between white and black people of society. The Civil Rights Movement was at its peak between 1954 and 1968, when it achieved its most important victories. Racial discrimination has been illegal and public racial interactions have been recognized legally. As a result, the racial dynamic shifted, and racism became more explicit. Coates (2011: 2) explains how racism works after the civil rights period:

The success of civil rights activism, laws, and judicial decrees has not only served to decode but also to nullify the more obvious forms of the racial matrix. Today's racial codes are more subtle, more hidden, and less obvious. These subtle, hidden and less obvious racial codes have served to create a new racial matrix which we characterize as covert racism... Covert

racism operates as a boundary keeping mechanism whose primary purpose is to maintain social distance between racial majorities and racial minorities.

This shows that covert racism maintains a difference between the majority and the minority groups. The status of majority and minority classes is reinforced by covered racism. In American society, white supremacy persists. However, how racism is recognized and functions in American society has shifted. Bonilla-Silva (2015: 12) focuses on the current post-Civil Rights racial frameworks and summarizes five elements which demonstrate how 'new racism' has developed in America today.

By this I mean the system or racial structure characteristic of the post-Civil Rights era comprised the following elements: (1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices, (2) the avoidance of direct racial terminology, (3) the elaboration of a racial political agenda that eschews direct racial references, (4) the subtle character of most mechanisms to reproduce racial privilege, and (5) the rearticulation of some racial practices of the past.

This shows how modern racist system define racist constructs that maintain white people's social privileges. This is done by linguistic structures and the willingness to reinterpret history without racial problems. Racism has shifted and a perspective that ignores American racism is allowed by modern racial systems. The old social dynamics changed into modern racism, a permanent white privilege and white people's privileged status in America. This illustrates that whites in modern America do not accept racism.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is considered one of the best contemporary authors in Nigeria. As one of the world's most widely recognized authors, Adichie presents numerous ongoing problems addressed by Nigerians in the present conditions. Adichie, as an author, characterized her fiction as social realism. She states that "I'm a human being, I live in the world, I'm sort of very politically aware and I have political positions, and surely my fiction reflects that" (Aspen Institute, 2014). In her novel *Americanah* there are certain similarities with the experience of the author in the USA, such as an understanding of the idea of "race" in the USA. Adichie goes on to say that:

It didn't take me very long to realize that in America black was not necessarily a good thing, and that black came with many negative assumptions. And so I didn't want to be black. I'm not black. I'm Nigerian. I'm Igbo. I'm not black. Race was not an identity I was willing to take (Aspen Institute, 2014).

In *Americanah* Adichie focuses primarily on the effects of migration on one's identity. In this novel she reveals the difficulties of adapting to host culture that immigrants undergo. Adichie depicts, through Ifemelu, how African immigrants, due to their blackness are forced to see themselves in another country.

Americanah introduces the journeys of the young nigerian couple Ifemelu and Obinze, who have grown up in a post-colonial, global world. While studying at Nsukka University, there were constant strikes at her faculty, which was disrupting Ifemelu's education. Her aunt Uju, who lives in America, wants her to continue studying, so she decides to leave Nigeria for the United States in the hopes of getting a better education. Ifemelu's migration to the United States was a life-changing event for her. Finally, she encounters an unfamiliar world when she moves to the United States. She faces different challenges from financial shortcomings to bigotry, which eventually leads to an intense feeling of alienation. She knows that because of her skin color, she belongs to a disadvantaged community. The novel depicts a series of events that female African immigrants face.

Meanwhile, Obinze decides to move to London with the expectation of escaping unemployment after university. However, he happens to work on a fake identity card and tries a sham marriage. On his wedding day, he was apprehended by the police and deported to Nigeria soon after. Obinze, on the other hand, is subjected to racism in a society dominated by whites, making him an unwanted visitor.

Both characters are frustrated mainly by racism and a lack of economic opportunity in these Western countries. Without their own residence permits both had to use fake identities to find jobs. Ifemelu worked as a babysitter, and Obinze as a toilet cleaner. Their relationship failed as they took on positions that did not reflect their dreams, and communication broke down.

When she would use a new name to find jobs in America, ifemelu has felt homelessness and displacement. She must change her name and learn to accept a new name. It first happens when Ifemelu uses the license of Ngozi Okonkwo, but cannot be separated from her actual name. She forgets her false name and waits for too

long to answer questions about her name's pronunciation. When she gets junk mail with its actual name, Ifemelu can only start feeling at home in America: "That credit card preapproval, with her name correctly spelled and elegantly italicized, had roused her spirits, made her a little less invisible, a little more present. Somebody knew her" (Adichie, 162).

When faced by racism and xenophobia in the United States and the United Kingdom, they felt forced to adhere to American and British accents. Finally it becomes an enticing option to change their accent to be accepted in their host countries. Adichie discusses how language can act as a way of disguising or showing one's identity. In Nigeria, the introduction of English as the main language reduced all other languages to a second - class status. It became a social achievement to be able to communicate in English, particularly in the manner of the British. This suggests that those who speak with a British accent will advance socially. *Americanah* deals specifically with this language issue. When she goes to America for the first time, ifemelu finds out that her Aunt Uju doesn't teach her son Dike Igbo.

'Dike, I mechago?'" Ifemelu asked.

'Please don't speak Igbo to him,' Aunt Uju said. 'Two languages will confuse him.'

'What are you talking about, Auntie? We spoke two languages growing up.'

'This is America. It's different.' (Adichie, 134)

In both Nigeria or America, Dike stands out as a character who lacks self-awareness. He was born and remains in the United States after his first birthday. His father died before he has the opportunity to meet him, and his mother never mentions him because he was a successful general and a married man, which would shame her. He does not really see himself as American, but he does not have any Nigerian roots. Dike attempts suicide as a result of his traumatic experiences. After this suicide attempt, Ifemelu criticizes her Aunt Uju: "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was" (Adicie, 470). With this sentence, Ifemelu draws attention to the feeling of humiliation stereotyped by racism. It is ironic that Ifemelu protests American racial inequality and encourages people to feel pride in their racial identities, however eventually she lost her own African identity. This shows that the brutal consequences of racial discrimination are inevitable.

Ifemelu, who has been homesick for nearly thirteen years, quits her job as a prolific blogger and moves to modern and lively Nigeria. She discovers here that her time in the USA changed her and that she needs to get used to the place she was born. Reuniting with his old love Obinze, both revive old feelings and Obinze decides to divorce his wife in order to marry Ifemelu. Ifemelu and Obinze remain in Nigeria, while Aunt Uju and Dike remain in the United States.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is involved in the complicated domain of racial issues in her novel *Americanah*. She not only offers a broad perspective on the complex relationship between blacks and whites, she also depicts the relationship among black people in various parts of the world. Race and gender are so interlinked in his novel that this situation ultimately pushes black women to the lowest status in society.

2. RACISIM IN AMERICANAH

Racial tensions are critical issues in the world. Racial groups are widely spread across various parts of the world now. The word 'race' was first used in the English language in the late 16th century to categorize human beings. Race was commonly used in the British colonies by the 18th century for ranking the people. Europeans who consider themselves superior, conquered Amerindians, and Africans brought in as slave labor and this use persists today. These enslaved peoples were distinctively different to the people of Western and Northern Europe. Referring to the complexity and different uses of the concept of race, Pringle states (2006: 29) that:

It was a maddeningly vague word, however, and it gave rise to considerable confusion. Some writers used it to describe all of humanity, as in the phrase "human race." Some politicians brandished the word to mean nationality, speaking of the French race, while scientists tried to define it more specifically, as one of the great divisions of humankind that could be distinguished scientifically by certain unvarying physical traits.

Race began to be considered as an important factor in the nineteenth century that divides the people into white and black categories. Racism was a central aspect of this period's ideology, since it was commonly assumed that people could be classified "into a small number of groups, called 'races,' in such a way that the

members of these groups shared certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of other race” (Appiah & Gutmann, 1998: 54). For all the physical or psychological characteristics that distinguish one group from another, ‘race’ was discussed as a biological term, more precisely an identity. The view that race is an important category that separates people hierarchically is further reinforced by Darwin's theory of evolution. This situation created a system that legalized the enslavement of black Africans, who are believed to be virtually inferior. The first arguments against a biological definition of race began to explore the concept sociocultural construction in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century. Arguing that race as a social construct, Du Bois (1968: 98) claims that race is “a matter of culture and cultural history”. The way race is portrayed and discussed in *Americanah* is closely related to the concept of racial categories as cultural structures.

The oppression of immigrants in the novel is shown in many examples. This novel portrays primarily the perspective of Ifemelu, a protagonist who struggles with problems of identification in a new world. Ifemelu's experience as an outsider in the United States reveals how embracing a new identity forced by society, as well as a country's definition of a category like race, may influence a person. Migration is generally a fact that influences both women and men in many ways, but women are often more vulnerable than men. Although becoming an immigrant in the USA is complicated enough, the case of Ifemelu as a repressed woman makes it harder. *Americanah* reveals that in America today, the race is still an important concept. Some of the topics, in particular those related to blackness in America, reflect the personal experience of the writer as a black person in the United States.

but racism is about power of a group and in America it's the white folks who have the power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans and mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire Somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they are not smart enough to be doctors. (Adichie, p. 327)

The government institutions are depicted as completely biased in favour of whites in this quotation. Because of the authority they possess, even the police department treats a white person as untouchable. Top institutions, such as the financial sector, are showing racist attitudes towards the blacks and they only offer loans and mortgages to white citizens, leaving blacks at the bottom of the social ladder. Even academics often ignored bigotry and the destructive nature of race relations in the United States. By highlighting the inevitability of segregation in the United States, Adichie highlights the catastrophic effects of this condition on African diaspora groups in the United States, such as Ifemelu.

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I am Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't black in your country? You are in America now. We all have our moment of initiation into the society of former Negroes... (Adichie, 222)

Americanah offers a comprehensive review and criticism of race and discrimination in America, England, and Nigeria, with Adichie's sarcastic observations. In Nigeria, ifemelu does not consider herself to be black, however, the ethnic hierarchy of Nigerian society still exists as people of light-skinned or mixed races are considered more attractive and people use cosmetics in order to lighten their skin. Ifemelu and Obinze, on the other hand, learn that racism is a much more prevalent aspect of life in America and England. When Ifemelu is forced to adjust to America's complicated ethnic dynamics, she first fully learns race and begins to consider herself black. Adichie offers multiple racial cases, such as the assumption that White Curt cannot date on Ifemelu, or patients who do not want black Aunty Uju as their doctor. People “would think they were doing her a favor by seeing her.” (Adichie, 174) The novel's exploration of race focuses on exposing racism. In addition, Ifemelu's relationships provide an overview of black people who are challenged by the process of cultural transformation and identity building. Ifemelu reveals the absurdity of the concept, which has no significance other than that which is socially attributed to it. Ifemelu states in another of her blogs:

But race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it's about how you look. Not about

the blood you have. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair. (Americanah 337)

A certain conflict between Africans and African Americans is also portrayed in the novel. Ifemelu had never thought about race before coming to America. It had never been a problem in Nigeria. Nigeria is a country where race is not a problem. Despite its impressive economic development, American culture and society have struggled to instill a sense of equality that cuts across racial lines.

Ifemelu demonstrates self-confidence and determination in choosing her hairstyle at the hairdresser at the start of the story, especially when she is an adult and popular blogger in the United States, since she confidently choose the hairstyle and responds to the hairstylist's criticism by saying "I love my hair the way God made it" (Adichie, 12). This apparent self-esteem is nothing but a product of a very difficult process in which societal beauty ideals are established, which the reader learns in the story: It became apparent in the later of the novel that, in the different conditions she would face, Ifemelu continually restyled her hair, attempting to understand the social and culture meanings of hair that were initially unknown to her. It is interesting that hairstyle does not have a political or social meaning in Nigeria.

Language discrimination is also a type of racism that describes a person being discriminated on the grounds of their own speech features for example, dialect, vocabulary knowledge, and syntax. This kind of inequity happens when a person's mother tongue or other aspects of his or her language abilities differ. An example of this is Ifemelu's meeting with Cristina Tomas at the admission office on the first day in the school. Cristina tells her speaking slowly: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand". Cristina's manner of speech leads Ifemelu to feel that she may "have some sort of illness that caused her to speak so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering" (Adichie, 133). But then she understands that this was the way Cristina Tomas spoke due to the obvious foreign dialect of Ifemelu. Ifemelu unexpectedly feels inferior after being discriminated against on the grounds of her Nigerian origin and blackness.

{Ifemelu} felt ...like a small child, lazy limbed and drooling.... Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second where her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent. (Adichie, 133-134)

In order not to be deemed inferior, Ifemelu decided to change her behaviors to American expectations. This experience is her first meeting with 'otherness'. Ifemelu was always proud of her Nigerian origin, However, her new life in the United States forced her to abandon her Nigerian identity after spending only a few months in this country.

By showing several scenes, Adichie demonstrates Ifemelu's difficulty in finding a place for herself in America. Ifemelu travels within the United States in addition to the move from Nigeria to America. She can't find a secure place to settle down to feel herself at home. Throughout *Americanah*, Adichie explores many facets of racism. The most important of these is that immigrants feel themselves 'out of place'. It's exhausting to constantly be confronted with one's race, but it's unavoidable at times.

3. CONCLUSION

Immigration, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and racism have all been subjects of debate in today's world. This novel discusses immigration process as an evolving mechanism in which immigrants chose whether to preserve their ethnic identity or to be incorporated into norms of the host country. In the twentieth century, the issue of acculturation and immigrant identity has been controversial. This novel offers a crucial framework for current ethnic discussions and reveals the experience of black migrants in hegemonic white countries. As seen in the example of Ifemelu, the immigrants have experienced the difficulties of displacement and feeling a deep longing for the homeland, they try to survive in the host nation, integrating into the dominant society.

Americanah presents the experience of immigrants in detail. In telling the story in parallel Adichie discusses the problems faced African women as immigrants while also addressing the perspectives of African male immigrants. The word "black" in the US includes all with darker skin, regardless of ethnicity, It is a concept, intrinsically racist, which categorizes individuals based on a light-to-dark basis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adichie, C. N. (2013). *Americanah*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

Appiah, K. A., & Gutmann, A. (1998). *Color Conscious the Political Morality of Race*. Princeton, NJ: Universtiy Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton.

Aspen Institute. (2014, March 11). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in conversation with Damian Woetzel. Retrieved March 26, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e0J24rTTu4>

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015). The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, Post-Racial America. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(11), 1358-1376. doi:10.1177/0002764215586826

Coates, R. D. (2011). *Covert Racism: Theories, Institutions, and Experiences*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.

DuBois, B. (1968). *Dusk Of Dawn: An Essay Toward An Authobiography of a Race Concept*. New York: Schocken Bocks.

Pringle, H. (2006). *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars And The Holocaust*. London: Fourth Estate.