
An Exodus to Personal Identity: Exploring America's Identity Subjugation in "Americanah"

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How does one define his or her own identity? In Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Americanah*, Adichie writes the story of Ifemelu, a Nigerian young woman, who moves to America in search of a brighter future than her life in Nsukka. In this realistic portrayal of the Nigerian immigrant Ifemelu, Adichie uses Ifemelu's trajectory throughout the novel to criticize how American society subjugates an individual's identity by defining personal identity through the perceptions of other people other than herself. With this criticism, Adichie first explores significant struggles within Nigerian identity through Ifemelu's early childhood and teenage life then moves on to explore Ifemelu's first critical years finding herself in America, next builds Ifemelu's unique and strong American-African identity when becoming a blogger, and at last concludes her message by returning Ifemelu to her roots in Nigeria where she finally finds peace in her own identity.

Building an identity conflict within Ifemelu's early age in Nigeria, Adichie creates Ifemelu's mother an independent personality then dismantles it to religious subjugation. Growing up "in the shadow of her mother's hair," Ifemelu identified her mother by her unique African braided hair that "sprang free and full, flowing like a celebration" (49). Describing freedom in her mother's hair, Adichie builds physical characteristics representative of an independent personality unique like a "crown of glory" (49). Despite building a strong character, her mother's braided hair changes one day when her mother arrives home and "chops off all her hair, [leaving it] on the floor like dead grass" (50). A shocking moment for Ifemelu, Adichie portrays this scene to compare the "chopping" of her mother's hair to the murder of her own identity. Her mother explains the reasoning behind her impetuous actions in a melodramatic fashion: "I am saved. Mrs. Ojo ministered to me this afternoon during the children's break and I received Christ. Old things have passed away and all things have become new. Praise God," followed by the narrator declaring, "her mother's words were not hers, [speaking] them too rigidly, with a demeanor that belonged to someone else" (50). Describing the sudden change in religion, Adichie criticizes the fraudulent tone in the mother's words to demonstrate the influence of a superior authority made her "mother's essence take flight" (50). As result of this transformation powered by Nigeria's religious influence, Adichie begins portraying identity conflict within Ifemelu's narrative that would progressively develop throughout her novel.

Notwithstanding her mother's identity conflict, Adichie depicts independence within Ifemelu's

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personal identity in Nigeria when describing Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze. When first meeting each other in their youth, Obinze describes Ifemelu "like the kind of person who will do something because [she] wants to, and not because everyone else is doing it" (73). Creating this bonding relationship between Obinze and Ifemelu early in the novel, Adichie begins planting Ifemelu's authentic identity by describing her as a person who acts voluntarily rather than manipulated by another person or ideology; therefore, her authenticity grows in her relationship with Obinze making "her like herself" and feel "at ease" (73). Additionally, Adichie continues building Ifemelu's independent identity describing her relationship with Obinze "seem natural" where she could feel comfortable "[talking] to him about odd things" (73). Building trust in her relationship with Obinze, Adichie contrast Ifemelu's identity conflict involving her mother to her experience with Obinze to demonstrate how Ifemelu begins developing a strong identity at the start of her life in Nigeria.

However, once in America, Ifemelu begins to experience a different perception of identity struggle when recognizing American society present feign people and culture different from her expectations. During Ifemelu's first day in America, the narrator describes Ifemelu staring at "matte" buildings, cars, and signboards, which revealed a "high-shine gloss" covering the "mundane things in America" (127). Adichie's description of "high-shine gloss" describes the narrator's point of view in portraying the physical aspects of America as a phony figurative depiction of its society that covered its flaws in its pretended culture. Likewise, Adichie reveals America's feigned identity when Aunt Uju answers a phone call mispronouncing her Igbo last name in an American accent. After the phone call Ifemelu challenges Uju's mispronunciation: "Is that how you pronounce your name now?" in which Uju responds blaming American people: "It's what they call me now" (128). With Uju's accent "emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing," described the narrator signifying Adichie's purpose in demonstrating how Uju lost her own identity when "America had subdued her" (135). As result, Ifemelu discovers the perplexing identity subjugation that would soon enslave her identity while living in America.

After discovering Aunt Uju's subtle change of identity, a white American, Cristina Tomas, begins subjugating Ifemelu's Nigerian identity. Registering into college in Trenton, Cristina Thomas unintentionally belittles Ifemelu talking to her in an exaggerated slow manner: "Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?" (163). Creating a pause between every word, Adichie makes Tomas exaggerate her slow tone to demonstrate how American society's categorization makes immigrants like Ifemelu feel inadequate as "a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (163). Thus, with Tomas' immigrant categorization, Adichie demonstrates how Ifemelu "shrinks like a dried leaf" knowing she had spoken English all her life to be considered an incoherent individual to American society. (164) As quick and simple as Tomas' categorization, Ifemelu likewise begins practicing an American accent to avoid future encounters with other white Americans who might diminish her personality; therefore, in this process of transforming her Nigerian accent to an American accent, Ifemelu begins subjugating

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her personal identity under the influence of white American culture. (164)

Once Ifemelu masters her American accent, Ifemelu realizes the pretentious value of her faked American identity. After living a year in America, Ifemelu had perfected her American accent “watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the t, the creamy roll of the r, the sentences starting with ‘so,’ and the sliding response of ‘oh really’...” (213). Creating an aura of American characteristics that helped Ifemelu achieve her perfect American accent, Adichie makes mastering the American accent an ultimate hardworking skill. After having a conversation with a foreign call center man, the caller compliments Ifemelu of her perfect American accent: “You sound American,” but Ifemelu was baffled as to why it was an achievement to sound American. (215) While Ifemelu had accomplished to achieve her ultimate American personality having won over people like “Cristina Tomas, [who] shrunk her like a small, defeated animal,” she now realized that her American accent was just “a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers” (216). Deciding to give up her pretentious American accent, the narrator describes Ifemelu: “This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake.” (216) Building back Ifemelu’s unique personality, Adichie achieves now to portray Ifemelu begin shaping her own American-African identity.

As result of accepting her new American-African identity, Adichie begins to build a strong voice for Ifemelu shaping her into race blogger. Beginning to find social activism in her life, Ifemelu speaks in a race dialogue: “The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America.” (359) Creating a bold tone in Ifemelu’s activism, Adichie now has build an Ifemelu that has recognized who she is in the American world and the important significance she has in inspiring American people. Thus, Ifemelu begins writing in her blog: “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’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care” (273). Making this statement in one of her blogs, Adichie suggests Ifemelu has now accepted her black identity in America and has now called other non-American blacks to understand the ideology of America’s pretentious identity to categorize immigrants.

Moving back to Nigeria, Adichie finalizes her novel creating an ambivalent identity for Ifemelu by leaving behind her American self and creating her own distinguished character. Away from the American ideology that defined her, Ifemelu felt “she was at peace,” beginning a new blog, discovering her old hometown, and finally “spinning herself fully into being ” (586). With this depiction Adichie portrays Ifemelu at the epitome of her own personality no longer facing pressure from an influencing society that cause her damage. When her American ex-boyfriend asked her if she still blogs about race, she declines explaining how “race doesn’t really work

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here feeling like she got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black” (586). Ifemelu’s recognition of the irrelevance of race in Nigeria nourishes Adichie’s purpose in finishing her novel by leaving Ifemelu continue her life without worrying about what her identity presents to society.

Through the depiction of Ifemelu’s trajectory, Adichie takes a stab at common aspects of American society that belittle certain minorities in the nation. While most Americans think the fight for black and female oppression had ended with the Civil Rights Movement and the passing of the 19th Amendment, Adichie brings to life the subtle oppressive characteristics that still today subjugate minority identities in our nation. In the long run, Adichie offers the moral message consisting of living true to oneself despite society’s pressure to change your identity.

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