

A WHIRLING WEB OF RACISM, DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE IN ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH

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Abstract

Literature updates us with what is happening in the society. It brings out the ills and the strengths of the society and writers crave for improvement in all aspects of life where necessary. With the introduction of organized slavery or slave trade by the Americans and Europeans in the late 15th century, racism was born. Slavery brought about massive migration and of course the results of migration are racism, discrimination, prejudice, xenophobia, to mention these few. As such, writers over centuries have preoccupied themselves with discrimination, racism and prejudice as their major themes. Racism and discrimination manifest when particular races believe that they are superior to the other race. These problems have been examined by other writers but this work with psychoanalytical as the theoretical framework looks at the above mentioned problems using Americanah by Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie. It examines the situations, events, and the psychological effects on the characters in the text. This paper after exploring the implications of racism, discrimination and prejudice observes that they are the cankerworms eating up different sectors in our societies all over the world and they are still prevalent in the most alarming way affecting people psychologically and socially. It is obvious that this persistent racial inequality is so serious that it is deeply destroying the world and can be solved by constant exposure of many writers who try to expose the ugly monsters.

Keywords: Racism, Discrimination, Prejudice, Migration, Inequality

INTRODUCTION

Migration started many years ago and Africans have been migrating across the globe for over a thousand years. Colin A. Palmer in his article, 'The African Diaspora' explains that the major African Diaspora movement is as old as the history of humankind believing that Africans 'have been on constant motion for over 100,000 years, travelling all over the globe, transforming it in many ways and being transformed themselves' (56). Some Africans equally moved to Europe, the Middle East and Asia around the fifth century, these groups of people include traders, slaves and soldiers. This gave rise to African communities in India, Portugal, Spain, Italy, the Middle East and Asia long before Christopher Columbus started his voyage across Africa. The most popular and widely studied African Diaspora movement is that of the Atlantic slave trade which began in the 15th century. Whites that came down to the shores of Africa as commercial experts in search of business and trade quickly settled down to another 'lucrative business' – slavery (trade in human beings). These whites dehumanize Africans by hawking and enslaving them. This singular act saw millions of Africans in America. 'Race' becomes the end result. Race ideology has affected the social, economic and educational aspects of human life style in America and Europe and by extension, all over the world. Since the 15th century slavery, the whole world

has been undergoing myriads of problems of which migration; racism, discrimination and prejudice are the major ones. Freedom, liberation and social equity remain a huge target to be achieved in the United States as oppression and exploitation become the order of the day and survival becomes difficult.

These migrants (slaves) searched for belonging. Actually, people have migrated for different reasons. Kingsley Aikins and Dr Martin Russell in their article 'Diaspora Capital: Why Diaspora Matters for Policy and Practice' write that about 215 million people are living outside of the country they were born in (26). For migrants to survive in Diaspora, they have to change certain aspects of their identity. The sufferings of immigrants have become pertinent as people move around the world looking for greener pastures. Immigrants suffer racial disparities, all forms of discrimination, envy, man's inhumanity to man, wickedness, violence in different communities they find themselves. These migrants are displaced, unguarded, vulnerable, weak, defenseless and unprotected to the societal, cultural and political problems in their host countries. Migrants feel discomfort, strange and not being at home in their host communities. Literary artists become necessary as literature is a very important and vital medium for communicating the ugly experiences to the public and also a means of transformation. Literary artists showcasing the sufferings to African Americans open up the hurt, wound, painful social and psychic experiences which affect their emotions. Different people tell different stories of 'race' as it affects them. Newer African literary artists like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole to mention but this few take pleasure in exploring new areas that most people have not explored so much. Such territories include race and Diaspora.

Though people have been trying to make racism a thing of the past yet insidious types of racism still has a pervasive effect on innocent people. Blacks are usually considered as options while seeking for jobs or education and police treat them badly whenever they have issues with them. The racial profiling of blacks in America is alarming. An article 'The mindless murder of George Floyd' by Tony Ademiluyi in 'The Guardian Newspaper', on the 9th June, 2020 reported the case of George Floyd in Minneapolis, United States of America, who was killed by American Police on the 25th of May, 2020 by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin who knelt 'eight minutes 46 seconds' on an unarmed Floyd's windpipe in broad daylight just for being a black. (13) An article in June, 11th 2020 Guardian Newspaper 'George Floyd's death and its Symbolism' by Abdurafiu shows that blacks in America face many challenges such as homelessness, inequality before the law, disorientation and unstable family life mainly due to discrimination Single parenthood appears to be common among the blacks. He writes: 'Today, two-thirds of African-American children are born out of wedlock.' (P.16) He goes ahead to explain that after the death of George Floyd, there was a worldwide protest tagged '#Blacklivesmatter#' which aimed at fighting injustice meted out on blacks in America (16) and that there is a psychological feeling of inadequacy and things not being in order as blacks do not feel any sense of belonging which of course gives rise to lack of self-esteem among blacks. Guardian newspaper reports that after George's death, protesters inundate the streets asking to 'Burn down racism'. There is suffering by blacks in every sphere of their social life and other endeavours. Blacks are segregated upon. There is inequality before the law and lack of self-respect among blacks.

Another similar killing is read in the article, 'Gray dies a week after his arrest' in Baltimore Sun newspaper of April 20th, 2015 (front page). It reports that the death of Freddie Carlos Gray Jr on 19th April, 2015, was an incident in which a black suspect died in police custody. A twenty-five year old African American, Freddie Carlos Gray was arrested by the Baltimore Police Department on April 12, 2015 for possessing an illegal switchblade. Gray was badly beaten by the police men and according to the report; there was a 'significant force' to inflict the injuries on him and he was arrested 'without force or incident' (front page). While being transported in a police van, Grey fell into coma and was taken to University of Maryland R. Adams Cowley Shock Trauma centre where he died on April 19th, 2015. With this and the article in The Guardian Newspaper 'The mindless murder of George Floyd' by Tony Ademiluyi on 9th June 2020, racism with its attendant vices is still very serious and weighty in America. Tony writes: 'The death has brought an awakening that the American society still has a long way to go to end racism which derives its origin from slavery. From slavery arises psychological problem of a feeling of inadequacy and loss of self-worth' (16)

Racism is antagonism and hatred directed towards one from another race. Achebe calls out racism and neocolonialism in their obvious, skillful and subtle manifestations. In his essay, 'An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, he shows the destructive effects of racism and injustice in Western society. Achebe writes that *Heart of Darkness* projects Africa's image as 'the other world' (2). Racists usually believe that they are superior to others. Blacks are psychologically, economically and socially affected because they face hostility from their hosts which in turn makes them face unjust and prejudicial treatments. Whites treat blacks and coloured less fairly, blacks and coloured are denied of decent jobs, training opportunities and promotions and they are not being paid handsomely as whites who do the same jobs with same qualifications and experiences. Ali Rattansi writes that 'half of all white men are in 'white-collar' jobs', while 'blacks is less than one-third' (142).

Racism is all about discrimination which makes a particular race believe they are superior and so mistreat people from the other race. It shows hatred and usually leads to xenophobia. Ali Rattansi in his book *Racism: A very Short Introduction* writes that most black children usually grow up in low income areas than whites and most blacks likely grow up in segregated areas. He writes: 'African Americans remain the most residentially segregated group in the USA, partly because white Americans refuse to live in areas with more than 20% blacks.(141) He goes ahead to write that *Whitewashing Race* by Brown et al points out that blacks do not have access to primary medical care as the ratio of 'doctors to the population is 1 to 12,993' (141) in South Central Los Angeles compared to 'wealthier Bel Air where the ratio is 1 to 214'. (141) The text under study, *Americanah* by Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie focuses on the above mentioned problems. The major characters, mainly immigrants are treated differently by the owners of the land. The author shows how difficult it is to live in any country where there is discrimination.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalysis was born out of self analysis undertaken by Sigmund Freud in 1897. At a point where medicine proffered defiance, Freud opened a path that is neither that

of medicine nor pure psychology. Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines Psychoanalysis as a form of therapy which aims at treating mental disorders ‘by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind and bringing repressed fears and conflicts into the conscious mind.’ (1121) In Freud’s bid to provide a cure for so many neurotic patients he had, he was able to discover how some unfulfilled desires and repressed feelings in the past exert a great control in the psychological nature of a person in adulthood. Psychoanalysis goal is to show that behavior is caused by the interaction between the unconscious and the consciousness. It believes that an awareness of the significance between the unconscious and the thought process is therapeutic and vital to a healthy mind. From the psychodynamic perspective, Sigmund Freud, in his clinical practice, encountered patients suffering from nervous disorders whose complaints could not be explained in terms of purely physical causes. He goes ahead to write that the mind is the reservoir which has mostly unacceptable thought, wishes, feelings and memories. According to him, methods analyzing the unconscious mind is by telling them (his patients) to say whatever that comes to their mind and through interpreting ‘manifest’ [dream – what we remember] and latent [what it means – content of dreams], people should learn to communicate with their subconscious mind which speaks to them in symbols through their dreams. N. Krishnaswamy et al in *Contemporary Literary Theory* write that Sigmund Freud believes that in ‘Pleasure Principle’ which is ‘the impulse to avoid all unpleasure’. (48) Each person’s personality is of three parts which are the ‘id’, ‘ego’ and ‘superego’. Personality is an abstract construct, which is drawn from observable behavior as a result of human individuality. Freud’s personality approach emphasizes the role of the unconscious factors and the importance of childhood experiences in the formation of an individual’s personality and behaviour. Psychoanalysis is the process of using what we know about ‘id’, ‘ego’ and ‘superego’ of someone’s personality to analyze the way that person behaves. The ‘id’ is the core of personality and is present at birth. It is the part of personality that contains our primitive impulses such as thirst, anger, hunger and the need for immediate gratification. We are born with our ‘id’ which means that it is present at birth and as newborns; it allows us to get our basic needs. ‘Id’ always seeks pleasure and avoids pains; it has no contact with reality and operates in an irrational manner. It wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the other circumstances of the situation. It is believed that ‘id’ has no contact with the outside world and cannot satisfy itself directly. To N. Krishnaswamy et al, ‘id is like a man on horseback who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horses – the unconscious’ while ‘Ego’ uses ‘borrowed forces to control the horse’ (48) The ego maintains a balance between our ‘id’ (impulses) and our ‘superego’ (conscience).

Psychoanalytic play therapy aspires to change the child’s behavior and mainly his/her ways of dealing with life and its ordeals. Here Dike’s life in *Americanah* and how he faces challenges are of great concern. This therapy helps a child integrate different aspects of his personality or adapting to puberty and its changes. This therapy goes beyond the immediate pain and helps healthy development to resume from where it had been stopped earlier by external trauma. Dike after trying to commit suicide is helped by people like Ifemelu to stabilize. This theory is good for this study as the repressed feelings of Ifemelu manifests years later which made her leave US for Nigeria suddenly while Dike’s repressed feelings made him try committing suicide. Auntie Uju’s frustration made her cantankerous and cranky.

Racism, Discrimination and Prejudice in the text

From the text, reasons for racism which usually leads to xenophobia include jealousy, supremacy, power, ambition, skin colour and superiority complex which is caused by people who decide to lord themselves over others and see others as inferior to them. Though America is the main location, other countries like Britain and Nigeria are also mentioned in the text. The treatment Britain gives to other people from Africa and Eastern part of the world is not palatable. In *Americanah*, Europeans see foreigners as the 'other' people and so do not treat them with respect. Whites treat blacks as mere objects and sources of distraction who earn lowly just to keep soul and body together. Life becomes difficult for blacks because of race. In the text under study, blacks mainly live in ghetto, Ifemelu is seen in Princeton in a salon owned by poor, illiterate Africans sharing one small unkempt room as their salon with unfunctional electrical appliances (*Americanah* 11).

Whites believe that blacks are not smart and intelligent and so cannot comfortably carry out intelligent ideas, assignments and projects, they believe that blacks are not bright, sophisticated, witty, cultivated, educated, learned and clever. To Americans, black people cannot do many things because they see them as inferior. To buttress the fact that blacks should have limit to what they can do and possess, a carpet cleaner that came to clean Kimberly's house, on seeing Ifemelu thinks that Ifemelu is the house owner and is not comfortable. When he finally finds out the actual owner, he becomes relaxed, '...it was like a conjuror's trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She too was the help, the universe was once again arranged as it should be' (*Americanah* 166). Blacks are not expected to live in such a house. It is abnormal and unusual for blacks to live well. The insult and humiliation is unbearable. Professor Hunk remembers how a white teacher said to him: 'Focus on getting a basketball scholarship, black people are physically inclined and white people are intellectually inclined', (*Americanah* 375). He feels insulted and being reduced to lowliness, he determines to spend the rest of his years as an undergraduate in the school then trying to prove the white teacher wrong by getting straight 'As' to make a point. He succeeded in proving the teacher wrong by showing that there is no difference.

Ifemelu realizes that she is black immediately she steps her foot in America. 'I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America' (*Americanah* 290). Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* supports Ifemelu's view that black people became aware of their blackness in white people's environment when she writes;

As long as the black man remains in his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for other.... For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. (*Black Skin, White Masks* 89 – 90)

Ifemelu learns about race in America and a new identity is imposed on her, identity that makes her look like white people, identity that makes her look like what she could not imagine in Nigeria, identity that makes her see her culture and her kinky hair as inferior, identity that makes her look substandard; and an identity that makes her see herself as fake. The fact that she is forced to believe that she is inferior gives her goose pimples, it makes her depressed, sad and bored of America. It gives her strong and

sturdy emotions. Ifemelu is forced to behave and look like the whites to enable her fit into the system she finds herself in and gain meaningfully from America. Blacks are traumatized daily and are not recognized, Ifemelu walks into a restaurant with Curt, a white waiter provides seat for Curt only, neglecting Ifemelu because she is black. Blacks face a lot of challenges and trauma daily in America. Adichie writes:

Dear non-American black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black...If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country...And if you are a man... never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you're about to pull a gun... If a black cashier gives poor service to a non-black person in front of you, compliment that person's shoes or something, to make up for the bad service, because you're just as guilty for the cashier's crimes... if you go to eat in a restaurant, please tip generously. Otherwise the next black person who comes in will get awful service because waiters groan when they get a black table... if you are telling a non-black person about something racist that happened to you, make sure you are not bitter. Don't complain. Be forgiving. If possible, make it funny... Black people are not supposed to be angry about racism. (*Americanah* 221)

Aunty Uju is psychically dispossessed, frustrated and displaced as she almost lost her sanity and African identity in America and she complains bitterly. 'These people, they make you become aggressive just to hold your dignity' (*Americanah* 217). Aunty Uju and Ifemelu try to hide their African identity but exhibit the American imposed identity. Aunty Uju adopts a nasal, sliding accent which makes her pronounce her name wrongly. Aunty Uju's denial of her identity is so bad that she no longer pronounces her name well and even encourages her son, Dike not to speak Igbo and quarrels with Ifemelu when she speaks Igbo to Dike (109). Aunty tries to live false life to impress the whites but she ends up being repressed and subdued. Even Halima is also traumatized as she complains how American identity was imposed on her son. The boy was always beaten in school until he changed his African accent to American accent (187). Dike, Aunty Uju's son faced a lot of challenges (discrimination and racial prejudice) as the only real black child in his school. He was actually pushed to the wall with many racist talks and actions from his classmates and teachers that he opted for suicide.

Ifemelu notices with dismay that status and class is inextricably tied to nationality and skin colour. Obinze complains of race issues in London. In London, race is so clear that 'everybody knows their place'. 'I think class in this country is in the air that people breathe.'*(Americanah* 275) The discomfort and sad experiences get worse by the day. Ifemelu once recounts a man telling her 'ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don't want them' (4). Ifemelu's abasement can be felt from the above statement as she is reduced to nothing. Adichie in *Americanah* clearly maps out the racial ladder where blacks are at the bottom. The hierarchy is spelt out in Ifemelu's blog post 'Understanding America for the Non – American Black: American Tribalism'

In America, tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds- class, ideology, region and race. First, class. Pretty easy. Rich folk and poor folk. Second, ideology. Liberals and conservatives... Third, region. The North and the South.... Finally, race. There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom. and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (*Americanah* 184)

Though blacks are at the bottom, Adichie goes ahead to define and explain well that there are different types of blacks. The Puerto Rican or Brazilian is not as black as 'recognizably black' (330). Even in the airports, people discriminate and 'act funny when I'm walking to the first- class line at the airport... like you're making a mistake; you look like that and fly first- class'. (*Americanah* 330). Blacks in America are really dishonoured and the whites see them as deficient that must be at the base at all times. Ifemelu's blog is all about racism, she tries to bring out racism in its true colour and let the whole world know about it. Racism is so bad that it continues even after Mr Barak Obama's election as the first United States of America's black president. Aaron Richardson in his article 'Spinning a web of Discrimination: An Examination of the Themes of Racism Prevalent Today', writes:

(Obama's) election really represents something serious and something special, that we were able to come together as a nation and do something that people would have laughed in your face about if you told them would have happened 50 years ago. So while the election of an African American President is a sign of progress in race relations, discrimination and racism still persist throughout society and throughout the legal system. (Richardson 18).

Whenever a black or coloured person commits a crime, anybody that fits the perpetrator's profile will be arrested and so if such happens, blacks will disappear from the vicinity for weeks. Adichie writes: 'When a crime is reported, pray that it was not committed by a black person, and if it turns out to have been committed by a black, stay well away from the crime area for weeks or you might be stopped for fitting the profile.' (*Americanah* 221) Adichie therefore is not wrong when she writes that '... whiteness is the thing to aspire to.' (*Americanah* 205) Ifemelu makes us understand that blacks are inferior in America as in the hierarchy of race in Ifemelu's blog post, blacks are the least, they are the last and in the bottom. This makes many black people deny their actual identity as they claim to have mixed blood but Ifemelu makes it clear that black is black. In her blog post, 'Why Dark-Skinned Black Women – Both American and Non-American - Love Barrack Obama':

Many American blacks proudly say they have some 'Indian.' Which means Thank God We Are Not Full-blooded Negroes. Which means they are not too dark. (To clarify, when white people say dark, they mean Greek or Italian but when black people say dark, they mean Grace Jones.) American black men like their black women to have some exotic quota, like half-Chinese or splash of Cherokee. They like their women light ... And this is the reason dark women love Barrack Obama. (*Americanah* 213).

White people claim to be superior to blacks irrespective of colour whether real black or with 'some exotic quota', they refer to all of them as blacks or coloured.

CONCLUSION

Racial disparities are the major causes of discrimination. Racism still raises its ugly head in the United States of America today as blacks are denied of their rights and killed at any slightest opportunity. Whites openly attack migrants who they see as inferior as they try to protect their national identity. The writer observes that racism, discrimination and prejudice are very serious as whites refuse to accept the fact that a man's worth does not depend on his skin colour. Blacks are intimidated and for the fact that Ifemelu is forced to believe that she is inferior gives her goose pimples, it makes her depressed, sad and bored of America and this forced her home. Former US President, Barack Obama broke the glass ceiling in 2008 as the first black president of the US when against all odds was sworn in on 20th January, 2009 as the 44th president of the United States of America. But unfortunately blacks still suffer racism, discrimination and prejudice as their attempts to reach their full potentials are blocked by the whites. These three destabilize the social, economic and political growth of a nation as they create the absence of sustainable development. This situation is a serious hurdle that needs to be dismantled by writers who uncover the situation as it disturbs and halts the migrants from participating actively in the new community.

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