

**RACIAL PREJUDICE, ENVIRONMENT AND LOSS OF PERSONHOOD IN ADICHIE'S IN
AMERICANAH: A NATURALISTIC DISCOURSE**

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Abstract

Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* is a mature tale and a prodigious breakthrough in African literature. Told with charm and a touch of rare ingenuity, *Americanah* touches the core of several aspects of our civilized world and recreates humanity from the perspectives of different races, cultures, and continents. The novel qualifies to be described as '*Roman a Clef*' - a novel with a key to unlocking life, variegated cultures, classes, and races among the myriads of ideological inclinations that are enduring constituents of the breath-taking narrative. Naturalism as a literary concept accounts for the influence of environment, hereditary, and other external influences on characters. With data from the novel as a primary source and naturalism as a theoretical anchor, the paper studies the naturalistic underpinnings in Adichie's *Americanah*. The paper discovers that racism, high cost of living, acculturation, harsh weather conditions, and socio-economic dynamics, in several ways, exerts great influence on characters and impact negatively too on their overall psyche often time leading to loss of personhood. The study concludes that these new experiences rob characters of their dignity and humanity and surmises that migrants as fictionally recreated in Adichie's narrative, should be fully aware of, and constantly in search of new ways to cope with of their new environment and its ennui and like Ifemelu, take the decision and the path that leads to lasting happiness and fulfillment whenever it appears the pathway to their sanity and reclamation of their identities.

Keywords: Naturalism, environment, race, trauma, humanity, migrants

Introduction

Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* is a captivating tale of love and a coming of age story that cuts across three continents, Africa, Europe, and America, all of which contributed significantly to the plot and thematic thrusts of the novel. Like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Adichie's *Americanah* further invites foreign critics into the emerging and intriguing literary oeuvres of Africa with a boldness that not many writers dare to exude as she delves into issues the so-called leading economies would wish to remain buried and untold. Day Elizabeth attests that:

There are some novels that tell a great story and others that make you change the way you look at the world. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is a book that manages to do both... *Americanah* is a deeply felt book, written with equal parts lyricism and erudition. More than that, it is an important book – and yet one that never lets its importance weigh down the need to tell a truly gripping human story. (NP)

“Weaved into the dominant love story are the narratives of racism, displacement, migration, border-crossing and borderlessness, liberalism, Nigerian middle-class apathy, Nigerian ruling class exploitation, colourism.... The novel begins with Ifemelu's point of view, and maintains it save for a few sections that allows us a glimpse of Obinze's thoughts, and from the start, we know that Ifemelu is not one to be trifled with and not one to trifle with us” (Navaratnam 1). But irrespective of the multifaceted and array of themes and ideologies explored by Adichie in the novel, one idea seems recurrent and most prominent which is worthy of all critical discourse and that is the idea of racism. Rebecca Jagoe, in this regard, asserts that: “...the novel explores the various manifestations of differing cultural values; what is held in esteem and what is stigmatized; how one is perceived and how one perceives oneself: and collectively, how all are defined by the topic of race. Subashini Navaratnam avers that:

In *Americanah*, Race-in-America is as much a character as Ifemelu and her first love, Obinze. Made up of seven parts, *Americanah* begins and ends as a love story, but it's a love story that travels and migrates and sees and learns, so that when Ifemelu and Obinze meet again, in the novel's final pages, they've been so shaken and turned inside out by the forces outside of themselves that they've shed and accrued different layers. It's a most believable kind of love story, and a kind of triumph, the kind that left me crying because it seems to be the kind of love that no one dares to believe in, anymore.
(1)

Eleanor Dasi supports that Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, ruminates on the politics of beauty in relation to race and identity. It has triggered some conversations from critics on the current situation of race and identity in American society (142).

Environment entails the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animals, or plant lives or operates. According to Harvey Kaye, environment refers to "the totality surrounding a substance or a person's existence and the way they relate to the world. This covers the social, political, economic, spiritual and natural environment which comprises living and non-living things, including water, air, land, all plants, man and other animals and the existing inter-relationships. Environment is all the external conditions, both biotic and non-biotic, that affect an organism or groups of organisms." (405) Personhood, which is the state or fact of being a person, is connected and often times, dependent on environment, the individual's interaction with materials of nature and other physical, spiritual and mental elements to uphold or loss personhood. Personhood which connotes the state or fact of being an individual or having human characteristics and feelings is greatly impacted upon by forces of nature, harsh human experiences, exposure and psychological imbalances that impact the overall personality and either transforms or reduces an individual from his original personality buildup. It is from this realization that this study argues loss of personhood in the characters in Adichie's *Americanah* as emanating from harsh racial environment worthy of note. The novel, *Americanah*, depicts strongly the realities of our environment which we cannot deny or shy away from but must collectively acknowledge and begin to proffer solutions to ameliorate many of these environmental factors on the human physique. It is this idea that makes the novel an interesting naturalistic piece which the present study seeks to validate in the novel.

Naturalism as Theoretical Anchor: A Conceptual Clarification

Naturalism as a literary concept is interested in the influence of the environment, internal and external forces in the life of a character. Though the features of this concept are well known, its applications to literary works seem to vary. Critics approach the general philosophy of naturalism in their criticism of literary works but their method and observation continue to differ.

Naturalists argue that this material world is being governed by a system of natural laws and the man, who is the creation of the material world, must submit to them. The naturalists have regard for actual facts, actual situations and realities. In the opinion of Malik Shawal "The naturalists see things as they are. They apprehend reality as it is in its own nature. They do not believe that there are any spiritual values or absolute truths. Naturalism takes recourse to such concepts as appetites, emotions, instincts and evolution. According to naturalists, instincts are responsible for all our activities — biological, psychological or social. To them there is no absolute good or evil in the world. Values of life, according to naturalism, are created by the human needs. Man creates them when he reacts to — or interacts with — his environment. He must adapt himself to the environment." (NP) Biological naturalists include Darwin (1809-1882) and Lamarck (1744-1829) and Henri Bergson (1859-1951).

Our quest in this paper is to examine Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* from the viewpoint of naturalism. The aim is to critically reveal the various manifestations and height of the influence of the environment and other external factors on the lives of the characters. Our interest here is in the workings of the environment in the characters which motivated their actions, propelled their various quest, and in the long run aided the writer to achieve her desired plot and unique narrative flavour.

The environment, which is synonymous with the setting of the novel, played a pivotal part in unfolding the actions and situations that replete the story in *Americanah*. The writer in the novel creates characters that are in constant struggle with the forces of the environment as well as other internal and external conflicts which in the end decided their various fates and defined our perception of them. While some characters in the novel witnessed happy endings, some did not, and a critical appraisal of the impact of the environment in deciding the fates of these characters sums up our investigation of the naturalistic leanings in Adichie's *Americanah*.

Naturalistic Reading of Adichie's *Americanah*

In the novel, *Americanah*, like earlier hinted, Adichie recreates the image of a country wallowing neck-deep in corruption and social vices. Nigeria, a country blessed with abundant mineral, human and material resources has remained one of the deplorable African states owing to the alarming rate of bad governance, corruption, mismanagement, embezzlement, bribery, near absence of basic amenities, electoral malpractices, social vices, abuse of power, monumental waste and lack of visionary leadership among the arrays of diseases that have eaten deep in our very fabrics. This resultant effect of these is the common knowledge of the fact that virtually every citizen of the country wishes to escape abroad with the faintest opportunity to do so. Only a privileged few managed to find their way out in a legitimate way. This is the environment we encounter in Adichie's *Americanah*. It is this environment that Obinze grew up in and as early as he could remember, he developed a childhood passion to check out of Nigeria and live abroad, America precisely: "...it had always been America, only America. A longing nurtured and nursed over many years. The advertisement on NTA for Andrew checking out, which he had watched as a child had given shape to his longings. "Men, I'm checking out". The character Andrew had said, staring cockily at the camera. "No good roads, no light, no water. Men, you can't even get a bottle of soft drink! America became a place where bottles and bottles of fanta were to be had, without permission. He would stand in front of the mirror and repeat Andrew's words "Men, I'm checking out! (232) It is clear that leaving Nigeria for Obinze, is not so much necessitated by economic gains, just like it drives a thousand others, but it was psychological torture, beyond wealth, it was the only place that could give his soul the inner peace and fulfillment he eternally craves for. Again we encounter Obinze's mother, a university professor, depicted in the narrative as a woman of virtue and goodness, who is perhaps, the last of her kind. She has a teaching job at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and she gives her best to her profession but it is disheartening to realize that the environment ruptured her ambitions. Corruption and negligence and the rot in the academic system mar her dreams, like many of her kind and it did not take long before the mass exodus of the teaching staff abroad in search of healthier and saner academic culture and welfare kick-started. This saddens her greatly and leaves a void in her heart:

One day, I will look up and all the people I know will be dead or abroad. She had spoken wearily, as they sat in the living room, eating boiled corn and ube. He sensed, in her voice, the sadness of defeat, as though her friends who were leaving for teaching positions in Canada and America had confirmed to her a great personal failure. For a moment he felt that he too, had betrayed her by having his own plan: to get a postgraduate in America, to work in America, to live in America. (232)

This void was never filled till her death. The mess in the system and the country at large forces her to compromise her integrity to smuggle her son out of the country. She lies that Obinze was her research assistant to secure a visa to London. She is aware of her son's increasing psychological torture following the series of denials of visas from the American embassy. She needs to act and when she gets a visa for a conference in London; she includes Obinze as her research assistant. It was not America, but she felt London could offer such a psychological recipe to her son in dire need of an escape from Nigeria. The lies she told haunted her as the writer describes her as coming from the generation of "the bewildered, who did not understand what had happened to Nigeria but allowed herself to be swept along. She was a woman who kept to herself and asked no favours, who would not accept even a Christmas card from her students because it might compromise her... (234). She sacrifices her personality, everything she believes in just for her son to make it abroad. Obinze's mother, aware of the decaying environment,

saw herself drowning in it all. The environment continues to mock her cherished virtues and the profession too was sinking with the degeneration made possible by the corrupt and nonchalant disposition of Nigerian leaders: “Nobody publishes in international journals,’ she had said. Nobody goes to conferences. It’s like a shadow muddy pond that we are all wallowing in” (*Americanah* 370). When she could no longer find the peace and fulfillment she sorts from her profession without sacrificing her beliefs in entirety, she died. Obinze blames her death on the environment and situation around her which robbed her of her cherished ideals and destroyed her. The fate of Obinze’s mother is not far from the fate of many other characters featured in the epic narrative.

The character of Auntie Uju comes in handy in our argument and discussion on the influence of the environment on characters. Auntie Uju’s character was utterly altered by several environmental factors inevitably surrounding her. First, she is compelled by the Nigerian environment she finds herself to date a Major general because she had refused to travel abroad and had a high dream of surviving in Nigeria. Dating the general becomes her only surviving livewire in a frustrating environment like Nigeria. In the end, the abroad which she had resented as a young girl growing up, becomes her only escape route. Ifemelu later followed suit when she could no longer put up with the incessant strike actions in Nigerian universities. In the novel, it is glaring that Education in Nigeria is left at the mercy of the government and greedy politicians who facilitate her burial. The abuse and continual rape of education in Nigeria is snowballing into a tale that will surely end in tears. Education, as popularly perceived, is the key to unlocking the future of any nation that aspires to greatness. But one begins to question the truism of the statement in the Nigerian context. Lack of infrastructure and social decadence are part of the unbearable situations that force these citizens away from the shores of the country.

In America, we witness the influence of the environment and other external factors of these emigrants. For these characters to survive in America, they have to pay the ultimate prize of the environment robbing them of many of their cherished ideals and virtues. This is the clear case of Auntie Uju in America. Auntie Uju is described as a loving, cheerful, and generous character way back in Nigeria. While growing up she shared a unique bond with Ifemelu, a bond that started while Ifemelu was three years. It was not Ifemelu’s mother but Auntie Uju that taught her everything she needed to know as a young girl growing up. It was after the death of the general that Auntie Uju escaped with her illegitimate son, Dike to America in order to escape General’s people that were determined to hurt her. It was the American environment that extinguished all the love, care, generosity, and large-heartedness of Auntie Uju. America destroyed the bond between Auntie Uju and Ifemelu. She meets a different Auntie Uju in America, the Auntie Uju that now plays by the rule and is struggling to survive in a racial American environment. Auntie Uju cared less about Ifemelu and her survival in America. From the expose, America seems to have fashioned a way of spelling out the ‘on your own’ ideology to everyone. Auntie Uju planned to marry a divorced accountant, Bartholomew to help her cope with her bills and all other environmental issues. She was in no way the Auntie Uju she used to know and her entire taste, kindness, and charitable spirit was all crushed by the American lifestyle. The writer depicts them thus when Auntie Uju told Ifemelu about Bartholomew:

‘He’s not bad. He has a good job.’ She paused, ‘I’m not getting any younger. I want Dike to have a brother or a sister.’ ‘In Nigeria, a man like him would not even have the courage to talk to you.’ ‘We are not in Nigeria, Ifem.’ Before Auntie Uju went into the bedroom, tottering under her many anxieties, she said, ‘please just pray that it will work.’ Ifemelu did not pray, but even if she did, she could not bear praying for Auntie Uju to be with Bartholomew. It saddened her that Auntie Uju had settled merely for what was familiar. (118)

Ifemelu struggles to come to terms with all the new attributes and shocking alterations in Auntie Uju’s characteristic traits. Ifemelu continues to clash with Auntie Uju on a number of issues through which she perhaps hopes to resuscitate the old Auntie Uju and remind her of who she was, the loving, caring, generous cheerful lady who has not always done things because others are doing the same thing. Auntie Uju reminds her of the realities of the environment as she emphasizes thus:

'I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed.' There it was again, the strange naiveté with which Auntie Uju had covered herself like a blanket. Sometimes, while having a conversation it would occur to Ifemelu that Auntie Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. Obinze said it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity. (119)

It did not take long before Ifemelu encounters her own bitter realities about the American environment. She too is soon to cover herself with the same strange naiveté Auntie Uju did and like her too, loses something essential, her old personality completely for something new. Her discoveries and experiences become part of her knowledge of the real pattern of life in America in the few many months she was unable to get a job. For Ifemelu to survive, at some point in her stay in America, she has to pick up a fake identity, she is forced to be Ngozi Okonkwo, a name on an identity card. The symbolic implication of this is her total acceptance of Ngozi Okonkwo and the gradual death of Ifemelu, her true self, her real charming personality that left Nigeria to America:

The bittersweet flow of an ending limbo overcame her days later when she kissed Dike goodbye... she sat by the window and spent long minutes looking again at the social security card and driver's license that belonged to Ngozi Okonkwo. Ngozi Okonkwo was at last ten years older than she was, with a narrow face. 'I don't even look like her at all,' Ifemelu had said when Auntie Uju gave her the card. 'All of us look alike to white people,' Auntie Uju said. (120)

Ifemelu has many traumatic experiences in assuming the name and personality of Ngozi Okonkwo. Many times, as a matter of instinct, she says her name "Ifemelu" even during an interview before she would remember her pseudo name. Ginika once teases her thus:

'You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one as your spiritual name. They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa.' Ginika laughed, a sure throaty laugh. Ifemelu laughed, too, although she did not fully understand the joke. And she had the sudden sensation of fogginess, of a milky way through which she tried to claw. Her autumn of half blindness had begun, the autumn of puzzlements, of experiences she had knowing there were slippery of layers of meaning that eluded her. (131)

Gradually, Ifemelu watches helplessly as the American environment claims her. The external and conflicting factors begin to take a toll on her. Even with the fake identity of Ngozi Okonkwo, she still could not secure any meaningful job, the few jobs she saw in the newspaper were advertising for Escorts. Ginika had told her to forget about the escort job. That it is prostitution though they claim it is not and the people involved are denied their fair shares by the agency in charge of them (151). Despite this realization, Ifemelu determines to survive. Auntie Uju had long abandoned her to her fate. Ifemelu's psychological disposition soon begins to grow into an unknown bitterness, anger, a suppressed violence with the world. It is in anger to destroy everything, shatter America and replace it in the shape she would wish it to be for her. Everything seemed to be working against her and she begins to turn her frustration to the environment, this was evident in her treatment of a dog. Once she has complains about her neighbour's dog that ate her bacon angrily: "Your dog just ate my bacon", she told Elena, who was slicing a banana at the end of the kitchen. "You just hate my dog". "You should train him better. He shouldn't eat people's food from the kitchen table". (152). Ifemelu is visibly and terribly angry with the environment that refuses to recognize her. She begins to plan her survival strategies. The search leads her to a tennis coach, a pervert, and a sexually disoriented personality. He is a little tennis coach that needs some naked contact with a lady to be able to relax and sleep. He pays anybody willing to indulge a hundred dollars bill per encounter. The hundred dollars was enough for Ifemelu's house rent. After her initial rejection and following the accumulation of her rent and tuition fee, she goes back to the tennis coach. The writer depicts the traumatic encounter with the coach thus:

‘I can’t have sex’ she said. Her voice felt squeaky, unsure of itself. ‘Oh no, I don’t expect you to’, he said, too quickly... ‘Just come here and lie down’ he said. Keep me warm. I will touch you a little bit, nothing you’ll be uncomfortable with. I just need some human contact to relax.” There was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was with a stranger who already knew she would stay.... she took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her.... (153)

This particular incident is to mark a turning point in Ifemelu’s life. The encounter robs her of a part of herself that she never recovers. It was something she would never have done in Nigeria, but she did in America, because she has to survive, because the American environment made it so. The environment seems well organized to frustrate the blacks and when they cannot cope anymore, they would embrace an option of a free ticket back to their countries as deported citizens. Even when she called Auntie Uju, she did not care to ask how she got the hundred dollar bill, it is obvious that she no longer cares about anyone but her son, Dike. She has become part of the American system and lives by its code. The psychological trauma of the event leaves emptiness and costs her the love of her life for over sixteen years. First, from ignoring Obinze’s calls and messages, she begins to delete his emails to her without reading them and refuses to read any of his letters. The racial and frustrating American environment kills this dream for the two lovers and impacted greatly their love lives afterward. Ifemelu surrenders to life in America. She dates Curt, a white man. Then there was Bob, whom she had a fling with and then Blaine, the Black American she abandons in the middle of the relationship. The environment made Ifemelu, a typical ‘Americanah’ who begins to survive in alignment with the American code and system of life. Obinze, on the other hand, faces the harsh environment of London when he travelled to England courtesy of her mother’s lie. He takes up a fake identity to survive in London. Obinze became Vincent Obi to survive in London because he had no papers. His greatest pain was the day his office was celebrating his birthday, unknown to them, it was not Obinze’s birthday but Vincent’s birthday as his I.D card suggests. Further, Obinze plans a sham marriage just to ensure she stays in London. The marriage was arranged by some Angolans he paid heavily. It is in the court where he is set to be wedded that the immigration officer caught him and bundles him back to Nigeria. Chika while speaking to Obinze in London expresses the environmental factors thus:

‘I met this man recently,’ Chika said. ‘He is nice o, but he is so bush. He grew up in Onitsha and so you can imagine what kind of bush accent he has. He mixes up *ch* and *sh*. I want to go to the chopping centre. Sit down on a shei.’ They laughed ‘Anyway, he told me he was willing to marry me and adopt Charles. Willing! As if he was doing charity work. Willing! Imagine that. But it’s not his fault, it’s because we are in London. He is the kind of man I would never look at Nigeria, not to talk of going out with. The problem is that water never finds in different levels here in London.” London is a leveller. We are now all in London and we are now in the same, what nonsense,” Bose said. (244)

In a nutshell, the argument thus far has shown that the environment exerts greater influence on the lives of characters in Adichie’s *Americanah* who are prototypes of real life immigrants fleeing their countries in search of hope and survival in America. Again, is the influence of racism in London and America, and from the viewpoint of the writer, more than any place in the world, America harbours the greatest level of racial prejudice and practices. Racism seems to have integrated itself into the American culture. Racism and the hostile American environment impacted greatly the lives of Ifemelu and other immigrants, which Ifemelu refused to ignore. She opens her blog to fight race. Though it brought her money and a fellowship in Princeton, regrettably, she realizes that the much someone can do about race in America is to discuss and speak of it. It doesn’t change anything in reality. That was why she has to close her blog. She leaves America and returns to Nigeria, in search of Obinze who at the moment is already married. But in reality, it is easy to argue that beyond Obinze, she is searching for her old self,

the people in it, all she lost way back in Nigeria. She is searching for peace of mind in that one place she does not need to explain herself to the ever irritated and suspicious gaze of Americans at the sight of any black person in America. All part of realities the influence of the American environment aids her to realize and embrace.

Conclusion

Naturalism accounts for the influence of the environment and other external factors in the lives of the characters. Adichie in *Americanah* creates characters that were in a constant battle with the environment and the forces that try to rob them of their humanity. First, Adichie demonstrates the influence of our corrupt and decaying environment on the citizens, which like a force; compels thousands outside the shores of the country. Again, the writer recreates the varying influences of the American environment on immigrants. The title 'Americanah' is symbolic of Africans who separated from their native homes, and struggle to adapt once more when they are exposed to the African environment and people again. As Rebecca Jagoe supports: "The title of the novel refers to the nickname given to Nigerians who move to the US then back to their native soil, taking back with them an array of affectations and snobberies about Nigeria and its differences with the West. Ifemelu, the lead protagonist of the novel, is herself an 'Americanah', who travels to the US to study, remaining there for over a decade before returning to her homeland" (1) The influence of the environment could be fingered as the catalytic factor that transforms and sharpen these emigrants into 'Americanahs' which beyond other things it entails, possibly connotes an epiphany into a strange culture and acceptance of that culture and a gradual loss of personhood and disengagement of one's true and former self. The environment is in many ways unfriendly, and Ifemelu's bold step to return to Nigeria is obviously part of the important messages Adichie wishes to communicate in her epic narrative, to other hundreds of 'Americanahs' who must come back sooner than later and contribute their quota in the making and reshaping their Nigerian and y extension, African environment which is where they belong.

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