

The Contemporary Denial of Racism: Insight from African Diaspora in Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

The historical institutionalized racism, characterized by injustices and inhuman practices against the black Africans in diaspora has tremendously occupied the African diasporic discourse even as far back as the colonial era. In recent time, these practices have been superseded by a deliberate act of denial. The deeply rooted belief in white supremacy and black inferiority manifests its reality in every sphere of the American and European society which include the economy, politics, education, health care, housing, etc. This denial is mostly seen in the everyday uncalled-for attitudes that tend to expose the black African people in diaspora to health harming conditions and unfair treatment by the criminal justice systems even in this 21st century. This paper while employing the postcolonial theory examines diaspora in the light of the researcher's perceived denial of the existence and practice of racism against the African black people within the American and European setting of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 21st century novel, *Americanah*. The study reveals that members of the white dominant group who deny the existence of white supremacy and privilege over the blacks maintain that policies and programs that center on race/racism promote racialized thinking. In other words, conspiratorial silence or denial of the practice is preferred by them. This study will add to scholarship on the role of writers as regards the current issues eminent in contemporary multicultural societies. Besides, the study will be invaluable to African literary scholars, students, teachers and researchers as well.

Keywords: Racism, Diaspora, Denial, Contemporary, European, American, Black African

Introduction

In recent times, one of the uppermost reasons why Africans leave their homes to seek abode either permanently or temporarily outside of their country homes is poverty. The high level of unemployment, hardship and the system of nepotism and 'god-fatherism' in the continent had doused the hope of many African people, most especially the youths. As a result, they seek greener pastures elsewhere in the developed countries to survive and live comfortable lives. The word 'diaspora' according to Safaran (1991) originates from:

Greek, meaning scattering and dispersion. It refers to a scattered population whose origin lies within a smaller geographical locale. It is also the movement of a population from its original homeland. Through the ages, diaspora has come to refer particularly to historical mass dispersion of an involuntary nature such as the expulsion of Jews from Judea their homeland signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion. (15)

The meaning of diaspora has changed with time, from the historical involuntary mass movement of people to its current meaning which has to do with the global influence of international operations. The current movement allows people of different category to migrate on their own individual terms. Today, according to Safaran, (1991)

'Diaspora' and more specifically, 'diaspora community' seem increasingly to be used as metaphorical designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expelles, political

refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court* – in much the same way that ‘ghetto’ has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted, and disprivileged urban environments, and ‘holocaust’ has come to be applied to all kinds of mass murder. (83)

The African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, brought about by the European capitalist system in the 17th century was the Europeans’ original core contact with the Africans which its operations gradually distorted the image of the black African man. A contact replete with man’s inhumanity to man and the indelible effect it perpetually created; one of servitude and over-dependence of the blacks upon the whites whose relationship will forever remain that of “master-servant.”

The black scholar, Benjamin Quarles has observed that the colonists considered blacks “not assimilable” almost from the time of their arrival. He emphasized three reasons why blacks became a “natural object of racial hostility for the whites: (1) their origin was in Africa rather than in Europe; (2) their cultural background was non-European and therefore exotic; and (3) Their skin colour was black, rather than white. He further identifies the high visibility of Blacks as a significant factor in the emergence of white racism” (67)

The colonists further resorted to measures which would ensure a perpetual subjection of black people to a servile and inferior status in the society. They formulated rigid and harsh slave codes which regulated the behavior and movement of blacks, and they sought to deprive them of their fundamental human rights through the adoption of many discriminatory customs. With Jim Crow segregation in the South, Davis in his work states that:

It became known as the “one drop rule,” meaning that a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person a black. It is also known as the ‘one black ancestor rule’ some courts have called it ‘the traceable amount rule’ and anthropologists call it the ‘hypo-descent rule,’ meaning that racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group. (24)

These regulations reduced the blacks to a status in the colonial order which was more subordinate to that of the whites. In time, the colonists came to look upon ‘Blackness’ as a stigma or badge of inferiority and degradation. Blacks were seen as savages, members of an inferior stock, whose manifest destiny was slavery and were merely treated with hostility, deep hatred, discrimination, extreme violence and abuse.

Colonialism which is characterized by slavery, racial discrimination, prejudice, inequality, stereotypes and so on is no longer institutionalized into the European laws. But there exist currently, the deliberate denial of the practice of racism which seems like a perpetual conspiracy to be insensitive to the Blacks’ struggles, complaints, and protests against the injustices being meted out on them. This is seen in the Whites discriminatory attitudes against the Black people in depriving them their rights such as in politics, housing, education, healthcare, etc. This practice which is deeply ingrained in the fabrics of the European society is probably as a result of the long-term practice stemming from the colonial era which has become part of them.

Theoretical Framework

The research adopts the Postcolonial theory and its focus is on the contemporary denial of racism in America and European societies as perceived by the Black African writers in diaspora. Also, it explores their prevailing and unswerving refusal to acknowledge the reality of the deeply rooted racism and prejudice exercised by them in forms of oppression, violence and injustice against the Black Africans resident in diaspora.

This theory began in the 1950s with its proponents as Frantz Fanon in his work, *The Wretched of the Earth* and reached a climax in the late 1970s with Edward Said’s work titled *Orientalism* which was credited as its founding text. This is because the theory is “mainly based on what Said considers the false image of the Orient fabricated by Western Thinkers as the primitive “other” in contrast with the

civilized West” (Hamadi, 2). This led to what came to be called colonialist discourse theory in the works of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and other vital post-colonial critics.

Postcolonialism and issues surrounding it deals with issues of post-independence period. From the late 1970's the term has been identified and used by literary critics to discuss the various cultures as well as many regions all over the world affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupation throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. Many African writers have written several works in which their subjects are based on the concept of 'otherness' and resistance as well as making every possible effort to reclaim the loss identity of the Black man.

Racism and its Denial

Racism which is based on the ill treatment and discrimination against people of different race and colour remains a pervasive scourge throughout the European countries and the US. People of African descent still face widespread and entrenched prejudice, oppression and exclusion. Oppression, as defined by George and Charles Merriam is an “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power especially by the imposition of burdens; the condition of being weighed down; an act of pressing down; a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the body or mind. It is the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual group, or institution.” (1028) When a certain society practices oppression as a whole, it is termed social oppression. This is when a single group in society unjustly takes advantage of, exercises power over another group using dominance and subordination. This result in the socially supported mistreatment and exploitation of a group of individuals by those with relative power which can be related to the attitude of Americans and Europeans in the diaspora against the black people especially the Blacks of the African descent.

So many instances have shown the systemic presentation of racism in the White society which reveals a subtle conspiracy to dehumanize the Black race in their midst. An example of an incidence which took place in Italy on the 29th of July 2022, where an African man (Nigerian) named Ogochukwu Alika was attacked by an Italian man named Filippo Ferlazzo and gruesomely murdered at his shop by an Italian man. This incident took place in a broad daylight and while the Italian man continuously hit him with his crutch since he was paralyzed and couldn't properly defend himself, he was killed at the presence of onlookers who videoed the incident without any intervention. In view of the above violence, Clea (2020) stated that a majority of Americans view the recent killing as a reflection of the virulent and systemic racism in the nation...suggesting that denial of the underlying issues exists, complicating the search for solutions. (5) This and many more cases of violence are the challenges the black Africans face in diaspora.

Alcoff (2006) stated that “race is determinant a great deal of social reality, even while our scientists, policy makers and philosophers would have us deny its existence.” (181) He summarized the whole issue of racism as he stated that “there is a visual registry operating in social relations that is socially constructed, historically evolving and culturally variegated but nonetheless powerfully determinant over the individual's experience.” (Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self, 194). This is the core observation of Adichie in her stay for so many years in America and the tons of experiences she had had, replete with marginalization and discriminatory attitudes from the Whites Americans and Europeans which she in *Americanah* tries to portray. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's literary works mostly center on race and racism and its denial, as well as experiences and struggles of Black Africans in diaspora. Her novel *Americanah* is a medium by which she, through her experiences as a migrant in America condemned the deliberate denial of the discriminatory society of the Western world.

Denial

Bonnet (2009) defines denial as the “express and conscious refusal to admit or acknowledge the truth about a disturbing or uncomfortable aspect of external reality”. (73) Currently, Europeans and Americas extol equality, yet are socially stratified, with the Black people experiencing severe social and economic inequality. This defense mechanism is a tool the Western countries have imbibed to

sustain covert or overt practice of racism which they express in various ways through violence, injustice and oppression.

Racial Prejudice and its Denial in Adichie's *Americanah*

The novel *Americanah* explores what it means to be an African in a non-African world. It illustrates the horrors and disconcerting experiences of Africans as they move to America and the European countries and what they suddenly learn about their identity as black persons and the stereotypes being attached to blackness. *Americanah* deals with the protagonist – Ifemelu who immigrates to the United States because of the Nigerian government's poor education management. Ifemelu in her own part experiences an austere form of racism with a carpet cleaner in which she expressed thus:

He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility. You need a carpet cleaned? He asked as if he did not care, as if she could change her mind, as if he wanted her to change her mind... he thought he was a home owner, and she was not what he had expected to see in his grand stone house with the white pillars. (195)

Adichie vividly describes the carpet cleaner's crude demeanor which changes at intervals until he acknowledges the fact that she was only a cleaner and not the owner of the house. This reveals the disdain the European society holds against the Black Africans in diaspora as a result of their dark complexion. Adichie described his change of countenance thus:

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. How are you doing? Know where she wants me to start?... (195)

Then in Ifemelu's blog about the incident with the carpet cleaner, she wrote that

Sometimes in America, Race is Class... it didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites." Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed. (195)

In the novel, Ifemelu's downright blog posts about race which she titled "*Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*" while in America gave her the needed opportunity to make known her observations about race and racism. In one of the posts, she summarized briefly, the discriminations of the white Americans against the Blacks which she had observed as a resident in America because of their colour. She says:

...racism is about the power of a group and in America, its white folk who have that 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 or 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 names sound white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they are not smart enough to be doctors and black politicians don't try some tricks to reduce the voting power of white folks through gerrymandering... (374-375)

Racism, which is about the power of the White America group, inevitably gave them an overall power over the Blacks that they could easily persecute, humiliate and oppress a black person simply on assumption which never happens to the white folk and yet they refuse to see the same treatment as being racial. The blacks suffer unfairness and injustice in the way they are being maltreated by their white hosts in so many ways. For every crime, they are the first suspect and therefore are being accused and held responsible before any proper investigation follows. This was what Auntie Uju complained to Ifemelu about concerning the incident in Dike's school. She says:

The principal called me on Monday to say that Dike hacked into the school's Computer network on Saturday. This is a boy who was with me all day on Saturday. We went to Hartford to visit Ozavisa. We were there the whole day and the boy did not go near a computer. When I asked why they thought it was him, they said they got information. Imagine, you just wake up and blame my son. The boy is not even good with computers. I thought we had left them behind in that bush town. (400-401)

When Ifemelu asked "why they would do that sort of rubbish," Dike said, "you have to blame the black kid first." (401) Dike, as young as he was, was forced to feel and endure the unfair treatment given to him by his white counterparts. He was made to feel different and unaccepted. This feeling of lack of self-belonging overpowered him that he tried to commit suicide. One of his depressing conversations with Ifemelu went thus:

So how was the camp? Good. A pause. My group leader, Haley? She gave sunscreen to everyone but she wouldn't give me any. She said I didn't need it. She (Ifemelu) looked at his face, which was almost expressionless, eerily so. She did not know what to say. She (Hayley) thought that because you're dark you don't need sunscreen. (215)

Dike's expressionless face hid his emotional turmoil until he reached the breaking point where he thought it was best to give up once and for all.

Ifemelu in her own part, had observed the intensity of racism earlier when she came to America. After all she had searched for job for months without success, had been refused to get her eye brows waxed, had been snobbed and treated indifferently by White Americans all because she was black. Her statement to the stylish poet from Haiti goes thus:

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. (335)

Ifemelu had a glimpse of the feeling of inadequacy throughout her relationship with his white boyfriend Curt. Truly, throughout their courtship, Curt had been really nice and almost made all her dream in America come through, more like picking her out from the miry clay and she was supposed to be grateful in every word of it but yet, she was not really satisfied. She felt that something was lacking. Their different races became a barrier to their becoming a soul mate and Ifemelu once told Ginika after she broke up with Curt that "there was a feeling I wanted to feel that I did not feel" and "she had longed, with Curt, to hold emotions in her hand that she never could. She had not entirely believed herself with him" (331) which was totally in contrast with her relationship with Obinze who understood her more and felt every nuance of her emotional needs. Also, the feeling of being treated as the "other" stemmed especially from Curt's mother's sarcastic comments thrown at Ifemelu and from outsiders too who made her feel like a gold digger. She once told a Haiti poet at a dinner party the truth about dating a white person and the real feeling that comes from it. She says:

When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we are worried they will say we're over reacting, or we're too sensitive... (335)

In *Americannah*, Ifemelu and Obinze at the beginning of their sojourn in America and London respectively were being treated in a cruel and unfair manner in the society which they found themselves. Ifemelu on her own part as a female while job hunting, became vulnerable and was exploited by some men who were ready to give her a job if only she would accept their sexual advances. These men made these advances only because they knew that as a black person without her papers in the US, she was desperately in need of a job – any job at all in order to sustain herself. One of those experiences went thus:

Once, she went to a gas station near Chestnut Street and a large Mexican man said, with his eyes on her chest, "You're here for the attendant position? You can work for me in another way." Then, with a smile, the leer never leaving his eyes, he told her the job was taken. (171)

In the above quotation, “you can work for me in another way” has many suggestions: it suggests Ifemelu working for the Mexican as a whore or there could be any other dubious job he intended to offer her which he did not want to mention. Also, his tone and body language, plus ‘his eyes on her chest’ suggested exploitation, in addition to his sudden rejection, telling her the job has been taken suggested that there was no position of an attendant in the first place.

Ifemelu’s major concern when she arrived in the US was to get a job. It later became extremely difficult finding a proper job in order to sustain herself. Consequently, after so many failed interviews, and disappointments, she decided to accept one that was totally against her will, morals and dignity even as a woman, one that left her feeling worthless even to Obinze. One her employer - the tennis coach knew was not her choice but knew she would take anyway because she accepted it and came all by herself; because he knew she needed the money.

...She felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already tainted. 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... Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened... now even she had washed her hands, holding the crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her. (181)

In his own part, Obinze who is almost perfect in the eyes of anybody he comes in contact with in Nigeria, became a persona non grata in London and is suddenly flawed by the pressure surrounding him and the stark reality of the intense need to survive in a foreign land. He who was “raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, was now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave.” (Adichie, 318)

It suddenly dawns on Africans in the diaspora at their arrival that even though they are graduates from well-known Universities in Nigeria, their degree certificates are totally useless without their being legally documented. That was why Obinze could only settle for menial and hazardous jobs and involved himself in impersonation, illegal marriage and so on.

With all his high hopes and his revelation to Roy Snell his new boss, that he “just wanted to see if he could have a better life” in London, Obinze scrapped for job until he finally landed in a construction company just like millions of other Africans in the diaspora. One of his discussions with Emenike’s friends went thus:

Did you read about Blunkett saying he doesn’t know how many immigrants there are in the country? Alexa asked, and Obinze immediately tensed, his chest tightening... Mark said, if he (Blunkett) really wanted to know, he would go to all the construction sites in this country and do a head count. (315)

In those construction sites that Obinze worked, he was made to feel unaccepted and intimidated. The discrimination against him was beyond bizarre but he really did not mind since he needed the money desperately.

Every evening, Obinze was covered in white chemical dust. Gritty things lodged in his ears. He tried not to breathe too deeply as he cleaned, wary of dangers floating in the air, until his manager told him he was being fired because of a downsizing. The next job was a temporary replacement with a company that delivered kitchens, week after week of sitting beside white drivers who called him “labourer,” of end-less construction sites full of noises and helmets, of carrying wood planks up long stairs, unaided and unsung. In the silence with which they drove, and the tone with which they said “labourer!” Obinze sensed the driver’s dislike. Once when he tripped and landed on his knee, a fall so heavy that he limped back to the truck, the driver told the others at the warehouse, “His knee is bad because he’s a knee-grow!” they laughed. Their hostility rankled, but only slightly; what mattered to him was that he earned four pound an hour, more with overtime. (291)

As mentioned earlier, Social oppression as a way of placing restrictions on an individual group or institution was the definition of Emenike's experience as he shared the story of a debasing experience he had with a cab driver on a night that truly angered him. It went thus:

He told the story of the taxi that he had hailed one night, on Upper Street; from afar the cab light was on but as the cab approached him, the light went off, and he assumed the driver was not on duty. After the cab passed him by, he looked back idly and saw that the cab light was back on and that, a little way up the street, it stopped for two white women.(317)

The writer noted how casually and differently Emenike had narrated the story to their friends unlike the way he had to Obinze.

He did not mention the rage he had felt while standing on that street and looking at the cab. He was shaking, he had told Obinze, his hands trembling for a long time, a little frightened by his own feelings. But now, sipping the last of his red wine, flowers floating in front of him, he spoke in a tone cleansed of anger, thick only with a kind of superior amusement. (317)

The above was Emenike's facade in the presence of his white wife and white friends who would rather choose not to understand that the significance of his story lies in the full existence of racism in Europe.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the Western countries have continued and succeeded to deny decades of truths pertaining to race and racism and their conscious effort to frustrate any solution to it. The author of the selected novel addressed these truths by exploring and portraying some disturbing issues prevalent in the contemporary European and American societies. They include: discrimination and segregation, violence, oppression, exploitation, stereotypes, etc. The study reveals that members of the White dominant group who deny the existence of white supremacy and privilege as well as Blacks inferiority maintain that programs and policies that center on race/racism promotes racialized thinking. In other words, they prefer living in denial of the reality of the deeply rooted racism in their society rather than making necessary effort to accord the Black Africans equal opportunity to thrive and contribute their own quota in their host lands.

From the theoretical framework adopted for this study, it shows the persisting factor of the post-independence issues and challenges surrounding Black Africans in diaspora. The solution to this issue must first start with acceptance of the fact that racism, for all intents and purposes, still exists. On the other hand, the image of the Black African living in diaspora would be recovered through their resilience and only if they refuse to allow the Whites to define their identity, and therefore strive to prosper in a society that hinders their personal development and growth.

This study will add to scholarship on the role of writers in society concerning the current issues affecting Africans in the diaspora. Besides, the study will be invaluable to African literary scholars, students, teachers and researchers as well.

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