

Women Meet Dystopia in Their America: A Femalist Reading of *Americanah*

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Abstract

Society has been patiently indifferent towards securing the women's welfare and that has exiled them to violence. The social realities, tinged in patriarchal patina, compel women to consider self-exile as an option to the path of liberation. Little does it occur to them that migrating America-wards or Europe-wards is as bad as cutting off themselves from their root. On arrival, the emigrant finds herself stranded, frustrated and constrained to submit to violation of her body: devastated, she is plunged into identity-crisis. Even when she is quick to realize her dislocation from her body, family and roots, retracing or returning is even more difficult to achieve. Her situation becomes purgatorial. America or 'abroad' turns out to be a land of dystopia, not utopia, for the emigrant. To survive, sex is grudgingly traded. Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* exposes the vicissitudes of women emigrants in America or Europe. It is our finding, through a femalist framework, that Adichie uses the story to try to dissuade women from thronging to foreign lands since any woman emigrant not only risks being sexually harassed but also risks losing her woman-essence, identity, roots, family and self; that once she is dislocated, it proves tough to rediscover, relocate and recover self and all.

Keywords: dystopia, Diaspora question, emigrants, exile, femalist, identity-crisis, root, sexuality, violence, utopia

There are polyvalent theoretical sites open to reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. It is open to a femalist, diasporic, realist, post-colonialist, socialist, Marxist, negritudist, cultural, linguistic, allegorical or so reading. There is no better way of measuring and/or proving the remarkable, staggering quality of this essay. Because of the eloquent uniqueness of this novel, in terms of its narrative curio, aesthetic commitment, multiple but controlled perspectives, elastic but compact ideational reach, and all, our study of it shall be well off especially where we engage it via a synergic deployment of femalist and diasporic *topoi*. This bipartite interrogation is strategically appropriate for *Americanah*, a novel that depicts the well-nigh unquenchable hunger of Nigerians/Africans, especially women, to emigrate to America, the actualization of which paradoxically turns out with snafu experiences and identity violence.

In a number of her narratives, Adichie has shown enough interest in addressing the Diaspora question, even as it affects woman beings. In their in-depth study of Adichie's diasporan inclination of imaginative recreation, Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu identify a number of reasons why she has so chosen. For one, according to them, that America has repeatedly been her setting (besides Abba, Nsukka and Lagos) is informed by "her fairly extensive stay in ... America, spanning more than a decade" (239). Having lived in America for more than a decade, she is in a position to say how an immigrant would fair there. After reading her, one could observe that Adichie's experiences tell her that staying abroad insidiously alienates the immigrants. That could be a mild way of reporting it. In fact, it seems that her idea is that the White Americans see the immigrants as 'the other'. The Whites are superior; the Blacks, inferior. Therefore, racism and segregation are constant threats against the immigrants.

In all this, Nigerians/Africans never cease to desire to emigrate to America. They throng in that exponential flurry. Their unbridled

ambition to be in America has been suspected as caused by a number of reasons. One is the seduction that goes with the myth that America or Europe is “the proverbial land filled with milk and honey, where every dream and aspiration of the Nigerian immigrant and/or potential immigrant can be realised” (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 251). Abroad, as it were, elicits curiosity and wonder from the outsiders. People throng this wonderland to explore the limitless possibilities that it promises. Merely thinking or dreaming of being in America or Europe is utopian.

Besides, some Nigerians/Africans desire to emigrate as a way of escape from the harsh socio-economic realities and political instability of the country or continent. Many families have lost hope in African countries; therefore, they seek visas to go and be delivered of their babies in America. Uncountable number of children have gained American citizenship in this way. With the reputation of Nigeria as a country that breeds the highest rate of unemployment, corruption, insecurity and all, its inhabitants seem compelled to look for safety and greener pastures outside its shores. For many who see Nigeria as prone to insecurity, a country run by inept ‘leaders’, moving away from the country provides them asylum. Some others who emigrate do so in quest of quality education. For them, to study abroad is to have an edge over those who study locally; to study abroad opens the door for Ministerial or Ambassadorial appointments and more! There are so many attractions in emigrating to America or Europe.

However, not all who actualise their dream of emigrating to America or Europe find it comfortable; many regret their stay abroad, when all the lofty projections become elusive, if not illusive. Comparatively, it is a worse experience for women (see *Chimamanda* 234). Female immigrants see themselves pitched with certain patriarchal socio-economic factors. These factors challenge their womanity to the extent that they see themselves in a sort of war where they must battle for survival. Most times, surviving calls for huge compromise of priced human/woman values. Often body violations and body exploitation are involved.

In this paper, femalism is chosen as the topos for evaluation of Adichie's diasporan novel, *Americanah*, mainly because of the aspect of body violence. Femalism might not be well understood by Charles Nnolim when he describes it as a "mish-mash, a conflation of indigested ideas about feminism and the female point of view" (217). Perhaps women writers understand better what the theory is all about. In fact, Chioma Opara does seem to know better. According to her, femalism is a hue of African feminism that "accentuates the body" (18). Femalism celebrates the body of the woman. It sees it as holy and high-priced. It protects the woman's body and professes that the woman's body is solely hers, not partnering men in the ownership. Femalist writers like Adichie join others like Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard in objecting to the assumption that "as a body, she [woman] exists for men" (qtd. in Opara 18). Femalists agitate that the woman's body is her personal possession, and should not be browbeaten or deceived or hoaxed to gift it away to the man-predator. She should be allowed to honourably use her body in ways that she is readily disposed and willingly poised to.

Literature is reformative. Adichie could be using her *Americanah* to reform enthusiasts intending to emigrate to America or Europe. She succeeds in her agenda by displaying Nigerian migrant-characters, who, out of their startling ugly experiences, rue their decision to be abroad. The characters such as Aunty Uju and Ifemelu could be oddly exemplary in exposing the dystopic disposition of female emigrants in America.

While still in Lagos, Uju whom the protagonist, Ifemelu, calls Aunty Uju, befriends the General, a military officer who is married with children. Uju cuckolds with him until die dies.

Before her pregnancy and eventual emigration to America, Uju seems subservient to the General's coital prescriptions. That could be the reason why she desperately pleads with Ifemelu to help her meet one of his conditions preparatory for their coital escapades: "Ifem, please come and help me trim my hair down there. Oga said it disturbs him" (*Americanah* 81). She is almost whorish with this old man.

At the General's instance, Uju chooses to go to America and deliver her baby. He secures a condo for her there; it is here that she bears Dike,

her son. However, the General dies in an air crash few days after Dike's one year birthday party in Lagos. But, the General's resources and connections at her disposal are enough for her in securing visa and returning to America with her son. It is not very long before Uju realises how difficult it is to live in America. She hardly settles down. She overworks to be able to settle her bills. She complains to Ifemelu: "Me, you can see I am working three jobs and yet it's not easy" (106). She seems not to have any choice, for "America had subdued her" (110). She is at the mercy of America or any available man. Little wonder why she has no hesitation in marrying Bartholomew, who though has spent thirty odd years in America has little or nothing to show for it. Of course, he does not meet Uju's fancy, but here is not Nigeria where she could have her feet down. As Ifemelu shows disquiet over Uju's intention to marry Bartholomew, Auntie Uju reminds her about their fate in a foreign land: "We are not in Nigeria, Ifem" (118). Similarly she intimates to her niece the reality of their being immigrants in America: "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" (119).

To speak of one's own lifestyle in America is a euphemistic way of saying that you shed yourself of your identity. You cannot keep your identity if you want to 'resettle' in America. Uju painfully resigns her own identity. We must report our disenchantment when we hear that "America had subdued her" (110). She had to live a fake, unsatisfying life in America, where she must answer what those in America call her rather than what her name really is. At the end of the day, America does not become a land of fulfilment for her. In fact, in her lamentation over the 'uncultured' cultural context that her son, Dike, is exposed to live and grow in, one can glean the degree of her frustration and disillusionment as she rhetorically asks: "Is this what I came to America for?" (141). We can only feel for her, but she has to bear it; she has to bear with the America that The General introduces her to before dying. The result of it is what Ifemelu informs Ranyinudo that Auntie Uju's relationship with The General was really what had "destroyed her" (422). One could add that America finishes her off.

For her own part, Ifemelu joins Uju in America on a student visa, but the intention is to babysit Dike while Uju is engaged with her multiple jobs. Ifemelu is hit with a mix of bafflement and disappointment at the America she finds. All the excitement of going to America dries up as soon as she gets there. Besides the nostalgic sickness that befalls her, she loses taste for America as she realises that she can never see another America than the one she is in. While she is stuck at the boundaries of utopia and dystopia, the narrator privileges us a peep into her new person: “There was a stripped-down quality to her life, a kindling starkness, without parents and friends and home, the familiar landmarks that made her who she was” (111). She almost becomes a branch detached from its stem. She suddenly becomes strange to herself. Ifemelunamma is already of age before travelling to America. She needs a job at least to maintain herself. But with a student visa she cannot get a job that can earn her enough to settle her bills, especially when she needs an apartment of her own.

If, however, she must get a job now, she must play the pranks many Black immigrants are wont to. She must deny herself. She must become somebody else, pronto. Ifemelu ‘becomes’ Ngozi Okonkwo. According to Auntie Uju, Ngozi Okonkwo has earned American citizenship before returning to Nigeria to start a business. So Ifemelu takes the name, Ngozi Okonkwo, in order to equip herself with a work permit. A Siswe Bansi complex at work!

While she goes to look for a job opportunity in South Philadelphia, “Ifemelu forgot that she was someone else” (130); she betrays herself when she mentions her real name instead of her fake one. She quickly comes to the realisation that she has lost herself. But in order to be qualified for a job she must subsist with the pseudo name. She rehearses Ngozi Okonkwo in front of a (standing) mirror before going for another day’s job interview.

That is just the beginning of her misery in America. After attending many interviews without success she is compelled to think, like her fanatically erratic mother, that her failure to secure a job is *spiritual*: maybe, some wizard is behind it. But time runs fast. She is about being

evicted from her apartment for her delay in paying her rent. She needs a job fast.

At last, there is a job in Ardmore by a sports coach; it is a job without the ritual of interview. The job description reads: *Female personal assistant for busy sports coach in Ardmore, communication and interpersonal skills required*. We are invited to listen to the implied interpretation of the description by the coach:

Now what I need is help to relax. If you want the job you have it. I'd pay you a hundred dollars a day, with the possibility of a raise, and you'd work as needed, no set schedule (143).

Ifemelu battles with the difficulty of fathoming the phrase 'help to relax'. But he quickly, volubly offers explanations: "Look, you're not a kid... You can give me a massage, help me relax, you know" (144). He goes ahead to let her know how greatly his pay offer can help her in settling both tuition fees and all.

Ifemelu, struggling with ample moral gravitas, excuses herself to think about this job that amounts to violating her body. She cannot see herself accepting this job, but the pressure to immediately settle her rent heightens, as Allison continually knocks on her door, dropping the embarrassing message: "Just wanted to remind you, your rent cheque isn't on the table. We're already really late" (152). But there is no other job for her except the one that relatively qualifies as a domestic job that demands her massaging *a busy man*, and keeping him warm. And she needs money fast. She is compelled to decide for an interoperable transaction with her body, an action that proves a farrago of feelings, almost pronto. She accepts this dehumanising condition, taking refuge in principle to Thomas Moore's idea that "people will do anything for money" (111). Ifemelu grudgingly caves in with her body – as in a coinable theorem: sex as economics – against her wish.

Her resolve to allow her body to be super exploited is a 'normal' predicament since she is a Third World woman and an immigrant in a First World country. It is the ugly lot of women immigrants. We corroborate the opinion of Rajeswar Rajan and You-Me Park in which they aver that some third world women "because of their migrant and

often illegal stature, tend to be super exploited... In all instances of sex workers, domestic workers and factory workers, they are predictably subjected to sexual harassment and assaults" (qtd. in Sekula 19). Ifemelu's case as a third world woman and an immigrant as well as a desperate woman who could qualify as a nervous wreck, could not have been different. Survival is by submitting to sexual exploitation.

It needs emphasising, however, that the point at issue is not that Ifemelu accepts and does massage the coach at a paltry price of a hundred dollars, a price fixed by the coach. The point at issue is the challenge of living with the reality of distortions, of dislocation, of dismembering of body and soul. Ifemelu, after the deed and remuneration, finds out that she has been cut up and cut off herself. She is close to being severed from herself. The narrator tells us how bad she feels:

Now, even after 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.* (Italics added, 154)

As it dawns on her that a part of her body does not belong to her any longer,

She began to cry... she washed her hands with water so hot that it scalded her fingers... She took off all her clothes and squashed them into a rumpled ball that she threw at a corner... She would never again wear those clothes, never even touch them (154).

She seems to have run into a psychopathic spot. In her high paranoid state, the narrator continues to inform us about her trauma, her agony:

She sat naked on her bed and looked at her life... her body rising with loathing... She imagined packing her things, somehow buying a ticket and going back to Lagos. She curled on her bed and cried, wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened (154).

She may have immediately gone gaunt courtesy of the overbearing burden of worry, of guilt. But what is done is done, Lady Macbeth would say.

The bottom line is that Ifemelu has lost herself to the coach, to America. What she has done with the coach is sexual, though she does it under duress. Maybe, under the chain of consternation, and the aim to re-assert her liberty at unprodded sex, much later, she readily and willingly gifts sex to the dirty, irresponsibly-looking Rob. It is almost a reckless act by her. But she has already lost herself to the coach, to America. In fact, she would think, as Aunty Uju would believe, that sex is “something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself” (288). Other than dying, nothing could be more tragic than going numb and coming round only to sense being haunted by the suffocating feeling that one has lost oneself.

To rediscover herself, it dawns on Ifemelu that it is high time she returned to Nigeria, her home. This, she does. It appears she succeeds in the quest for rediscovery, for, she reconnects with her root, parents, and reunites with her ‘lost-but-found’ fiancé, Obinze, though all can never again be as usual.

Conclusion

From the above study, one observes that Adichie presents America or ‘abroad’ as a bait to people whose countries’ leaders have failed in the primary responsibilities of securing lives and providing employment and social welfare to the youths, especially the women. The irony, however, is that rather than being the land of utopia the emigrants would look forward to, America or Europe turns out to be a land of dystopia where violation and frustration are rife. Moreover, a feminist reading of *Americanah* reveals that women emigrants are the worst hit by violence. For the woman, the ‘franchise’ of living as an emigrant is a threat to her sexuality, it violates her; it pushes her to a point where she helplessly gives away her dignity, identity and self. In fact, in order to reclaim these lost glories, she must return, even if it means as a prodigal, to her own country.

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