

## **Feminist Pedagogies in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah**

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### **Abstract**

Feminism as a phenomenon has gained widespread recognition in Africa over the course of the recent decades. The perception of women who self-identify as feminists are often characterized as extremist, as their beliefs and actions are seen as contravening against African customs and traditions. This study diligently examines the exploitation and oppression endured by women, effectively illustrating the oppressive condition that leads them to be psychological wrecks. As a result, people become aware of the importance of institutionalising societal reforms in order to improve the status of women in patriarchal society. The finding of this study implicitly encourages the collaboration between men and women as an essential ideology in the current social and political transitions taking place in the African continent. The methodology employed by the central character in the literary work to emancipate herself could conceivably be regarded as revolutionary. The utilization of African Reformist Feminism serves as the theoretical framework for the critical examination of the novel. Indeed, it is an undeniable verity that women endure subjugation, dehumanization, and a multitude of cruelties perpetrated by men. Nevertheless, within the purview of this feminist paradigm, one must also acknowledge certain affirmative facets

inherent in patriarchal societies, which foster the cultivation of harmonious cohabitation between men and women. Consequently, reformist feminism strategically employs the inclusion of positive male characters in its discourse, with the aim of fostering a transformative shift in the mindset of men who harbour repressive inclinations towards women. By presenting men as potential agents of change, reformist feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle the existing patriarchal power structures, urging men to perceive women as equal and indispensable partners in the collective progress of civilization.

**Keywords:** Reformist feminism, Political leanings, Sexual orientation, Age, State of health.

The doctrine of feminism espouses the principle of egalitarianism, advocating for equality between the genders across various domains encompassing politics, economics, and social engagements. In accordance with the tenets of feminist ideology, it is imperative to acknowledge the presence of a historical backdrop that has engendered the contemporary discourse surrounding feminism among women. The essential determinant in the pursuit of equality for women lies in the personal encounters of those who have matured within a societal framework predominantly governed by males. *Americanah*, the subject of this analysis delves into the backdrop of the vibrant Nigerian milieu. The text portrays the narrative of Ifemelu, a youthful Nigerian woman who embarks on a journey to the United States with the intention of pursuing higher education at a University. The literary work chronicle the life of Ifemelu in both nations, encompassing her experiences with racial discrimination, alongside her amorous relationship with Obinze, a friend from her formative years.

Adichie possesses an astute awareness of the fact that racial discriminations fail to permeate through individuals within the United States. The rationale behind the prevailing

tendency among individuals in the United States is to instinctively employ the term “blacks and poor whites” as opposed to “poor blacks and poor whites” when engaging in discourse pertaining to matters of race and socioeconomic status. Adichie’s discerning observations predominantly revolve around the intricacies inherent in language. When individuals exhibit reluctance in employing the term ‘racist,’ they instead opt for the expression ‘racially charged.’ The fundamental tenets of human rights, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, dictate that equality among individuals is a paramount principle. In contemporary society, a plethora of factors persistently contribute to the manifestation of prejudice. These factors encompass individuals’ ethnic, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as their religious, linguistic, and gender orientations. The examination of political inclinations, sexual orientation, age, state of health, and similar factors holds significant relevance and contemplation. Discrimination in its various manifestations, particularly those predicated upon the notion of ‘race,’ persist as enduring and pervasive phenomena within contemporary society. The perils associated with prejudice have become increasingly pronounced within modern societies due to the phenomenon of globalization, which has engendered a heightened sense of multiculturalism. The culture of respect and tolerance is of utmost importance in order to guarantee harmonious coexistence within a heterogeneous society.

Adichie’s perspectives on race and racism permeate her literary opus, where she deftly weaves a narrative that encompasses both the personal and the overarching analysis and evaluation of race and racism in the US, England, and Nigeria. Despite her Nigerian heritage, Ifemelu does not identify as black. Nigerian society has a racial hierarchy. Modern society values light-skinned or mixed-race people. Thus, some use various products to lighten

their skin. Ifemelu and Obinze discover that racism is more pervasive than they thought when they travel to the US and England.

Ifemelu awakens to her black identity after being forced to adapt to America's complex racial dynamics. Obinze is called a "knee-grow" by his detractors for scratching his knee (33). Society also thinks Curt and Ifemelu's romance is unlikely. The narrative also shows discrimination when patients refuse Auntie Uju as their doctor. Ifemelu then creates a race-focused digital platform, demonstrating her intellectual independence. Adichie skillfully blends these blog pieces into the plot, creating a cohesive whole. Through the blogs, Adichie is able to engage in a highly public debate that critically criticizes US racism. Ifemelu adeptly explains a multitude of microaggressions, circumstances, and presumptions that have been placed upon her, which Caucasians may not always notice or understand. She does this with candour and fun. Ifemelu's association with Blaine and a large part of her writing focus on navigating disparities between African Americans and American Africans, or African immigrants to the US who experience racial discrimination for the first time.

Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship is founded on feelings of love, respect, and desire for one another. Ifemelu's choice to relocate to the United States in order to pursue additional education at a university level is the most critical decision in their lives because it means they will be separated from one another. Adichie, portrays this young man with care and kindness, making him lovable from the very beginning of his storey as a powerful character. Their love is flawless until Ifemelu's life takes a catastrophic change, and she becomes unable to maintain any form of romantic connection anymore. Essentially, Obinze provides her with maturity gained through life experience; he is the one who knows her the best since he has been through a similar scenario and acculturation process himself. Apart from that, Obinze has also had to deal with a lot of obstacles that have been stacked up against him as a result of

his race. Even though Obinze is still in Nigeria, Ifemelu feels supported and understood by him.

The central character of the novel, Ifemelu, can be described as a ‘Americanah’ in her own right, as she embarked on a journey to the United States with the intention of pursuing higher education. Subsequently, she resided in the United States for an extended period of over ten years before ultimately returning to her homeland of Nigeria. Contrary to the aforementioned trajectory, the novel undertakes an exploration of diverse manifestations of cultural values, examining the notions that are esteemed and those that are subject to social stigma. It delves into the intricate dynamics of how individuals are perceived by society and how they perceive themselves. Moreover, it collectively scrutinises the manner in which our identities are shaped by the overarching theme of race.

*Americanah* is a well-written and eloquent novel that serves as a timely warning that, while racism has been outlawed in Western countries, it is nonetheless built into institutional structures and outmoded individual belief systems. *Americanah* is concerned not only with how racism is implemented on a larger scale, but also with the little occurrences that occur on a daily basis, highlighting the differences in cultural values and definitions between Nigeria, the United States, and the United Kingdom (UK). After relocating to Philadelphia for further study, Ifemelu meets Ginika, a friend from back home who had also relocated to the United States a few years before. Furthermore, while *Americanah* is a story about a group of individuals, it is also a broad examination and critique of race and racism in America, England, and Nigeria, among other places.

A clear representation of the complicity and mutual understanding that exists among the African community, is a pleasure to behold. As Frantz Fanon himself acknowledges in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, “the black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow

Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man.” (1). This is due to the direct impacts of colonialism as well as the white supremacy that has been imposed on the African-American population. With regard to Ifemelu, her cooperation with Obinze is made clear throughout the novel: he is the only one who understands her plight and is willing to accept her problems. We find ourselves in a braiding salon in Trenton, New Jersey, at the opening of the tale, when Ifemelu is preparing to get her hair braided before going to Nigeria. We can categorically state that

Adichie employs the realm of hair and braiding in a braiding salon in Trenton, New Jersey, at the opening of the tale, when Ifemelu is preparing to get her hair braided before going to Nigeria, to demonstrate how political and personal concerns – such as ‘race’ and gender – may become inextricably intertwined with one another. It would appear to the reader that the females who work at the salon are all non-native Americans, and as a result, they would feel a certain amount of affinity towards Ifemelu. Nonetheless, their characters are completely distinct from hers, and they are unable to identify with her in any way:

Ifemelu looked at Aisha, a small, ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin who had two Igbo boyfriends, implausible as it seemed, and who was now insistent that Ifemelu should meet them and urge them to marry her. It would have made for a good blog post: “A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy.” (22)

Even if both ladies are from the same continent and, thus, share a same history, we cannot presume that they are in a comfortable setting in this situation. When it comes to Ifemelu’s character, she is a fiercely independent woman with a strong personality. She does not adhere to any social standards, as many other women would do: she believes in herself and does not

care about what other people think of her decisions. Furthermore, Ifemelu's connection with Aisha — the little girl who is braiding her hair — highlights the ambiguity and complexities that exist within transnational relationships and between “Nigerians in America, Africans in America, and, indeed, immigrants in America” (19). When asked by Aisha about her experience in America and the number of years she has spent there, Ifemelu feels compelled to lie about her knowledge of the country and the number of years she has spent there in order to feel superior and integrated into American society:

Ifemelu took her time putting her phone back into her bag. Years ago, she had been asked a similar question, at a wedding of one of Aunt Uju's friends, and she had said two years, which was the truth, but the jeer on the Nigerian's face had taught her that, to earn the prize of being taken seriously [...] she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half. Eight years, she said when it was five. Now that it was thirteen years, lying seemed unnecessary but she lied anyway. “Fifteen years,” she said. (19)

However, coming back to the point at which the protagonist begins to establish herself in the United States, we are told how she comes into contact with a group of students at her institution who are members of the African Students Association. When it comes to other African people living in an American neighbourhood, Ifemelu's emotions towards them are expressed in the following verse.

They mimicked what Americans told them: You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It's so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa. And they themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole

again. Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here she did not have to explain herself. (171)

Ifemelu creates a blog shortly after arriving in the United States, titled “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) by a Non-American Black,” shortly after her arrival. This blog, which has a huge number of subscribers, has a variety of entries that portray the experiences of African immigrants in the United States of America. Ifemelu is able to explain her views on ‘race’ in a simple manner through her writing, which is a testament to her talent. It is a method for her to express herself without worrying about what other people think of her; it is also a way for her to help others in her situation by sharing her experiences in a bitter-sweet manner with others. Additionally, when Ifemelu initially came in the United States, one of her primary worries was finding work. It is incredibly difficult for her to get a legitimate employment that would allow her to support herself. As a result, and after several unsuccessful interviews, Ifemelu chooses to take a position that will significantly improve her status as a woman and as a black person. This is due to the fact that she chooses to work for a white man who has certain expectations of Ifemelu, including the following:

She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be there, 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. [...] He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. (189)

Because she is unable to face reality and tell Obinze what she has done, this is one of the incidents that, as the author previously stated, will have an impact on her identity as a woman. It is also the breaking point in her relationship with him, as she does not know how to tell him what she has done. This marks a watershed moment in Ifemelu’s life since Obinze



emerges as her confidante and the person in whom she places the most faith in a situation in which she feels completely out of place. During her first few months in the United States, his phone conversations have a calming effect on her, and she begins to feel optimistic about her future as a result of him. Nonetheless, from this point on, Ifemelu ignores Obinze's calls and refuses to respond to his letters; she has been deeply affected by her own acts and does not want Obinze to bear the brunt of her mistakes.

The fact that Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and re-establishes her connection with Obinze after spending many years in the United States, attempting to become someone she is not, is startling. Readers can now visualize a lady who is "whole," who is ready to face any obstacle since she has been reunited with the love of her life after a long separation. This juncture, which coincides with the conclusion of the story, serves as the culmination of her quest for an identity. Eventually, she discovers that there is no place like home after years of adventure, experiences, and pain; and Obinze represents home to her in this way.

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