



Resistance to Cultural Imperialism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This paper takes a cursory look at the conceptual framework of what cultural imperialism entails with the help of some instances experienced by the characters of Nigerian origin in contemporary American society, and a closer look at the transportation and importation of western cultural values and the implantation of the same in their minds. This work particularly looks at Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and distills classical cases of cultural imperialism. This paper examines how *Americanah* gives voice to the colonial legacy of Nigeria and how a key feature of colonialism—the adoption of the colonizer's language and culture as a tactic of colonial conquest—works to negate one's culture and refashion the colonial subject's identity. The paper concludes by identifying the various ways in which the characters seek to resist cultural imperialism by reasserting their identity as Nigerians and embracing one's authentic self.

Key words: culture, cultural imperialism, identity, Americana.

Culture represents "the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviours, and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next" (Henslin, 1995, p. 35). Culture in this respect will include material objects that distinguish a group of people like the buildings, works of art, machinery, clothing, jewellery, hairstyles, utensils, and weapons. While the non-material culture includes the community's ways of thinking like its beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world, and its common patterns of behaviour including language and other forms of interaction. Culture, according to Rothkopf (1997), is quite dynamic and often grows out of a systematically encouraged reverence for selected customs and habits. In other words, no present day culture is a product of merely one historic or political source, rather people continually re-establish their culture by what they choose to accept. Cultural imperialism, on the other

hand, has been defined by Hamm and Smandych (2005), White (2001) as the domination of one culture over another other by a deliberate policy or by economic or technological superiority. Cultural imperialism therefore arises where there is a deliberate attempt to downplay an extant culture of a group or community in preference for the cultural values of an imperial power. It was this experience that the various cultural groups in most part of Africa, including what Nigeria went through and it is still going through as a result of the compulsive transplantation of their cultural values with the colonial masters' values. With particular reference to Nigeria, several cultural taboos were introduced by the British and in fact, became the order of the day as a result of the ethnocentrism, which means the use of one's own culture as a yardstick for judging the way of other individuals, groups, or

communities, generally leading to a negative evaluation of their values, norms, and behaviour.

Cultural imperialism is an integral part of the larger concept of imperialism, which on its own, entails the political, territorial and geographical subjugation of the will, independence and sovereignty of a less powerful state, to the political will, political control, and authority of a more powerful state. This implies beyond the loss of political, territorial, economic, social, and cultural controls by the lesser state or group to the whims of the superior state, even sometimes, in capricious dimensions. Classical examples abound in history of the concept of imperialism of Europe, and more currently American imperialism over African and Asian states.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is replete with so many instances of cultural shocks arising from the imposition of the imperialist culture on the Nigerian people. To understand the work itself, it is necessary to understand the author's background. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in the post-independent Nigeria, precisely 1977. Her background of growing up and substantially being educated in Nigeria, from primary to university, where she was engaged in the study of Medicine in one of the Universities in Nigeria afforded her a grand opportunity of experiencing firsthand, the true consequences of cultural imperialism. She has published short stories in literary magazines in Nigeria, the UK, and USA. A study of her works has drawn subtle comparisons to the works of one of the masters of African literature, Chinua Achebe. Her mastery in portraying the cultural details have positioned her work worthy of literary appraisal, especially in the area of the clash of cultures between the imperialist West and the indigenous African value system.

Adichie's award-winning novel *Americanah* is about a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who immigrates to the United States where she struggles with racism, relationships, and identity. After Nigeria's independence from the British Empire in 1960, the country faced a series of military coups, and the government passed from one general to another. The resulting instability had catastrophic

effects for the nation's infrastructure. Poor working conditions and late payments for the staffs of the universities caused strikes, and universities closed for months at a time. Amidst this chaos, many Nigerians chose to immigrate to countries like the United States and Britain in search of opportunities. Adichie has said that she wanted to depict this kind of immigration in *Americanah*, one of the middle-class immigrants on a quest for more opportunities instead of fleeing danger.

In *Americanah*, a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, moves to the United States for school, leaving behind her boyfriend, Obinze, and her family. It's a story of relocation, far-flung love and life as an alien, spread across three continents. After Ifemelu lands in the United States, she becomes, among other things, a blogger, writing funny, punchy updates about black life in America — from hairstyles to politics — intended for America's blacks and nonblacks, and for non-American blacks. She writes, "Of all their tribalisms, Americans are most uncomfortable with race. If you are having a conversation with an American, and you want to discuss something racial that you find interesting, and the American says, 'Oh, it's simplistic to say it's race; racism is so complex,' it means they just want you to shut up already."

Ifemelu's luck changes when Ginika introduces her to Kimberly, a white woman who needs a babysitter. The steady work offers her a chance to focus on her studies. She meets Kimberly's wealthy cousin, Curt, who is immediately smitten with her. They start dating, and when Ifemelu graduates, Curt helps her get a job that will sponsor her green card. For the job interview, Ifemelu needs to have her hair relaxed so that it will look professional according to American standards. The relaxer burns her scalp, and her friend Wambui encourages her to try wearing her hair natural. At first, Ifemelu thinks her hair is ugly, but soon grows to love it. Ifemelu starts a blog focusing on her observations on race in America as a non-American black woman, and her clever posts soon lead to its popularity as she experiences America both as a black as well as an African woman.

Ifemelu's reclamation of her natural hair mirrors her acceptance of her Nigerian identity. When she first cuts her hair down, Ifemelu believes her hair to be ugly. This shame is similar to how she's made to feel about her Nigerian accent, leading her to affect an American one. Just as she considers her American accent to be a false air she puts on, by relaxing her hair she forces a part of herself to contort into an unnatural shape. Others do not allow Ifemelu's hair to be a neutral representation of Ifemelu's identity. Ifemelu's coworkers assume her hair is a political statement. Her Nigerian friends don't understand her natural hairstyle, mirroring how Nigerian immigrants throughout the novel are allured by Western culture. Although caring for her natural hair takes effort, Ifemelu finds joy in conditioning, contrasting the stress of relaxing her hair. Similarly, her return to Nigeria has challenges, but she finds satisfaction instead of doubt in writing about Lagos. Ifemelu's love of her hair, therefore, matches her love of Nigeria, and she finds joy in authenticity.

Ifemelu's journey to America is more an idea other people had for her than her own. Throughout the novel, she turns more to the markers of her true self, including her real accent, her natural hair, and eventually a return to Nigeria. Ifemelu is the protagonist of *Americanah* because her self-actualization lies at the narrative's heart. Ifemelu's departure for America ignites the major conflict: her separation from Obinze. Despite Ifemelu's independent spirit, she doesn't initiate her immigration to America, but agrees to Obinze's American dream in part because of Obinze's belief that America is the future.

An exchange early in the novel—told in the form of a flashback before the protagonist Ifemelu leaves for the United States—captures how language shapes one's identity. Ifemelu and Obinze are outside of a party trading traditional proverbs. During the exchange they move in and out of speaking Igbo and English: "If something bigger than the farm is dug up, the barn is sold," Obinze says, to which Ifemelu replies, "If you kill a warrior in a local fight, you'll remember him when fighting enemies" (62). In each case both Ifemelu and Obinze deliver the proverb in Igbo first then translate it into English.

The literary strategy mobilized by Adichie captures the duality of their identities that is bifurcated by language and marked by the legacy of British colonial rule. Ifemelu says, "How do you know all that? ... Many guys won't even speak Igbo, not to mention knowing proverbs," as she can only recite three traditional proverbs herself (62). This passage speaks to the politics of language in addition to constituting the form of the novel itself; it is multilingual. The explicit political concern Adichie exposes is that the legacy of colonialism has removed younger generations of Nigerians from their native language and by extension ways of knowing through the transmission of knowledge via proverbs from one generation to the next that creates their identity. Adichie highlights how English suppresses the identity and culture Igbo provides. *Americanah* gives voice to the colonial legacy of Nigeria and how a key feature of colonialism—the adoption of the colonizer's language as a tactic of colonial conquest—works to negate one's culture and refashion the colonial subject's identity.

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So, what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. (Adichie)

This quotation, which comes from the blog post that ends Chapter 21, sums up Ifemelu's realization that Americans do not differentiate between black Americans and black non-Americans. A major part of the post details the ways this conflation means that black non-Americans need to accept and work within the rules of this identification in order to cope with the racist structures in America. Despite Auntie Uju's insistence that Dike is not black, Dike cannot escape the racism and microaggressions that black Americans must deal with. While Ifemelu is at university, the black Americans in her class become angry at Wambui's disagreement with them over the use of the n-word in fiction. They are angry in part because they did not expect to have to explain the pain of the n-word to a person who looks black, and because the white people listening could use Wambui's reasoning to justify their own use of the word. In all these cases,

attempting to ignore or go against expectations for black Americans makes life more complicated and difficult for black non-Americans.

She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. (Adichie)

This quotation marks the moment Ifemelu decides to stop faking an American accent after a telemarketer compliments her by telling her she sounds American. Ifemelu initially adopts an American accent because Cristina Tomas, the university registrar's receptionist, speaks to her as if she does not understand English well, causing Ifemelu to feel ashamed of her own accent. However, Ifemelu is not American, and by allowing herself to accept sounding American as an achievement, she accepts that being American is something to aspire to over being Nigerian. In this quotation, she acknowledges that American mannerisms and speech are not hers naturally, emphasizing that she still sees herself as Nigerian at heart. The telemarketer's comment therefore constitutes an empty victory because she does not value Americanness over Nigerianness, nor does she see herself as an American. This pivotal realization marks her first step to reclaiming her identity as a Nigerian woman and embracing her authentic self.

They would not understand why people like him, who were 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, were now resolved to do dangerous things . . . none of them starving . . . but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (Adichie)

Obinze makes this observation at Georgina and Emenike's dinner party in Chapter 29. As the dinner guests passionately talk about the importance of Britain remaining open to refugees, Obinze realizes that their image of an African illegal immigrant is someone fleeing desperate circumstances, someone who requires their benevolence. As the son of a university professor, Obinze has not been desperate until he immigrated

to London, where his status as an illegal immigrant takes an emotional toll on him and makes it extremely difficult to earn money. He has scrubbed toilets and committed fraud based on a seemingly false promise of a better life. The contradiction between how white British people imagine illegal African immigrants and Obinze's reality demonstrates how the image of a war-torn Africa allows the party guests to feel good about themselves as saviors. In light of this, Obinze believes that the people at the dinner party would not react well to his story because his suffering does not allow them to be heroes, but instead makes them complicit in the myth that the West is the only land of opportunity.

The novel draws inspiration partially from Adichie's experiences in the United States throughout college, and those of friends. Like her character Ifemelu, Adichie was taken aback at being considered black in the United States and the negativity associated with the label. In America, Ifemelu struggles as she's labeled "black" for the first time in her life, and discovers the racism prevalent, if not overt, in American society. As the novel progresses, Ifemelu becomes more comfortable rejecting American culture and white standards of beauty in favor of her authentic Nigerian self. She drops her American accent and wears her hair in its natural texture because she wants to be her true self. Her blog makes her feel fake because she must strain to understand race in America as an outsider. Therefore, her return to Nigeria is a return to her authentic self, the person she can be effortlessly. At the very end of the novel, while Ifemelu is sad at the possibility of losing Obinze, she is fully prepared to live without him because she has achieved a more complete sense of self by embracing her Nigerian identity.

The crisis of cultural imperialism clearly depicts the lack of learning or an upside down conceptualization of knowledge acquired for only selfish ends. This act of ethnocentrism allowed the imperial powers including Britain in their pursuit of self-interest to be blinded to the need to study and take advantage of the unique and rich indigenous cultures of the African people. In her work *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie provides a

classical platform for the exposition of some of these threads of cultural imperialism, and explores possible avenues of limiting or completely diffusing the unwarranted consequences of this cultural invasion on the psyche of the Nigerian people.

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