If You Don’t Like Their Story, Write Your Own: 
Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* and the New Postcolonial Literature

Abstract:
The novel *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is the focus of this study. Published in 2013, it narrates the lives of two Nigerians, Ifemelu and Obinze, who live and work abroad, before returning to their home country. The object of this essay is to, first, examine the evolution of postcolonial literature and place *Americanah* in its contemporary context. Second, to discuss the issues inherent to postcolonial and multicultural societies presented in the novel. Third, to examine the ways in which the choice of a Nigerian female protagonist deepens the discussion about female empowerment and social equality. Finally, the essay aims to analyse the influence of literary representations of the East, as noted in the novel. The essay uses postcolonial theory based on the criticism of Edward Said, Chinua Achebe, Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon, among others, to analyses the shift of contemporary African literature from a theme of anti-imperialism to the exposition of contemporary, transnational and multicultural issues. These new narratives reflect contemporary Diasporas, the nuances of globalization and the attempt to suppress of multiculturalism. The subversion and questioning of Western stereotypes of Africa made in *Americanah* definitely appeals to the general audience. Adichie’s work, as part of African literature, offers Western readers a different perspective on African countries, in particular Nigeria, breaking stereotypes by calling attention to the dangers of a single story. In *Americanah*, Adichie uses the power of communication of the traditional literary form to criticise Western standards and stereotypes about Africa. Adichie explores the different cultures of United States, England and Nigeria from an African perspective, identifying the Western culture as the other. *Americanah* raises issues of race, gender and immigration as well as language and literature. Adichie’s work represents the postcolonial power in a new perspective, in which the individual suppresses stereotypes and gains a sovereign place in contemporary literature in the English language.

Keywords: Literature; Postcolonialism; Nigeria; Language; Identity; Adichie.
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Introduction

There were immense changes in the 20th century, which affected all nations’ social and economic levels. These changes opened up the boundaries of a world that was, until then, a binary one and before that, imperialist. This process induced the fragmentation and spreading of cultures, followed by multiculturalism. In this context, it is important to recognize the decolonization of the East and the Americas as a decisive moment, from a geopolitical perspective, since it represents a drastic change on a worldwide scale. In the first half of the century, over 80% of the globe was composed of colonies and ex-colonies (Loomba xiii). Hence, the independence of more than half of the world’s population from the dominion of European empires, and the diaspora from these former colonies, demanded an increasing study of colonial times and their consequences in a postcolonial period. Since then, a series of analysis and studies devoted to the new global scenery began to emerge and create what is now called postcolonialism.

Postcolonial theory attempts to revise historical representations of former colonies in order to understand their present situation and possibly develop their own cultural identity. Edward Said’s Orientalism, published in 1978, is considered the literary work which properly inaugurates postcolonial criticism (Barry 186). In his book, Said refers to a specific way of establishing the place that the East occupies in European Western experience, whereby the East appears as adjacent to Europe “and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other” (Orientalism 1). Orientalism expresses and represents an opposition in cultural and ideological terms in a form of discourse, based on institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, bureaucracies and European colonial styles imposed on colonies (Said Orientalism 2). Undoubtedly, Western literature had to become more comprehensive.

The language and discourse of the European West started to be used by writers outside the Western tradition as they developed fictional discourses as an answer to the centuries of slander spread by classic literature. Although supposedly well intended and well informed, European writers constructed and imposed the ethnic images of the East, which begins in prejudice and, later, helps to perpetuate it. In this sense, the literary production of former colonies possesses the capacity to respond to imperialism by bringing other visions and replacing metaphors of their own history. Moreover, postcolonial cultures appropriate the classic Western literary forms and use them
according to their own specifications. It allows them to propose a more dignified version of the narratives that represent their culture, which once had no institutional or intellectual legitimacy and was often ignored by academia.

In her latest novel, *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie expands the range of representation of African subjects through the complexity of her main characters and the cultural tensions they must confront at home and abroad. The novel focuses on the lives of Ifemelu and Obinze, two Igbo Nigerians who meet in high school, move abroad in search of more opportunities, and come back to their homeland – and to each other – as more experienced individuals with a better understanding of themselves and of the world. The fact that Adichie starts and ends her story in Nigeria works as a powerful symbol of boldness and independence in postcolonial literature. Adichie is both geographically and worldly precise when exploring social relations and identity in the United States and England. Furthermore, she explores the influence and diversity of the English language in former colonies, as opposed to the danger of disappearance of native languages.

The different events occurring in *Americanah* change significantly the lives of the protagonists and might as well change the mind of its readers by promoting a wider vision of the world of these characters, as well as through a comprehensive narrative focus and discussions of matters such as politics, culture and religion, among others. From Adichie’s work, arises a new experience in literature of the English language and the renewal of the African literary canon, with the inclusion of contemporary discourses. Novels, such as *Americanah*, might direct English literary culture to a more inclusive interaction between former empires and new democracies.

1 Postcolonial Literature

Postcolonial criticism attempts to deconstruct the European vision of postcolonial nations with the intent of exposing its prejudice. Furthermore, it helps colonized peoples to regain ownership of their narratives and become protagonists in their own stories. In this sense, postcolonial literature provides an opportunity for historical transformation. Through accounts of personal and collective experiences, inside communities and among different cultures, it reveals the complex dialog between the traditional and the contemporary. Furthermore, a diverse perspective in literature causes reflection on the new socio-political conditions of ex-colonies and their effects on the identity of postcolonial individuals.
Stories were the medium which writers and explorers depicted places, peoples and cultures strange to them. In the same manner, they can be a tool for postcolonial cultures “to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (Said Culture and Imperialism 11). These new stories can disempower previous classic narratives by bringing perspectives and opinions previously silenced. As observed by Said, the themes of emancipation and social awareness in narratives prepared postcolonial cultures to free themselves from the colonizer’s oppression, whilst also influencing American and European readers to expect more egalitarian narratives (Culture and Imperialism 11).

Western novels distinguish Africa as a place diametrically different to Europe, and, therefore, the opposite to civilization. This stereotypical vision the West has of Africa owes much to the depiction of African subjects in novels such as Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. In 1958, Chinua Achebe published Things Fall Apart, a reaction to the legacy left by western fiction, such as Conrad’s. Achebe questions the colonialisist discourses and practices of the British while at the same time he investigates the reality and logic of his native culture, dissecting the internal contradictions and responsibilities of Africans in the fate of their own societies. Achebe’s characters could not be more distant from the ‘wild’ native portrayed in Heart of Darkness.

Regarding the success of Conrad’s work, Achebe concludes that: “racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked” (“An Image of Africa” 709). Things Fall Apart tries to revive myths, signs and images of Nigeria through the story of Okonko and the Igbo people, before and during the arrival of the missionaries. Its success shows how necessary it is to recount the past as a history of resistance while inspiring a feeling of identity. As he notes in another essay: “I would be quite satisfied if my novels … did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Achebe Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays 197).

1.1 Contemporary Nigerian Literature

Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, - one of the most notable African authors, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature - inspired the appearance of a new generation of writers. Young authors of African descent writing in English are increasingly finding
a place in the literary sector, particularly in the United States. Their books feature in best-seller lists, gather impressive reviews and win major awards (Lee). A key difference from this generation to Achebe’s is that the stories being told “while sometimes set in Africa, often reflect the writers’ experiences of living, studying or working elsewhere and are flecked with cultural references — and settings — familiar to Western audiences” (Lee).

Nigerian author Teju Cole reflects on the transition between cultures in his novel *Open City* and writes about the Western view of Africa in his essay “The Industrial Complex of the White Saviour.” Rotimi Babatunde’s “The Bombay Republic” – winner of the Caine Prize – tells the story of a former Nigerian sergeant who fought in the Second World War for the British Empire, who, when he returns to his country, declared his house a sovereign state. Babatunde explains that the previous generations of African authors addressed common themes, such as colonialism and dictatorship. On the other hand, the new generation does not have many unifying elements, leading to a proliferation of styles and themes. He adds that his goal as a writer is bigger than the deconstruction of stereotypes of Africa, he also intends to mediate human experiences among individuals in his fiction, and make each character as complex as possible. In this process, misconceptions are exposed as the intolerant prejudices they are (Babatunde).

Other themes addressed by this new generation of writers are the return of Nigerian immigrants living in Europe and the United States, the expansion of the middle class in Nigeria, and the intimidation from Boko Haram. Adichie chooses a traditional Western literary style and the language of the colonizer to deliver her story. These were two strategic elements used by Western empires to spread their values, in order to secure cultural domination over the colonies as well as relaying supposed European superiority. Given that situation, Adichie uses those literary tools masterfully, when she takes ownership of them, as an outsider, and place her characters in the West to precisely criticize Western ignorance about the East.

2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie already has a strong presence in contemporary African literature and her works are well known and praised in Western literary circles. In addition, her words have been sampled by pop music artists and she is celebrated for her speeches in TED conferences, making her ideas also reach non-readers.
Born in Nigeria, Adichie published her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, at age 25. She won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for a first novel and, three years later, her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, about the Biafran War, won the Orange Prize. The international success and favourable criticism of her books places Adichie among great authors of the Nigerian tradition, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. Undoubtedly, this happens because she offers a valuable vision of the world. She represents a side of history, which is rarely heard, yet is most powerful. Her last novel, *Americanah*, explicitly raises issues related to the negotiation of identities. The author uses the story of Ifemelu to expose the coexistence of differences and, at the same time, a lack of belief in a consensus between them. Her main characters are part of academic and politicized environments and engage in constant bourgeois intellectual debates about race, ethnicity and culture in Nigeria, the United States and England.

Adichie has experienced a different African reality than the one existing in the Western imagination. Born in 1977 of a middle class family, she spent her early years at the university campus in the city of Nsukka in Nigeria, where her mother worked as an administrator and her father as a teacher. Later, she moved to the United States as a university student. Indeed, Adichie’s life and work represent the diversity of a continent marked by a single story. She recounts that, from an early age, she used to read British and American stories. Consequently, the texts she produced as a child were filled with characters with blond hair, who played in the snow, ate apples, and were happy to see the sun appear. Western literature had created a world in her imagination stronger than her own, a place where most people have dark skin, eat mangoes, and there is no surprise at the sunshine. When Adichie first read African novels, she realized that people of dark complexion and a hair texture, which cannot be turned into ponytails, could also be literary characters. African authors, she says, saved her from the dangers of a single story. (Adichie “African ‘Authenticity’” 43-44).

At the age of nineteen, while living as a student in the United States, her American roommate was shocked to realize that Adichie spoke English proficiently and wanted to know where she learnt it. Her roommate was surprised to know that English is Nigeria’s official language. Then she asks Adichie to play some ‘tribal music’, but is disappointed to see Adichie’s Mariah Carey CDs (Adichie *The Danger of a Single Story*). With these
anecdotes, Adichie reveals how a single story also affects the way the world perceives her.

3 The Novel

*Americanah*, is an involving story that takes its audience to Lagos, in 1990, where Ifemelu and Obinze experience their first love relationship and Nigeria faces challenging times under a military government. Ifemelu, a middle class Nigerian student, moves to the United States after a sequence of strikes at universities in Nigeria. In America, Ifemelu has to deal for the first time with racism, but also the burdens of life as an immigrant woman. Over ten years later, Ifemelu is a successful blogger in the United States, but her steady life abroad neither lessens her attachment to Nigeria, nor changes her connection to Obinze. When she finally returns to Nigeria, Ifemelu finds a different country than the one she had left. Obinze intended to join Ifemelu in the United States, but after having his visa denied, he moves to England as an illegal immigrant. Years later, he returns to Nigeria and becomes a wealthy man by working as a real estate agent. With the continuous distance created between him and Ifemelu, Obinze marries another woman and has a child. When both Ifemelu and Obinze meet in Nigeria, they must make tough decisions about reviving their relationship. Adichie uses an interesting non-linear narrative structure, in which every part is focused in one of them, while a third-person narrator exposes the much more intricate universe of these characters. However, the expectation of Ifemelu and Obinze’s reencounter is mainly a guide to the discussion and criticisms proposed in the narrative, a background to expose the difficulties both characters come across when trying to become legal residents in the United States and England.

According to Izevbaye, “Both the literature and its criticism have been governed by an African awareness of its relation to the modern European world and by a preoccupation with the displacement of the west from the centre of the universe” (127). Adichie creates in *Americanah* a powerful narrative that displays contemporary post-colonial issues by exploring the cultures of the United States, England and the different African identities from a Nigerian perspective. In postcolonial literature, the novel represents a shift in narratives away from blaming imperialism by discussing contemporary domestic, socio-political and transcultural concerns. When Adichie uses
different geographic perspectives in *Americanah*, she offers a comprehensive diversity of themes and a more accurate representation of the hybridity of her country.

Africa is generally referred to as a place with no agency, without its geographical or cultural distinctions being considered. Such oversimplification is a disservice to the continent’s identity (Adichie “*African ‘Authenticity’*”). In contrast, *Americanah* displays metropolitan middle-class characters, business people and academics, as well as poor, uneducated, rural and traditionalist characters. Adichie represents the various places of Nigeria constituted by diversity, urban spaces and educated individuals, also often characterized in Eurocentric traits. By doing so, she incorporates contemporary Nigeria into literature, not as a uniform mass as proposed by the West, but as local modernity itself, marked by the processes of globalization and cross-cultural issues. This juxtaposition between local and global, private and public, reveals the similarities between individuals in the West with the ones in Africa. Thus, the range of different characters from the different social, financial and educational layers, helps Western readers to identify themselves with the narrative. From the communication between social and personal, Adichie provides a reflection on old and new African problems. This is how *Americanah* creates a form to dilute and problematize a single view on places, beliefs and identities.

3.1 Immigration

After establishing her life in the United States, Ifemelu reaches economic stability by writing a blog. Her new work leads her to speak in social events and begin a fellowship at Princeton. However, Ifemelu decides not to continue her promising career. The main question posed at the opening of the novel is why Ifemelu wants to move back from USA to Nigeria after 13 years without any apparent reason? Although what causes the character to move away from Nigeria is a view of the United States as a land of opportunities, her reason for returning is rather particular: “...there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness” (Adichie *Americanah* Ch.1). As a result, after thirteen years living in the United States, Ifemelu longs for a Nigeria that has changed - as she did - and for the love of a man whom she has not spoken with for over a decade. “Nigeria became where she
was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze” (Adichie Americanah Ch.1).

Obinze is a middle class and well-educated boy who plans to move to the United States and meet Ifemelu, but his visa is denied after 9/11. Later, he travels to London with his mother, to a University conference, and does not come back to Nigeria. At this point, Obinze’s story is used in the novel to expose the vulnerable situation faced by illegal immigrants. Obinze is undocumented, has to live with somebody else’s identity, and often has to remind himself of his new name. He tries to make his situation legal through an arranged marriage, but the fraud is discovered and he is deported immediately. Obinze states that in England things happen as if people lived in a world where the present has no connection with the past (Adichie Americanah Ch.37), referring to the African diaspora. Moreover, English citizens do not seem to understand any reality outside the African stereotype, as it is observed in a party, where Obinze meets old friends and other English guests:

Alexa and the other guests, and perhaps even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. 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, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (Adichie Americanah Ch.29)

The prevailing notion of African immigration the West has, is that of refugees of wars, fleeing terrible poverty. Immigrants are often expected to be deeply grateful for being allowed in a Western, so-called developed country. However, the reality in which Adichie places her characters is very different. They represent members of an educated Nigerian middle class who wish to leave their homelands because they have dreams and want more opportunities. They may or may not succeed, but mainly they have difficulty adjusting to a new culture.
This is the case of Ifemelu’s aunt Uju. A former lover of a General of the Nigerian military regime, Uju moves to the United States to give birth to their child, as well as with the intention of applying to medical school and continuing the education she started back in Nigeria. “Nigeria will not be like this forever, I’m sure I will find part-time work and it will be tough, yes, but one day I will start my clinic, and on The Island!” (Adichie Americanah Ch.3) she says to Ifemelu before leaving her country. After a year, the general is killed and Uju does not come back. Uju is one of the most important secondary characters in the narrative and a clear example of the prejudice faced by immigrants: she spends years working up to three jobs simultaneously, until she validates her Nigerian diploma and is hired by a private practice. There, Uju begins to notice the strange looks directed at her, while white patients refuse her medical care as they do not believe she is a capable professional.

In Ifemelu’s case, it is the political situation in Nigeria that causes students like her to seek opportunities abroad:

In the newspapers, university lecturers listed their complaints, the agreements that were trampled in the dust by government men whose own children were schooling abroad. Campuses were emptied, classrooms drained of life. Students hoped for short strikes, because they could not hope to have no strike at all. Everyone was talking about leaving. (Adichie Americanah Ch. 8).

As immigrants, her situation and Obinze’s in London are contrasted significantly. Ifemelu does not live in shadow, and she bears her name. In the United States, Ifemelu faces different struggles, such as racism and the pressure of cultural adaptation, while trying to keep true to her identity. Ifemelu, as an immigrant, student and blog writer, exposes American contemporary issues such as racism, immigration, as well as Western views on postcolonial countries.

3.2 Race

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes Princeton, New Jersey, where Ifemelu felt as part of a sort of sacred American club. However, she needed to go somewhere else to braid her hair. Ifemelu notices that the Princeton station is full of white people, but then as the train advances to her destination in Trenton, the number of black
people is proportionally higher. It is a simple but powerful perception: Ifemelu likes the place where she is, where all seems fine and correct, but if she wants to do something as simple as going to a hairdresser, she must go somewhere else because, in a certain way, that place was not made for her. Another curious part of the narrative happens during her graduation, when she joins the African Students Association and finds out that, at her university, a Black Student Union also exists. Ifemelu points out the distinction between an African American and American African: the former is a person of African descent whose ancestors were brought to America as slaves, while the latter is a person of African descent who came (more or less) willingly to the US (Adichie *Americanah* Ch.14). Race is presented as the medium of organizing American history in the novel. It is a subject not treated as an unfinished matter of the past, but actually as very contemporary issue. Ifemelu argues that she only becomes black when she moves to the United States, which is one of the main themes in the novel: “In America, you don’t get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you” (Adichie *Americanah* Ch.37). Her character brings an honest perspective on the discussion of race and the treatment of minorities in the United States.

Ifemelu struggles between cultural adaptation and keeping true to her identity. She questions how becoming ‘more American’ is encouraged in order to blend successfully in American society. Dominant cultures impose a condition of subordination, which makes social and class divisions difficult to overcome, since parts of society are excluded from legal and political decisions. As Frantz Fanon points out: “The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority. Let us have courage to say outright: It is the racist who creates his inferior” (Fanon and Markmann 69). Nevertheless, beyond imperialist notions of subordination, issue of gender and ethnicity must also be reviewed. In the words of Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of "woman" seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways” (294). There is to say, the relegated place of women in society, specially black and poor ones, contributes to silencing their voices.

Western critics have acclaimed the rearrangement of social symbols in Adichie’s work, which aims to construct black female characters whom are relevant and have an active voice in the narrative. The narrative of Ifemelu’s life begins in an all-female
universe of hairdressing and African braiding salon, where she gets her hair done. “So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair” (Adichie Americanah Ch.31). Hair plays an important role in the novel, which discusses how hair of black women is so little understood and known. Misconceptions make it easier to label coarse hair as unprofessional or unsophisticated, although that is the way that it naturally grows. The issue of accepting naturally coarse hair is raised in the novel when, more than once, the protagonist confronts Western hegemony, asking herself why coarse hair is considered ugly or exotic. In one of her blog’s posts, Ifemelu takes the hair of the United State First Lady, Michelle Obama, in the 2008 election, as an example of how it could affect the campaign of Obama for presidency:

Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky or curly) in the ugly “before” picture, and in the pretty “after” picture, somebody’s taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight? […] Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls. […] She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (Adichie Americanah Ch.31).

Adichie implies that Michelle Obama represents a sort of black respectability, but then again, if she wore her natural hair, since terms attached to it - such as difficult or radical - are not good for presidential candidates, Obama would not win. This happens because in Western culture, being too black is an issue and the acceptance of natural hair is connected to the acceptance of black identity, and this is seen as subversive in relation to western standards.

Meanwhile, white society reinforces these stereotypes which privilege their own phenotype and, secondly, the individuals who most approximate these standards. In practice, straight hair almost always has an advantage over curly hair, and the black individual who opts for giving up the Western archetype, will certainly confront greater obstacles to achieve professional and personal success. Frantz Fanon considers this relation as an imposition of the colonizer in contrast to an attempt of colonized people to prove themselves. According to Fanon, “There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at
all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.” (Fanon and Markmann 3). The black individual tries at all matters to be considered as important as white individuals, either physically or intellectually. Moreover, he/she tries to thrive in a society, which believes in values of beauty, intelligence and acceptable culture that come from white men’s standards. This creates an industry turned to darker-skinned and coarse-haired people that encourages hair straightening, skin whitening, nose jobs, in an attempt to approximate black individuals to an imposed archetype. Postcolonial studies play an important role in this process when it deconstructs these archetypes. In this case, coarse hair is a symbol of black resistance when women accept their bodies and ancestry. Therefore, in Americanah, hair – which bears an important role in relation to women and vanity – works as a symbol of strength and assumes a significant role against racism.

Adichie points out in the novel that, in the United States, individuals with a dark complexion are thought to experience race all the same. Mainly, there is an issue of imposing one identity on the other, an identity that is not perceived as a good thing. From this point, Ifemelu searches for a black identity, since her experiences as a Nigerian Igbo are unknown or ignored by the average American. In the West, the idea of black achievement is a remarkable thing, but in Nigeria, this is a norm. Nigeria is the most populous country in the second biggest continent. One in five Africans is Nigerian. However, cultural divisions in Nigeria are ethnic and religious. On the other hand, in the United States, to be black meant something much more meaningful than having a dark complexion, it came as a burden and heavy assumption, as Ifemelu argues:

“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. 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…” (Adichie Americanah Ch.31).

The narrative follows Ifemelu’s adaptation to her life in the United States, where she stays for over ten years. At first, she was rejected at various job interviews, endured financial problems, and found it difficult to integrate into academic life at the university campus. Similar to Adichie’s personal account, Ifemelu’s colleagues seemed to ignore
the fact that the official language in Nigeria is English or, with the best of their intentions, compared her life experiences to black Americans without acknowledging outright distinctions. With a strong personality and opinions, Ifemelu begins to write a blog called “Raceteenth, or Various Observations about American Blacks (those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” to share her visions of American society. The blog adds another layer to the narrative, with the texts written from Ifemelu’s points of view, all of them filled with bold statements. During the writing process of the blog, Ifemelu imposes on herself some reflections on internalized conducts, such as conforming to beauty standards and to prejudice. Issues such as how to fit in - or rather if she should fit in at all - or the effort to integrate and, therefore, to become “more American”, are connected to the idea of conforming. In one of her blog entries, Ifemelu directs a post to other non-American black readers:

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. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—you say “I’m not black” only because you know black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder. And you want none of that. Don’t deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? Would you still say “Don’t call me black, I’m from Trinidad”? I didn’t think so. So you’re black, baby. And here’s the deal with becoming black: You must show that you are offended when such words as “watermelon” or “tar baby” are used in jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about—and since you are a Non-American Black, the chances are that you won’t know. (Adichie Americanah Ch.21).

The blog’s social commentary works very differently from what could be a dialogue in the narrative. Adichie’s authorial narrator noticeably differs from Ifemelu’s voice. In addition, Ifemelu as a writer also differs from her daily life persona. As a result, Ifemelu’s blog posts add a sensation of reading non-fiction inside a novel.
After moving back to Lagos, Ifemelu finds success again by establishing another blog, this one titled “The Small Redemptions of Lagos”:

The blog posts would be in a stark, readable font. An article about health care, using Esther’s story, with pictures of the packets of nameless medicine. A piece about the Nigerpolitan Club. A fashion article about clothes that women could actually afford. Posts about people helping others, but nothing like the Zoe stories that always featured a wealthy person, hugging children at a motherless babies’ home, with bags of rice and tins of powdered milk propped in the background. (Adichie Americanah Ch.49)

This is how Adichie includes important themes in an intricate manner into her novel, without losing the rhythm of the narrative and then, by doing so, she raises questions over daily Western behaviour from an alternative angle.

Although Americanah might seem to have the traits of an immigrant story, its main character chooses to return to Nigeria, not because she must, but because it is where she wants to be. This element makes Americanah distinct from an immigrant story as well as transforming the narrative into a classical novel about the observations of a distanced outsider.

3.3 Language

Language is another important factor regarding cultural identity in the novel. Americanah highlights the different functions served by the language of the empire and of the colony in Nigerian and, particularly, Igbo culture. Igbo, the idiom of Ifemelu’s ethnic group, is mostly spoken among family members. When young Igbo are directed towards a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and move away from their ancestors’ villages, they lose contact with their oral tradition (Ifejika). During Ifemelu’s adolescence, the influence of Western countries in the lives of young Nigerians is clear. The ones who travel frequently to Europe and the United States are objects of interest and admiration of their friends:

[Ginika]’ll come back and be a serious Americanah like Bisi,” Ranyinudo said. They roared with laughter, at that word “Americanah,” wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi
a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred r to every English word she spoke. “But, Ginika, seriously, I would give anything to be you right now,” Priye said. (Adichie Americanah Ch.5)

In addition, all of them have access to, and can opt for, a bilingual education. Nigeria has an education policy that, in practice, permits the use of a mother language – mainly Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa – along with English (Igboanusi 721). Therefore, many Igbo families can speak English and Igbo in one sentence. Both as first languages.

There is a contrast between English, the official language, as the medium for rational thought and intellectuality, while Igbo has the function of expressing emotions and it is a language full of metaphors. Igbo names carry meaning and history, while “storytelling and proverbs are very important to the traditional Igbo way of life, and have always helped to sustain the language” (Ifejika). However, there is still a feeling of animosity in Nigeria after the deaths and poverty of numerous Igbo people caused by the Biafran War, an issue still unsolved in Nigerian culture. The secondary place of Igbo language in contemporary Nigerian relations is evident in the following passage:

“A Yoruba man will see a Yoruba person anywhere and speak Yoruba. But an Igbo man will speak English to an Igbo man. I am even surprised that you are speaking Igbo to me.” “It’s true,” Obinze said. “It’s sad, it’s the legacy of being a defeated people. We lost the Biafra war and learned to be ashamed.” (Adichie Americanah Ch.54)

It is difficult for a colonized country to reclaim its own identity by expressing it through the official language imposed by the empire, which reduces its native language to a secondary role. For instance, the metaphors used in Igbo language are symbols unfamiliar to British culture, while at the same time Nigerian English has its own syntax compared to Standard English. According to Bhabha:

It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences -- literature, art, music, ritual, life, death -- and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. (Bhabha 172)
The hybridity, integration and mingling of cultural signs and practices from different cultures leads to the assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, which is positive as well as oppressive. In *Americanah*, Adichie uses Igbo language constantly in the speech of her characters. There are no Western versions of their names and the readers must absorb the Igbo sentences in their original usage. Also, not all sentences and expressions in Igbo are translated. To understand the language, the reader depends on hints in the context of the narrative or has to Google, as Adichie suggests:

I’ve always had Igbo [in my writing]. And I’ve always had well-meaning advice, often about how American readers will be confused, or they won’t get something. I don’t set out to confuse, but I also think about myself as a reader. I grew up reading books from everywhere and I didn’t necessarily understand every single thing — and I didn’t need to. So, I think for me, what was more important, for the integrity of the novel, was that I capture the world I wanted to capture, rather than to try to mold that world into the idea of what the imagined reader would think. (Adichie “NBCC Fiction Award”)

The author has been advised to change the setting of her novels and create narratives more agreeable to Western readers. As a response, Adichie advises that: “Google is fantastic. If people are interested, they can look something up. I remember thinking, ‘I don’t care if I’m published by a very tiny press and only ten people read it, but it will be the book I want to write.’ And that’s been my attitude from the beginning” (Adichie “NBCC Fiction Award”). In this way, Adichie takes a stand by including in her novel how she experiences Nigeria as an Igbo, creating a fuller representation of aspects of Nigerian culture.

3.4 A Novel about Books

*Americanah* is a novel that celebrates books. Reading is a medium to change the characters’ lives, help them adapt, and help them with homesickness. Besides Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter* is frequently referenced throughout the novel. Some of the various themes of the novel are the post-war British colonialism, the beginning of the Cold War, the daily life of the colonial administration, dealings in the diamond trade, and the possibilities of becoming easily engaged in corruption, in addition, of course, to the existential dramas of the characters involved.
The novel is read by Obinze’s mother every year, however, for the young Obinze. It was not as good as an American novel: “‘It is a wise book. The human stories that matter are those that endure. The American books you read are lightweights.’ [Obinze’s mother] turned to Ifemelu. ‘This boy is too besotted with America’” (Adichie Americanah Ch.5). The novel is used to connect the memories of the main characters and, with time, Obinze grows to appreciate it. *The Heart of the Matter* is described as an honest novel that portrays people’s colonial lives, without malice.

On the other hand, a white woman at the braiding salon mentions V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* as the most honest book about Africa, a novel that made her really understand how Modern Africa works. While Ifemelu does not agree:

She did not think the novel was about Africa at all. It was about Europe, or the longing for Europe, about the battered self-image of an Indian man born in Africa, who felt so wounded, so diminished, by not having been born European, a member of a race which he had elevated for their ability to create, that he turned his imagined personal insufficiencies into an impatient contempt for Africa; in his knowing haughty attitude to the African, he could become, even if only fleetingly, a European. (Adichie Americanah Ch.18)

In the Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul's novel, the merchant Salim, a Muslim and of Indian origin, shows little attachment to the memory and historical importance of his people. Salim portrays European settlers from a neutral, almost pleasant perspective. For the reader, the text is ambiguous. Europeans can be seen as the owners of history, which is shaped according to their will, or as the guardians of a collective memory, that enables the preservation of the identity of other cultures. Naipaul’s novel is often compared to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, both criticized by Achebe.

4 Conclusion

Adichie’s *Americanah* creates a bridge between Africa and the West through English literature by including contemporary African discourses and considering them as valuable as Western discourses. A key idea in postcolonial theory is the focus on how the literature of postcolonial nations can rearticulate their identities. These new narratives attempt to reclaim their countries’ past and discredit the Western representation of the East as the
other. As observed by Said, these representations served for a long time as an endorsement of colonialist ideas. *Americanah* is an example of the inversion of classic paradigms of Western literature. As its title implies, *Americanah* allows for a postcolonial interpretation, as the slang encompasses the idea of the identity of the colonized as a manipulation of colonialism. In addition, these affectations of African individuals returning from the United States evoke the ambivalence of the postcolonial subject.

The contemporary Nigerian perspective Adichie offers in her novel, challenges the Western imagination. Firstly, the author breaks the expectations of a reader accustomed to a Eurocentric canon, by having Africans as all of her major characters. Secondly, the narrative starts and, most importantly, ends in Nigeria, forging a new perspective on the lives of immigrants. Adichie’s narrative choices operate in favour of the interaction of differences, once Western readers are willing to identify with African characters and share an anti-colonialist position. Her choice of including Igbo vocabulary suggests a conscientious representation of a local identity. As Ifemelu is a character as ambivalent as a postcolonial identity might be, a pure national identity does not function in a postcolonial context because the intrusion of another culture marks deeply the identity of the colonized. It is not through the denial of the imperialist culture, but the renegotiation of it, as prescribed by Bhabha, that Adichie uses to discuss identity in the novel.

The contemporary literature produced by authors outside the male-dominated Eurocentric standard is richer than the canonical literature, in the sense that they create characters whose existence in the real world is, by itself, a significant struggle. African authors writing in English, such as Adichie, have books in a prominent position in the literary sector, especially in the United States. In fact, the popularity of contemporary African novels is justified by their geographical comprehensiveness and, specifically, by the strong influence the West still has in postcolonial nations. In Adichie’s case, it is the complexity of her characters that makes it easy to identity with their characteristics, regardless of any cultural difference. Adichie proves to be an excellent storyteller but beyond her merits as a writer, the themes that permeate her works are important tools to understand history and must have their space in literature.

Racism, or any kind of prejudice, per se, arises from the supposition that homogeneity is natural, but literature, and the world in general, cannot be limited by it.
Adichie as an African woman who is openly feminist and who insists in seeing people such as herself represented in novels, empowers a whole range of readers who, as the author, have not seen themselves represented fairly or often, not at all. Adichie’s *Americanah* is an exercise in the deconstruction of a European vision of African countries that more than break stereotypes, for it shows that the history of numerous countries and cultures have been silenced and that they must now be heard from the point of view of the ones who actually live it.
Works Cited


