

Book Review

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) London, England: Harper Collins.

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In the 21st century globalisation and global movements have had a significant impact on the kinds of literature that have been written. Diasporic writing has multiplied incrementally and, at the same time, become more popular as well. According to Ramraj (1996) diasporic writing has come to be associated with works produced by global dispersed minority communities that have a common ancestral homeland (p. 214). Diasporic writers do not necessarily belong to one homogenous community; rather they are incredibly diverse and differ from one another remarkably. Nevertheless, there are certain common themes that all diasporic writers explore in their writing and these are themes of homelessness, nostalgia, sense of alienation, a deep longing for the mother/fatherland, an unreasonable clinging to tradition, culture and customs even in the adopted country and the new climes.

Many post-colonial narratives are all at once quest novels and, at the same time, clearly delineate the strong attachment that their protagonists have to their homeland. This attachment to a homeland is inextricably linked to their sense of identity. Language and culture provide the means of anchoring such people who feel adrift in an alien world with no star to guide them. They are floundering in a sea of iniquity and, nonetheless, they have a desperate need for survival and a deep yearning to belong wherever they are. This paradoxical pull, often expressed as anguish, creates a sense of ambivalence in their writing.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's latest offering *Americanah* is a novel that belongs to the diasporic literature genre. What is unique about her novel is that it traces the spiritual, emotional and mental growth of its eponymous heroine, Ifemelu, while describing her journey from Nigeria to the United States and back. Ifemelu's and her boyfriend, Obinze's, longing for a better life and education makes them flee Nigeria during political turmoil. Each one of them immigrates to two continents separated by a vast ocean. While Ifemelu travels to the United States, Obinze finds himself in the United Kingdom, both of them promising to remain faithful to each other and to maintain the sanctity of this long-distance relationship. But destiny has other plans in store for the couple and they spend two decades apart from each other. Life's trajectory takes them down different paths, but when they return to Nigeria and meet each other, life has turned a full circle and they are back in each other's arms.

Diasporic writing articulates the ambivalence of migrants in two ways: one, the traditionalists who believe that even though they are living in a foreign country, they should not give up their customs and habits because these give them their sense of identity. Two, assimilationists believe that it is not only important, but also necessary, for foreigners to immerse themselves into the local cultures, to accept and adopt the norms and behaviours of the local population in order to gain equality, recognition and acceptance. In either case, the situation is fraught with tension and conflict because it also means giving up socio-cultural values, which are closely linked with religion. While Adichie's novel does not devolve into the question of religion, the social-cultural value system that Ifemelu has to grapple with almost destroys her at one point in the novel. It is

her courage and dogged determination that causes Ifemelu to break away from her relationship with a white American and to build up a successful career.

The novel is remarkable in the way it encapsulate the multiple discourses that belong to the educated middle-class American society and its interactions with people of colour. Ifemelu discovers to her utter surprise that the "blacks" who live in America respond to the issues of racism differently from the "blacks" from Africa. In fact, this becomes the title of the blog that she starts writing, which makes her both popular and rich. She calls this blog "Understanding America for the non-American Black". Her pithy and witty blogs also reveal her deep insight into racial relations in the great land of opportunities, the United States. For example, writing about "American tribalism", she says:

In America tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds- class, ideology, religion and race. First, Class. Pretty easy. Rich folk and poor folk. Second, ideology. They don't merely disagree on political issues. Each side believes the other is evil. Intermarriage is discouraged and on the rare occasion that it happens, it is considered remarkable. Third, region. The north and the south. The two sides fought a civil war and a tough stain from that was remaining. The north looks down on the south while the south resents the north. Finally, Race. There is a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American black which is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or, as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you are black, better get back!). (p:184)

If Ifemelu faces one kind of social discrimination in the United States, her boyfriend Obinze, faces another kind in the United Kingdom. The narrative flits from Ifemelu to Obinze to give us a picture of both their lives and also an opportunity to compare and contrast their lives in these two first-world countries. For both the characters the journey back to Nigeria is as important as is their need to submerge themselves into the politics of a crass, materialistic, and unforgiving Nigeria.

Americanah can be described as a coming-of-age novel, where it is in fact the African novel that comes of age. Brilliantly written with insightful comments about multi and inter-racial relationships, Adichie, not unlike her spiritual mentor, Achebe, turns her scathing gaze onto her own country. Nigeria is depicted in all its vulgarity and nakedness shorn of any redeeming quality. Achebe's lyricism in his pre- Independence novels, which evoked a peaceful, coherent and stable society, has completely disappeared from the annals of modern Nigerian literature. What gives *Americanah* its strength is its brutal honesty, its vitriolic attack on Nigerian politics and incorruptible and unequivocal delineation of the Nigeria society as it exists today. At 477 pages, *Americanah* is a novel of considerable length, but it is eminently readable. Adichie's skill and the use of the English language make this novel one that should become compulsory reading in any course on African literature. When Achebe proclaimed that the novelist is a teacher, he was stating that he wanted to educate the Nigerians to take pride in their own culture. Adichie takes this tradition forward, but her novel, on the other hand, exposes the ugly underbelly of Nigerian politics. Through this novel, hopefully, Adichie will succeed in educating the Nigerian people and pricking their conscience. This is not to say that the novel cannot be read and enjoyed

by people from other continents. In fact, it has a universal appeal. Being a serious novel it raises more questions than it answers which, for me, is the mark of a great novel.

Reference

Ramraj, V.J. (1996) "Diasporas and Multi-culturalism" in *New National and Post-colonial Literature* ed by Bruce King, Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.

Dr. Sarala Krishnamurthy has a Ph.D. in Stylistics from Bangalore University, India; MA in English, Post Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English and, Certificate in Online Education and Training from the Institute of London. She has taught at the post-graduate level for twenty-five years and supervised the research of about 20 Masters and eight Ph.D. scholars in the areas of Stylistics, English Language Teaching and Post-colonial Literature. She has published widely in several international journals and books in Post-colonial literature, Stylistics and English Language Teaching. She has presented papers at several international conferences world-wide. She is an examiner for International English Language Testing Services (IELTS) which is a University of Cambridge Exam held world-wide. Currently she is the Dean of the School of Human Sciences at the Polytechnic of Namibia. In 2011 she received an award for being the best researcher in her faculty at the Polytechnic of Namibia.