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## A postcolonial Afrocentric reading of Adichie's novel Americanah

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### Abstract

This study is a postcolonial Afrocentric reading of the novel 'Americanah' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie for its application of Afrocentricity in reconstructing distorted African identity. It employed postcolonial theory and its strand, Afrocentricity, which gives a special focus to Africanism as its overarching framework. Through a qualitative approach which comprises textual analysis, the study probed how Adichie, in her novel, applied an Afrocentric perspective to reclaim African identity disparaged by colonial discourses. The findings of this textual analysis revealed that re-centering African identity, critique of European beauty standards, celebration of African narratives, challenging colonial legacies, and amplifying African diaspora experiences are the major Afrocentric themes and values treated in the novel. These themes were emphasized by Adichie's innovative use of blogs as narrative devices, which served as tools for conscious-raising, racial identity development, critique of misrepresentation, and commodification of Blackness, particularly concerning African women and their hair. Based on the discussions held in the analysis, this paper, thus, concludes that African identity can be reconstructed even within the contexts of colonization, racial discrimination, and globalization.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, identity reconstruction, postcolonial African novels, application, Americanah

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## Introduction

African identity, culture, and narratives have all been profoundly impacted by the legacy of colonialism. Colonizers have crafted distorted African narratives with undertones of their own colonial discourses. Through their Eurocentric literature, Europeans misrepresented Africans and depicted them as caricatures (Fanon, 1967). In line with this, Ngugi (1986) claims that “the Western world equates knowledge, modernity, modernization, civilization, progress, and development to itself, while it views the Third World from the perspective of the antithesis of these positive qualities” (p. 96).

The colonial narratives about Africa have long been characterized by blurred representations that served to achieve their colonial objectives. These narratives, inscribed by the Western colonizers through their Eurocentric literature, often portrayed African environments as the continent with no history, culture, calendar, art, literature, writing system, or rationality, reflecting the racist belief that African societies were fundamentally inferior to European rule and enlightenment. On top of that, the Eurocentric literature depicted Africa and its people as a land of darkness, enigmatic, disparaged, savage, brutal, ridiculous, and uncivilized, placed at the margin and even in need of the Europeans’ support to continue existing on the earth. Africans were considered barbaric, primitive, and childish people who were unable to distinguish between what was morally good and what was evil. And Europe, in contrast, represented the forces of light, of knowledge, of civilization because it was perceived as progressive and as mature (Memmi, 1965; Fanon, 1967).

*Heart of Darkness* and *King Solomon’s Mines*, which were penned by European monopolists Joseph Conrad and Rider Haggard, respectively, are typical case in points of Eurocentric literature. These novels depicted Africa as a land of backwardness and darkness, both literally and metaphorically. They played leading roles in the formation of a single and monolithic view of Africa that overlooked the diversified and colorful nature of the continent and the rich cultures and histories of its people. In the narratives of these texts, Africans were obviously represented as others, worse, defeated, grotesque, and voiceless subjects that never responded to their colonial masters (Aydın, 2018; Cunha, 2014).

Having been informed by these skewed and fragmented narratives orchestrated about Africans, African writers, through the potent medium of postcolonial African literature, have tried to recuperate African identities and histories that have been twisted by colonial discourses

(Kehinde, 2010). Chnua Achebe, widely regarded as the father of modern African literature, is among the most prominent African writers committed to reclaiming African narratives. Achebe did so primarily by challenging colonial misrepresentations of Africa and by centering African voices, cultures, and histories in his literary works. His most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is a foundational text in postcolonial African literature and a powerful response to the Eurocentric depiction of Africa as primitive and uncivilized (Asante, 1998). Alongside Achebe, other pioneer African writers such as Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o also played a crucial role in inspiring the third-generation (contemporary) writers to continue critiquing Eurocentric misrepresentations and to assert African perspectives in literature. Among these contemporary voices is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a prolific Nigerian female writer. In her acclaimed novel *Americanah* (2013), Adichie presents counter-narratives that highlight the resilience, richness, tenacity, and diversified nature of African cultures while also addressing the detrimental and enduring impacts of colonialism on African societies and identities (McCoy, 2017). This paper, therefore, seeks to explore how Adichie in her novel *Americanah* articulates Afrocentric themes and values.

Despite the substantial contributions of postcolonial African literature to narrative and identity reclamation, the practice of analyzing novels for their applications of proper and specific theoretical framework(s), when they are produced, continues to be very limited. This is because most of the existing studies on postcolonial African literature focused just on the representations and traumas of Africans in this postcolonial literature (Andrade, 1990). Moreover, many of the previous studies predominantly utilized broader Western-oriented literary theories like postcolonial, postmodern, and psychoanalysis, overlooking the Afrocentric approach, which seeks to reclaim African agency and epistemologies moving beyond the focus of trauma (Asante, 2003).

Thus, how postcolonial African writers apply Afrocentricity in their novels to reconstruct their imposed identities, we argue, deserve particular attention, for they fully engage authentic values, cultures, and experiences of Africans. In this sense, this paper explored the exploration of Afrocentricity in Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013), focusing on how the novel utilizes this framework to challenge colonial narratives and reconstruct African identities, histories, and values within a postcolonial context. It has thus tried to address one core research question: How does Adichie, in her *Americanah*, apply Afrocentric perspective in a postcolonial African context to challenge and reconstruct African identities distorted by

colonial narratives? In tandem with this general question, it has attempted to address the following specific research questions:

- What are the key Afrocentric themes and values reflected in the novel, and how do they contribute to the construction of African identity?
- How does Adichie, in her novel, employ blogs as narrative strategies to foreground themes of Afrocentric values?

### **Theoretical Lens of the Study**

This study is undergirded by the theoretical framework of postcolonial literary theory with the intersection of its strand, Afrocentricity; however, the latter is the pivotal theoretical lens here. This is because postcolonial theory, as stated by Ashcroft et al. (1989), examines the colonial discourses that demote African narratives generally and their cultures, experiences, and histories specifically. When combined with Afrocentricity, which, in the words of Asante (1998), valorizes and sees African occurrences from an African-centered perspective, allowing African values, cultural identity, and historical agency to be reclaimed and reasserted. It mainly deals with the intricacies of African narratives in the postcolonial period. Therefore, postcolonial theory, with its strand Afrocentricity, but a core theoretical lens for this particular study, effectively lending support to each other to help the current researchers explore the applications of Afrocentricity in postcolonial African novels with a particular reference to Adichie's *Americanah*.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory is a critical framework that critiques the lingering impacts of colonialism on African cultures and identities. It examines how Western colonizers imposed African cultural values, histories, experiences, and identities. According to Ashcroft et al. (1989), postcolonialism is a term employed “to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.” Lawal (2021) also asserts, “Postcolonial theory emanates from the experiences of the formerly colonized in relationship with the colonizers” (p. 231).

Postcolonial literary theory mainly focuses on examining colonial discourses that depict and denigrate the colonized societies as primitive or underdeveloped, neglecting their rich histories, complex political systems, and cultural achievements. African, as a postcolonial continent, has long been affected by a Eurocentric perspective that distorted its narratives,

often leading to the distortion, marginalization, and misrepresentation of its cultures, histories, and identities (Said, 1978).

### **Afrocentricity**

Afrocentricity, according to Montle (2020), is a strand of postcolonial theory that gives a special focus to Africanism. The words “Africa” and “Center” combine to form the composite word “Afrocentricity.” The motive behind the coinage of the term is its emphasis on African narratives. Therefore, it has evolved into a theoretical perspective that provides a solid foundation for Africanism.

Molefi Kete Asante, who is the most published African-American scholar, is considered the father of Afrocentricity and is the foremost theorist on the subject, although Tsheloane Keto and Mualana Karenga are also key figures in it (Smith, 2020). Thus, for Asante (2009), Afrocentricity is a paradigm based on the idea that African people should “reassert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity” (p. 81).

“Afrocentricity in literature is a viewpoint that encourages writers to victoriously write about the history and culture of Africa” (Zargar, 2012, p. 85). In line with this, Monteiro-Ferreira (2014) contends that “Afrocentricity can lead us beyond Western structures of thought that have held sway since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, towards a new epistemological framework that will enable a more human humanity” (p. 217).

Similarly, Oyebade (1990) asserts that Afrocentricity aims to revive the African identity that the colonial era's elites once erased. These elites downplayed or discredited the contributions of numerous Black Africans due to the legacy of slavery and colonialism, which sought to erase Africans from history. He further states that the need to develop an Afrocentric perspective, which takes Africa as the starting point for African studies, stems from the nature of the Eurocentric paradigm used in many African studies. The Eurocentric paradigm often presents a pervasive character of hegemony, where European culture has placed itself at the center of social structure, becoming a reference point or standard for defining other cultures. Oyebade (1990) finally writes, “The Afrocentric perspective seeks to liberate African studies from this Eurocentric monopoly on scholarship and, thus, asserts a valid worldview through which Africa can be studied objectively” (p. 234).

From the above theoretical discussions, one can understand that the Afrocentric approach is a paradigm that challenges the dominant Eurocentric narratives and seeks to re-center African perspectives in the study of history, culture, and society. This approach not only empowers African voices but also promotes a more inclusive understanding of world

history. In this sense, Afrocentric theory, together with postcolonial theory, has been adapted as an important modus for this particular study. This is because both postcolonialism and Afrocentricity are “dominant discourses aiming at representing the marginalized and liberating the oppressed from Eurocentric cultural dominance” (Noman, 2018, p. 21).

### Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach that according to Bhandari (2020) comprises gathering, reviewing, and examining non-numeric data to comprehend certain behavioral patterns, reactions, and experiences. This paper, thus, has hinged entirely on the above-mentioned qualitative method to explore how Adichie, in her postcolonial African novel, *Americanah*, applied an Afrocentric approach to reconstruct identities decried by colonial discourses. Hence, it has collected its primary data from this novel and supplemented it with data from secondary sources. Moreover, this paper utilized textual analysis which, according to Schreiber and Asner-Self (2011), is used for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting textual data from selected text(s)—in this case, Adichie’s novel *Americanah*.

The novel *Americanah* was selected over other African novels by virtue of its reflection on the exploration of Afrocentric themes in reconstructing African identities. The clear presence of narratives that elevate African cultural values, including language, histories, and experience; exploration of African identities; and critique of Eurocentricism using literary devices such as blogs are the major criteria to approach the novel from the postcolonial Afrocentric standpoint. Through a close reading of the novel from a postcolonial approach and Afrocentric perspective, the researchers identified instance excerpts dealing with Afrocentric themes and values, critiques made on Eurocentricism, cultural authenticity and return, and narrative devices employed to reclaim African values. In other words, the excerpts were selected for their illustration of re-centering African identity, reclamation of African beauty ideals, return to reapriciation of African values, and critique of colonial bequests. The identified extracts were then classified into major themes, and finally, based on these classified themes, the extracts collected from the novel were analyzed and interpreted in light of postcolonial theory and its strand, Afrocentricity. In so doing, a careful textual analysis of excerpts from textual sources was conducted.

### **Synopsis of the novel**

*Americanah* was written by a female Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in 2013. The novel is set around 2009. Ifemelu is the protagonist of the novel whose flashback sections begin in the early 1990s, while Obinze's London segment takes place around 2002. The place of the story ranges from Lagos and Nsuka (Nigeria) and various cities in America and London (England). The story is about these two young Nigerians, Ifemelu and Obinze, who fall in love during their university years in Nigeria. The narrative discloses as Ifemelu moves to America for education, leaving Obinze behind with plans to reunite. After five years in America, Ifemelu sent Obinze an email to tell him about her return to homeland, Nigeria, and finally they reunited there, but Obinze must make a firm decision whether or not to leave his wife, Kosi. He decided to end this marriage after Ifemelu convinced him to be honest with his emotions. The novel ends when he goes to Ifemelu to tell her about his final decision.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Colonialism often distorted African identities, narratives, and cultural values that the people cherished before the imperialists arrived on the continent. African writers thus sought to reclaim and rewrite their history by posing questions to colonial depictions of Africa and its people and offering substitute perspectives (Gover et al., 2000). For doing so, a number of postcolonial African novels have been produced with the intention of identity reconstruction by uncovering the devastating effects of colonialism on the lives of colonized subjects. One such novel is *Americanah* by Adichie, which intently unearths the indelible marks of colonialism that have and still influence the lives of many Africans. Hence, this paper gives particular attention to how Adichie applied an Afrocentric perspective in her novel to reconstruct African identities distorted by Eurocentric colonial discourses. The novel mainly presents the story of Ifemelu, the protagonist, whose life is conflicted by Eurocentric influence. It is about her journey from her home country, Nigeria, to the US and back to Nigeria. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu struggles to find her true self and authentic African identity.

### **Afrocentric Themes and Values in *Americanah***

Throughout the narrative of her subversive novel *Americanah*, Adichie has skillfully woven key Afrocentric themes and values, which significantly contribute to the reconstruction of African identity. Re-



centering African identity, reclamation of African beauty standards, celebration of African narratives, critique of colonial legacies, and giving voice to the African diaspora experiences are some of these themes. Below, in line with the theoretical concepts delineated so far, we discuss these Afrocentric themes with substantial extracts and how they contribute to the reconstruction of African identity in the novel:

### Re-centering African Identity

One of the most central Afrocentric themes in *Americanah* is the recentering of African identity, which Africans cherished before the advent of the white colonizers (Asma, 2015). Through Ifemelu's experiences and, by extension, her own, Adichie delves into the intricacies of African identity. Throughout her journey, Ifemelu grapples with her identity as an African, ultimately finding a way to reconcile her Nigerian roots with her experiences in America.

Ifemelu's decision to come back to Nigeria is, in fact, a symbol of her strong desire to get in touch with her roots. Upon her return, she discovers that she is once again immersed in Nigerian culture and social norms, and this reconnection allows her to reaffirm her African identity, which has been exacerbated throughout her stay in America. An important extract that captures this sentiment in the novel is when Ifemelu realizes that one's own cultural identity is more essential than belonging to a foreign country:

She recognized the traditional cadence of the sounds, the expressive cadence of Pidgin English, and she felt something deep and old inside her, a belonging that had nothing to do with any country or passport, just a firm rootedness in the culture of her people. (Adichie, 2013, p. 385).

The moment in the above extract implies Ifemelu's decision to completely embrace her Nigerian background, which she has now found makes up who she truly is. Her return to Nigeria signifies more than a geographical move; it is a step towards re-establishing a deeper sense of self and rootedness, and it means returning not just physically, but spiritually.

In the same vein, Ifemelu's return to Nigeria is also marked by her reconnection with the socio-cultural and political realities of her home country. She becomes more engaged with Nigerian issues, reflecting her commitment to being an active participant in her society, rather than a detached observer. The following quotation best captures this situation:

"She felt a deep sense of purpose as she wrote about Nigeria, about its politics and its people, about the things she had missed, the things



that made her Nigerian. She realized that she was not just writing for herself; she was reasserting her place in the world." (p. 470).

Furthermore, 'hair' plays a pivotal role in Ifemelu's quest for her African identity. "Dressing hair in its natural form, African-American women manifest the sense of Black identity, beauty, power, and consciousness" (Gilani & Ranjan, 2022, p. 6474). In the novel, Adichie recurrently uses hair as a potent symbol to further develop her central themes such as identity, racism, relationships, and more. At first, Ifemelu relaxes her hair, for she feels pressured to live up to the Western beauty ideals in America. Eventually, however, she returns to having her hair natural, which serves as a powerful symbol and metaphor for her acceptance of who she truly is and rejection of identities imposed upon her. Ifemelu started accepting her hair natural by declining questions about hair relaxers, stating, "I like my hair the way God made it" (Adichie, 2013, p. 9). In this quote, the phrase 'God made it' explicitly refers to her natural black hair, which she accepts as beautiful. The following passage can also depict how Ifemelu exploits hair to navigate her true self through an Afrocentric perspective:

The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss (Adichie, 2013, p.172).

The above excerpt reflects Ifemelu's unwavering struggle with accepting her African identity, symbolized by her hair. The phrase "something organic dying" clearly symbolizes the dying of her original African identity while straightening her hair. She is expressing her desire to realign her African identity by wearing her hair natural and priding her own culture.

### **Reclamation of African Beauty Standards**

"Adichie proposes ways through which women in particular and Africans in general can overcome the myth of the superiority of Western standards of beauty" (Dasi, 2019, p.152). Ifemelu's decision to give up relaxing her hair and embrace her natural Afro is seen as a political statement against the pressure to adhere to Eurocentric beauty standards that decry African identity. In the novel, through her constant interaction with the online community, Ifemelu progressively transforms herself from a "submissive girl to White supremacy to an activist of resisting the White racial beauty" (Bhandari, 2020, p.42).

Embracing her own natural Black hair, Ifemelu partakes in the process of deconstructing Western beauty standards, especially in the context of hair politics. “She had always hated the smell of relaxers, the stinging chemical smell” (Adichie, 2013, p. 265). This quote captures the physical and emotional uneasiness Ifemelu feels when altering her natural hair texture, which depicts her initial internalization of Western beauty ideals.

In deconstructing the White beauty standards, Ifemelu remembers a post by Jamilah1977: “I love the sistas who love their straight weaves, but I’m never putting horsehair on my head again.” Ifemelu comments on this post saying it was an inspirational moment for her, recalling Jamilah’s words, which made her remember that “there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me” (Adichie, 2013, p.180). In this quote, the phrase ‘God gave me’ is a clear reference to her naturally black hair, which she finds ‘beautiful’.

Furthermore, with this shifting perception, Ifemelu commences to adore and appreciate her natural hair. “She looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (Adichie, 2013, p. 180). This excerpt overtly highlights Ifemelu’s evolving love of her natural hair, symbolizing a greater trajectory towards self-acceptance and identity reclamation. Here, hair is a strong metaphor for identity, heritage, and noncompliance with Western beauty standards. The phrase “dense and spongy and glorious” conveys a sense of pride in the texture and beauty of her natural hair in contrast to social pressure to conform to straightened, Eurocentric ideals. Concurrently, the sentence, “She could not imagine it any other way,” signifies a turning point in Ifemelu’s personal growth, which represents her mental and emotional shift from internalized discomfort or shame to pride in one’s culture and self. This shift is noteworthy for the fact that it reflects Ifemelu’s evolving journey of reclaiming her African identity after interacting with various cultural contexts, particularly in America. Her love for her natural hair carries a deeper meaning than simple aesthetic preference; it symbolizes a resurgence of her true self and authentic African identity, relinquishing the American identity.

### **Critique of Western Media Portrayal of Africa and Celebration of African Narratives**

Afrocentricity is highly concerned with the importance of African agency and self-definition (Asante, 1998). Through Ifemelu, Adichie attempts to critique the single, often distorted narratives about Africa propagated in Western media and tries to celebrate the richness and

diversity of African experiences. The Westerners use media as “agents of cultural imperialism—promoting conservative Western values that undermine local cultures and resources on which the foundations of alternative development strategies could be built” (Kiely, 2005, p. 122). This is quite apparent in the novel when Professor Moore interacts in the classroom with the non-American students and the rest of the class:

“Let’s talk about historical representation in film,” Professor Moore said.

A firm, female voice from the back of the class, with a non-American accent, asked, “Why was ‘nigger’ bleeped out?”

And a collective sigh, like a small wind, swept through the class.

“Well, this was a recording from network television and one of the things I wanted us to talk about is how we represent history in popular culture and the use of the N-word is certainly an important part of that,” Professor Moore said.

“It makes no sense to me,” the firm voice said. Ifemelu turned. The speaker’s natural hair was cut as low as a boy’s and her pretty face, wide-fore headed and fleshless, reminded Ifemelu of the East Africans who always won long-distance races on television.

“I mean, ‘nigger’ is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out.”

This discussion lights up how African history and race are critically reflected in American media, specifically in film. Ifemelu’s direct question, “Why was ‘nigger’ bleeped out?” reveals the uneasiness and reluctance in Western society to fully confront the painful realities of racism. Similarly, the collective sigh from the class, “a small wind,” when Ifemelu raises her question indicates the discomfort that students feel about the discussion of race, particularly in the context of American history. It signifies a shared, unspoken tension—students are perhaps uneasy to confront the issue directly. In addition, Professor Moore reflects her uneasiness with the issue (the racial language) in that she does not give a clear-cut response to the student’s question; instead, she deflects it by stating that “one of the things I wanted us to talk about is how we represent history in popular culture.” Here, her answer is vague, almost evasive, signalling a reluctance to truly engage with the severity of the ugliness of history. Furthermore, in the extract, the expression “nigger” is

a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people, and I think it is insulting to “bleep it out” reflects Ifemelu’s firm stance of facing the music about the historical truth. She finds that censoring the word is more disrespectful, for it diminishes the painful reality of its usage. Hiding the word, she believes, sanitizes and lessens its significance rather than addressing the historical harm it caused.

On the other hand, the celebration of African narratives is evident in one of Ifemelu’s expressions in the novel: “The only people who say Africa is too hard are those who have never been there. It is a continent full of problems; yes, but also full of vibrancy and hope. But nobody talks that part” (Adichie, 2013, p.135).

In the above extract, the central character, Ifemelu, is reclaiming African narratives by acknowledging the existence of the problem but shifting focus to the “vibrancy and hope” that also characterize African life. This indicates Adichie’s endeavor to undo the effect of colonial discourse, which historically portrayed Africa as a bleak and hopeless continent. Being an African woman, Ifemelu also claims to have firsthand experience of the continent, setting it apart from the perception of people who have “never been there.” This reinforces Ngugi’s (1986) idea that “Africans should be the primary narrators of their own stories” (p.178). Moreover, by saying, “But nobody talks about that part”, she tries to draw attention to the selective silence of positive African narratives, highlighting the ways in which Westerners amplify negative aspects of African life while downplaying the positive ones. In short, Ifemelu critiques the reductive external perspectives while simultaneously celebrating the richness of African life. It aligns with postcolonial and Afrocentric efforts to reclaim and reconstruct African identities through more balanced, and multifaceted narratives.

### **Critique of Colonial Legacies and the Slave Trade**

Adichie, in her novel, defies the lingering impacts of colonialism through Ifemelu’s evolving consciousness about race, identity and beauty:

Colonialism may be over, but its effects still linger, shaping the way Africans see themselves, and the way they are seen by the world. But it’s time for us to tell our own stories, to reclaim what was taken (Adichie, 2013, p. 299).

In the above excerpt, Adichie deftly addresses the enduring impact of colonialism on African identity and the global perception of Africans. Ifemelu’s statement, “Its effects still linger,” captures the way that cultural and psychological imperialism continues to exist even after independence,

influencing how Africans internalize their identity. It highlights the postcolonial reality in which the remnant of colonialism still influences Africans' socio-political landscape. In the extract, Ifemelu overtly calls Africans for action to engage in countering the enduring repercussions of colonialism, saying, "It's time for us to tell our stories." She urges Africans to say no to imposed narratives. Conversely, as the excerpt makes abundantly evident, Ifemelu's emphasis on reclaiming "what was taken" resonates with (Fanon, 1967) idea that "the first step for colonized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past (p. 31). It speaks to the need for Africans to reclaim their identities and histories from the distorted narratives that colonialism imposed.

In her novel, Adichie condemns not only the colonial bequest but also the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and its European-driven origins. In the extract below, Ifemelu seems to criticize Europeans for being the structural foundation and economic motivation behind the slave trade:

Sorry, but even if no Africans had been sold by other Africans, the transatlantic slave trade would still have happened. It was a European enterprise. It was about Europeans looking for labor for their plantations (Adichie, 2013, p.115).

Ifemelu explicitly blames Europeans for the existence of slavery in the excerpt, saying, "It was a European enterprise. It was about Europeans looking for labor for their plantations." Her remark acknowledges that although Africans were involved in selling other Africans, European colonizers, who massively benefited from the exploitation of slaves, were the ones driving the demand and volume of the trade. Ifemelu also states in the extract that Europeans are "looking for labor for their plantations," not that Africans are complicit. Thus, Adichie reminds the reader through Ifemelu that African complicity was not the cause of the exploitation of African labor; rather, it was a European imitation driven by economic motivation. By emphasizing Europeans' role in the transatlantic slave trade, she reclaims African narratives from Eurocentric distortions, aligning them with Afrocentric principles of centering African agency and experiences.

Through such themes, *Americanah* contributes to African identity reconstruction, for example, by rejecting imposed Eurocentric norms such as beauty, race, and culture. Through these themes, Adichie also contributes to African identity reconstruction by reaffirming African heritage, values, and aesthetics. Furthermore, via such themes, Adichie tries to reconstruct African identity by encouraging diasporic Africans to reclaim their voices and stories.

### **Giving Voice to the African Diaspora Experiences**

Ifemelus's journey as an African immigrant in America offers a voice to the intricacies of navigating race, identity, displacement, and alienation in the diaspora. Through her blog, Ifemelu writes about African experiences in America and inspires them to speak out about the challenges they face in creating space for African perspectives:

"You're black in America, but in Nigeria, you're just Nigerian. The experience of being black here is different from anywhere else. But it is also in being black here that I have discovered my true Nigerian self" (Adichie, 2013, p.220).

"In America, you don't get to be just Nigerian. You become black. And blackness is different thing here; it's not just about where you're from, it's about where they think you should belong" (Adichie, 2013, p. 201).

The excerpts above speak to the dual nature of African identity for those living in the diaspora, particularly in America, where race is a significant determinant of one's social experience and identity. The phrase, "but in Nigeria, you're just Nigerian", for example, makes it apparent that identity in Nigeria is primarily defined by nationality, ethnicity, or class, but in America by race. Through Ifemelu's experiences, Adichie challenges the simplistic labels often imposed on African immigrants by providing a space for them to explore and express their multifaceted identities.

### **Blog Posts as Narrative Strategies to Foreground Themes of Afrocentric Values**

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu, instigated by Wambui, starts her blog posts and subtly promotes Afrocentric values, challenges stereotypes, and offers insights into Nigerian identity within a global context, intertwining personal and cultural identity with border social commentary (Hallemeier, 2015). Blogs serve as a medium for Ifemelu to explore racial and identity issues, blending fiction with social commentary, and this reflects how much Adichie is engaged in contemporary media and Afropolitanism (Guarracino, 2014). "Ifemelu enjoys greater freedom and plays a more prominent role in the virtual space of a blog, which she exploits as an advocacy tool for her social campaign of exposing the inherent racism in America" (Bhandari, 2020, p. 45). Thus, in the novel, blogs serve several functions:

## **Blogs as Consciousness-raising and Racial Identity Development Tools**

Ifemelu uses her blog, *The Non-American Black*, as a platform where she addresses her observations of race, hair politics, and identity in American society, raising awareness and challenging mainstream racial narratives. This becomes evident when Ifemelu writes an entry to inform her fellow non-American Blacks:

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 (Adichie, 2013, p.186).

The above blog entry highlights how coming to America forces non-American Blacks to adopt a new racial identity—"Black." It critiques the oversimplification of diverse African identities into a monolithic "Blackness" once they arrive in America. Through this blog, Ifemelu challenges how diverse Black identities are categorized into one, irrespective of their heterogeneities, and establishes a platform for solidarity and reflection within the African diaspora. The expression "the Society of Former Negroes" satirically exposes the irony in the expectation that one must conform to a single racial identity upon coming to America. She reminds readers that people from places like Jamaica or Ghana have distinct cultural experiences that are reduced in America's racial rhetoric. In this blog, Ifemelu creates a sense of community among readers who could have experienced displacement, bewilderment, or frustration upon realizing they were in America. Her audacious statements: "Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care", encourages readers to face the hard truth, fostering a collective consciousness and building camaraderie among non-American Blacks who face similar racial issues.

In another blog, Ifemelu creates awareness of the complex intersection of race, class, and national identity, particularly for African immigrants who are categorized alongside African-Americans but have distinct experiences:

Dear Non-American Blacks, while you are here, don't start using African-American to mean black, because black can mean many things. Somebody will say he's African-American and you'll wonder



at the odds that he is American and has never been to Africa (Adichie, 2013, p.350).

Here, Ifemelu intends to explore her identity, particularly how one's perception and experience of race vary depending on their geographic and cultural background. She advises her non-American Black fellows not to automatically equate "African-American" with "Black," emphasizing that the term "Black" encompasses a wide spectrum of identities and experiences around the world. The phrase "Black can mean many things" underscores the diversity within the Black diaspora, where Blackness transcends geographic and contextual boundaries, existing across continents. She advises them to be cautious in using "African-American," pointing out that identity is flexible and dependent on context. "The American social construction of the Black race differs from that of African countries" (Bhandari, 2020, p. 38). Hence, through this blog, she wants to communicate with them that in Africa and other parts of the world, individuals may not be identified as "Black" but rather by their ethnicity, nationality, or tribe. In America, however, race becomes a dominant identifier.

Ifemelu has not just urged the African diaspora to maintain their identity, but she has also rebuked non-Black Americans for their often misguided responses when discussing the real-life experiences of Black Americans concerning race. This is best captured in her blog titled, *Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness*:

Dear American Non-Black, if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. Don't say "It's just like when I ..." You have suffered. Everyone in the world has suffered. But you have not suffered precisely because you are an American Black. Don't be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. Don't say "Oh, it's not really race, it's class. Oh, it's not race, it's gender. Oh, it's not race, it's the cookie monster." You see, American Blacks don't WANT it to be race (Adichie, 2013, p.276).

Through this blog, Ifemelu offers sharp insights into how race is experienced and discussed in America, criticizing the superficial ways in which non-Black Americans deflect Black experiences, shifting the conversation to their own. The phrase, "It's just like when I ..." reflects the tendency to universalize suffering in ways that overlook the specific racialized experiences of Black Americans. Her argument here is that,

although everyone may suffer, not everyone suffers in the same way and that, specifically, Black Americans experience unique forms of suffering linked to their racial identity. In this particular blog entry, she urges non-Black readers to not react hastily to the discussions about race and to better listen to the experiences of Black individuals without sidestepping and disparaging them.

### **Blogs as Panacea for the Structured Racial Division**

Through her blog, Ifemelu has also suggested solutions for the persistent and structural racial divide in America. She has done this through the lens of romantic love, contrasting it with superficial forms of love:

The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. Not the kind of safe, shallow love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable. But real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. And because real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved (Adichie, 2013, p.250).

Ifemelu offers a compelling argument that romantic love, especially emotionally intense and transformative love, could be the potential solution to racial tensions. Such type of love, she argues, has the power to transcend racial barriers. She distinguishes “safe, shallow love,” which aims at maintaining comfort and avoiding confrontation, and that of profound romantic love. The phrase “breathe through the nostrils of your beloved” metaphorically conveys the intense and all-encompassing nature of deep romantic love and its capability to alter one’s perception towards racial divisions. This distinction signifies the systemic racial issues require broader societal change to be addressed, rather than just maintaining comfortable relationships without deep emotional connection. However, she swiftly highlights the rarity of such interracial romantic love, specifically between Black and White Americans, due to societal structures that uphold racial boundaries.

### **Blogs as a Critique of Commodification of Blackness**

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s blogs play pertinent roles in her self-discovery and offer a platform for her to critique race and identity in America. At the same time, her blogs become lucrative businesses and

economic empowerment, reflecting the monetization of her racial experiences (Shymchyshyn, 2021). This is best manifested in the following blog posts:

So now the Big Race Debate is whether Joe Biden calling Barack Obama ‘articulate’ was racist, which is, by the way, a stupid question. The question should be why Joe Biden thinks it’s worthy of note that a black man could be articulate. But the average American doesn’t care. ... They’re too busy hiring expensive consultants to teach them how not to be racist, just as companies spend millions on ‘diversity training’ because it’s cheaper than hiring an actual black person (Adichie, 2013, p.324).

This blog entry reveals that Ifemelu’s writing about race creates not only social commentary but also facilitates her own economic empowerment. Her blog develops into a platform that critiques the monetization of Blackness and simultaneously benefits from it:

The simplest reason for this is that Obama, with his dark skin and his woolly hair, is on the cover of every magazine, every news show, every newspaper. He is the most visible president in the history of the world. His dark skin and woolly hair give dark-skinned black women who have been told, explicitly or implicitly, that they are not attractive, a sense of validation. ... Obama is the reason dark-skinned black women love him: he is president and he is like them (Adichie, 2013, p.298).

Ifemelu highlights how certain groups use Obama’s Blackness as a commodity, particularly non-Black individuals who tokenize him as a symbol of advancement while downplaying the larger struggles of Black people. She critiques the propensity of non-Black people to celebrate or appropriate a sanitized and exoticized version of Blackness without addressing the real problem Black Africans face. Ifemelu calls out the use of Obama’s identity as a token for non-Black people to feel good about racial relations in America, ignoring the deeper, systematic racism at play.

### **Blogs as Critique of Misrepresentations of African Women and Hair**

Ifemelu uses her blog to criticize how African women’s beauty, especially hair, is often misrepresented in the mainstream media (Bhandari, 2020). She discusses how the pressure to conform to Eurocentric notions of beauty affects Black women, especially when it comes to their natural hair. The blog post on Michelle Obama’s hair best captures this:

I wonder if Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it. And she says—you mean her hair doesn't grow like that? So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair. 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?.....When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you "did" something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven't "done" anything to their hair. ... No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair—there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is. (By the way, can we ban Afro wigs at Halloween? Afro is not costume, for God's sake) (Adichie, 2013, p.250).

Here, Ifemelu's blog serves as an anti-representational representation, for it deconstructs media representations, specifically makeover shows, which propagate the notion that natural Black hair is inherently unattractive and needs to be altered to fit the white beauty ideals. The "before" picture with natural, coily, or kinky hair is marked as "ugly," while the "after" picture with straightened hair symbolizes beauty, achievement, and acceptance. This episode reveals the pressure Black women face to live up to white standards in order to be accepted as "normal" or "beautiful." Likewise, Ifemelu's statement, "No, it's not political," is ironic. Despite her assertions that wearing her hair natural is not political, the fact that she has to justify this choice highlights how political Black hair is in America. In a nutshell, through the metaphor of hair, Ifemelu confronts how race is experienced, perceived, and misunderstood, while also resisting and reshaping those perceptions. The post exemplifies how Adichie uses Ifemelu's blog to provide a platform for alternative, Afrocentric narratives that free Black identity from perversions caused by colonial and Eurocentric norms.

## **Conclusion**

In *Americanah*, Adichie deftly employed Afrocentricity to reconstruct African identity by re-centering African narratives and critiquing colonial legacies. Through the central character, Ifemelu, who throughout the novel struggles to find her true self and authentic African identity, Adichie wove key Afrocentric themes. Ifemelu's journey of embracing her natural hair served as a potent symbol of resistance to Western ideals of beauty,

reflecting the broader Afrocentric themes of reclaiming African beauty standards and identity reconstruction. Moreover, Adichie critiqued Western media's portrayal of Africa, countering stereotypical narratives by celebrating the diversity and richness of African values. She also interrogated the lingering impacts of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, exposing their roles in shaping global perceptions of Blackness and African identities. Furthermore, through Ifemelu's lived experiences in America, Adichie explored the complexities of identity reconstruction for Africans in the diaspora. She brought these experiences to the forefront, offering a nuanced portrayal of how the African diasporas reclaim their identities in racially charged Western environments.

Through the strategic use of blogs, the novel amplified African voices, using these digital spaces as platforms for raising consciousness about racial identity, critiquing structural racial divisions, and challenging commodification of Blackness. Through Ifemelu's blogs, Adichie addressed the misrepresentation of African women in the diaspora, particularly their hair. This multi-layered approach underscores how African identities can be reconstructed and asserted amidst forces of colonization, racial division, and globalization.

### **Implications**

The analysis encourages a critical engagement with the postcolonial Afrocentric perspective to reconstruct African identity. It opens vital avenues for future research by demonstrating the efficacy of Afrocentricity as a lens for literary analysis and identity reclamation. It suggests that future studies can explore how the Afrocentric paradigm can be applied to other postcolonial African literary works to uncover themes of cultural reclamation, resistance, and self-definition. Moreover, future research may investigate the role of digital platforms such as blogs and other social media as contemporary tools for identity negotiation, particularly among the diaspora. Comparative studies could also be undertaken to examine how different authors utilize Afrocentric perspectives to counter colonial bequests and re-center African narratives across varied historical and geographical contexts.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declared that the research was conducted with no theoretical, commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest among them.

### Statement of Data Availability

All the data extracted from Adichie's novel, *Americanah* are in the manuscript.

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