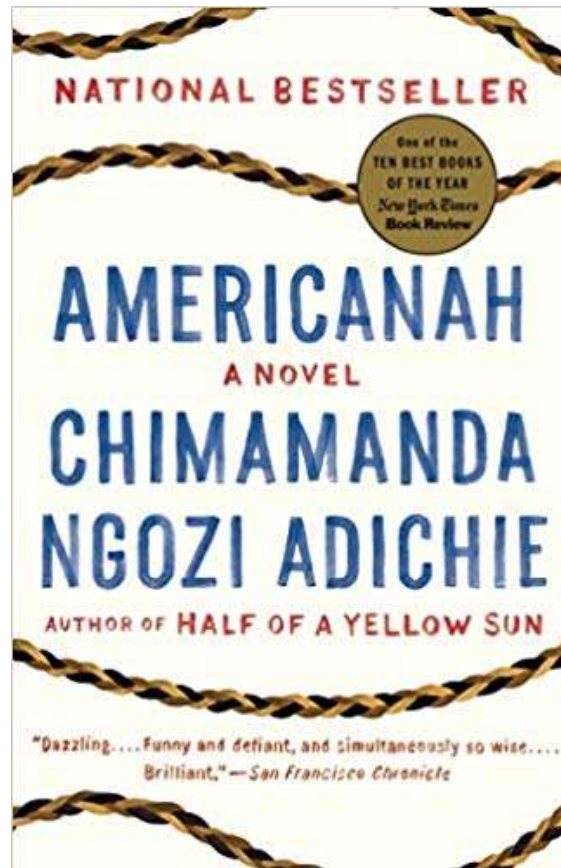


**Double-Consciousness:
An Analytical Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah***

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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Americanah-Chimamanda-Ngozi-Adichie/dp/0307455920/ref=sr_1_1?crid=186IW8TPNJ7YJ&keywords=americanah&qid=1576277083&s=books&sprefix=Americanah%2Camazon-devices%2C229&sr=1-1

Abstract

Adichie uses *Americanah* as a vehicle for cultural commentary that examines the impact that Westernization has on people from African countries. As with her previous two works,

Adichie uses *Americanah* as a space to analyze the power imbalances between the Western hegemony and the “other.” Adichie’s commentary in *Americanah* differs from that of her previous two works in that she closely examines the double-consciousness that characterizes the lives of blacks in America. This double-consciousness saturates the identities of those who are citizens of a nation that refuses to acknowledge their worthiness. Blacks in America find themselves caught between a desire for acceptance into the mainstream culture and the solidarity that they must maintain as a collective in order to counter the very culture into which they seek acceptance.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, Double-Consciousness, Westernization, African-Americans, Non-black Americans, Nigerians, whites.



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Courtesy: <https://www.chimamanda.com/about-chimamanda/>

In *Americanah*, Adichie analyzes race relations from all perspectives - African-Americans, Non-black Americans, Nigerians, whites, among others. Despite the different stories Adichie gives us, they all are contingent on a dominant/subordinate binary opposition that ultimately always gives power to the dominating force.

In uncovering the trace in *Americanah*, we have to consider the framework of tension that Adichie has created between whiteness and blackness. Whiteness, as researcher use it here, refers to the systemic racism that is embedded in American culture that which privileges those of white

European descent over any others. Additionally, researcher considers whiteness to be any byproduct of this embedded systemic racism. For example, non-whites who oppress other non-whites because of a paradoxical loyalty to whiteness would be considered a byproduct of whiteness. The other side of the tension that Adichie constructs in *Americanah* is that of blackness. For the purposes of researcher argument, researcher use blackness when referring to the collective consciousness of blacks in America who experience marginalization and oppression because of the societal hierarchy that positions whiteness as superior to blackness. In *Americanah*, the subordinate position that characterizes blackness is evident in the self-perception of blacks. Self-perception, as is demonstrated in several scenes in *Americanah*, affects every aspect of one's life.

The construction of a whiteness/blackness binary opposition by Adichie rests on the assumption that whiteness is unequivocally superior and more powerful than blackness and for all intents and purposes, always has been more powerful than blackness. In examining the trace that is implicit within the signification of whiteness, we have to consider that whiteness, as a concept, has meaning only because of all other concepts to which it has been set in opposition. The same principle applies to blackness. Blackness, as a concept, has meaning due to everything it is not. Because these differences can be infinitesimal in scope, the trace becomes an unending referential network of possible significations. The limitlessness of possible significations contributes to the instability of the text.

Although essentializing African countries in the way that she is a conscious choice on Aisha's part, it was one that is forced on her by the essentialist views of the dominant society in America. DuBois notes that "...a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois 8). This statement rings particularly true in this instance.

Though Aisha is fully aware that Africa is comprised of multiple countries, peoples, cultures, languages, belief systems, etc., she nonetheless alters the ways she refers to the continent. She acquiesces to the ignorance of the dominant society and begins to essentialize people from Africa. However, her explanation to Ifemelu about why she essentializes Africa implies that she at once sets herself apart from dominant society while acting in a way that is consistent with its beliefs. When Aisha says, "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that," she uses the term American in a way that suggests her exclusion from the group. However, the contradictory action of using Africa as a blanket location for all African countries evinces the double-consciousness that characterizes Aisha. She understands that she is seen as the "other" in American society, but she still admires American culture and most likely longs for success by American standards. Aisha is impressed when Ifemelu tells her that she has been in America for fifteen years.

More telling of Aisha's reverence for American culture is the fact that she cannot understand why Ifemelu wants to return to Nigeria. Ifemelu's keen observations of American life give us a broad view of the impact that double-consciousness has on Non-American black immigrants. Even though being an immigrant compounds the immigrant double-consciousness, the framework can still be applied. Those from African and Caribbean countries are trying just as African-Americans, to be accepted in mainstream American society. Aunt Uju is an important example of this concept. The summer that Ifemelu moves to America, she stays with Aunt Uju and Dike in New York. Immediately, Ifemelu notices differences in her aunt's personality. As they are driving in the car, Aunt Uju mispronounces her own name when she takes a call. Adichie continues this scene with an exchange between Ifemelu and Aunt Uju:

Is that how you pronounce your name now?
It's what they call me. (Adichie 105)

Just as we see with Aisha, Aunt Uju appears to give in to the American perception of who she is. Because she is traveling the road to American success, she chooses to make her travels smoother by ignoring bumps along the way—namely, the correct pronunciation of her name. Just as with Aisha, we also see Aunt Uju simultaneously acknowledge her otherness while submitting to the identity that the dominant society has created for her. Aunt Uju's response to Ifemelu's questioning of the mispronunciation is "It's what they call me." Using the term "they" suggests that Aunt Uju knows she is an outlier in American society, but her choice to accept the dominant society's perception of her shows that she considers the dominant society to be superior to her.

Aunt Uju again shows her willingness to bend to the ways of the dominant society when she Dike and Ifemelu are at the grocery store. Ifemelu observes the way Aunt Uju speaks when she engages in conversations with white Americans. "Dike, put it back," Aunt Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back*. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing" (Adichie 109). Ifemelu who is unschooled in the nuances of racial politics in America, observes, through unfiltered eyes, the double-consciousness that pervades Aunt Uju's personhood. It becomes clear that Aunt Uju has fallen prey to a self-consciousness that is the byproduct of systemic racism. In the voice of Stuart Hall, Aunt Uju has been made to see herself as "other." One possibility for this is that Aunt Uju does not achieve immediate success in America despite her training and expertise as a physician. Considering she has the knowledge and skill to perform the duties of a physician, what she likely internalizes is that she is not "American enough" to be a physician in America. DuBois speaks to this point when he says, "...from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence" (136). As Aunt Uju

attempts to hold on to parts of her identity-dignity, belief systems-she simultaneously tries to mimic the dominant society. What results from this duplicity is degradation to the self that, ironically, keeps Auntie Uju in a subordinate position.

It does not take long for Ifemelu to acquiesce to the same state of double-consciousness as Auntie Uju. Adichie describes Ifemelu's encounter with Cristina Tomas on her first day at college. Cristina Tomas patronizes Ifemelu because of her Nigerian accent and this becomes Ifemelu's first encounter with feeling like the 'Other'. Adichie writes, "Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf... And in the following weeks as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent" (Adichie 134-135). In this scene, Ifemelu goes from a self-assured, assertive individual to an insecure subordinate. There are several levels of power imbalance in this scene.

First, Adichie gives a detailed description of Cristina Tomas's whiteness: "Cristina Tomas with her rinsed-out look, her washy blue eyes, faded hair and pallid skin... Cristina Tomas wearing whitish tights that made her legs look like death" (Adichie 134). Adichie firmly establishes that Cristina is white and this careful characterization cultivates a dichotomy that contrasts whites and blacks. Second, within the context of this scene, Adichie positions Cristina in a place of authority: It is Cristina from whom Ifemelu needs information and assistance. Ifemelu is decidedly at a disadvantage in this scene.

This scene can be magnified so as to examine the symbolism that makes it more than an uncomfortable and condescending encounter between a white student and a black student. In fact, Cristina symbolizes America for Ifemelu. At this point, Ifemelu already realizes that America is not all glitter, gold and high-gloss as she had imagined. Similarly, Cristina is characterized as rinsed-out and faded. Cristina's ignorance becomes representative of many encounters that Ifemelu has with American whites, so Cristina's behaviors can be taken as representative of white America as it is portrayed in the novel. With Cristina being a symbol of white America, the dominant society, Ifemelu is immediately placed in a subordinate position.

Ifemelu needs Cristina's (America's) help in order to gain entry into her college life (American life). Moreover, Cristina (America) has relegated her to a position of inferiority based on her otherness. Ifemelu's subsequent remedy for her subordinate position is to practice her American accent, which is the beginning of her journey into the double-consciousness that absorbs the lives of blacks in America.

To conclude, Adichie is suggesting that while minority groups are aware that their oppression can be traced back to whiteness and all of the systemic racism that comes with that

term, they nonetheless aspire to achieve the privileges of whiteness. In other words, there is a duality in the consciousness of blacks in America—they dislike the whiteness that oppresses them, but they want to be part of that whiteness and receivers of the appurtenances of white America.

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