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Gender Inequality in Adichie's 'Americanah'

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Abstract

A person or an individual is known by his or her identity through various aspects such as name of the person, country, class, culture, religion, way of lifestyle, gender, profession etc. When the individual faces struggle in his life, he is unable to identify himself with the country or culture he is living with. Due to this crisis of identity, one faces troubles to express the real self. In the novel *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie offers a wide approach to the intricate relations between blacks and whites. She expands her boundaries into portraying the relationship amongst blacks in different parts of the world. Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, is a powerful character with different prospects and objectives in life affected and influenced by her race. She becomes a famous blogger and goes through several romantic relationships which affect her personality and shape her identity. These relationships and American culture affect her and help her grow into a strong, independent character and story line goes with gender inequality.

Introduction

Gender is rooted so thoroughly in our beliefs, actions and institutions, that it appears to us to be completely natural. To study gender is not simply as cause, but as effect; and not just as individual, but as social. The issues of the gender politics across the world have been a major focus of contemporary study.

Gender bias and discrimination could obviously be found not only within the family framework but also from the point of view of larger social, economic and political structures. The political representation of women is without doubt significant because the equal participation of women in politics is essential to building a democratic society. If women have the chance to influence the situation in the public sphere, they are then able to change conditions in the private sphere, in their homes. Public sphere like social, economic and political structures and private sphere like family spheres are strongly connected and influence each other.

Gender bias, Colonialism and the concept of patriarchy are inseparable in feminist discourse as it emphasizes a relationship of inequality and injustice. Though it seems that the colonial master has vanished from the colonized countries, the impact of colonization is still felt in the form of patriarchy. It is obvious that only men feast on the fruits of independence whereas women are still subjected to oppression by the male as the colonial masters did on the colonized. It is true that women are always at the receiving end.

Therefore the Third World women writers have raised their voice for the need of a separate principle. They have mobilized, educated and encouraged other women. They have built up confidence and helped other women's consciousness. Ever since the dawn of civilization, there has been a struggle to liberate women from female oppression. Feminism is an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to any women.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – a Nigerian writer focuses primarily on Igbo women since she is of Igbo descent and her novels as well as short stories are set mainly in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, where the Igbo ethnic group is predominant, and in the USA, where the author emigrated when she was nineteen years old. The primary attention is turned to three significant historical periods in the development of women's position in Nigeria: the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial time frames. Pre-colonial Nigeria represents traditional tribal societies with their values and colonial and post-colonial Nigeria introduces the advent of modernity. These three historical periods are significantly different in terms of changes in the positions of women in society.

Americanah is a feminist novel. Gender subordination is seen as a triumph issue in this novel which is the problem of women in Post-colonial Nigeria. Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel is an intelligent, stubborn, outspoken Nigerian woman who moves to America to attend university. She has difficulty adjusting there but eventually becomes a citizen, wins a fellowship at Princeton, and starts a popular blog about race. Yet, she has periods of deep depression at times and often feels like an outsider. She had three serious boyfriends: Obinze, Curt, and Blaine. She eventually moves back to Nigeria, reconnects with Obinze, and builds a life for herself there. Ifemelu is not a compromising character. She has her own set of principles. Ifemelu is the representative character who belongs to the post-colonial Nigeria. Ifemelu's mother is a super-religious woman who uses her faith to try to hide from the corrupt realities of the world. She loves Ifemelu but doesn't understand her very well. ?? "Ifemelu was uninterested in church, indifferent about making any religious effort, perhaps because her mother already made so much" (44). She was comforted by her mother's faith. Her father is a respectable man, he loves both his wife and daughter. Unlike her mother, her father was not a religious person, yet he did not distract in her ways. Ifemelu's father once said "Prayers were delusional battles with imaginary traducers" (44). Ifemelu had no restrictions in her home.

Though Ifemelu is not religious herself, two characters in the book are drawn in by religion in a way that Adichie describes as dangerous: Ifemelu's mother and Esther, the secretary at Zoe. Ifemelu's mother converts multiple times between sects of Christianity that have her fast for days at a time, abstain from pleasures such as dancing, and most importantly chop off her hair and swear off relaxer. Even as a child, Ifemelu views these churches with skepticism, as she notices that the congregants

are often asked to donate as much money as possible while the preachers live in luxury. Esther partakes in the same kind of religion, often fasting for days and trying to get the other women in the office to come to her church. In one interesting scene, Esther even tells Ifemelu, almost cheerfully, that she has “the spirit of husband-repelling” (517).

Sister Ibinabo, the saviour of young females, condemns girls for their dressing code. She tells Christie, a friend of Ifemelu “I saw you wearing tight trousers last Saturday. Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial. Any girl that wears tight trousers wants to commit the sin of temptation. It is best to avoid it” (50). Even a woman don’t allow another woman to enjoy her freedom, here the colonization is in the form of religion. Feminists have argued that one is not born a woman, but made a woman, because from birth, it is already decided what kind of clothes they should wear and how they should behave. Ifemelu’s mother was tied up with the religion and Ifemelu who has not much interest in religion tries to overcome that. ss Obstructive ideas of gender run widespread throughout Americanah and surface in both Nigeria and America. When reminiscing on her childhood years in Nigeria, Ifemelu reveals how her own parents reinforced social concepts of gender. As a young teenager, Ifemelu’s family was forced into poverty because her father “was fired for refusing to call his new boss “Mummy” and came home “complaining about the absurdity of a grown man calling a grown woman “Mummy” because she had decided it was the best way to show her respect” (Americanah 56). In Nigeria’s highly stratified workplace, Ifemelu’s father demonstrates that a male does not willingly work under a female, or if he does, he does not provide her with the respect a male boss would be afforded. In her research on Black identities and their formation, explores the importance of parents in shaping Nigerian children’s identities. In her study, she writes, “Participants reported that their parents played a fundamental role in influencing the construction of their Nigerian identity. In doing so, these parents instilled and emphasized the practice of traditional norms, values, and expectations that were in line with Nigerian culture” (101). Hence, parents are imperative in a Nigerian child cultivating traditional norms of gender identity and gender expectations (101). Thus, readers begin to see the world that Ifemelu’s parents shape for her being one that gives male bodies the preference and even control over female bodies. While in appearance contradicting this patriarchal pattern since a woman has power over Ifemelu’s father, Adichie still demonstrates the deeply ingrained nature of male dominance in the Nigeria’s gender hierarchy as Ifemelu’s father refuses to accept a woman in an authoritative position (7).

In Americanah though the characters struggled in the beginning, finally everyone settled in their life. A black woman faces lots of marginalisation than a black man which Adichie exposes in the course of the novel. The double marginalisation of black women takes place in two ways. At first, women are marginalised in Africa because of their gender. They occupy the lowest rank in their society. And so women are not allowed to take any major decision in or outside the family. And secondly, in the western countries like America or London, black women are marginalised for being a Black. The notion of double marginalisation of black women is well expressed by Adichie in the novel.

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