

## Rejecting American Stereotypes

*“There is no doubt that we are all equally human, but the course of history has made it possible for some people to question the humanity of others, which has grave consequences for all of us. And so, we need to combat and challenge and complicate stereotypes.”*

*- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

America is known for many things: the land of the free, home of the rich and powerful, and a beautiful place for new beginnings. This country is often portrayed in a blinding light of optimism in many of the novels high schools and colleges have their students read, spreading ideas of falsity and blind hope that things will always be ‘great’. Because most of these novels are written by Americans for Americans, students are rarely ever subjected to an outside opinion from an outside source. Where it is true that pieces regarding immigration are presented in schools and colleges, these pieces often relay the same message, being that America is a gateway to success. These pieces portray praise and gratitude towards America, thanking it for all the blessed opportunities it has to offer. It is not often for pieces degrading America to be taught—pieces that point out the stereotypes of America.

In the phrase, “stereotypes of America,” an American mind is most likely to float to all the stereotypes *created* by Americans regarding other cultures. These stereotypes cause large rifts in enabling foreigners to fit into what is supposed to be a ‘large melting pot,’ allowing for racism and discrimination to carry on, Americans are hardly ever brought to attention the stereotypes other cultures have on them, hence the true meaning behind the phrase “stereotypes of America.”

Charlotte Knoors, writer of “Making the Invisible Visible,” claims “stereotypes are a way of showing knowledge, although this knowledge may be faulty.” Without acknowledging these stereotypes brought upon Americans by other cultures, Americans are left clueless about the assumptions others have about them, leaving them without the knowledge of how to overcome these stereotypes and, possibly, move on from stereotyping. Knoors continues to say:

Since whiteness has been deemed the norm in society, and since white people hold most the power... white people determine more or less what is normal, and what is abnormal; and they do so in such a manner, that it favors their positions and views on how to live life.”

This quote can be taken into consideration when realizing just why Americans are left blind to their stereotypes. It is important that pieces portraying these stereotypes, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, be taught to high school and college students to bring to light the impact stereotyping has on people of other cultures through the use of the common phrase “tasting [their] own medicine.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* is a highly intellectual novel revolving around a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who comes to America to pursue a consistent education (it is important to understand that it is *consistent* and not *better*, as in most immigrant stories; Ifemelu attended two years of university in Nigeria but was unable to continue due to the constant strikes held by the professors). This novel is well known for portraying the issues of racism and feminism, without the issues being actively discussed throughout the storyline. Although these issues are important and famously known to be up for discussion when analyzing the novel, one must not ignore the stereotypes of America, pointed out by Ifemelu herself. Knoors describes stereotypes as “establishing the boundaries of Us versus them,” though, in Ifemelu’s case, she

established boundaries between herself versus America. It isn't that these stereotypes need to be proven false or inaccurate, but rather they must be taken into account when constructing Ifemelu's wayfinding map back to her appreciation for her Nigerian roots, such as said in Amonyeze's "Writing a New Reputation": "Ifemelu...represents the new stylistic attitudes of self-confidence and resistance by young contemporary Nigerians."

While in Nigeria, Ifemelu was often put under the impression that America is a great place. When her best friend, Ginika, announced that she and her family were moving to America, the people around her were envious, giving the assumption that America was a great place to live. Her school friend, Priye, says, "I don't understand why you don't want to go. You can always come back." Ifemelu's mother even says, "At least they are fortunate to have that option... They are blessed." (Adichie 78). Obinze, Ifemelu's boyfriend, also praised America, claiming that "'You look like a black American' was his ultimate compliment"; he even indulged in American culture, knowing "details about American presidents" and insisting that American literature is "very interesting." (Adichie 81).

Because of Obinze's enthusiasm, Ifemelu "began to dream" of what one might call the *American Dream*: a nice, fancy house and a rigorous, yet efficient, education system. Ifemelu has a rude awakening upon her arrival to America when one of the first things she witnesses is a boy peeing outside. After questioning this to her Auntie Uju, she gets the response, "He can get arrested for that, but this is not a good neighborhood anyway." (Adichie 127). This statement is insinuating that in America, the law disregards 'bad' neighborhoods, bringing to the reader's attention a stereotype of America. This concept of unruly neighborhoods is further addressed when Ifemelu becomes wary of her neighborhood after watching all the awful things in the news; instead of seeing positive things, such as "self-important army officers cut ribbons or [give]

speeches,' she saw 'images of men being hauled off in houses, the wreckage of cars crashed in police chases, blurred videos of armed robberies in shops.' (Adichie 139). Ifemelu's mind is tainted with the thought that America is violent and untamed, allowing for her distaste for what seems to be the American way of development.

Her distaste furthers the more she lives with her Aunt Uju; she begins to notice changes in her aunt, changes that seem out of the norm for her to make, according to Ifemelu. Upon Ifemelu's arrival, Aunt Uju takes a cell phone call and pronounces her name differently, saying "*yoo-joo* instead of *oo-joo*." (Adichie 128.) When Ifemelu points this out, Aunt Uju responds with, "It's what they call me." (Adichie 128). It is safe to assume *they* refer to Americans, addressing the cliché that Americans refuse to properly pronounce unusual, un-American names. Ifemelu opposes this explanation, stating, "...that isn't your name." (Adichie 128).

On page 135, Ifemelu's observations of these changes continue, expressing that "the old Aunt Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. She would never have tolerated the ingrown hairs that grew like raisins on her chin, or worn trousers that gathered bulkily between her legs." Ifemelu concludes this thought with "America had subdued her." (Adichie 134) This is the first passage of the novel where Ifemelu is actively realizing the "effects American culture has on immigrants". Aunt Uju finalizes Ifemelu's conclusion on page 144, when Ifemelu is pointing out that Aunt Uju's love interest, Bartholomew, wouldn't dare speak to her in Nigeria and Aunt Uju responds with "We are not in Nigeria...", showing that even though Aunt Uju has given up her Nigerian ways, Ifemelu would rather hold onto her Nigerian roots instead of participating in

Mimicry... a strategy conducted by non-whites to participate in society. It is not necessarily so that non-whites aspire to be white when they adapt to white norms. It is merely a strategy to get things done (Knoors).”

Before leaving Aunt Uju’s place to live in Philadelphia to pursue college, Aunt Uju provides Ifemelu with her friend’s Social Security card so that Ifemelu may find work: To Ifemelu “I begged her and she agreed to let you work with her Social Security card” (Adichie 131). This is necessary for Ifemelu to find work, being that “[she] can’t work with [her] student visa, and work-study is rubbish, it pays nothing, and [she has] to be able to cover [her] rent and the balance of [her] tuition.” (Adichie 131). It is common for immigrants to use other people’s Social Security cards and even though it is well known for immigrants to do this, it seems as if America doesn’t do anything to allow the obtaining of work, giving the sense that America promotes identity theft among immigrants, allowing them to put more blame of their downfall. Although Ifemelu opposes this idea, asking, “How? I’ll use her name?” (Adichie 131) and complaining that she doesn’t even look like the person of whom’s identity she is stealing, she reluctantly listens to her Aunt, forcefully falling into another of America’s stereotypical traps.

Upon arriving in Philadelphia with her ‘new identity’, Ifemelu meets with her old, Nigerian friend, Ginika. Ifemelu immediately begins to notice the effects American culture has on her friend, such as when she questions her thin figure, to which Ginika responds with, “Americans say ‘thin.’ Here ‘thin’ is a good word.” (Adichie 151). This gives the impression that Americans would rather starve and be thin than eat and be plump. Ifemelu even asks, “Is that why you stopped eating?” (Adichie 151). Ginika further shows the gaps between American culture and her own when taking Ifemelu out to shop. When trying to tell the cashier which store assistant had helped them, the cashier fails to ask, “Was it the black girl or the white girl?”

(Adichie 155), which, to Ifemelu, seemed to be the easiest and straight-to-the-point question. She expresses her confusion to Ginika, who responds with, "...this is America. You're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things." This shows America's lack of confidence when identifying different races; it stereotypes Americans to be unknowing of the mannerisms they should show towards non-white people, expecting everyone to 'just be American.'

Being with Ginika also affects Ifemelu's view on the ways of American youth, showing her the lack of subsistence and strive American youth portrays. On page 152, Ifemelu is with Ginika and Ginika's roommates. They talk about things that are foreign to Ifemelu, in what Adichie refers to as "codes." They also drink beer—a common, cheap, American, alcoholic drink—laughing at the girl who chugs hers. "Bottles and cans of beer were piling up.... The others laughed with enthusiasm that puzzled Ifemelu because it was not that funny. How did they know when to laugh, what to laugh about?" (Adichie 153). This passage shows Ifemelu recognizing the naivete young Americans seem to have; it also promotes the stereotype that Americans sit around, drinking beer, to have a good time.

By the question in the last sentence, it can be seen that Ifemelu doesn't understand the fun in what Ginika and her friends are doing, allowing her to have further opposition to 'American ways.' Ifemelu alienates herself away from American youth, even more, when she moves into an apartment with three American girls. This part of the novel further portrays American youth in a negative light, emphasizing their uncleanliness. When addressing "...a shallow intimacy, with people [Ifemelu] did not know at all," (Adichie 156), it is also pointed out that these people, her roommates, "...did not scrub in the shower; their shampoos and conditioners and gels were cluttered in the bathroom, but there was not a single sponge." (Adichie 156). Just this small observation caused Ifemelu to see her roommates as "unreachably

alien,” being that, when growing up in Nigeria, she was taught to be clean; her mother had said to her, “Ngwa, scrub between your legs very well, very well...” (Adichie 157.) The uncleanliness is further shown in the following passage:

They left pizza boxes on the kitchen table, and the kitchen itself in casual disarray for days, and on weekends their friends gathered in the living room, with packs of beer stacked in the refrigerator and streaks of dried urine on the toilet seat (Adichie 157).” Ifemelu’s roommates’ untidiness is also exhibited in their clothing choice for a party; where Ifemelu, sticking to what she knows, wears “slim-fitting trousers and a halter-neck blouse,” her roommates look unkempt, “wearing slouchy jeans” (Adichie 157). This acknowledgment of different dress styles eventually prompts Ifemelu to write a blog post, reading:

When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded this courtesy of self-presentation but has turned that disregard into a virtue. ‘We are too superior/busy/cool/not-uptight to bother about how we look to other people, and so we can wear pajamas to school and underwear to the mall’” (Adichie 157-158). Although this passage stereotypes Americans, it prompts Ifemelu to set herself apart, even more, sticking to her more classy fashion sense.

This setting also further enunciates the role alcohol plays on American youth, with the focus on cheap alcohol like beer and vodka, such as the vodka at the party Ifemelu’s roommates bring her to. Where Ifemelu expected a lively party, one with dancing and lots of conversation, she was disappointed to find that “...there would be no dancing; to party here was to stand around and drink” (Adichie 157). As well as portraying the American youth as those that simply drink and party, this novel also shows the thoughtlessness of their actions. This is shown on page 158, when Ifemelu’s roommates, knowing she doesn’t have a job, invite her to go out to eat; Ifemelu

accepts the invitation, thinking her meal would be paid for as it would be in Nigeria and is shocked when “Allison carefully began to untangle how many drinks each person had ordered and who had the calamari appetizer, to make sure nobody paid for anybody else” (Adichie 158). Ifemelu’s roommates, overall, represent American youth as lazy, alcoholic people with no sense of pride in the cleanliness of their lives.

Ifemelu, still unable to find a job, applies for an ad she sees in the newspaper: “Female personal assistant for busy sports coach in Ardmere, communication and interpersonal skills required” (Adichie 176). Upon finding that the job is not to be an assistant, but rather “to help [the coach] relax,” (Adichie 177), Ifemelu turns away, even after the coach informs her that his past “assistant” liked the job and the money she received. The coach seems to normalize this type of behavior in America, placing ads for sexual favors. Ifemelu does eventually accept, but she does not return after the first meeting; she does not allow herself to go along with what the coach represents as norms.

Because of this situation, Ifemelu falls into a dark depression. She stopped doing her daily activities, as simple as eating and going to class. She was “slowed by sadness... [knowing] there was no point in being [there], in being alive, but she had no energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself” (Adichie 192). Where it is clear to the reader and even Ifemelu’s friend, Ginika, that Ifemelu is suffering from depression, Ifemelu denies this, claiming that “Depression was what happened to Americans, with their self-absolving need to turn everything into an illness. She was not suffering from depression; she was merely a little tired and a little slow” (Adichie 194). Because of the negative stigma Americans give depression, Ifemelu would not accept she had it, therefore making it harder for her to move on and get help.



Ifemelu overcomes her depression when she finally gets a job as a babysitter for a rich, white family. This family represents the *American Dream*; a beautiful mom, a handsome and successful dad, and two children, a boy and a girl, all living in a large, fancy house, that entertains parties and charity events. Despite Ifemelu's dislike of the husband, Don, she finds herself growing fond of the wife, Kimberly, and the two children, Morgan and Taylor. Ifemelu's dislike of Don stems from her suspicions of him cheating on Kimberly: "Cheating was the first thing anyone would think of with a man like Don, with that lubricious aura of his" (Adichie 198). Don can be seen as a typical, American male, holding to the cliché that rich husbands with a great families will still cheat on their wives. Ifemelu keeps her distance from Don, rarely mentioning him or engaging in conversation. Later on in the novel, the idea of cheating is portrayed again when Ifemelu takes her driver's license test; the instructor erased incorrect answers on people's sheets and fill in the correct ones. Ifemelu tells Kimberly and her sister, Laura, "It was a strange moment for me, because until then I thought nobody in America cheated" (Adichie 203).

After a few months of babysitting Morgan and Taylor, Kimberly offers Ifemelu the opportunity to live in their house: "Would you consider living in?...It would be free, of course" (Adichie 201). This offer proves the point Amonyeze makes in her paper; Kimberly can be seen as a "sympathetic character...a as privileged middle class White, [is] educated not to notice how different social reality is for minorities and the lower class." Ifemelu refuses the offer and instead rents a studio apartment, her first space in America that is completely hers. In refusing the offer, Ifemelu is refusing charity and turning away from the rich and pristine American life Kimberly and her family portrays. This refusal enables Ifemelu to grow and mature, accepting the responsibilities of living on her own.

Through Kimberly and her family, Ifemelu meets Kimberly's cousin, Curt. They begin dating, with Curt finding Ifemelu to be gorgeous and intelligent. As their relationship grows more serious, Curt has Ifemelu meet his mother, who insists on informing Ifemelu which government party she belongs to: "I'm Republican, our whole family is. We are very anti-welfare but we did very much support civil rights" (Adichie 244). It was, as Adichie puts it "...as though it was the most important thing to get out of the way." Ifemelu, finding it odd and comical, humors Curt's mother by asking, "And would you like to know what kind of Republican I am?" (Adichie 245). This brief exchange shows how important it is to Americans which party people belong to; by offering a comical question, it can be seen that Ifemelu finds the dedication to parties unappealing. This can be further seen in a blog post Ifemelu writes, which is on page 227. Titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism," Ifemelu writes in a comical tone that "Tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds- class, ideology, region, and race... Liberals and Conservatives. They don't merely disagree on political issues, each side believes the other is evil," further portraying Ifemelu's opposition to American culture.

It is in Ifemelu's relationship with Curt that the reader can start to see a full emergence of Ifemelu's true self, the self that holds on to her Nigerian ways. By the time Ifemelu is dating Curt, she has ditched the American accent she had worked so hard to adapt after a lady in registration at Ifemelu's college insulted her Nigerian accent by speaking extremely slow to her (Adichie 163). The revelation occurred to Ifemelu to rid herself of her American accent when a telemarketer had complimented her voice: "You sound totally American" (Adichie 215). Ifemelu had thanked him and then, after hanging up, had questioned herself:

Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?... her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers.”

Ifemelu detached herself from her American accent, holding onto her Nigerian culture and disregarding the fact that the “acquisition of language is an essential part of the socialization process as language is not only a tool for communication but a cultural carrier” (Amonyeze).

Curt manages to line Ifemelu up with a communications job interview; ecstatic about the opportunity, Ifemelu tells her friend, who in turn tells Ifemelu: “My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff matters but it matters. We want you to get the job.” Ifemelu recalls Auntie Uju telling her the same thing and wanting to laugh, but she realizes the seriousness of the issue (Adichie 250). From this conversation, one can understand that it is typical of Americans not to hire immigrants, or even, simply, people of color, based on their cultural appearances. “Society... tries to hold non-whites up to white norms. They have to act and dress the way white society does, otherwise they are not normal” (Knoors). Ifemelu gives to this request, but she eventually resorts back to her natural hair after it begins to fall out. At first, she is appalled by her appearance, but she then discovers a website “HappilyKinkyNappy.com” (Adichie 259). This website is full of black women who are in love with their natural hair; this sight gives Ifemelu the final encouragement she needs to indulge in her Nigerian culture.

Ifemelu’s new emergence of herself, her full acceptance of who she is because of her disdain for American culture, leads her to break up with Curt and begin her career as a blogger. We see Ifemelu as a fully developed character, strong in her pride of being a non-black American; it is this concept, of being a non-black American, that Ifemelu writes about in her

blogs, proving that the stereotypes of America are what caused Ifemelu to stay true to her own culture. Amonyeze says it best when she claims:” “it is [Ifemelu’s] sense of self, reposing records of peculiar cultural experiences, which make her attitude structurally different from people.” She also claims that “it is important to observe... that if Ifemelu had seamlessly accepted American society, she could have settled down more easily and coped with the stress of [the] new society.” And though this may be true, it would have also meant the loss of Ifemelu’s true self.

*This paper was written by critically analyzing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s **Americanah** through the use of historicism and cultural studies literary theory. The historicism perspective offers the idea that “what makes a fact depends on the perspective we look from,” as well as from the perspective of the Foucault model, which argues that, “...we internalize patterns of expectations from the surrounding culture...” a model that Ifemelu had to deal with in her time in America. In retrospect to the cultural studies literary theory, it was taken into account that “cultural studies [focus] on the resistant side of popular culture,” which can be seen in Ifemelu’s opposition to accepting American ways (Parker).*

## Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. First Anchor Books, 2014.

Amonyeze, Chinenye. "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*". *Journal of Black Studies*. April-June 2017.

Knoors, Charlotte. "Making the Invisible Visible." June 2016.

Parker, Robert D. "How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies". Oxford University Press. Third Edition. 2015.