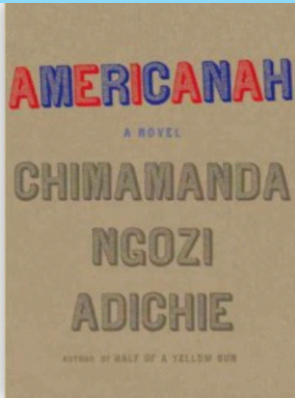


Book Review



Americanah: Through a looking glass glumly

Ikheola Ikhide

For you. "Ceiling," poor thing!

There are many good reasons to buy *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie's publisher should rise and take a bow. *Americanah* is an ode to editorial excellence. Not a word out of place. When the book is good, it is really good; defiance pops out of well-dug trenches, igniting wars that give the middle class and the poor in Nigeria and America the middle finger. *Americanah* confers on the reader a deep respect for Adichie's industry and writing prowess. Many of the characters in Adichie's *Americanah* live in my part of America. I do see my daughter in the book's dingy apartments negotiating a hair weave. In this book of many opinions, Adichie handles the sensitive subject of child labor and house help abuse with mastery; this is what Adaobi Nwaubani should have done. The reader will swoon at her re-telling of America's love affair with Barack Hussein Obama, of how millions of Americans held their breath on that night in 2008 as they waited for Obama to win the presidency.

Americanah is not a perfect book, but it is perhaps the best narrative on contemporary Nigerian life I have read in a long while. Campus life in Nigeria is expertly handled. Adichie captures the hustle – and the filthy bustle of campus life in Nigeria. The love-making between the two main protagonists, "Ceiling" Obinze and Ifemelu, may be cringe-worthy to some but felt authentically Nigerian. Adichie builds convincing characters in Auntie Uju and her son and the relationship between her and Ifemelu is moving. Adichie uses Nigerian lingo in convincing and refreshing ways. She captures the culture clash going into America comically; read Auntie Uju, the apologetic Nigerian, trying to be an American. As she channels Jhumpa Lahiri in the soulless tenements of her America, in the blandness of her America and her food garnished with tasteless spices and pretty words, the sadness weighs on you like a heavy winter coat three sizes too big for you:

In London, night came too soon, it hung in the morning air like a threat, and then in the afternoon a blue-grey dusk descended, and the Victorian buildings all wore a mournful air. In those first weeks, the cold startled Obinze with its weightless menace, drying his nostrils, deepening his anxieties, making him urinate too often. He would walk fast on the pavement, turned tightly into himself, hands deep in the coat his cousin had lent him, a grey wool coat whose sleeves nearly swallowed his fingers. Sometimes he would stop outside a tube station, often by a flower or a newspaper vendor, and watch the people brushing past him. They walked so quickly, these people, as though they had an urgent destination, a purpose to their lives, while he did not. His eyes would follow them, with a longing, and he would think: You can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don't even know how fortunate you are. (p 227)

Americanah is an ambitious but flawed chronicle, immensely readable, brilliant in parts, showing off some good writing. Tension snaps the pages. Adichie spares neither Nigeria nor America; she does have a soft spot for England. Her analysis of the politics of hair in the book is fascinating and engaging, even though there is hair everywhere, hair fascinates Adichie, and she shrinks from nothing, not even pubic hair. It is a near-fetish. In public interviews and comments,

Adichie seems to regard growing natural hair as the next civil rights movement, and she comes across as evangelical and judgmental. Her treatment of the subject in the book however is actually entertaining and illuminating; not in-your-face judgmental. Yes, *Americanah* is an engaging book. Messy. Like life. Brilliant. Like life. Dumbass. Like life. Infuriating. Like life. Adorable. Like life. Bipolar. Like life. It is not hard to fall in love with a book that sighs like this:

For months, the air in their flat was like cracked glass. (p 41)

This is my favorite passage; it spoke to me in many ways:

And so she sent them invitation letters, bank statements, a copy of her green card. The American embassy was better now, the staff was still rude, her father said, but you no longer had to fight and shove outside to get in line. They were given six-month visas. They came for three weeks. They seemed like strangers. They looked the same, but the dignity she remembered was gone, and left instead something small, a provincial eagerness. Her father marveled at the industrial carpeting in the hallway of her apartment building; her mother hoarded faux-leather handbags at Kmart, paper napkins from the mall food court, even plastic shopping bags. They both posed for photos in front of JC Penney, asking Ifemelu to make sure she got the entire sign of the store. She watched them with a sneer, and for this she felt guilty; she had guarded their memories so preciously and yet, finally seeing them, she watched them with a sneer. p 301

What is the book about? It is several conversations about identity, race, immigration, class, exile, longing, and heartbreak, all of this drama carried out in Nigeria, England and America. And oh, it is about women's hair, the politics of women's hair, that is. Ifemelu, the protagonist, seemingly affected with the Sokugo wandering disease walks through life in a funk, draped in a supercilious daze, hating any and everything and every human in her tortured sights. It gets annoying really, well, until you meet "Ceiling" Obinze, the liberated, some would say, emasculated Nigerian man that is the only one good enough for Ifemelu. And boy, is he liberated. He chops greens in kitchens, cleans and cooks and does not grunt, fart and dig into his butt like most Nigerian men seem to do in the book with gleeful abandon. You almost expect to see him in the next page with a baby firmly tied to his feminist back with a woman's wrapper loudly featuring the picture of a scowling fist pumping NGO feminist and the words I LUV MY STRONG BLACK WOMAN! Many would say he Obinze is weak also; he deserts his long suffering wife who is not good enough for his eclectic and intellectual tastes (he did marry her, duh!) and ends up with Ifemelu, the love of his life. And they live happily after. End of discussion. Well, not really.

It must be said: *Americanah* is a work of intense industry, it is not easily dismissed. Adichie's research skills are meticulous for the most part; you fall in love with her demons' passions and obsessions. It features good, well-edited writing. Every writer should get a copy of the book. Part 3 houses my favorite passages. It is lucid and fluid. Adichie is on the saddle here. It is as if two different people wrote the book. Here, Obinze the male protagonist stars and shines and Adichie

is at her best; tart prose and attitude strutting all over the place, stab, stab, stab with the mind. The book is more comfortable with England than with America and Obinze is a more believable and pleasant character than Ifemelu. He rescues the book somewhat from the carcinogen of Ifemelu's intense neurosis.

What is there to dislike about *Americanah*? Plenty. For starters, the pseudo-intellectual over-analysis grates on the weary reader; it is cloying and eye-roll inducing – Adichie's mind reaches for intellectual complexity where the simple would do. Supercilious anecdote after patronizing condescending pat on the head and the reader is soon done with the book. Adichie, using Ifemelu as a proxy, analyzes everything and the analysis is not always the best. No wonder the book is hefty. Many African writers tend to deploy caricatures to analyze issues. It can be effective. In *Americanah*'s case it is simply overdone and it diminishes the book immensely. Also, sometimes, *Americanah* feels and tastes like sugary processed food. Top that with cheesy romance layered on social commentary, and the reader soon chants Halleluiah! as the book mercifully trots mechanically to a pre-determined end, like a mass-produced batch of cookies out of a Starbucks oven.

Americanah proudly shows off botched attempts at innovation. Ifemelu's "blog posts" in the book would have made good provocative essays. However, they are not very good, filled with generalizations and specious arguments, prescriptive at best, never examining why things are the way they are. They are at best mildly thoughtful as if the blogger was too lazy or timid to fully flesh out the thoughts. There is no vision here which is fine if it is just for entertainment but then the book strains to be taken seriously. It tries too hard. And in there lies the possibility that like many African writers straining to write "fiction"

true success may lie in simply writing good essays.

There is a formulaic feel to *Americanah*. There is no perfect novel but as fiction goes, *Americanah* plays it safe, straight off the orthodoxy of an MFA program. All the rules of "good writing" are checked. Meticulously. As a near-aside, I would hate to be an author today. In the age of social media, readers already burdened with ADHD issues have more reading options than in the halcyon, analog days of old. Today, a book must engage readers or they are back to typing "LOL" on inane luscious Facebook gossip. At almost 500 pages, *Americanah* is too fat for the 21st century. It is engaging but unless you are a hermit, reading it will take forever.

For many African writers, fiction provides a sense of security and a wide, comfortable palette to discuss social/political issues. It is fair however to question whether Adichie should have used the essay format instead of fiction to address all the social anxieties in the book. After *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe stopped using fiction to comment on social and political issues. He wrote brilliant essays as a result. I think *Americanah* should have been a book of essays. Even at that it would have needed considerable work.

