

**FICTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF FACTS: MEMORY
AND INDICTMENT IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S
AMERICANAH**

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Abstract

Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah has received a wide range of criticisms from feminist, postcolonial, even from psychoanalytic perspectives, etc., but not really from the New Historicist evaluation which usually offers the opportunity for a panoramic historical interpretations of literary texts. Such interpretations usually enable readers to have a broader understanding of some vital actual historical developments being fictionalized in a literary text to learn from the mistakes of the past with regard to certain actions of individuals and institutions in society. In an attempt to achieve this, the study establishes the relationship between the characters, settings, incidents, and even some discourses created and represented in the novel with factual historical and contemporary political figures and issues related to them. The crystallizing issues from the author's literary searchlight in this regard principally border on former President Obasanjo's controversial privatization programme, General Babangida's political and economic maradonism, particularly his IMF/SAP-inflicted economic sores and sufferings and the historically suspicious plane crash under his administration, as well as several other sensitive and indicting issues associated with dictatorship, ethnicity and racism, among others. The study maintains that as an insightful creative writer and a reminder of history, Adichie dutifully stands on the watchtower of society, remembering and making certain significant indictments with the instrumentality of her novelistic art in focus, and that such representations can only be said to be fruitful or serve their cardinal

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intent when individuals in society learn from them and avoid recurrences.

Keywords: Creative writer, Indictment, Memory, Political and economic *maradonism*, Representation.

Introduction

Creative writers are usually individuals of sound retentive memory. Thus the ability to effectively remember, represent, re-interpret, re-invent and even resuscitate both past and contemporary issues in society appear to be one of the significant prerequisites for success in artistic creativity of any form or content. Having demonstrated a unique ability to articulately deploy lexico-semantic and syntactic resources in the manipulation and representation of developments in society in her fictions, Chimamanda Adichie is undoubtedly an outstanding Nigerian creative writer with a towering record of artistic success. Such representations in a creative work usually serve a myriad of purposes: vindication, vilification or indictment, education, verisimilitude and so on. The achievement of verisimilitude in a fictional work, of course, makes it to be aesthetically endearing, concrete and realistic. This article affirms that the infusion and representations of certain developments in society in Adichie's *Americanah* contribute in making the fiction to attain an optimal degree of verisimilitude and also transforms it into an authentic tool for indictment. The lexical item 'verisimilitude' is a derivative of the Latin 'verisimilitudo,' which means 'likeness to truth.' It is the extent to which a literary text imitates reality and is, therefore, believable. A work of art which focuses on being realistic or believable actually seeks verisimilitude. The term has a meaningful nexus with what the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge refers to as "suspension of disbelief." According to *Wikipedia* (2020), The poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge introduced the term suspension of disbelief in 1817 and suggested that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative. ("Suspension of Disbelief")

This explication is in tandem with Joseph Agassi's notion that "...verisimilitude carries a version of realism - usually known as scientific or critical realism" (62). Although Agassi in his work considers verisimilitude from the perspective of physical and metaphysical studies, the implication and meaning of the term is essentially the same. It is important to note that many literary texts which enjoy the privilege of global readership or being categorized as classics are usually those

that strongly connect directly or indirectly to the backgrounds they emanate from. Chimamanda Adichie's novel under investigation is not an exception. This study, therefore, focuses on how Adichie has commemorated, represented and consequently indicted certain individuals and institutions in her third novel, *Americanah*, for some notable controversial and questionable past and present involvements.

Theoretical Standpoint

New Historicism is the theoretical basis of this research. Although Selden and Widdowson assert that the terminology New Historicism covers a broad range of approaches to the study of history and literature, the starting point of New Historicism, however, is the notion that 'history' is textual (3). Lynn elaborates on this when he states that "...the new historicist assumes that history is a story, a construct necessarily written and re-written"(120). The term originated from a book written by the eminent American critic Stephen Greenblatt in 1980 titled *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Abrams and Harpham submit that,

New Historicism since the early 1980s has been the accepted name for a mode of literary study that its proponents oppose to the formalism they attribute both to the New Criticism and to the critical deconstruction that followed it. In place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural interpretations and evaluations. This is not simply a return to an earlier kind of literary scholarship, for the views and practices of the new historicists differ markedly from those of earlier scholars who had adverted to social and intellectual history as a "background" against which to set a work of literature as an independent entity, or had viewed literature as a "reflection" of the worldview characteristic of a period. (190)

The theory emphasizes on evaluating history as a broad discipline, thus viewing it as a social science such as sociology and anthropology and more importantly as background for literary articulations. In so doing, the dividing line between historical and literary productions is blurred, almost erased. New Historicism maintain that it is treacherous to reshape or reconstruct the past as it really was - rather than as the

conditions of our own place and time have made us to think and accept that it was. It is for this reason that anytime the adherents of New Historicism describe or analyse a historical change, the consciousness of the theory of historical change that informs their account is always there. In view of the foregoing critical perceptions, it can be said that, as a theoretical framework, New Historicism operates by insight-fully examining a myriad of discourses that affect both the author and the text. Instead of utilizing the context of history as a background for a literary text, the theory views historical texts as materials which are in discourse with the literature related to them.

Issues and Discussions

In *Americanah*, Adichie continues to observe a myriad of societal ills and consequently continues to raise her literary placards against them, implicating the alleged perpetrators. Her indictment of certain known individuals regarding the cankerworm of corruption, nepotism and abuse of public office in the Nigerian society remains conspicuous, just as it is in her two previous novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. She believes that some of the nation's notable political leaders such as Generals Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha and Olusegun Obasanjo contributed in different ways in entrenching corruption in the country, and she goes ahead to indict them by even naming them in a direct manner and also indicating certain alleged fraudulent issues historically associated with their respective administrations, actions and inactions while in power. For instance, Adichie is of the opinion that Obasanjo's privatization programme when he returned to office as civilian-elected president between May 29, 1999 and 2007 was shrouded in corruption and lacked transparency and accountability. This is revealed in the novel through the character simply identify as Chief, a typical Nigerian bourgeois capitalist who benefits from the arbitrage, thereby accumulating enormous wealth for himself at the expense of the rest of the masses. Of course, one of the factors that enable Chief to amass wealth in such a corrupt manner is his strong connection with the powers that be. He says...Obasanjo is my friend. They say the National Farm Support Corporation is bankrupt and they're to privatize it. That is our free market! I am going to buy seven properties for five million each. You know what they are listed for in the books? One million. You know what the real worth is? Fifty million (*Americanah* 26).

This representation implies that Chief's boldness to corruptly benefit from a manipulated privatization process is largely hinged on his friendship with 'Obasanjo.' Concerning this issue, *Sahara Reporters* maintains that "... President Olusegun Obasanjo and his deputy, Atiku

Abubakar, may have influenced the sales of government enterprises to their friends”(par.7). Corruption and nepotism are again subjects of indictment for Nigeria’s political leaders when the narrator talks about a particular woman who “...had made a lot of money during General Abacha’s government. She has been a pimp...providing young girls for the army officers who, in turn, gave her inflated supply contracts” (28). Also, the narrator’s statement “about how the Babangida’s government had reduced Nigerians to imprudent idiots” (48) can as well be seen as an indictment for some of the General’s dangerous economic experimentations with IMF-World Bank in the 1980s; experiments which brought about a considerable devaluation of the country’s once mightier than dollar currency, naira. Ostensibly, these experiments brought about hyperinflation, unemployment, poverty and hardship to the country. In his “President Babangida’s Structural Adjustment Programme and Inflation in Nigeria,” Anyanwu captures the situation thus:

The IMF-World Bank economic policy packages embodied in President Babangida’s Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) provide overt encouragement to the fostering of an unregulated, dependent capitalist regulated model, while allowing only a supportive role for the government in a refurbished economic environment of highly reduced government ownership and control of enterprises. Inflation has assumed a doomsday scenario since the inception of the SAP in July 1986 (from 5.4% in 1986 to 40.9% in 1989), and is threatening to destroy the very fabric of Nigerian society. It is the principal price of Babangida’s SAP measures... This SAP-induced inflation has resulted in adverse income distribution, leading to increased personal insecurity and lessened personal satisfaction, while heightening interpersonal and institutional tensions and deterring investment... Other costs include the depletion of external reserves; a worsening balance of payment position; the diversion of managerial talent from managing production, maintaining efficiency and innovation, in favour of manoeuvring and

speculation for protection against (or benefit from) inflation. (5)

Indeed, Babangida's political and economic *maradonism* "reduced Nigerians to imprudent idiots." There was so much misery and disillusionment on account of his IMF-World Bank inflicted SAP that many citizens wondered whether the country will ever come out of the travails of that era. This is the historical situation Adichie reminisces in her fiction. By doing so, she has both implicated and indicted the principal actor under whose administration Nigerians were subjected to such historic anguish and on whose shoulders the responsibility must be squarely placed. In her portrayal, Adichie believes that such is a form of economic oppression Nigerians were subjected to by her leader in connivance with foreign economic forces. Bringing a former national leader to account in such a manner can possibly serve as a deterrent to contemporary leaders and can enable them to be more circumspect in handling issues of national importance, knowing full well that posterity shall remember their deeds, and can call them to account in different forms, even through the instrumentality of literature as Adichie has done in her fiction under study. She also observes as in *Purple Hibiscus* that while the "no good roads, no light, no water..." situation persists in Nigeria, "General Buhari's soldiers were flogging adults in the streets, and lecturers were striking for better pay..." (232), even as they are still doing till today under the same Buhari administration. By this representation, Adichie projects her belief that a responsible government should have been much more concerned about fixing non-existent or dilapidated infrastructure and social amenities than in using soldiers to flog adults in the streets.

When the issue of a plane crash involving a character identified as "the General" and several other military officers who die; their "bodies charred"(86) is brought to focus, Adichie is simply commemorating, illuminating and at the same time re-interpreting a questionable historic plane crash in Nigeria. The unfortunate incident actually happened on 26 September, 1992 involving the Nigerian Air Force Lockheed C-130H Hercules which killed all the 159 military officers on board. Omoigu insists that although the air mishap was detected early, "no organized rescue effort was arranged within a time that would have meant anything to the victims of the crash." Till today, several questions surrounding the occurrence are yet to be answered by the authorities. The continual silence over such questions seems to have authenticated the "rumours that the Head of State had engineered it..." (86). The statement and manner of representation of the incident in *Americanah* has the potential to mobilize popular agitation in Nigeria and, perhaps, elsewhere to ensure that diligent

inquiry is made as to the authenticity of the “rumour” and if true, possibly seek for justice for the victims. This is similar to the assertion credited to the character of Bartholomew when he says, “Kudirat’s death will not be in vain...” (116), an assertion which re-echoes the gruesome assassination of Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, wife of the widely acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential election.

Obi-Ani is of the view that Kudirat was assassinated because “the General Sani Abacha regime was prepared to silence all opposition to the annulled election and spared no effort in targeting the arrowheads...” (158). For the various ills associated with some notable Nigerian leaders, just like the purportedly masterminded plane crash and the broad daylight assassination of Kudirat, Auntie Uju upon facing certain ordeals in America as an immigrant says, “I blame Buhari and Babangida and Abacha, because they destroyed Nigeria” (*Americanah*, 218). And the narrator will observe “how Auntie Uju spoke about the former heads of state, invoking their names with poisoned blame”(218). The specific issues that prompt her bitter invocations of the names of some tyrannical leaders she believes contributed in “destroying Nigeria” can be adduced from her comments of regret.

I don’t even know why I came to this place [America]. The other day the pharmacist said my accent was incomprehensible. Imagine, I called in a medicine and she actually told me that my accent was incomprehensible. And that same day, as if somebody sent them, one patient, a useless layabout with tattoos all over his body, told me to go back where I come from. All because I knew he was lying about being in pain and I refused to give him more pain medicine. Why do I have to take this rubbish? (*Americanah*, 218)

Issues of indictments in Adichie’s *Americanah* also border on her vehement agitations for racial justice and equality in a multiracial society like the United States of America (USA). Long before Adichie’s work emerged, other notable African-American creative writers such as Richard Wright in his *The Black Boy* have equally made some representations against the malaise of racism as a vehement indictment on the American society. Racism and racial politics in USA largely crystallize in *Americanah* through some blogs which are, however, traceable to Ifemelu who upon migrating there later turns out to be a successful blogger. Most of the blogs can be said to be quite satirical. They seem to be aimed at demonstrating and ridiculing the monster called racism in the American society which although continues to pride itself as the global beacon of democracy and egalitarianism still harbours different forms of discrimination against people of colour, particularly the blacks. In one of such blogs, the blogger admonishes thus: Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come

to America, you become black. Stop arguing... America doesn't care... You're in America now... You know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder... Don't deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? (*Americanah* 220).

The expressions simply satirize the defects and hypocrisies of a society that lays enormous claim to upholding the tenets of egalitarianism, democracy and justice. It is a clarion call for sincerity, a modest effort by a creative writer to bring to account the monstrous issue of racism which still surfaces in one form or the other in the American society. The emergence of "Barack Obama," an African-American, as "the Democratic Party's candidate for president of the United States" (290), however, ignites feelings of excitement among some black and white citizens, and again, racism is on the front burner. At a dinner in Manhattan, the narrator observes "a balding white man" saying, "Obama will end racism in this country" (290). Indeed, Obama's emergence even at the level of a candidate of the Democrats in the presidential race ignited so much global enthusiasm, garnered enormous goodwill for the American people and seemed to be one of the most significant political developments in America's history with the potential to bring the long-desired end to racism. But then the blogger continues on her sarcastic note on the issue of racism when she writes:

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 breath through the nostrils of your beloved. And because that 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. They tell us race is an invention, that there is more genetic variation between two black people than there is between a black person and a white person. Then they tell us black people have a worse kind of breast cancer and get more fibroid and osteoporosis. So what's the deal? Is race an invention or not? (*Americanah* 296, 301)

The underlying point Adichie makes with most of the ironic blogs credited to the character Ifemelu is that “In America, racism exists” (315). She believes that the American society will be much better, healthier and prosperous without the factor of racism. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* defines the toxic six-letter word racism as: 1. the unfair treatment of people who belong to a different race; violent behaviour towards them; 2. the belief that some races of people are better than others (1264). The synonym for racism is racial discrimination. This is a factor that has denied many persons their fundamental human rights, even cost many their precious lives in the American society over the years, despite the implications of America’s famous creed: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness...” These liberating expressions were enshrined in America’s Founding Documents in their declaration of independence as far back as July 4, 1776. Yet as late as 25 May 2020, a George Floyd (black man) was gruesomely murdered on the American soil on account of racism. Adichie’s indictment or negative portrayal of racial discrimination in *Americanah* is predicated on her belief that it is a societal ill with a potential to pull down and not build any society where it exists. Ifemelu sounds even more sarcastic, revealing and indicting in her criticism of racism when she blogs thus:

But race is not biology; race is sociology, race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it’s about how you look. Not about the blood you have it’s about how you look. It’s about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair... Many American Blacks have a white person in their ancestry because white slave owners like to go a-raping in the slave quarters at night. But if you come out looking dark, that’s it... In America, you don’t get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you. Barack Obama, looking as he does, would have had to sit in the back of the bus fifty years ago. If a random black guy commits a crime today, Barack Obama could be stopped and questioned for fitting the profile... Of all their tribalisms, Americans are most uncomfortable with race. (*Americanah* 337-338, 350)

Ifemelu is so much concerned about Obama's presidential ambition to the point that "every morning, Ifemelu woke up and checked to make sure that Obama was still alive. That no scandal had emerged, no story dug up from his past... she would read the latest news about him, quickly and greedily, seeking information and reassurance..." (353). It is on one of such occasions of seeking information and reassurance concerning Obama that she discovers and reads a shocking post from a racist American, stating, "How can a monkey be president? Somebody do us a favour and put a bullet in this guy, send him back to the African jungle. A black man will never be in the White House, dude, it's called the White House for a reason" (353-354). In response to the post, Ifemelu 'wilted' and would "get up and move away from her computer, as though the laptop itself were the enemy, and stand by the window to hide her tears even from herself" (353).

As Obama's presidential aspiration brings racism to an intense exposure and trial, Ifemelu does not back down in her support for him because she believes that "Obama will do it better" (354). The idea of infusing a myriad of issues relating to Obama's historic presidential aspiration and eventual victory is meant to demonstrate the extent to which racism affects political developments in the United States of America, and how, through collective determination, support and faith, the ill can be possibly conquered for the good of society. Obama's eventual ascension to the White House is portrayed not as a victory won by one man alone but by the collective doggedness of all Americans of goodwill, both black and white. It is one of the significant realizations of Martin Luther King Jr's 28 August 1963 historic and prophetic speech famously titled "I Have A Dream." Since then, the speech has continued to resonate globally as a clarion call for fairness, racial equity and justice.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the commemoration and judgment of history cannot be suppressed by anyone, institution or leader, no matter how powerful while in power or out of power. With such knowledge and understanding, individuals and authorities can be enabled to be more circumspect with their actions and involvements at any point in time, knowing that history and posterity will revisit such and only vindicate them when they portray the traits of fairness, transparency, equity and justice in their dealings. On the other hand, they will be remembered, indicted and vilified when the reverse is the case. Adichie employs the medium of art to raise global consciousness on a variety of issues which constantly constitute impediments to the progress of the human race. Her representations, allusions and portrayals of some significant involvements of certain past and present political leaders while in office are indeed shockingly indicting.

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