

# The Conundrum of Ethnic Discrimination and Identity Crisis in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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## Abstract

The issue of Racial discrimination has emerged as a pressing concern worldwide in general and in the United States in particular in recent times, posing a significant challenge to human rights. Racial discrimination constitutes a grave violation of human rights, which encompasses a broad spectrum of human rights violations, including the adoption of discriminatory practices, the marginalization of domestic issues, and the unjust targeting of ethnic or religious minorities, refugees, and immigrants, often branding them as criminals, either intentionally or inadvertently (Smith & Johnson, n.d.). In this context, the present study aims to examine the facet of ethnic and racial discrimination that is meted out against the African immigrant community in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. This study tries to investigate the instances of racial discrimination that are orchestrated on the protagonist Ifemelu and her deep longing for ethnic identity after she migrated from Nigeria to America. This research paper also examines the myriad forms of racial politics and myths of sexism and racism prevalent in the American discourses in the light of Intersectionality theory.

**Keywords:** feminism, intersectionality, struggles, racial discrimination, identity crisis

## 1. Introduction

Black Feminism emerged in America during the late 1960s. The term "Black" carries with it an implication of racism. A Feminist is generally an individual who possesses the knowledge that the exploitation of women is caused by patriarchal hegemony, and such an individual actively strives to dismantle this hegemony to improve the lives of women. According to Rachel Suresh, much of African American literature delves deeply into the psyche of black women who faced the dual oppression of both white Americans and their fellow black Americans (Hill Collins, n.d.). On the other hand, the theory of Intersectionality is recognized as a critical theoretical framework that challenges hegemony, advocating for individuals of African descent who have experienced social injustice within the context of intersectional oppression. This investigation specifically focuses on the intersectionality of Black feminism, with an emphasis on understanding and addressing racism. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores themes of racial discrimination and identity crisis in her literary works by conducting extensive research on the intricate aspects of cultural heritage and individual self-identification. In her novel 'Americanah' (Adichie, 2014) which is set in Lagos, narrates the life journey of the main character, Ifemelu, a Nigerian immigrant in the United States, as she grapples with questions surrounding racial and ethnic identity. her gripping narratology, Adichie examines how racial discrimination and identity crisis can serve as both a unifying and dividing force. She presents the lives of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds and explores how the conflict influences their identities. The researcher employing a descriptive and qualitative analysis of the novel's text, investigates the myriad layers of the impact of racial discrimination that has plundered the lives and dignity of Afro-American immigrant settled in the U.S.

## 2. Literature Review

Author Mdika investigated Adichie's storytelling technique also allows her to explore complex themes and social issues in a thought-provoking manner (Mdika Tembo, n.d.). By weaving together different timelines and perspectives, she encourages readers to critically analyse the character's actions and decisions, prompting a deeper examination of societal norms and cultural expectations. Through her meticulous investigation of these topics, Adichie challenges conventional thinking and offers fresh insights into the complexities of human nature and the world we live in.

Murphy in his article discusses Adichie's ability to weave complex narratives and create multidimensional characters allows readers to truly empathize with the experiences of marginalized groups (Murphy, 2017). By humanizing these individuals, she challenges societal stereotypes and encourages her audience to confront their own biases. Through her powerful storytelling, Adichie motivates readers to actively engage in the fight for social justice and work towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

Ganapathy examines the intersections of race, gender, and class, shedding light on the ways in which these social constructs shape individual's lives and interactions (Ganapathy, 2016). Through her nuanced portrayal of characters from diverse backgrounds, Adichie invites readers to consider the impact of systemic inequalities and power dynamics on personal growth and relationships. Her meticulous attention to detail and vivid descriptions further immerses readers in the worlds she creates, allowing them to understand with the character's struggles and triumphs.

Shevchenko emphasised Adichie's use of multiple perspectives and shifting points of view further enhances the complexity of her narratives (Shevchenko & Рафаильевна, 2022). This technique allows readers to see events from different angles, challenging their preconceived notions and inviting them to question their own biases. By presenting a range of perspectives, Adichie encourages readers to engage critically with the themes and issues explored in her work, ultimately promoting a more nuanced understanding of the world.

Ngwaba draws attention to the power dynamics and inequalities that exist within society (Ngwaba, 2022). By highlighting the struggles and injustices faced by marginalized groups, Adichie illuminates the need for social change and equality. Her storytelling not only captivates readers but also serves as a call to action, urging individuals to question and challenge the status quo. Through her nuanced exploration of these issues, Adichie inspires empathy and understanding, fostering a greater sense of compassion and solidarity among her audience.

### 3. An Overview of Theoretical Framework

In order to examine the relationship between racial discrimination and identity crisis, it is essential to provide a concise explanation of these concepts and a general outline of the foundational theories of racial discrimination and identity crisis which is an indispensable part of the framework of intersectionality. However, it is important to note that the examination of transnational racial discrimination represented by Ifumela in Adichie's *Americanah* does not necessitate an exhaustive exploration in the context of the diasporic experience racial segregation of the migrated Nigerian community settled in Lagos.

The concept of Intersectional oppression was initially introduced in 1989 by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, an African-American lawyer, in her seminal papers entitled "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour". These seminal works consolidated black feminist criticisms of feminist theory, which had primarily focused on women as an undifferentiated social group that represented the interests and needs of white, middle-class women (Crenshaw, n.d.). Rosa Frascua Aira and Marta Ruiz Pascua (2020) define Intersectionality as "the phenomenon whereby individuals experience oppression or privilege as a result of their various social identities (Aira & Pascua, 2023)". Likewise, Author McCall posits that Intersectionality refers to the mutually constitutive relationships among social identities and has become a fundamental principle in feminist thought (McCall, 2005). Many scholars argue that it is the most significant contribution of feminist theory to the understanding of gender. To comprehend gender relations, one must consider the existing factors that shape and influence these relations, whether positively or negatively. Everyone possesses multiple identities of oppression, including race, class, gender, sex, ethnicity, and religion. These identities determine how society perceives us and influence our gender relations. Our personal experiences are shaped by these identities and are grounded in a broader context that extends beyond an individual's subjective awareness. Intersectionality brings attention to these identities and their interconnectedness, forming a complex web. Each system of oppression derives its identity from other systems of oppression, and these identities are deeply ingrained in our culture.

The concept of intersectionality places great emphasis on the notion that individuals possess a multitude of social identities, thereby acknowledging the intricate and nuanced nature of human existence. Take, for instance, an individual who identifies as both a woman and a person of colour; this convergence of identities engenders a set of experiences and challenges that are distinctly unique and worthy of careful examination and contemplation. The theory of intersectionality posits that various forms of societal subjugation, such as racism, sexism, and classism, are inextricably linked to the concept of diasporic experience. Hence the manifestation of discrimination which is rampantly pervasive in the examination of racial discrimination amongst the immigrant community is underscored in intersectionality

Intersectionality, recognizes that individual's lived experiences are intricately shaped by the intersections and overlapping of their multiple identities. According to the theory of Intersectionality, these lived experiences of the expatriate community are highly diverse and resist easy categorization by appreciating the interplay between various aspects of identity and infusing profound insight into the complexities of human existence. Additionally, the theory of intersectionality serves as an invaluable tool for advancing social justice advocacy, as it provides a comprehensive lens through which the intricate and multifaceted dynamics of discrimination and privilege are examined. Another important element of intersectionality is combating inequality and promoting social justice. In a world that is increasingly diverse and pluralistic, comprehending the multifarious ways in which different dimensions of identity intersect is imperative for effectively combating racial and transnational discriminations and to promote social justice.

Above all, recognizing that the experiences of women are not monolithic, contemporary feminism acknowledges the need to consider the intricate interplay between gender, race, class, and other intersecting factors in the fight for women's rights. By adopting an intersectional lens, feminists can develop a more nuanced and inclusive approach to advocacy, thereby ensuring that the needs and experiences of all women are duly recognized and addressed. Moreover, the relevance of intersectionality in contemporary society cannot be overstated as society becomes increasingly diverse, comprehending how different aspects of identity intersect becomes vital in tackling inequality and promoting social justice. Thus, intersectionality has emerged as a foundational pillar in a wide array of fields, including law, sociology, and activism and a relevant theoretical framework for the analysis of racial discrimination and identity crisis. Therefore, it is imperative to

consider how race, class, and other factors intersect with gender in the pursuit of women's rights. On this ground, the current research investigation is very relevant and significant as the researcher attempts to unearth the traumatic experience of racial discrimination and identity crisis that Ifumela in Adichie's *Americanah* embody.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 Examination of Racial Discrimination and Identity Crisis in *Americanah*

Adichie's novel *Americanah* examines the complex relationship between racial discrimination and identity crisis, shedding light on African immigrants' experiences in the US and their struggles to find their identities in the face of systemic racism.

*Americanah* clearly depicts the racial persecution Ifemelu, the novel's protagonist, and other African immigrants face in the US. Daily microaggressions, racial stereotypes, and overt racism are prevalent throughout the story. These events permeate the protagonist's daily existence, making them feel alienated and different. Discrimination affects their career and romantic relationships, producing a complex web of problems.

Through the character's different replies, Adichie masterfully shows the complexity of racial prejudice. Ifemelu answers by writing a thought-provoking blog about race, encouraging open dialogue and self-reflection. Her blog challenges preconceptions, starts racial conversations, and promotes change. However, her companion Obinze feels invisible and disconnected from his Nigerian heritage. Different reactions show the complexity of immigrant identity crises in the face of racial prejudice.

In *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the theme of rejection by male characters is a significant element in the story, especially in the life of the main character, Ifemelu. Ifemelu's experiences with rejection by men serve as a lens through which Adichie explores themes of identity, cultural displacement, and relationships. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu experiences rejection and a sense of alienation from the male characters in her life. Her relationship with Obinze, a central character, is marked by their separation due to immigration and the rejection of their love by external circumstances. This rejection deeply affects Ifemelu's sense of self and her perception of relationships. The following excerpt from the novel, showcases how deeply hurt and distraught the central characters really are by the ubiquitous presence of racial discrimination even in the portals of academic environ.

“But it can,” Blaine said. we prove that the world can be like this  
room. It can be a safe and equal space for everyone. We just need to  
dismantle the walls of privilege and oppression.” (Adichie 2014, p 331)

Additionally, Ifemelu's romantic relationships with Curt and Blaine in the United States also carry themes of rejection. She struggles with the expectations and stereotypes placed on her as a Black woman in an interracial relationship. This complex dynamic of acceptance and rejection by her partners highlights the intricacies of identity and belonging. On this ground (kumar & Christopher, 2023) posit that women who undergo repeated rejection by her own kin kith uncnciously develop attachment anxieties and suffer from sporadic spasms of depression. These instances of rejection by male characters reflect the broader theme of identity crisis in the novel. Ifemelu's experiences with various men shape her understanding of herself as an African woman living in the United States and her struggle to navigate the complexities of race, culture, and love.

Thus, the theme of rejection by the male characters in *Americanah* underscores the challenges of forming and maintaining relationships in a multicultural and racially diverse society. It also helps as a vehicle for Adichie to explore into the complex interplay between individual identity, societal expectations, and the search for belonging in a world marked by rejection and acceptance.

Likewise, social exclusion which is a marked manifestation of Racial segregation is also found replete in *Americanah*. Ifemelu's deep sense of self- esteem silent campaign for equality is evident in the following conversation with another expatriate doctor working in Lagos. The suppressed undercurrents of racial prejudice and the need for resilience is found in the ensuing conversation.

“The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you  
wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it is a lie. I came from a  
country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black  
and I only became black when I came to America.” (Adichie, 2014 p 288)

Ifemelu, as a university student, struggles to obtain job and is often judged by her sexuality. Although Ifemelu is comfortable in a mixed environment and has a white male loving partner, Curt, class, and race excluded her from his life and family. She discovers a divide between African Americans with a long history in the US and African immigration. These disparities impair her connection with Blaine. Additional exclusion considerations include national, ethnic, and tribal diversity. Ifemelu is shunned by her former friends after returning to Nigeria. Former friends call her Americanized and snooty, so they doubt her experience. Because Obinze lived in England and understood immigrants, Ifemelu wanted to rekindle her connection with him. Social exclusion may manifest itself via several forms of discrimination, such as those based on gender, race, and age. These discriminatory practices hinder the ability of marginalised groups to obtain social services and restrict their involvement in the job market.

The tentacles of Racial discrimination dint even spare the well educated and sophisticated African expatriate community settled in the Lagos. This ubiquitous invasion is found in the character, aunt Uju who is an immigrated medical practioner from Nigeria, working in

America now. Her statement that her patients approached her with a air of snobbery tell the ethnic annihilation that was silently meted against them. "...She complained about the patients who thought they were doing her a favour by seeing her" (Adichie, 2014 p 172). Moreover, the American colleagues of Ifemelu themselves take a narcissistic pride in being identified as 'whites' and unconsciously indulge in ethnic cleansing against the balack community. In this regard (M & G, 2023) postulate that individuals who take excessive pride in their own community values and mores demand self-admiration and launch brutal exploitative behaviours. The native white americans orcherstate untold misreirs and maltreatments againt the expatriate afro-american settled in the U.S. under their narcissitic pride of being white natives. Her skin tone pits her against white patients. His skin tone causes Dike to face classroom racial prejudice. "She said I didn't need it" (Adichie, p 183), his white group leader says he does not need sunscreen because he is dark. This makes Dike feel different, and not in a good way. Being too young to grasp racism in America affects his mental health.

Cultural alienation and intersectionality of identity is predominantly found reflected in the novel. Cultural discrimination occurs when people connect with others from different cultures, altering their cultural identity. Increased intercultural interactions in the modern world perform, preserve, negotiate, and perpetuate cultural identities through communicative discourses. In the postcolonial multicultural context, the novel's central characters Ifemelu becomes an epitome for the exploration of cultural identities and inequities. Ifemelu, the novel's heroine, tries to identify with her African racial, ethnic, and national roots and American linguistic, cultural, and social environment. Thus, her identity is a fluid mix of identities. Boehmer says Ifemelu's attempts to define herself via language and appearance are vital for cultural authenticity, hybridity, and resistance (Boehmer, 2005). Culture is language, belief, values, conventions, behaviours, and even material items passed down from generation to generation.

Moreover, the novel delves deeply into the intersectionality of identity, as it not only explores racial discrimination but also delves into the nuanced layers of gender and class. Ifemelu's experiences as a Black woman demonstrate how discrimination becomes even more complex when intersected with gender and class. This intersectionality deepens the complexity of her identity crisis, forcing her to navigate multiple layers of societal expectations and prejudices. Besides, in discussing Americanah, it is essential to acknowledge that the novel also highlights the idea of a transnational identity crisis and subsequently yearn for acceptance and acknowledgement by the American white community. Characters like Ifemelu and Obinze grapple with the question of where they truly belong, across the worlds of Nigeria and the United States. This transnational identity crisis, deeply rooted in their experiences of racial discrimination, underscores the fluid nature of identity itself, challenging conventional notions of belonging.

Thus, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah provides a powerful and subtle exploration of racial discrimination and identity crisis. Readers are confronted with the harsh truths of racial prejudice while delving into the many layers of ethnic discrimination, social ostracization, occupational discrimination, communal maltreatment, identity crisis in the context of intersectionality. Through the experiences of its characters, the book reminds essential discussions about race, identity, and the imperative need for societal transformation in addressing racial discrimination. Adichie's work assists as a mirror reflecting the challenges of contemporary society and encourages readers to engage in critical conversations surrounding these pressing issues.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus, the examination of the novel Americanah through the lens of intersectionality explores the constant transnational discrimination and racial disparity faced by both primary and secondary characters in their quest of acceptance and respect within the United States. These individuals often find themselves forced to assume false identities, modify their personal attributes, or alter their physical appearances to assimilate into the cultural fabric of these nations. In this context, it is very pertinent to consider the outcry of the protagonist, Ifemelu when he admits, "I came from a country where race was not an issue. I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie, 2014 p 290). This comment by Ifemelu proves that race and ethnic discrimination is all prevalent in a country that profess "all people are created equal" stands polemical. Due to prevailing racial prejudices in the United States. African individuals depicted in this novella are forced to undergo a process of linguistic adaptation, name alteration, and the cultivation of new facets of their identities to garner respect or assimilate into their respective societies. Due to prevailing racial prejudices in the United States. African expatriates represented by Ifemelu in Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a standing testimony of the ethnic crisis and racial discrimination experienced by the immigrant community globally. However, it is necessary to adopt a multifaceted strategy to address these problems, including law and policy reform and the confrontation of personal prejudices and attitudes. However, it is essential for establishing a more just and equitable society in which every person, regardless of race or ethnicity, is regarded with dignity and respect.

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Chitra Devi P has conceptualised, collected resources, analysed, and wrote the original draft.

Dr Christopher G is the corresponding author and supervisor. He edited, reviewed, and developed the final draft.

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