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The Waning and Waxing of Ifemelu's Journey of Love in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an internationally acclaimed Nigerian writer who grew to prominence with her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. Her novels exceptionally capture the beauty of Igbo and their sufferings faced in the world. Her third novel *Americanah* illustrates the different issues faced by the Nigerians in America and England due to their colour and culture. Ifemelu is the protagonist of the novel *Americanah* who represents the many sufferings faced by black women in America. Their identity is questioned at every occasion in America that makes the blacks feel inferior and traumatized. Ifemelu goes to America with great hopes which is crushed within a few days. Ifemelu's is in deep love with her childhood sweet heart Obinze who encourages her take up studies in America. Her love life begins to trail due to her encounter with an American sportsman who exploits her sexually. She completely withdraws due to this sexual exploitation; she feels that she has betrayed Obinze and cuts her contact with him. Many years later she tries to make up with married Obinze which ruins Obinze's family. The paper focuses on Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze and the hardships and betrayals that crosses their path.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Love, Relationship, Struggle, Betrayal and Pain.

1. Introduction

“There was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself.” (Adichie 6)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* is her third novel which gained world attention as it explicitly illustrates racism and its effects on the Nigerians. Ifemelu the protagonist of the novel hails from Lagos, Nigeria from a middle-class family. The narration of the novel moves back and forth shuffling between reality and flashbacks. Ifemelu has a happy school life where she meets the love of her life 'Obinze Maduewesi' in a party. She gets easily attached to him and they converse with ease as if they have known each other from their birth. They talk for hours together and cherish each other's company and their relationship is envied by their classmates. They have a strong bond and they

beautifully connect with their emotions and they share common ideas and interests. Even when their interests differ, they try to venture into it for the sake of their love.

Because of her, he had joined the debate club, and after she spoke, he clapped the loudest and longest, until her friends said, "Obinze, please, it is enough." Because of him, she joined the sports club and watched him play football, sitting by the sidelines and holding his bottle of water. (Adichie 42)

Obinze introduces Ifemelu to his mother who takes an immediate liking to her, "What a beautiful name you have. Ifemelunamma," she said (Adichie 45). Obinze's mother is a widow and she works in Nsukka University as a professor of literature in English. She approves of their relationship and encourages them to settle in life by choosing a career outside Nigeria. Her dream for Obinze and Ifemelu is for them to settle abroad as she feels Nigeria lacks opportunities. Obinze reads American novels to gain an understanding of America and he also motivates Ifemelu. They plan to leave Nigeria and settle in America so that they might have a better future together. When Obinze moves to Nsukka campus, Ifemelu often visits him and they enjoy their time talking about so many things like books, cooking, music, dance etc.

She often ate lunch in Obinze's house, or they would go to town, to Onyekaozulu, and sit on wooden benches in the dimness of the restaurant, eating, on enamel plates, the tenderest of meats and the tastiest of stews. She spent some nights in Obinze's boys' quarters, lounging on his mattress on the floor, listening to music. (Adichie 59)

Ifemelu earns a scholarship to America even before Obinze. He and his mother are very happy for Ifemelu. Although Ifemelu is unsure and scared about the new life in America she takes a leap of faith. She goes to America and finds it weird and odd due to the new life style, food habits and language. She communicates to Obinze through emails and seldom through phone. Ifemelu struggles as she is unable to comprehend the way the Americans speak English. Obinze helps her out from Nigeria, "Obinze suggested she read American books, novels and histories and biographies. In his first e-mail to her—a cybercafé had just opened in Nsukka—he gave her a list of books."

She is received in America by her school friend Ginika who has already assimilated into the American culture. She guides Ifemelu in America and asks her to take up a part-time job in order to cover her expenses. Ifemelu applies for part-time job and receives a call from an American Tennis Coach who offers her a job as a 'relaxation assistant'. She meets him in his house where he describes the nature of her job. She has to bodily comfort him after his sports practice and he offers a good amount of money and is also willing to cover her to and fro expenses.

Ifemelu initially hesitates but has no other choice left therefore agrees to take up the job. On the first day of her job her life turns into a nightmare as she is sexually harassed by the sports man which leaves her depressed and traumatized. She begins to isolate herself and refuses to communicate with others. She becomes guilty for having given space to the sports man and hence turns miserable. She suffers from her guilt and she battles out with her feeling of having betrayed Obinze. Hence, refuses to speak to him and slowly withdraws from him and society. She does not open up her feelings even to Ginika, her only companion in America. Obinze tries to reach her through Ginika but all his efforts go in vain, he even sends her numerous mails which goes unanswered. Ifemelu completely shuts off from Obinze and carries on with her life in America. He goes clueless and helpless as he is not aware of what is happening to Ifemelu in America.

After Ifemelu's bitter experience she is introduced by Ginika to Kimberly an American who offers Ifemelu a job as a baby sitter. She grabs the position and takes care of Kimberly's children. She happens to meet Kimberly's cousin Curt who lives in Baltimore often visits Kimberly and falls in love with Ifemelu. She initially hesitates as he is a white but later accepts his love, he is her first American

boyfriend. He is rich and cares for her a lot, he gets annoyed when she uses relaxers for her hair. He likes Ifemelu's braided hair and helps her to get back her hair to the original self. Despite the differences they have, he loves her and pampers her. She ruins her life by making love with Rob her neighbour as she wants to fill the void left by Obinze which she does not receive from Curt. She even confesses her mistake to Curt which ends their relationship and her new found luxurious American life also comes to an end. "She spent weeks calling Curt, waiting in front of his building until he came out, saying over and over how sorry she was, how much she wanted to work through things" (Adichie 181).

She later befriends Blaine a black American professor and an activist and it turns into a romantic relationship. Her relationship with him is complex as he is unable to digest the fact that she is an African and not an African-American. There is a fissure in their relationship when he starts mocking at her blog which irritates Ifemelu. She understands that her relationship with him is a disaster and that his behaviour toward her and her blog is not pleasing. She feels smothered in this relationship and wants to escape from it. They try to make some efforts to work out the relationship but it fails. Ifemelu feels that their ideologies and opinions regarding culture clashes and therefore she decides to end her relationship with Blaine. Although he is disciplined and moralistic her relationship with him does not work out when it comes to emotional understanding. Her relationship with him is unlike Obinze which she misses deeply. Her heart runs to Nigeria as she yearns to go back to her native country and to Obinze.

Obinze never understands her silence yet respects Ifemelu's feelings and proceeds with his life. While Ifemelu is carving a niche for herself in America with her blog Obinze goes to England. He goes to England as an illegal immigrant and encounters multiple issues like racial discrimination, poverty, identity crisis and hardships. He despises his new life but continues to work for the sake of his mother's satisfaction. He works as a sanitary worker, cleaning toilets and tries to survive with the meager amount he earns. He gets deported as his visa has been rejected due to the September 11, 2001 attack. On his return to Nigeria, he begins a brand-new life, he becomes rich as he takes up real estate business. He grows rich and gets married to Kosi and has a girl baby. His relationship with Kosi is very superficial unlike his relationship with Ifemelu. He is unhappy and discontent in his marriage to Kosi because he is unable to accept Kosi in Ifemelu's place.

Ifemelu regrets her mistake of avoiding Obinze and she begins replying to Obinze email even when she is in a relationship with Blaine. Obinze's heart throbs as he finds her mail and stares at it for a very long time. He starts replying to her mails with excitement and begins telling her about his deceased mother. She replies to him with a heavy heart on learning of death of his mother. "Her e-mail made him happy. Seeing his mother through her eyes made him happy" (Adichie 230). She also apologizes for her late reply as she writes that she was busy taking care of Dike who had attempted suicide. Obinze wonders at Dike's daringness to attempt suicide and wants to reach out to Ifemelu and extend his support. He wanted to buy a ticket and get on a plane to America and be with her, console her, help Dike, make everything right. Then he laughed at his own absurdity. (Adichie 230). He begins to ruminate on Ifemelu's emails and starts neglecting his family.

He surfs through the internet and starts reading her blog "HE READ all the archives of Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black (Adichie 232). He is jealous when he reads the part of the blog where it refers to her boyfriends "—The Hot White Ex, Professor Hunk" (Adichie 232). He rereads the post several times trying to figure out clues regarding her past boyfriends. He is unable to believe his eyes that Ifemelu his childhood sweet heart has drifted away so far.

Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and gets a job as an editor of a magazine. She suddenly surprises Obinze by calling him up. He fails to pick up her call as the number is an unknown one and later, she messages him calling him 'Celling' the nickname given to him by her. He returns her call immediately without a second thought. Their love is so genuine and it is evident that both of them have missed each other so badly. Ifemelu's life gets destroyed with the American sports man and on top of it Ifemelu ruins it more by not communicating with Obinze.

She sent a text: Ceiling, it's me. Her phone rang almost immediately.
"Hello? Ifem?" That voice she had not heard in so long, and it sounded both changed and unchanged.
"Ceiling! How are you?"
"You're back."

"Yes." Her hands were trembling. She should have sent an e-mail first. She should be chatty, ask about his wife and child, tell him that she had in fact been back for a while.

"So," Obinze said, dragging the word. "How are you? Where are you? When can I see you?"
"What about now?"

She is overjoyed to meet Obinze after a long break and their meetings become regular. They meet in restaurants and in her apartment and both are relieved from their realities. Their meetings are an escape from the real world, a break for Ifemelu from her suffocated relationships and for Obinze from his insipid married life. The nostalgic meetings bring back their shared past. Obinze gives his full attention to Ifemelu by switching off his two phones and gives her full attention. Obinze does not care for his job or money for him Ifemelu is everything, he is so honest and loyal to Ifemelu. Obinze on seeing Ifemelu, "He switched off both his phones. A rare declaration, in a city like Lagos for a man like him, that she had his absolute attention." (Adichie 263). They take off from where they left off with the same excitement and *joie de vivre* that they shared when they fell in love when they were in high school. There is something beautiful and attractive in their meeting, both of them are nervous, blushed, excited and expressive. Their love is so fresh and emotional and knew no boundaries, a sudden happiness inside both of them. Obinze tells Ifemelu that "I hate to go but I have to." (Adichie 267).

She apologizes to him for not replying to his emails and also confesses the guilt she felt due to the sexual exploitation that she encountered in America. He visits Ifemelu either for breakfast, lunch or dinner. He spends his time at Ifemelu's place remembering their teen days and they listened to the Nigerian songs, dance and laugh. They begin to make love and Ifemelu realizes that their love has not waned over the years. They both undergo a psychological transformation in each other's company. The emptiness experienced by Ifemelu in America and Obinze's traumatizing experience in England are overshadowed by newly found bliss. Both of them realize that nothing has changed and the intensity of their passion, humourous exchange of adult jokes and bullying each other remains the same. He always loved her and not Kosi and begins to avoid his wife. Kosi is fully aware of what is going on but chooses to remain silent in order to save their relationship.

2. Conclusion

To conclude among all her three boyfriends Obinze, Curt and Blaine she realizes that she loves Obinze so much that she is unable to think of anybody else. She realizes that her life belongs to Obinze which she understands very late and therefore leaves America wishing to meet Obinze again. It takes two failed relationships to make her understand that her heart always had space only for Obinze. She meets him and learns that he is married and has a daughter yet she is stubborn in winning back the love of her life. Obinze is always loyal to Ifemelu but Ifemelu has never been so. There is so much of pain, silence and struggle involved in both Ifemelu and Obinze's life. They struggle staying apart and have messed up their life and distance brings them closer. Ifemelu has been racially insulted by her two boyfriends and Obinze undergoes racial discrimination in England. It is a homecoming for both of them as each of them return to Nigeria in search of their lost selves. Adichie has brought in an unconventional romantic love between Ifemelu and Obinze which makes their relationship exceptional and controversial. Adichie gives a jaw dropping ending where Ifemelu succeeds in her plans of winning Obinze back from his wife into her life.

He paused, shifted. “Ifem, I’m chasing you. I’m going to chase you until you give this a chance.”

For a long time, she stared at him. He was saying what she wanted to hear and yet she stared at him. (Adichie 294)

Thus, their journey of love life has come full circle, complete and illuminated like a full moon. “She rested her head against his and felt, for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself” (Adichie 40).

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