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Ensayo

The struggle to pretend and belong: *Americanah's* case

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Resumen:

La lucha por fingir y pertenecer: el caso de *Americanah*

En este ensayo se analizará la novela postcolonial *Americanah* (2013) escrita por la autora Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Se explorarán las vidas de los personajes principales y secundarios para encontrar evidencia de que, al vivir en el exterior, deben adaptarse a la vida en Estados Unidos y en Inglaterra pretendiendo ser algo que no son para así poder demostrar un sentido de pertenencia. El racismo, los lenguajes usados y sus identidades son algunos temas a tratar en el ensayo.

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Palabras claves: Migración, Racismo, Pertenencia, Postcolonialismo

Abstract:

In this essay, it will be analyzed the postcolonial novel *Americanah* (2013) written by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The lives of main and secondary characters will be explored in order to demonstrate how, living in a foreign country, they will have to adapt themselves to the American and England life pretending to be something they are not to find a sense of belonging there. Racism, the language used by these characters and identity are some topics to deal with within this essay.

Key words: Migration, Racism, Belonging, Postcolonialism

Introduction

In this paper, I will analyse *Americanah*, a novel written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in 2013, and develop how the main characters -but also secondary characters- reveal strategies to be something or someone they are not in order to be respected, altering different aspects or characteristics of their identities and appearance in order to be accepted in diverse groups, to fit in, to belong. At the same time, these characters will struggle in order to get recognized as people who *deserve* to be respected.

Racism in the USA, African people and their lives in America and England, some aspects as regards identity and language -for instance, names, native and second languages or the African body- are some of the topics of analysis.

The theoretical background will be provided by authors such as Homi K. Bhabah, Verónica Pardiñas and Noliwe Rooks, among others.

Hierarchies

When Ifemelu is in America, she is immersed in a multicultural, multiethnic society. However, she soon understands she is part of a society in which even babies do not belong there, being rejected by white Americans but also by people who are supposed to feel empathy with them, "Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don't want them." He told her that he and his wife had adopted a black child and their neighbors looked at them as though they had chosen to become martyrs for a dubious cause." (Adichie, 2017, p. 4-5) In addition, this self-hatred or self-segregation is not only seen, as it is the case, in quite important decisions as having a baby, but it is also seen in minor issues such as dating. In online dating pages where a person can select which profile and race is preferred "Black men are the only men likely to tick "all", but some don't even tick Black." (Adichie, 2017, p. 306)

The hierarchies are exposed from the very beginning: the blackest a person is, the most discriminated they will be. In the case of the rejected babies, what is left for them- future adolescents and adults- is to struggle to fit in that society that rejects them or does not see them as ordinary people who do not deserve to be invisibilized. For instance, a Nigerian taxi driver "would be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job, and his daughter was on the dean's list at Rutgers..." (Adichie, 2017, p. 8) as a strategy to let people know that they exist, that they can survive and to demonstrate,

maybe lying, that they belong to a higher class, denying his own suffering and segregation. Similarly, in England, when Obinze finds an old Nigerian friend, Emerike, he realized he was pretending in order to show off, "Obinze wondered if Emenike had so completely absorbed his own disguise that even when they were alone, he could talk about "good furniture," as though the idea of "good furniture" was not alien in their Nigerian world..."(Adichie, 2017,p. 269). To make a big impression and using *pretentious* words is Emerike's way of demonstrating he belongs there and that "He was married to a British woman, lived in a British home, worked at a British job, traveled on a British passport..."(Adichie, 2017,p. 267). In that way, his status would be elevated. Also, he openly refuses to admit his origins to be part of an *upper class of people*, although his grandiloquence and self-confidence may be, as Obinze had noticed, a disguise, "But the Americans love us Brits, they love the accent and the Queen and the double decker," Emenike said. There, it had been said: the man considered himself British." (Adichie, 2017,p. 271-272) Although it is not clear if he acts in a *subversive* or *ironic* way, this character is the most related to a mimicry performance: he imitates the language, manners and the cultural attitude of their colonizers, the British. He even considers he is one of them and that can be an "effective strategy of colonial power and knowledge." (Bhabha, 1994,p. 85)

Identity struggle is represented in the novel by means of different battles and circumstances the different characters have to face. Some battles are related to ideas and assumptions and others are related to something that might seem -for the exterior eye- simple or superficial as someone's appearance. For example, the hair is a topic of discussion in different instances of the novel, marking the relevance it has in black people's lives and describing how it is connected to racism.

The African Body

In the theses *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah: (Re)Opening A Conversation About Race And Beauty* (2014), the author makes reference to the traditional consideration of the African body as the body of an inferior human being, "The physical appearance of the Africans, especially their skin colour and hair texture, was interpreted by most beneficiaries of slavery as a statement of the inferiority, both moral and intellectual, of black slaves." (Pardiñas, 2014, p. 11-12) The topic of the hair texture is introduced by a hairdresser, Aisha, who is surprised of Ifemelu's natural hairstyle,

She touched Ifemelu's hair. "Why you don't have relaxer?"

"I like my hair the way God made it."

"But how you comb it? Hard to comb," Aisha said. (Adichie, 2017,p. 12)

What seems to be an old consideration as regards the African body is still relevant today and what seems trivial is a question of identity, in which a person can be natural and be criticized because of that, or will have to pretend to be something they are not and change some aspects of their body in order to belong to a different *status*. That is the case of Auntie Uju, a doctor that instead of being confident because of her profession and cleverness, is preoccupied because of her hairstyle before a job interview,

"I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."

"So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" Ifemelu asked.

"I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed." (Adichie, 2017,p. 119)

The relation of the relaxed hair with being professional is explained by Noliwe Rooks in *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, (1996) as "Its style could lead to acceptance or rejection from certain groups and social classes, and its styling could provide the possibility of a career" (Rooks p. 5-6) Also Ifemelu, before a job interview is told, " My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job." (Adichie, 2017,p. 202) The quotation suggests that nobody will openly declare how the African relaxed hair will be seen as a symbol of superiority against those who still decide to maintain their natural hair, their identity, their roots. However, this *representation of something a person is not* can be seen as a cage, "Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. That picture you sent me, you had your hair covered on the boat. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do." (Adichie, 2017,p. 208)

This profound statement as regards the hair can be interpreted as how repressing one owns identity and, consequently, the lack of free expression is quite similar as being locked in a prison. The said battle, which is supposed to be related to the hair, is an inner battle against who they really are and who they are expected to be.

The double colonization Ifemelu suffers because of her race and her gender is explicit when her hair is burnt and she has to cut it, looking "like a boy" (Adichie, 2017,p. 209), something that makes her lose her confidence. For the subaltern subject, it won't be easy to *succeed* and be happy and confident in a racist, patriarchal world in which the hegemonic

representation of the ideal female body is the blonde, thin, white, femme fatale for the male consumer. For this purpose, the media representations of women from the male gaze takes a key part and Ifemelu suggests that idea by asking her aunt, "What if every magazine you opened and every film you watched had beautiful women with hair like jute? You would be admiring my hair now." (Adichie, 2017,p. 216)

However, Ifemelu ends up naturalizing this view on African women, repeating what she had been told, and explaining her new position to her boyfriend Curt,

"Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided. And when you took out the braids the last time and just kind of let it be? It was even more gorgeous, so full and cool."
"My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky."

"It's so fucking *wrong* that you have to do this." (Adichie, 2017,p. 204)

The importance of the hair as a feature that could indicate a person's background, a reflection of one's own identity and it is expressed symbolically by the narrator as "She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had at-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss." (Adichie, 2017,p. 203) It can be stated that Ifemelu mourns her black identity that was suppressed, sacrificed, in order to belong to America and her set of values.

As it was mentioned before, the skin colour and hue creates a scale value being white the most valuable colour and black, the least one. In between, there is a space for the mixed races, half-caste people with different skin tones. Ifemelu writes something in her blog that explains this theory: "There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, especially White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!)" (Adichie, 2017,p.184) As a result, people use bleaching creams to avoid being at the bottom of the *skin tone ladder*.

This is described, for instance, when Ifemelu meets Aunt Uju's suitor, "Couldn't you see? His face is a funny color. He must be using the cheap ones with no sunscreen. What kind of man bleaches his skin, *biko*?" Aunt Uju shrugged, as though she had not noticed the greenish-yellow tone of the man's face, worse at his temples." (Adichie, 2017,p. 117) Ifemelu finds the use of bleaching creams incomprehensible and surprising whereas Uju,

being “subdued” (Adichie, 2017, p. 108) after living in America for a long period of time, decides to ignore the *taboo topic*: skin tone.

In Africa, being mixed-race can be seen as a compliment, “The same way she laughed, with an open, accepting enjoyment of her own looks, when people asked her “Is your mother white? Are you a half -caste?” because she was so fair-skinned. It had always discom ted him, the pleasure she took in being mistaken for mixed-race.” (Adichie, 2017, p. 22) While those kind of compliments are openly said in Africa and are well received by the addressee, in America, as it was said before, skin tone is a taboo topic,

“Was it the one with long hair?” the cashier asked.

“Well, both of them had long hair.”

“The one with dark hair?”

Both of them had dark hair.

[...]As they walked out of the store, Ifemelu said, “I was waiting for her to ask ‘Was it the one with two eyes or the one with two legs?’ Why didn’t she just ask ‘Was it the black girl or the white girl?’ ”

Ginika laughed. “Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things.” (Adichie, 2017, p. 126-127)

Pretending appears again as a way to negate something or, in this case, someone’s characteristics intrinsically linked to identity. Something similar happens with some expressions and words that will be eliminated because of taboos developed around the African life in a privileged, white society.

Language, Censorship and Identity

As it was anticipated, certain words are censored in America in order to avoid *hurting* black people. In chapter fourteen, a confrontation as regards language and censorship takes place at Ifemelu’s University when it was noticed that, in a movie, the word *nigger* was removed,

“Why was ‘nigger’ bleeped out?” [...]

“Well, this was a recording from network television and one of the things I wanted us to talk about is how we represent history in popular culture and the use of the N-word is certainly an important part of that,” Professor Moore said [...]

“I mean, ‘nigger’ is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out.” (Adichie, 2017, p. 137)

In this passage, an African American voice is questioning that removal of the word *nigger*, bleeped as it it were an obscene word or an insult. Similarly, Judith Butler makes a reference to the word “abortion” in her book *“Excitable speech”: a politics of the performative* (1997)

explaining how there is an “ascription of such magical efficacy to words” as “pro-life” activists censored that word because of being “obscene” and it is bleeped out in some films, as “The utterance is understood not merely to offend a set of sensibilities, but to constitute an injury, as if the word performed the act [...]” (Butler, 1997,p. 21) The Professor, representing the white voice, uses the expression “N- word” censoring it again, reaffirming the suppressive position. As the discussion continues and white students argue that the word hurts African Americans, the African American voice says, “But it’s like being in denial. If it was used like that, then it should be represented like that. Hiding it doesn’t make it go away.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 138) exposing the American hypocrisy, their belief that eliminating or forbidding a word will change the concepts, the history, the burden of the meaning.

Comparably, Shan’s book editor wants to hide racial issues censoring some parts of it or asking the author to change them,

I wrote this scene about something that happened in grad school, about a Gambian woman I knew.[...] Anyway, she lived in London and she was in love with this white English guy and he was leaving his wife for her. [...]And you know what Peter said to her? He said, ‘His wife must feel worse knowing you’re black.’ He said it like it was pretty obvious. Not that the wife would feel bad about another woman, period, but that she would feel bad because the woman was black. So I put it in the book and my editor wants to change it because he says it’s not subtle. (Adichie, 2017,p. 335)

Language, then, has the power to break taboos and expose cruel realities for minorities as it is demonstrated in *Americanah*. As complicated as their situation is, it should be displayed and arts can be the means of this expression: a film or a book -and their possible control over the language used in them- can trigger different reflections.

Names

Generally in America, as it is depicted in *Americanah*, black people’s identity is not important for the white ones. This is exemplified when Ifemelu gets another girl’s ID in order to find a job in the USA and she complains the girl does not look alike, “All of us look alike to white people,[...] Amara’s cousin came last year and she doesn’t have her papers yet so she has been working with Amara’s ID. You remember Amara? Her cousin is very fair and slim. They do not look alike at all. Nobody noticed. She works as a home health aide in Virginia. Just make sure you always remember your new name.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 120-121) She only needs to pretend she is someone she is not, even taking her name, in order to survive.

In England, Obinze has to do the same thing in order to stay there, “That evening, as dusk fell, the sky muting to a pale violet, Obinze became Vincent.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 250) A name

is a crucial factor that creates a sense of identity, of being oneself. That is why the passage "he lived in London indeed but invisible, his existence like an erased pencil sketch..." (Adichie, 2017, p. 257) may have a relation with his name being erased, changed in order to belong to that city.

The power of names is so strong it can change people's emotions. This is illustrated once again in a dialogue between Obinze and a Brazilian man he met,

"I'm Dee." A pause. "No, you're not English. You can pronounce it. My real name is Duerdinhito, but the English, they cannot pronounce, so they call me Dee."
"Duerdinhito," Obinze repeated.
"Yes!" A delighted smile. (Adichie, 2017, p. 251)

That delighted smile as a reaction to hearing his real name is something presented as unusual in the novel as in America, as well as England, immigrants have to pretend to be somebody else and use their fake, *bought*, names until they are legally accepted. And, even in legal circumstances, they have to adapt or simplify the name because of the English pronunciation as Aunt Uju did, "Aunt Uju's cell phone rang. "Yes, this is Uju." She pronounced it *you-joo* instead of *oo-joo*. "Is that how you pronounce your name now?" Ifemelu asked afterwards. "It's what they call me." Ifemelu swallowed the words "Well, that isn't your name." (Adichie, 2017, p. 104)

The importance of being called by our name is depicted when Ifemelu, using another girl's ID, "forgot she was someone else." (Adichie, 2017, p. 130) but later, she received a letter, "That credit card preapproval, with her name correctly spelled and elegantly italicized, had roused her spirits, made her a little less invisible, a little more present. Somebody knew her." (Adichie, 2017, p. 132)

Native Language and Second Language

The question of identity as regards language is a theme that is repeated throughout the whole novel. Ifemelu's way of acquiring the American language -words, expressions, accent, sounds- is detailed described and the experience is a journey from rejection to incorporation and then to rejection again.

At the first stage, her rejection is evident for instance in her inner response to Aunt Uju's new pronunciation, "Well, that isn't your name." (Adichie, 2017, p. 104) Also, there is a number of expressions Ifemelu identifies as obvious or not necessary to say,

When you tripped and fell, when you choked, when misfortune befell you, they did not say "Sorry." They said "Are you okay?" when it was obvious that you were not. And when you said "Sorry" to them when they choked or tripped or encountered misfortune, they replied, eyes wide with surprise, "Oh, it's not your fault." And they overused the word "excited," a professor excited about a new book, a student excited about a class, a politician on TV excited about a law; it was altogether too much excitement. (Adichie, 2017, p. 134)

However, at the second stage of her American colloquial English acquisition, the words and expressions that were once criticized were now incorporated into her vocabulary without even noticing it,

"YOU KNOW you said 'excited'?" Obinze asked her one day, his voice amused. "You said you were excited about your media class."
"I did?"
New words were falling out of her mouth. (Adichie, 2017, p. 136)

That *natural* use of the expression surprises her. A new language altogether with a new identity was formed: the *Americanah's* identity. In chapter 17 the reader gets to know that,

Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July, the same day she met Blaine. It was convincing, the accent. She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the *t*, the creamy roll of the *r*, the sentences starting with "So," and the sliding response of "Oh really," but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds." (Adichie, 2017, p. 175)

This passage describes the third stage and it is related to the impact the mother tongue has in our identity and how it is strongly linked to emotions. It is proved by many linguistics how a second language does not have, no matter how perfect it is, the same emotional weight as the native language. In spite of all her struggle to produce a perfect American English to belong to that country and society, the narrator recognizes the importance of Ifemelu's mother tongue and how it will prevail over English in critical or emotional situations.

Also, it is related to Chinua Achebe's point of view about language, "Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling." (As cited in Ashcroft et. al., 2003, p. 285) In Ifemelu's case, the decision of stop faking the American *perfect* pronunciation is maybe related to her inner fight and the guilty feeling Achebe writes about.

The topic of language and pronunciation is also explored in other characters, "They roared with laughter, at that word "Americanah," wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America

with odd a ectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 65) This rhetorical character represents the denial of origins, how pretending to be from somewhere else will mean *superiority* and how that desire to be somebody else will cause the removal of that person's roots.

In a similar case, Aunt Uju pretends to be somebody else when she is in the presence of the American -*white*- people, “Dike, put it back,” Aunt Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back*. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 108) This new persona the narrator exposes, acts differently according to what is acceptable and expected for the immigrants to do and to *be*: an imitation of the white Americans.

In order to avoid the rejection Aunt Uju suffered, she educates his son, Dike, as *American* as possible, denying his origins,

“Dike, *I mechago*?” Ifemelu asked.

“Please don’t speak Igbo to him,” Aunt Uju said. “Two languages will confuse him.” “What are you talking about, Aunt? We spoke two languages growing up.” “This is America. It’s different.”(Adichie, 2017,p. 109)

The excuse of the confusion because of knowing two languages is to protect her child as children are beaten because of having a foreign, African, accent. As a customer said in the hairdresser, “When I come here with my son they beat him in school because of African accent. In Newark. If you see my son face? Purple like onion. They beat, beat, beat him. Black boys beat him like this. Now accent go and no problems.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 187)

Racism and Privileges

Ifemelu writes in her blog an article called “*What Academics Mean by White Privilege, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White*” which starts with a white man question, “So this guy said to Professor Hunk, “White privilege is nonsense. How can I be privileged?” (Adichie, 2017,p. 347) In different instances of the story, racism is treated as something without importance or something that belongs to the past. Bell Hooks in the essay “*The Revolution of Values*” writes about neoconservatism and lies about ordering to the chaos, among other topics. The author states, “That lying takes the presumably innocent form of many white people (and even some black folks) suggesting that racism does not exist any more, and that conditions of social equality are solidly in place that would enable any black person who works hard to achieve economic self-sufficiency.”(As Cited in During, 2001,p. 235) It is seen in *Americanah* how white people do not question or take into account their privileges as if racism was not a problem in America. As regards economical issues, as Hooks explains, America is seen a place to prosper no matter the colour of your skin, and this idea is portrayed

when “a young white woman”(Adichie 189) enters a hairdressing salon and asks the black hairdresser, “But you couldn’t even have this business back in your country, right? Isn’t it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and now your kids can have a better life?” (Adichie, 2017,p. 189) When Ifemelu started working for Kimberly, Laura, Kimberly’s sister “looked up so much information about Nigeria [...] telling her how much money Nigerians in America sent back home every year.” (Adichie, 2017,p. 163) Both passages exemplify the idea of black people being self-sufficient economically as America gives them the opportunity to do so.

However, Ifemelu would explain in her blog that American people that believe that are just pretending racism does not exist there,

Don’t say “Oh, it’s not really race, it’s class. Oh, it’s not race, it’s gender. Oh, it’s not race, it’s the cookie monster.” You see, American Blacks actually don’t WANT it to be race. They would rather not have racist shit happen. So maybe when they say something is about race, it’s maybe because it actually is? Don’t say “I’m color-blind,” because if you are color-blind, then you need to see a doctor and it means that when a black man is shown on TV as a crime suspect in your neighborhood, all you see is a blurry purplish-grayish-creamish figure. Don’t say “We’re tired of talking about race” or “The only race is the human race.” American Blacks, too, are tired of talking about race. They wish they didn’t have to. But shit keeps happening. (Adichie, 2017,p. 325-326)

In that way, black people will struggle with discrimination in order to belong there, they will be rejected, will suffer and will have to pretend they are something they are not in order to live there in the best way possible.

Conclusion

As it was analysed, in *Americanah* the main characters and also secondary characters struggle all the time in order to be respected in the USA or England, sometimes pretending to be something they are not, altering their IDs or different characteristics of their identities and appearance to be accepted in those countries.

Because of racism in the USA and England, African people in this novella will adapt their native language, will change their names, creating new aspects of their personalities to be respected or to “fit in”. Even their bodies will have to be adapted to the American stereotype to be considered professional people, erasing their roots in some cases, and ,consequently, creating inner conflicts. Taking everything into consideration, the *struggle to pretend and belong* will be a constant topic of discussion among these characters, and also it will be repeatedly expressed in the protagonist’s blog.

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