



RACIAL PREJUDICE, INJUSTICE AND THE SEARCH FOR SELF IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Abstract:

The notion of racial superiority gives rise to racial prejudice. Racial prejudice arises from race-based stereotypes. The prejudice of one race against another has resulted in injustices meted out to members of other races. Racism is an ideology that has bedevilled contemporary societies; eating deep into the fabrics of such societies. In Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, non-whites who seek freedom and opportunity in Western societies face all kinds of racial prejudice which is an act of injustice against their humanity. The continent that faces the highest form of racial prejudice is the African continent. Africans in the Diaspora are discriminated against because they are considered inferior. Using the post-colonial theoretical approach which undermines Western values and ideas, this paper argues that Adichie recreates African (Nigerian) characters who revolt and resist racial prejudice by embarking on the search for selfhood and the assertion and affirmation of their lost African identity, integrity and personality.

Keywords: racism, prejudice, injustice, selfhood

1. Introduction

The uniqueness of peoples and races contingent upon their languages, colour, hair texture, physical characteristics and values has been undermined by the concept of racism. This is due to the fact that these differences have been misconstrued to mean inferiority. Different races believe that any other race is inferior and so should be treated as such. These inhuman treatments have resulted in injustices, atrocities, oppression and intolerance. Racial prejudice arises from race-based stereotypes where the dominant race views other races as crude and barbaric; forming a negative opinion about all members of that particular race, when, in reality, not all individuals from the stereotyped race conform to the attributed characteristics of the race. Florence Orabueze in *Society, Women and Literature* argues that "Racism is a smokescreen for the economic exploitation of Africans and the pillaging of her natural resources for the development of the Western capitalist market" (12). In the same vein, Nadra Nittle notes that

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"Racism generally refers to the systemic oppression of a racial group due to the idea that some groups are inherently inferior to others" (1). These impressions are as a result of race-based stereotypes. *"Racial prejudice is an insidious moral and social disease affecting peoples and populations all over the world. It is diagnosed by the cataloguing of its various symptoms and manifestations which include fear, intolerance, separation, segregation, discrimination, and hatred"* (www.allaboutpopularissues.org).

Adichie is a post-colonial African female writer who seeks to uphold African identity and personality; she exhibits these through her characters. Seldon and Widdowson in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* note that "Postcolonialism seeks to undermine the imperialist subject" (189). Patrick Chabal in *The End of Conceit* notes that:

Until now the term 'postcolonialism' has mainly referred to the critique by intellectuals on non-Western origin (most of whom, however, living in the West) of the West's past sins and its continued intellectual, cultural and political arrogance. It has focused primarily on how Westerners continue to hold the non-Westerner 'others' in contempt and how this attitude permeates what the West does both domestically and abroad (15).

Charles Bressler in *Literary Criticism* notes that:

"Postcolonialism refers to a heterogenous field of study, in which even its spelling provides several alternatives. Some argue that it should be spelled postcolonialism with no hyphen between post and colonialism, while others insist on using the hyphen, as in post-colonialism. Many of its adherents suggest there are two branches, one that views postcolonialism as a set of diverse methodologies that possess no unitary quality, as suggested by Homi Bhabha and Arun Murkerjee, and those who see postcolonialism as a set of cultural strategies "centered in history" (201).

This paper is concerned with the branch of *"postcolonialism as a set of cultural strategies "centered in history"* (201) because the blacks are oppressed and considered inferior because of their colonized historical past. Post colonialism is a theory that disregards Western values and advocates African worldview, that is what gave rise to Bressler's assertion thus:

"Born out of the colonized people's frustrations, their direct and personal cultural clashes with the conquering culture, and their fears, hopes, and dreams about the future and their own identities, postcolonial theory slowly emerges. How the colonized respond to changes in language, curricular matters in education, race differences, and a host of other discourses, including the act of writing itself, becomes the context and the theories of postcolonialism" (202).

Chinyere Nwahunanya in *Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Post-Colonial African Literature* argues that:

"The issues raised in post-colonial criticism includes the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wake of colonial rule, the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the

colonizers; how knowledge of subordinate people is produced and used, and the ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of the images of the colonized as inferior" (41).

Using the post-colonial theoretical approach, this paper discusses racial prejudice, injustices and the search for selfhood in Adichie's *Americanah*, and concludes that Western values that are oppressive to Africans should be jettisoned; and African values, lifestyle and identity promoted.

2. Racial Prejudice and Injustice

In the novel, although they are other non-American races that are immigrants in the society, the highest form of racial prejudice is experienced by Africans. This is based on the stereotype that Africans are inferior. Adichie through Ifemelu's blog exposes this thus: *"If you're white, you're right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!" (184)*. Therefore, the continuous habitation of Africans in America and their subsequent biological multiplication peeves a typical American racist. This gives rise to the questions Ifemelu, a female character in the novel is asked when she introduces herself as a writer of *"lifestyle blog"* (4) thus: *"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"* (4). This vividly depicts America as a racist country. Corroborating the existence of the concept, Adalberto Aguirre and David Baker in *Structured Inequality in the United States* argue that *"The ideologies of racism and sexism remain pervasive in contemporary society because they are deeply ingrained in U.S culture"* (6). The duo had earlier on noted that *"unfortunately...American society is intrinsically racist and sexist"* (xviii).

The American society considers qualifications obtained outside their shores inferior because the awarding institutions are considered so, that is why Aunty Uju after qualifying as a medical doctor in Nigeria and after haven begun practicing in a Military hospital, when she was compelled to leave Nigeria because of insecurity, was made to write and pass the American Medical examination in order to be qualified to practice in America. This frustrates her as she attempts the examinations severally without success, coupled with the fact that she engages in three different menial jobs to eke out a living. She degenerates from a high class lady in Nigeria to a low class citizen in America. Adichie through Ifemelu notes that *"America had subdued her"* (110).

However, the American society is justified for subjecting Nigerians to rigorous examinations to be qualified to work in her society due to the incessant strikes and closure of Nigerian Universities, churning out half-baked graduates yearly. The narrator states this clearly as follows:

"Strikes now were common. In the newspapers, university lecturers listed their complaints, the agreements that were trampled in the dust by government men whose own children were schooling abroad. Campuses were emptied, classrooms drained of life. Students hoped for short strikes, because they could not hope to have no strike at all" (98).

Having finally succeeded in the medical examination, Auntie Uju faces another form of prejudice. For her to be successful in a job interview, she has to transform her hair from what identifies her as an African woman to what looks like an American hair. This implies that for African immigrants to be accepted in the American society, they have to shed off everything that links them to the African worldview. Auntie Uju expressing her frustration tells Ifemelu *"I have to take my braids out for my interview and relax my hair....If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional....You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed"* (119). This picture of Africans relinquishing their identity in order to be accepted in the American society is vividly captured by Abobo Kumbalonah in *"Stop Acting Blacks!"* thus: *"To be precise, a black person who is accepted into a white status is required to exhibit a behavior fully purged of the inferiority of his/her black origin"* (115). This includes his/her physical looks.

Ifemelu also experiences the same thing as she removes her braid and relaxes her hair in order to look professional for a job interview, and she is considered to be a *"wonderful fit"* (204) for the job.

Later, after she breezed through the job interview, and the woman shook her hand and said she would be a *"wonderful fit"* in the company, she wondered if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo hair, the Afro (204).

In the same vein, Obinze, Ifemelu's lover in Nigeria who also travels to London after several attempts to get an American visa failed, faces racial prejudice, exploitation and betrayal in that country. In order to be accepted in the British society, he decides to contract a sham marriage with a British woman. His fellow African brothers exploit him due to his desperation, and he is compelled to pay a whopping sum of two thousand pounds for that purpose. On meeting the girl, he tells her: *"I'm very grateful and it won't take too much from you – in a year I'll have my papers and we'll do the divorce. But I just wanted to meet you first and make sure you are okay to do this"* (228).

Obinze also lost his identity in search of a National Insurance number to enable him find a job. He relinquishes his real name and rather bears Vincent Obi at the risk of paying off thirty-five percent of his earnings to the owner of the name. With his new identity, he is able to get a menial job of toilet cleaning which he abandons after encountering *"curled shit on the toilet lid"* (251). Africans in the Diaspora do not only face exploitation and betrayal from non-Africans, their fellow brothers exploit them as well under the pretext of business.

Firstly, Obinze is exploited by Vincent Obi, a fellow Nigerian who demands thirty-five percent of his earnings if he must bear his name. Shortly after, Vincent demands for a raise in his percentage. He calls Obinze on his own birthday and tells him: *"I want a raise...I want forty-five per cent. I know you are working more now"* (261). Since Obinze refuses to consent to his demands, Vincent betrays him by calling the office. *"Somebody called yesterday. Said you're not who you say you are, that you're illegal and working with a Brit's name"* (261).

Secondly, Obinze is exploited by two Angolans who collect the sum of twenty thousand pounds from him just for arranging a fake marriage for him. Before then, he was duped by two Nigerian men who had collected one hundred pounds from him with the promise to arrange an *"Eastern European woman"* (256) for him.

In America before her graduation, Ifemelu was denied several menial jobs because she is an African and has an accent. A white lady, Kimberly ridicules her and her African people by describing everything and everybody African as "beautiful". Ifemelu senses the sarcasm in Kimberly's voice and subtly challenges her thus: *"You know, you can just say 'black'. Not every black person is beautiful"* (147). The same scenario plays out in London as Obinze visits Emenike, his school mate, who is now married to a Briton. He adopts their pretentious lifestyle by sarcastically describing everything poor as beautiful. Obinze expresses his surprise thus:

"Those plates, with their amateur finishing, the slight lumpiness of the edges, would never be shown in the presence of guests in Nigeria. He still was not sure whether Emenike had become a person who believed that something was beautiful because it was handmade by poor people in a foreign country, or whether he had simply learned to pretend so" (271).

Nittle recognizes the different forms racial prejudice take, that is why he states that *"Racism...involves everyday slights such as being ignored, ridiculed or treated differently because of one's racial background"* (www.racerelations.about.com).

Faced with frustration in America, Ifemelu takes up a job offer by a tennis coach who needs a massage and is paid one hundred dollars. She needs the money to pay her rent; she therefore succumbs to the demands of the coach for sex. Coincidentally that night, there was snow. The snow symbolizes the reality of the American society. The snow welcomes her to the American society of exploitation, racial prejudice and discrimination. This changes her attitude towards everybody including her Nigerian boyfriend, Obinze, she feels contaminated and therefore unworthy of the purity of the love they share. The narrator tells us: *"Obinze called many times but she did not pick up her phone. She deleted his voice messages unheard and his e-mails unread, and she felt herself sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself up"* (155). After being 'baptized' into the society, the babysitting job she was initially denied by Kimberly finally comes, and she takes up the offer. Chibueze Orie in *Who is a Woman Being?* articulates the vulnerability of the female African thus: *"Because women are the worst hit, they are it seems thrown into the exploitative hands of men who savour them sexually, and discard them as a sucked-dry orange pulp"* (21). This constitutes injustice and violence against women as they are exploited because they are vulnerable. Grace Etuk in *Violence Against Women* argues that *"Generally, women are regarded as second class society members. They are always obviously treated as inferior and subordinate sex. Society accords women low status and this explains the inhuman and unjust treatments they often receive"* (55).

Aunty Uju as a medical doctor who has been re-trained in the American medical profession still faces racial prejudice because she is African. Patients consider her unqualified to administer treatment on them. The narrator exposes Uju's experience to the readers *"...she walked into an examining room and a patient asked "Is the doctor coming? And she said she was the doctor and the patient's face changed to fired clay"* (182). Aunty Uju's experience is what other Africans in the Diaspora face. Mbaiver Nyitse in *"African Literature, Nationalism and the Experience of the African Diaspora"* notes that Uju's experience

"...confirms the unchanging face of racism in America and, of course, constitutes one of the reasons for the personal despair of professionals in America. Notwithstanding their contributions to the country and the heights they have achieved in their professions; American racism is still a brick wall they have not been able to scale" (37).

The African woman faces double oppression because of her gender. She faces racial prejudice as an African on one hand, and gender oppression on the other hand. In spite of her qualification as a medical doctor, even inferior whites disregard her because of colour, and then at home, her live-in lover, Bartholomew, also seeks to oppress her by demanding for all her earnings. Uju expresses her predicament thus:

"All he wants is for me to hand over my salary to him and cook peppered gizzard for him on Saturdays while he watches European League on satellite. Why should I give him my salary? Did he pay my fees in medical school?...Is it my fault that he cannot get the loan? Did anybody force him to come here? Did he not know we would be the only black people here? Did he not come here because he felt it would benefit him? Everything is money, money, money. He keeps wanting to make my work decisions for me. What does an accountant know about medicine?" (217-218).

Adichie through her central character Ifemelu, discusses the different dimensions of racial prejudice non-Americans face in America using Ifemelu's blog. Even little Dike, Auntie Uju's son, faces prejudice because he is a black (African) boy. He finds himself in the midst of an all-white children school, and every one of his moves and actions stand him out. Auntie Uju notices the prejudice thus: *"Look at him, just because he looks different, when he does what other little boys do, it becomes aggression" (172).* This is because Africans have been stereotyped to be aggressive people. Dike is denied what other children get generously. In a camp where other children are given sunscreen, Dike is denied one. He narrates this unjust and unfair discrimination thus: *"My group leader, Haley? She gave sunscreen to everyone but she wouldn't give me any, she said I didn't need it" (183).* This is based on the conception that Africans can withstand any harsh condition and are accustomed to suffering.

Ifemelu has experienced racism personally, that is why she feels insecure in her romantic relationships with the white guy, Curt, and the African American young scholar, Blaine. She speaks her mind freely about her experiences in racial prejudice even in the midst of white people.

"I come 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. When you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters....I speak from experience." (290-291).

These racial prejudices non-Americans and especially Africans face amount to injustices against them as individuals, and their collective entity. The fundamental human rights of the immigrants have been infringed upon and the greener pastures they seek in

America elude them. Aguirre and Baker recognize this fact as they argue that “*The persistence of racial, ethnic, and gender inequality in a society ostensibly committed to individual rights is a direct challenge to the historical romanticisation surrounding the arrival of immigrants to the United States seeking freedom and opportunity*” (7).

3. The Search for Selfhood

Adichie expresses her disgust for racism and racial prejudice by recreating Ifemelu, the central female character who rejects the practice by re-tracing her steps to search for selfhood. Despite the fact that she has finally established a lucrative blog that is yielding enough resources, in addition to the romantic relationship she shares with Blaine, the African American young scholar, she lacks that feeling of fulfillment; and longs for her selfhood because she considers the present state a fantasy.

She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person whom she had never felt the need to explain herself (6).

In spite of her achievements, Ifemelu searches for her lost self, as the thought of her country Nigeria, and her first love Obinze, makes her nostalgic. On the contrary, Obinze's misadventure and dehumanization in England propels him to voluntarily select the option of repatriation from England. He tells the lawyer, “*I'm willing to go back to Nigeria*” (279). Adichie uses Ifemelu and Obinze to represent the African race that should regain her lost identity in the hands of Western hegemony. Ifeoma Onyemelukwe in “*Search for Lost Identity*” argues that Africa's tragedy is akin to that of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and reckons that:

“Okonkwo's tragedy...represent also that of colonized Africans and even subjugated Blacks elsewhere...many African peoples had lost their identity in the colonial era like Okonkwo and they must try to regain it...a frantic search to regain one's lost identity” (46).

This is what Ifemelu has done to regain her lost identity and search for selfhood by rejecting everything alien and un-African, by embracing African lifestyle through her hair style and accent.

4. The Search for Selfhood through the Hair

Ifemelu decides to cut her permed hair and returns to natural kinky hair. She revolts against anything that makes her look un-African, she decides to cut her hair and braid it the African

(Nigerian) way. She notes that *"Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you"* (208). She does not want the hair to rule over her, that is why when she enters the "African Hair Braiding Saloon" (10), and the saloonist expresses her surprise over Ifemelu's natural hair, she tells her, *"I like my hair the way God made it"* (12).

Braiding of hair is an African woman's way of expressing fecundity because hair represents fertility. Relaxing the hair breaks it thereby preventing it from growing. After relaxing her hair, the narrator tells us that: *"AND THEN her hair began to fall out at the temples. She drenched it in rich creamy conditioners, and sat under steamers until water droplets ran down her neck. Still, her hairline shifted further backwards each day. It's the chemicals"* (208).

Ifemelu feels out of place after relaxing the hair; with the attendant burns and subsequent breakage, she decides to put an end to the bondage by cutting the hair and returning back to kinky hair. She joins an online group known as "HAPPILYKINKYNAPPY.COM" (212). A group of black women with *"dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils....They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat"* (212).

Adichie lays emphasis on the African woman's natural hair as a search for selfhood through her personal looks. She carries her natural hair, and sometimes braids her hair the African way. Commending Adichie as a true African woman writer, Eve Eisenberg in "Real Africa/Which Africa?" notes that *"We picture her as an artist who takes up her pen in order to present a 'true image' of African people and the African past in order to contest racist misrepresentations and erasures"* (9).

Through her blog, Ifemelu exposes the recipe on how she maintains her natural afro hair, and achieves a sense of fulfillment as she tells us that

"On an unremarkable day in early spring – the day was not bronzed with special light, nothing of any significance happened, and it was perhaps merely that time, as it often does, had transfigured her doubts – she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair". (213).

5. The Search for Selfhood through Accent

Ifemelu's search for selfhood is also exhibited in her accent. She grows from an African (Nigerian) who seeks to be accepted in the American society by faking the American accent, to a liberated and established African woman with a self-controlled identity and personality. She decides to return to her real self, and not to fake the American accent. The use of the term 'Americanah' in itself is a form of ridicule in Nigeria, it is used to mock people who fake the American accent.

"Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July....She was in her apartment on Spring Garden Street, the first that was truly hers in America, hers alone, a studio with a leaky faucet and a noisy heater. In the weeks since she moved in, she had felt

light-footed, cloaked in well-being, because she opened the fridge knowing that everything in it was hers..." (173).

Ifemelu has indeed achieved selfhood; she uses the "sunlit day in July" as a metaphor for expressing her independence and self-actualization. Grace Okereke in "Language as an Index" notes that "Language in society is a cultural product" (141). In the same vein, Blossom Ottoh-Agede in "Language and Identity" argues that "Language is the avenue through which a person or a group of persons identify themselves" (89). By returning back to her Nigerian accent, Ifemelu identifies herself as a true Nigerian. Adichie tells us that Ifemelu's decision to stop faking the American accent came after her phone conversation with a telemarketer who commends her speech as sounding "totally American" (175). Ifemelu views the commendation as a betrayal of her African origin. And we understand that "*Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. And so she finished eating her eggs and resolved to stop faking the American accent*" (175). The egg she eats symbolizes a renaissance, a rebirth of the African speech which gives her a sense of selfhood, identity and satisfaction. Okereke in "African Gender Dialogics" argues that

"The power to speak is fundamental, and appropriation of it qualifies one to struggle for empowerment in other spaces. Lack of the power to speak inflicts silence and victimhood on a subject, relegating her/him to the object position" (263).

Adichie through her character Ifemelu refuses to allow Africa to be relegated to silence and victimhood, hence her relocation back to Nigeria. To achieve total freedom and selfhood, Ifemelu moves away from the American society that stifles and limits her to a freer one where she can actualize herself without fear. Okereke in "Language as an Index" notes that "*The journey is in itself an act of revolt by woman, as she moves out of the context of her confinement to the liberation and expansion of the larger, mobile space of the metropolis*" (144). Although the new environment she moves into is not devoid of certain challenges, but the relocation is refreshment that offers new choices and opportunities. Helen Chukwuma in *Accents in the African Novel* notes that "*On the physical side, this involves a distancing; a far remove to a new place which makes its own demands and sets its own standards*" (84).

Also, Auntie Uju revolts against domestic oppression from Bartholomew, her boyfriend by relocating to Willow; thereby moving away from his life. This going-away motif signifies freedom and the search for selfhood. Ifemelu returns to Nigeria being her real self without an American accent. Her friend Ranyinudo who notices the plainness of her language comments: "*But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!*" (355). Ifemelu not speaking in the American accent is considered an issue because; it is the habit of Nigerians who travel to America, even for a short vacation, to come back faking the American accent. But Adichie creates Ifemelu to repudiate and revolt against racial prejudice and makes her to be a true African woman who cherishes everything African even though she has spent thirteen years in America. Ifemelu resents everything that will make her look alien and strange to her

Nigerian people such as accent, hair and romantic relationship. She returns to take up a job with *Zoe* magazine as a feature editor.

The injustice and discrimination Ifemelu and other Africans face in America makes her take a decision to return to her country, to her lover Obinze, to her natural hair, because she considers everything happening around her as falsehood; she needed to be real to herself, hence the search for selfhood. She starts a blog in Nigeria entitled "*The Small Redemptions of Lagos*" where she discusses the pretentious lives of *been-tos*, the daily lives of Nigerian single girls who depend on their sugar daddies for sustenance and high class lifestyle. She gets engrossed in her blogging business about everything happening around her and achieves a sense of fulfillment. The narrator tells us that: "Still, she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (475).

6. Conclusion

In the context of this paper, racial prejudice is any negative attitude towards Africans in America and England based on their race which is considered inferior, without culture and history. But Okereke in "*African Gender Dialogics*" refutes this claim by stating categorically that:

"The Western colonialist's utterance that the African lacked civilization, culture, history, in fact selfhood, became an addressivity that generated a dialogic response from the African. The educated African in his response authenticated the image of the African by vesting him with selfhood – dignity, a unique civilization, culture and history" (257).

This is what Adichie has done in *Americanah* by addressing the western world that indeed Africa has a history, culture and worldview. She heeds Achebe's call "*to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word*" (30). Mary Kolawole corroborates this in "*Gender Myths, Self-Image and Metaphor*" as she states that "*the perception of the African as a pitiable, impotent, silent and oppressed group is a distortion of the truth*" (111).

Ifemelunamma lives to the meaning of her name which means: "Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made" (69), as she appreciates her African culture, way of life with all its imperfections, even though she has spent thirteen years abroad. She fulfills what Akachi Ezeigbo in *Gender Issues in Nigeria* notes that "*Africans view with seriousness the names they give to their children. The names not only ensure rich depths of meaning but also suit the peculiar occasion or experience surrounding their birth*" (20). Ifemelu achieves selfhood as she returns home to Nigeria to continue with her blogging, and regains her man, Obinze, who has willingly moved out of his matrimonial home because he wants to be with Ifemelu the love of his life.

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