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LOVE SENTIMENT IN *AMERICANAH*

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ABSTRACT

By the time Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the well known writer of Nigeria publishes *Americanah* in 2013 the readers are aware of her constant preoccupation with the theme of love. In fact, beginning with *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) she dramatizes failures in human relationships as unsuccessful attempts at forging abiding bonds based on the sustaining principles of love. This is not an easy thing to do and much of the narrative energy in her plots derives from this pursuit of love and the attendant disappointments. One of Adichie's strengths as a novelist has been her sensitive and gripping portrayal of people falling in and out of love.

**Key words:** love, race, white, black, America, Nigeria

*Americanah* is not only a narrative delineating the lives and struggles of different characters. Rather it is about the love life of the characters, the pains and pangs they undergo in consequence. It is mostly about the love entanglements of Ifemelu, the protagonist of the novel. Originating in Nigerian locales, she makes her home in various American cities, takes lovers. Adichie deftly reconstructs the deep bonding of Ifemelu's first love in Nigeria (Obinze). Then her relationships with a white American (Curt) and a black American (Blaine) form the emotional core of her story. When Ifemelu moves to America and is separated from Obinze the latter moves to Great Britain where, under great duress, he tries to gain legal status and is deported back to Nigeria after a failed attempt at a sham marriage to an Angolan-Portuguese girl called Cleotilde. On his return to Nigeria he becomes rich, wealthy and marries Kosi and joins an elite circle of businessmen.

Ifemelu's story forms the central component of the love theme. During her university days she falls in love with Obinze. It is Obinze who likes all the qualities in her as in the language of Kayode, "...she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees." (60) All these outspoken and not-too nice qualities are appreciated by him. He loves her at first sight. This is reciprocated by the brash and attractive young woman. But her love becomes a sort of physical one when she sees him on the dance floor in Kayode's party she feels, "It was indeed true that because of a male, your stomach could tighten up and refuse to unknot itself, your body's joint could unhinge, your limbs fail to move to music, and all effortless things suddenly become leaden." (58). The erotic and bodily aspects of love in the novel, however, is not only portrayed as positive and empowering, but is also marked by trauma and tensions, when she exchanges sex for money in a scene involving a coach in America later. From then on she stops talking to Obinze until her return to Nigeria thirteen years later. After this incident she feels like "a small ball, adrift and alone [...] she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily." (154)

This situation leaves her in a state of depression and she loses her self confidence. When Curt comes into her life she regains her confidence. She likes his approach, his small tokens of appreciation. He is

instinctively drawn towards her: "...it was love at first laugh... Her laugh was so vibrant, shoulders shaking, chest heaving; it was the laugh of a woman who, when she laughed, really laughed" (191). His love has two different aspects. In one way he is very much concerned about her –her health, career, happiness and well being in life. On the other hand he fears losing her, becomes possessive. In various situations his caring nature, symbolizing his love towards her can be felt by the reader. He is worried about her job, so with some phone calls he arranges a job for her. When her scalp burns because of a hairdo he tells her not to do anything with her natural hair, "Why do you have to do this?" (204). He appreciates her braided natural hair. When she is slighted in public places he comes out in support of her. In the parlour episode when she is denied service he becomes aggressive and ensures that she is treated properly. When in front of his family members (his mother and aunt) she feels ill at ease he helps reassure her that that they are not talking in terms of race. He handles her in a very tender way, he keeps her "like an egg" (219) and she feels "breakable, precious" (219). In a way the relationship with Curt acts as a restorative, erasing the bad memories of early struggles in America:

WITH CURT, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth... She was lighter and leaner; she was Curt's Girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favourite, flattering dress. She laughed more because he laughed so much. (196)

But sometimes this so very precious relation gives a feeling of insecurity. She feels, "... that he did not always believe her, or that his belief lasted only so long before he would need to hear her affirmation again. There was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing."(207) As long as it lasts this relationship is pretty reassuring but it ends when Curt comes to know about her brief fling with Rob, a young man living in her apartment block. Apparently Curt cannot understand Ifemelu's impulsive act of infidelity in the face all those he has done for her. The two drift apart and he treats her like a stranger and starts seeing at their relationship through the "lens of past tense" (289).

After the breakup of her first love she starts writing blogs and comes in contact with her black American boyfriend Blaine with whom she has had a chance meeting during a train ride. He is a professor at Yale University. Blaine never answers her phone calls initially but later the two meet in changed circumstances when Ifemelu has acquired visibility due to her blogging. In terms of the plot Blaine occupies the space vacated by Ifemelu's white lover:

She had always been able to sense the desire of men, but not Curt's, not at first. She still thought of Blaine,... she had been arrested by Blaine, and in her mind he had become the perfect American partner that she would never have. (191)

Her love life with Blaine is not discussed in detail in the narrative. She only starts loving the organic foods he recommends. Her love life changes because of change in principle. Blaine behaves patronizingly at times and expects her to be altruistic on race issues. He does not like it when he learns that she skips a demonstration he has organized for the sake of a black man, Mr. White in the campus. When he comes to know the truth about her absence he barely hides his sense of outrage:

"You know, it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don't really take seriously; it's like choosing an *interesting* elective evening class to complete your credits." She recognized in his tone, a subtle accusation, not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American. (345)

While Adichie lends touching moments of tenderness in Ifemelu's love life, she also underscores how swiftly such relationships can change. But such configurations of love allow Adichie to highlight the frail inner life of this diasporic self. It is at this juncture that Ifemelu contemplates a return to Nigeria and a re-entry into the life of her first lover, Obinze. The narrative makes it clear that the female protagonist maintains an organic link with her past and her country, a place where "she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil." (6)

The return to Nigeria and a former lover is not without problems. Obinze is caught between his family commitments and his dedication to a passionate life with Ifemelu. But the two separated lovers rediscover

intimacy in a new context and the old bond resurfaces between the two. As they have a history of strong connection he could “see her mind” (428) and he understands her more than herself. After the initial awkward moments an old trust is renewed: “He took her hand in his, both clasped on the table, and between them silence grew, an ancient silence that they both knew. She was inside this silence and she was safe.” (440) Ifemelu reestablishes herself in her new location and suffers from doubt and anxiety about her resurgent love:

This was love, to be eager for tomorrow. Had she felt this way as a teenager? The emotions seemed absurd. She fretted when he did not respond to her text right away. Her mind was darkened with jealousy about his past. “You are the great love of my life,” he told her, and she believed him, but still she was jealous of those women whom he had loved even if fleetingly, those women who had carved out space in his thoughts. She was jealous even of the women who liked him, imagining how much attention he got here in Lagos, good-looking as he was, and now also wealthy. (449)

Obinze’s love towards Ifemelu is so deep that he openly moves everywhere with her. He takes her to dinner, lunch, his private club where she receives the position of his wife as she is addressed in those places as madam. He spends late nights with her, moves to his home with her smell: “[...] he went home wearing her touch and her smell on his skin. He was determined to give their relationship as much dignity as he could.” (450) Even he indicates to his wife that he can’t live with them because he loves Ifemelu so much. Although Adichie gives no definite resolution to this tale of the separated lovers, keeps the issue unresolved, there is no mistaking the return to and rediscovery of old rituals of love between the two.

With Curt she becomes self-assured, gains her shattered confidence; with Blaine she plays the role of an intellectual, social activist girlfriend, yet she never feels deep enough for him. But Obinze is different. With him she feels most comfortable. It can be argued that he has the most prominent impact on her identity; he is the one without whom she ever feels complete and is a major factor in her decision to return to Nigeria.

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