Adichie's *Americanah* and the Discourse of Stereotypes in the New African Diaspora

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Abstract

The narrative of *Americanah* interrogates the discourse of stereotype in the new African diasporan experience in the United States. It does this because stereotypes produce fixed statements of reality that conceal underlying politics. In this regard the narrator leads us through the multiple encounters of Ifemelu with both white and African American characters. The objective of this level of stereotyping is to denote the migrant and to construe her as different. At the same time, we witness African migrants in the United States that engage in stereotyping behavior at fellow Africans. By adopting the theory of colonial discourse enunciated by Homi Bhabha especially his explanation on the discourse of stereotypes, we show how this pervasiveness does not only pave the way for tragic situations as in the attempted suicide of Dike, but it inflames lack of self-esteem in the African American personality and characters in the novel. Although scholars' accounts on the novel reveal Adichie's commitment to experiences in the new African diaspora stereotype undermines and perpetuates what Biodun Jeyifo has described as: "the colonization … of the body and that of the psyche". *Americanah,* therefore, equips us to describe our discourses and conception of colonialism and its relationship to modernity.

Key words: stereotypes, new African diaspora, transnational turn, Nigerian novel, Adichie

Introduction

This discussion focuses on the discourse of stereotypes in Adichie's *Americanah.* The novel reveals the consequence of stereotypical communication on intercultural relations in the new African diaspora. The term "new African diaspora" is used in a historic sense following the case by Isidore Okpewho in order to distinguish between the diaspora of enslavement and the diaspora of imperialism. Okpewho reports that the dangers behind slavery may well have remained intact in the new diaspora (Okpewho, 5). One of such dangers is the prevalent discourse of stereotype. Okpewho recommends the need to foreground these dangers in order to understand the relations between the old and the new African diaspora. Unlike in the old diaspora of enslavement, the new diaspora has found representation in the Nigerian novel and some of these experiences are precipitated by the immanent and irreconcilable contradictions in the nation in the postcolonial context. For example, the contradictions in the nation trigger the urge to flight leading to economic migration to other lands.

Another factor that motivates this study is the debilitating force of unanimity and impunity in African modernity and the need to transcend it. Unanimity has thrived in the promotion of one-dimensional viewpoint in postcolonial Africa. Apart from thriving in the ideas of the founding fathers of modern Africa it has generated stereotypical discourse. *Americanah* narrates a counter perspective as Adichie constructs her main character as a marginal subject who functions to "foster openness [by deconstructing] stereotypical identities" (Perlicer-Ortin, 256).

"Stereotype" is a rigidly conventional expression, idea, character, etc. The rigidity in the stereotype yields it to the construction of what Adichie has called the "single story". She asserts, "the single story creates stereotypes …[which] make one story become the only story" (Adichie, "Single Story"). Thus, stereotypical discourse is both exemplary of how the formal and aesthetic category can be mobilized to foster the unanimity of the single story and how to deconstruct it. Our perception of the stereotype incorporates not only this penchant to foster one-dimensional

picture of the world, but also, how the narrative text presents marginal characters that creatively deconstruct stereotypical identities and outlooks. Accordingly, the heterodiegetic narrator engages the character of Ifemelu as both the seer and reporter of instances of stereotypes and as the interrogator of their immanent content.

Within the context of postcolonial theory stereotype shares affinity with the Other and its associated discourses of primitivism and cannibalism. The Other enables us to mark out a subject as separate and as such to distinguish between what is normal from a culture's perspective and what is not normal. Besides, the Other locates and defines one's position in the world. However, within a system of hegemonic power structure such as colonialism "normality" and "position" are not just mere linguistic markers. They convey the idea that a pattern of behavior acquires the characteristics of a power structure and can become normal while at the same time functioning as abnormal especially when perceived from the perspective of the others outside the range of normality. Within hegemonic discourse of unanimity, the discourse of primitivism and cannibalism has been mobilized as means of enforcing the binary separation between dominant and marginal subjects. Secondly, it functions to mark "the naturalness and primacy of the [hegemonic] culture and world view" (Ashcroft, *et al*, 169).

Stereotype separates human types as either subjects or objects. Thus, the subjects are those that construct the stereotype, which leaves the objects as those that are constructed and by constructing them, they emerge as mere contents that fill the form constructed by others who are outside the form. The basis for the subject's justification is animated by a sense of belonging to a social group imbued with a certain interest and power. Besides, it means a commitment to place one's construction of the other in the definition and involvement with a world. Therefore, the stereotype is imbued with force. It is an elaboration not only of a basic racial, gendered or geographical distinction, but also a whole series of interests. It is speech that expresses even in its subtlety a certain intention and a conviction to control a different group of people and world. It is, above all, shaped by a distinctive and peculiar power that has cultural, political and ideological implications.

The stereotype is rooted in the awareness of difference that animates a process of marking out. We recall the analogy of marking out with the intention to include or exclude described by Mary Louis Pratt. She recounts: "Sunday school missionary stories built the color line into our imaginations. That was part of their job to create us as subjects of empire, give us our place in the world" (Pratt, 3). "Us" and "Our" acquire topographical dimension in this account on the prominence of "fencing". The word "fencing" concretizes the sense of marking that underlies "us" and "our". "Us" and "our" implies the absent and unnamed other, the "them" and "theirs". "Fencing" serves to give body to these pronouns in terms of chickens, cattle which are kept in and the foxes that are kept out. Although Pratt's essay is not *directly* related to the subject of stereotype, but her adoption of the turn of phrase "rhetoric of vigilance associated with the Cold War" in her description of the discipline of Comparative Literature in the United States and the image she evokes on the fence as instrument of separation (Pratt, 1995:58) testifies to how the discourse of stereotype creates imaginary walls between people in the new African diaspora. Interestingly, the walls go beyond the color line created in the missionary stories some of which go back to the old diaspora of enslavement. We witness ideological and imaginary walls between white and black, and between black and black.

We show that Other and its associated discourses share affinity with the discourse of stereotype. But stereotype functions by creating human categories in stock characters and stock phrases encapsulated in labels. We argue that among other concerns such as transnationalism and exile, *Americanah* adopts stereotype to represent human types in their fear of being over-run by the other, or due to mere cultural and racial separation through ideological and discursive "fencing". Through Ifemelu's story, Adichie creates a space for unrepresented and underrepresented minorities such as diasporic women, for example Mariama and Aisha, to find a voice of their own to express their dreams. Aisha shares with Ifemelu and with the readers the unfortunate encounter with the two Igbo men in her life. Through their representation the women tell of their experiences of exile and manage to mentally free themselves from stereotypes.

The theoretical impetus of this study derives from Homi Bhabha's account of the stereotype as part of his explanation on the theory of colonial discourse. For him

colonial discourse was rooted in ambivalence. It manifested both as "a civilizing mission and a violent subjugating force". As Bhabha argues, it is a world that bears the sheen of itself as a civilizing agent but its operational strategy is characterized by "subjugating force". Also, for Bhabha, it is in this ambivalence that we see not only the discriminatory power of colonial discourse but the root of its discourse of stereotype. In other words, stereotype becomes its signifying force for enforcing its subjugation on the margin of colonialism.

Bhabha's preoccupation with the stereotype forms part of the discussion in "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" which appears as the third chapter in *The Location of Culture*. He identifies a definite feature of colonial discourse which is cleavage to the concept of fixity. Fixity acquires ideological, cultural, and historical permutation to the extent that the vision of the world is marked by repetition. Bhabha observes that the stereotype manifests as "its [colonialism] major discursive strategy" (94). This strategy acquires momentum in terms of that which is "always in place, already known, and that must be anxiously repeated". In other words, the strategic import of the stereotype is its cast-iron essence that occludes openness. Within the context of his account on the relationship between colonialism and modernity Biodun Jeyifo has underscored that it is this essentialism that animated Europe's autotelic "civilizing mission" to isolate human types in terms of those that are educable or civilizable and those that are deemed not to be educable or civilizable" (Jeyifo, 609). But Bhabha reiterates that such firm division served to project colonial discourse in general terms as an "apparatus of power" (100). Its objective Bhabha affirms is to:

> construe the colonized [already marked out as uncivilizable] as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and instruction (101)

The more pertinent aspect of how colonial discourse functions as an apparatus of power is its potential to generate a "mode of representation of otherness". It is this mode of representation of otherness that enables us to apprehend the functionality of the stereotype. Its immanent ambivalence crystallizes in a conceited division of the world into two in terms of those that are "educable" and civilizable", as Jeyifo notes, and those that are not. And since those at the margin of colonialism are

presumed to be "uncivilizable", they bear the trait of being "unspeakable" and mute. We can recall a slight incident in which Dike who is black is marked out by the teacher and denied the use of sun screen lotion in the course of a school camp outing. What worries the teenage Dike is the fact that to be denied the use of the lotion is to be marked out as one of the "black folks". Thus, to be black is to be denied certain privileges and be treated as different. Eventually this marking out builds up to the point leading to his suicide attempt.

The discourse of colonialism as an apparatus of power smoothened the civilizing mission and enhanced conquest of "the Africans [the West enslaved], the "Indians" they slaughtered, and the Asians they indentured" as Paul Gilroy recalls in the context of his account on "the Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity" (Gilroy, 2). For Bhabha, the colonial system constructed final vocabularies that mark out the colonized as inferior, lazy, and a population of degenerates. This is because, Bhabha argues, "the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as … degenerate on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha, 101). Although Bhabha underscores the colonial context as underwriting the functioning of stereotype, he equally recognizes the possibility of stereotype functioning beyond the colonial limit. Commenting on Bhabha's insight on the stereotype, David Huddart confirms that through racially charged jokes and "other forms of representation, the colonizer circulates stereotypes about … the colonized" (Huddart, 24). In practical terms stereotype permeates experience in otherwise non-colonial context, such as the new African diaspora, by functioning to enforce power and control through discourse. As Huddart further explaines, while the stereotype is a "stable if false foundation upon which colonialism bases its power, [in the new African diaspora, which is not under traditional form of colonialism] stereotype functions to mark out the migrant outsider for exclusion", and the black from the mainstream. Mainstream is used here to mean particularly upper-middle-class white population. This is achieved by underscoring difference. This process of marking out manifests sometimes in simple turn of expression as in the case used against Dike. We are told that the white female minister in the church will greet other children "hello" but turns to Dike to assert "bros". Also, in the incident of the hacking of the computer at school by an unknown individual, the first suspect is Dike because he is different.

Of what relevance is the account of Bhabha and others on colonial discourse to our current desire to apprehend the immanent operation of stereotype in the new African diaspora and in the representation of experience by Adichie? How can we explain the adoption and perpetuation of features of colonial stereotype in the contexts of African new diaspora even after the end of colonialism? How can an understanding of colonial discourse equip us to apprehend the pattern of relationship in the new African diaspora especially in the United States? Adichie's main character, Ifemelu, is chagrined by how the appropriation of forms of colonial stereotype permeates intercultural relation between racial and even intra-racial categories,that is between white and black, African American against Africans, and African against fellow Africans. It is this kind of ambivalence that animates our concern in this study.

Action in *Americanah*

"Action" is used following Peter Brooks' reiteration of Aristotle's argument in the *Poetics* that plot constitutes the combination of incidences, or things done in the story. Brooks asserts that "plot is first of all, a constant of all written and oral narrative. Plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through discreet elements" (Brooks, 252). Within the context of Anglo-American New Criticism, R.S. Crane has described plot as the "temporal synthesis effected by the writer of the element of action, character and thought that constitute the matter of his invention" (Crane, 141). Thus, plot is not just one thing, it is a unity of other elements namely, action, character and thought. But since action, character and thought cannot acquire their specific identity except through language, plot, as a synthesis is realized in a linguistic selection and combination. This is because plot is basically an invention and its identity depends on the creative power of the writer. In a sense, therefore, our goal in this section is to trace the unique inventiveness of Adichie in the nuanced nature of her novelistic presentations in *Americanah*.

The action of *Americanah* alternates between two different experiences of migration from Nigeria to the United States and the United Kingdom. It is the stories of Ifemelu's experiences in Nigeria and in the United States and Obinze's experiences in Nigeria and in the United Kingdom. Ifemelu is a documented migrant with partial undergraduate scholarship. She endures the harsh

experiences of living, schooling and working in a context marred by racial prejudice. The subplot that revolves around Obinze is focused on his nightmarish experiences in London. Unlike Ifemelu he is undocumented and has to work with a borrowed work permit. He gets into trouble with the authorities and is eventually deported back to Nigeria.

This alternation of experiences negates linearity and reinforces what Simon Gikandi has described as "new reciprocal rather than unilateral relationship". The absence of the unilateral is a unique feature in the new diasporan narrative whereby stories and experiences from a diversity of contexts meet. But unlike in the old diasporan novel the collision in another world is precipitated by the inherent discontinuities in the nation rather than sheer human thralldom and identity politics. This alternation in the narrative line is indicative of the transnational turn in the telling and even arrangement of the action. Our account on action and on the discourse of stereotype will dwell mainly on the prejudices that trail Ifemelu in the United States.

The action begins in Chapter One which is subsequently arranged in two sequences. In the first sequence (A) Ifemelu moves from Princeton to Trenton to braid her hair. We can chart this sequence in terms of its immanent content of departure from the Platform at Princeton Station to the moment of arrival at the Platform at Trenton Station. Within this segment of departure and arrival we are presented with five different incidents. These are the moment of her waiting at the Platform at Princeton (3). The story shifts to tell us about other potential commuters equally waiting. Of these others we are told that they are "all of them white and lean, in short, flimsy clothes. The man standing closest to her was eating ice cream cone" (4). The account adopts the filmic technique of zoom and close up in order to focus on this ice-cream-cone-eating white male character. The focus on this male character becomes the occasion for the narrator through Ifemelu's perspective to adopt the strategy of analepsis in order to comment on social behavior "especially the eating of ice cream cones by grown up American men in public" (4). Ifemelu's emphasis on this social behavior through the stylistic sequence of the words is to mark a cultural difference between say adult white males and adult Nigerian males that consider the eating of ice cream cones in public abhorrent. But the setting is not Nigeria. It is in Princeton, United States, in

summer. Besides through the embedded analepsis the narrator equally presents brief accounts on Ifemelu's blogs on social behavior in America. After the forays into Ifemelu's blogs, the sequence returns to the ice-cream-eating white male (5). The man "sat beside her on the train, and to discourage conversation, she stared fixedly at a brown stain near her feet … until they arrived at Trenton." No clear explanation is given at this stage on why Ifemelu has blocked the space for conversation between her and this man. The final incident in this sequence is on the platform at Trenton. As Ifemelu leaves the platform at Trenton we are led to a crisis situation that is of relevance to the new African diaspora. In this regard we witness that the subject of the new African diaspora is oppressed by homesickness (6). This subject may become successful as Ifemelu as we see in the success of her blogs which are doing well with thousands of visitors. She is earning good speaking fees. She has a fellowship in an Ivy League institution and a thriving affair. Yet in spite of this level of success she laments: "there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while … a bleakness and … piercing homesickness" (6).

The unique feature in the foregoing presentation of the account is Adichie's adoption of the homodiegetic form of analepsis; what some version of Anglo-American criticism of narrative has described as flashback. According to Shlomith Rimmon, "homodiegetic" is used to refer to the same character or the same story line as the primary narrative (Rimmon, 43). The primary story line at this opening section of the action is Ifemelu's movement from Princeton to Trenton for the purpose of braiding her hair. In order to do this, she adopts a homodiegetic analepsis that shows the same character as the point of focus. However, beyond this primary story line that reveals her movement from Princeton to Trenton, there is another deep reality that accounts for what we see at the surface. That deep reality is indicative of her recent decision to move back to Nigeria. The reflections that unveil as she makes the primary movement become the character's inner attempt to explain it all. Through a weaving of connected experiences in the action we witness Ifemelu's inner struggle to recall where it all began and what followed up to the moment when we see her going to Trenton.

The second sequence (B) continues as Ifemelu arrives at Mariama's African Hair Braiding. The sequence here begins as the taxi driver, Marvin Smith, announces:

"Here we are!" (9) She will spend the next six hours at Mariama's as another female character, Aisha, braids her hair. As Ifemelu settles in to braid her hair Time becomes a crucial factor in the entire narration. There is the time in the temporal sense of physical waiting within the space of the salon. But there is also time unfolding in terms of the present and the past. In the present, Aisha is working on her hair, combing, weaving, standing and talking while Ifemelu sits. Aisha is a minor and undocumented immigrant. But by presenting her as "working" and "talking" Adichie uses Ifemelu's story to create a space for unrepresented, underrepresented and undocumented minorities such as diasporic women (such as Mariama and Aisha) to find a voice of their own to express their dream (Aisha tells Ifemelu of the Igbo men in her life) and to tell their experiences of exile and to free themselves from stereotypes. Aisha is curious to know about Ifemelu and so asak questions about her identity while also revealing her own identity and the identity of her colleagues working in the salon. Ifemelu reveals her impression of Aisha, providing a description of her skin condition. Aisha talks about the Igbo men in her life and her expectations from Ifemelu when she learns that she is of Igbo origin. All this unfolds in the present time.

From this present time frame the narrator through Ifemelu's perspective leads us into the past. This happens at the end of an exchange between Aisha and Ifemelu on the possibility of meeting Aisha's Igbo men and a disagreement on the use of a comb. The narrative opens up to an extended analepsis beginning with Ifemelu's growth under the shadow of her mother's hair (41-44) and her mother's conversion and misadventure through new-age churches.We are also led into another account on the character Uju and her "mentor" (44-46). Yet another block opens now on Ifemelu's father and how he loses his job (46-48). The thread of events ends in a description of Ifemelu's childhood (53-54).Chapter 6 is presented through Ifemelu eyes. But it renders a detailed account on Uju. It tells of her relationship with the General as his mistress and who later becomes the father of her son, Dike. Dike's connection as we will see later serves to underscore the effect of stereotypical discourse on the subject of the new African diaspora in the United States. But still on Uju we witness her experiences as a mistress, her pregnancy and birth of her son. This is followed by a crisis situation leading to the death of the general in a plane crash and Uju's escape to the United States.

The account returns again to the present in chapter 9 (102-103). The present ends with the subject of heat wave. Then the action shifts to the past to recall Ifemelu's experience of heat wave the first summer she arrives the U.S. (103-106). The narrative returns to this present after recalling three years of Ifemelu's experiences in the U.S as she visits Uju at Warrington, Massachusetts. As we move through this past, we witness some manifestations of the new diaspora experience through Uju. We are told, for instance, that "she is insistently under pressure" (108). Also, her skin is dry; her eyes shadowed; her spirit bleached of colour …" We are told that: "America has subdued her" (110).Still on the new diaspora, we are told of Bartholomew, "" He went to America and refused to comeback". Uju explains: "You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (119).At Mariama's salon Ifemelu reveals to us that identity in the new diaspora is tied to the nation state. Thus: Mariama tells Ifemelu that she is from Mali. Aisha is from Senegal. Ifemelu asks Aisha to say country instead of Africa (15). The reason is that in the postcolonial context the nation and belonging to a nation state is prior to a generalized belonging to the continent.

From the account so far, it is apparent that apart from movement as a dominant motif, movement is aligned to time because it unfolds in time dimension and the narrative landscape tends to plot the pattern of movement as it unfolds in a temporal order. Even though our concern is not principally on the nature of time in Adichie's novel, we are keen to adopt current knowledge on the manifestation of time in narrative in order to account for the temporal trajectory in the representation of Ifemelu's experiences. Our approach is hinged on Paul Ricoeur's modification on Gerard Genette's structuralist work on the interpretation of time in fiction. Genette distinguishes between two levels of time in narrative, namely: the time of the act of narrating and the time that is narrated. In addition to these two levels, Ricoeur introduces a third level which is the time of life. Thus, according to Ricoeur, there is the time of utterance, time of statement, and time of the world as the third level. In *Americanah* we have these three levels manifesting thus:

1. The Utterance. By utterance here implies the set of experiences presented through a character's point of view that unfolds in a duration of time. This manifests in the present time as Ifemelu moves from Princeton and goes to

Trenton. We also experience it as Ifemelu arrives at Mariama's salon and settles to have a braid given to her by Aisha for the next six hours.

2. Statement. This is time narrated manifesting at different moments. For example, through the use of analepsis we are presented with the time that depicts Ifemelu's childhood at an earlier time in the past. This time occurred much earlier than the time of the incident with her mother's hair. Embedded into the time of the mother's hair, are other minor events including: the time of her mother's conversion, the time of Uju's "fortune" with her "mentor", and the time of her father's sack from his job. These events unfold through the narration of Ifemelu growing under the shadow of her mother's hair.We also encounter another time segment that encapsulates the birth of Dike and another time of Uju's movement to the U.S. after the death of the General. This is followed by the time of Ifemelu's arrival in the U.S. in summer. Summer here serves as a time marker that encapsulates different events.

3. World. This is the ambient sphere that historically encapsulates the entire action of the narrative. This is the fictive experience of time projecting the world of postcolonial Nigeria towards the end of military rule in the late 1990s. Thus, we note expressions such as "the head of state", "the officers", etc. Also, the death of the General in the air crash is analogous to a similar event in reality involving the late Mamman Vasta. This does not imply that Uju's "mentor" is categorically modelled on that historical personage. But some level of verisimilitude seems tomanifest here.

The action shifts from the present but returns to the moment of Ifemelu's "utterance" in the present at the arrival of Mariama's new customer "wearing jean shorts" in chapter 18 (186-191). These shifts through time and place serve to map the different worlds that suture Ifemelu's experiences in the past and the present. As the narrator plots these new experiences in the new African diaspora, those experiences are juxtaposed with the character's past in Nigeria. Besides, we can place this within the background of Ifemelu's present state of mind as she is burdened by home

sickness. But more importantly, the intersection here serves to illuminate Adichie's unique view on Afropolitanism.

In her account on Taiye Salasi's novel, *Ghana Must Go,* Maria Rocio Cobo-Pinero acknowledges that the internal structure ofthat novel displays an "aesthetics of mobility and distortion". This portrays the characters' diasporic subjectivities as they transit between worlds (Cobo-Pinero, 78). We recall this view here as it paves the way for us to apprehend Adichie's reconstruction of Afropolitanism especially as conceived in terms of the "promotion of the universal story" (90) orientated towards the attribution of African success in the diaspora to the West. Adichie is more attuned to how Africa sees itself rather than how Africa is seen by the West. A shift to the Afrocentric vision of success is rooted in a conscious reconstruction of the "universal single story". Yet, it projects African subjects in the West who are conscious of their homeland and roots. This accounts for the pattern of the aesthetics of mobility in *Americanah* both in terms of place (a shift between the U.S. and Nigeria) and in terms of time. It is also in this sense that Ifemelu as a member of the new African diaspora differs from the subjects of the old diaspora. We witness her strong connection with "home", with roots. Ifemelu's strong pull to "home" contrasts with a character such as Bartholomew of whom we are told, "He went to America and refused to come back" (116). On her part, Uju demonstrates a tenacity of purpose thus she affirms: "You are in acountry that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (119). Uju's tenaciousness, manifesting both as a single mother and a qualified and certified medical doctor, is animated by Adichie's vision of the African subject in the West.Indeed, the contrast between Ifemelu and Uju, on the one hand, and Bartholomew, on the other hand, illuminates a significant value of the title of the novel, "Americanah". In popular contemporary Nigerian lore, the word "Americanah" conveys a double significance, a positive and negative value.Bartholomew appears as truly "Americanah" in the negative sense as a consequence of his creolized in-betweenness, of failing to be truly integrated into the American society and because of having been initially lifted out of the indigenous origin, he is not truly indigenous anymore and that is why it is said of him, "he went to America and refused to comeback". In Igbo lore, he is deemed to be lost. Contemporary Nigerian popular experience abounds with stories of young men and women who had left the homeland for the idealized American dream. But they are caught up

in the complex web of immigration laws that sometimes result in eventual deportation or ultimately return back to the homeland. Such a premature return comes with the burden of emotional and financial crises to the individual and the family. In the eye of the popular imagination such an individual is addressed as "Americanah" because she is caught up in the liminal condition of not being American or at least being successful over there and as a consequence of the emotional and financial stress that come with such sad event, not being stable as an indigene anymore. In his liminal condition, he adopts a lifestyle that is a corrupt, pidginized version of an American, both in fashion, gestures and in speech. It is indeed this pidginized version that secures him in the liminal condition of not being American and not being Nigerian. At the same time, some of the affected individuals learn from the ugly experience of the past and arrive at a new sense of self-discovery that equips them to become highly successful in the homeland. It is in this regard that Adichie's *Americanah* becomes a veritable "contact zone'' where American, European, African-American and African experiences, histories, and cultures meet (Nwanyanwu, 387). Besides, the contrast between Uju/Ifemelu and Bartholomew can be understood at yet another level. Any conscious reader of Adichie from her early novel *Purple Hibiscus* will not fail to recognize her underlying feminist orientation at play in this contrast. It is not surprising that it is the male character that is the "Americanah" in the negative sense. This male character reminds us of Eugene in the earlier novel while the Uju/Ifemelu connective reechoes the character Ifeoma. These female characters dramatize how the narrative of the new African diaspora illuminates those women as indeed different. It is a difference that revises traditional passive roles attributed to women while revising their status within the context of the new diaspora. Uju's sense of revision crystallizes in the realization that she has to remain focused. It is a realization that is equally in line with Adichie's own vision of rewriting the "single story", that is the patriarchal narrative of women as silent and passive.

As the account shifts to the present, we are brought to a point of crisis in chapter 43 (379-381). The incident of Dike's attempted suicide forms the core issue in Part Six with its one chapter, Chapter 43 of three pages. The account here revolves around the attempted suicide by Dike. Even though it is narrated in the present it interconnects with events and experiences rooted in the past. The account begins as Ifemelu is filled with bewilderment, haunted with the "elliptical thoughts of

what could have happened" (379). On the surface what has happened is that Dike has swallowed an overdose of Tylenol. His apparent intention is as he has "read on the Internet that an overdose could kill…" (379) He is rescued. In the aftermath of the failed suicide what follows is the need to understand the underlying motivations that triggered the attempt. The literature on attempted suicide presents possible classification as in Geo Stone (1999) while insisting on the need to understand the underlying triggers which could be psychological or anthropological in relation to social/lived experiences. Unlike semiotically based enquiry, phenomenologically oriented research acknowledges the importance of felt aspects of lived experience (Boden, 52). Therefore, following Stone's classification, Dike's falls within the third type which encapsulates mainly younger attempters who very likely use "less lethal means … most frequently drug overdose…" (Stone, 31) Even though Stone designates this category as "tossing the dice" the narrator of *Americanah* does not provide information to enable us conclude that Dike tossed the dice hoping to be rescued. However, following Stone's insight, the attempters in this category, just as Dike, are in "much emotional pain or frustration" even though it is said he never gave a clue to the significant others around him. As Boden has suggested it becomes imperative to create "bridge … that allows [others] to know more about the suicidal experience for that person" (51). Ifemelu creates this bridge in her attempt to understand. For instance, "… she searched his face, his gestures, his words for a sign…" Later, "she made him the kind of jollof rice he liked …" (379)

We witness two approaches to understanding Dike's attempted suicide. Ifemelu approaches the crisis from an anthropological/social view point while Uju adopts the clinical viewpoint. These two viewpoints manifest in a dialogue between the two characters as Ifemelu struggles to find answers to the underlying intention. Ifemelu asks Uju:

> Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said 'we black folk' and you told him 'you are not black'? …
> "Yes, I remember"
> "You should not have done that."

> "You know what I meant." I didn't want him to start behaving like these people and thinking that everything that happens to him is because he's black."
> "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was."

It is understanding the difference between "what he wasn't" and "what he was" that illuminates the underlying triggers to Dike's attempted suicide. For Ifemelu, Dike needed "reassurance". It is a reassurance about his identity, his paternity, his roots and his past. It is about the absence of his father. Bartholomew fails to fill the void. We are told that "Dike never set eyes on him for a whole week" (182). Thus, there is no real connection between Bartholomew and the boy. This is even reflected in Dike's reaction to a gift from Bartholomew. In this instance, his mother selects the shirt in question to be won for a particular Sunday church service. Dike rejects the shirt because it was bought by Bartholomew. We are told about the shirt: "a striped and humourless shirt that Bartholomew had bought Dike" (215). Also, Dike is anxious about his name. Uju reports: "he didn't ask why he has my name, he asked if he has my name because his father did not love him" (171). Besides, Dike's difference becomes the main trigger that built up to his attempted suicide. It is not only that he is different, but that difference has become the basis for which the significant others in his life assess and interact with him especially within the public domain in the church, at school, and even at times of recreation in the camp. For instance, at school Dike's teacher reports that he is "aggressive" (171). And Dike tells Ifemelu about the incident of someone hacking into the school computer network: "You have to blame the black kid first." His friends suspect that because he is black, he deals on "weed". Thus, they would say: "Hey Dike, got some weed?" (349) And at church we are told: "You know that if he does not dress properly, they will find something to say about us. If they are shabby,it's not a problem, but if we are, it is another thing." (215) Besides, he "told her about the pastor at church, a white woman, who had said hello to all the other kids but when she came to him, she said, 'What's up, bro?'" There is also the incident at the camp with the sun screen. Dike explains in a candid tone: "I just want to be regular". Besides all these examples, there is Uju's anxiety about how Dike is perceived in the eye of the other. Unfortunately, that anxiety is weighing heavily on the child.

As we had noted earlier, all these instances reflect the perception of Dike within the ambit of the social and lived sphere where he encounters others in the world that view him from a narrow-defined prism. The hinge point here is the difference between what he wasn't and what he is. This represents Ifemelu's view point. The alternative view point is basically clinical in outlook. Uju asserts: "Ifemelu, his suicide attempt was from depression" … "It is a clinical disease. Many teenagers suffer from it" (380).

The relevance of this crisis in the plot woven around Dike's attempted suicide is that it illuminates the struggle of the subject of the new diaspora in the United States. The statement, "you black folks" seems innocuous. But beyond the surface it ushers Dike and by extension other young people like him into the maze of color and ethnic matrix in the United States. It expresses the dynamics of power, subjectivity, and identity. In a racialized context and from the eye of the White population he is black and he is measured on the same pedestal as other blacks appear in the eyes of the White. Apart from his mother who is the sole parent, Dike suffers the deep-seated pain of not knowing his father as he was just a mere infant when the father dies.

Stereotypical Discourse through character representation

Adichie's point of departure in her representation of stereotypical discourse is that it does not flow only in one direction, that is from the white main stream to the other ethnic and racial categories. Even though one form of power or the other underwrites stereotypical discourse, it is not power in the cusp of an absolute mainstream. This is due to the inherent ambivalence of stereotype which Bhabha clarifies enables it to function within the colonial moment both as "a means of practical control" and also as a justification of the colonial mission as a civilizing agent (Huddart, 25). In addition to the insight of Bhabha, we can discern two possible explanations at the level of theory for this inherent ambivalence. The dispersal of stereotypical discourse in Adichie is sutured by her opposition to the absolute single story. Whereas the single story poses a danger by excluding other forms of story, Adichie envisions the proliferation of multiple stories in any context. Therefore, if stories matter, then we witness the different narratives "march[ing] to the sounds of different drummers" to recall Howard Felperin's apt

imagery (Felperin, 29). But this cacophony of sounds obviously flows into diverse directions of stereotypical discourse.

The second explanation, we think, derives impetus from Michel Foucault's idea of power. As explained by Mills, Foucault disavows the liberal humanist model of power as a possession. He rejects power as a violation of someone's right and discountenances Marxism's assumption that power relations are determined by economic relations. Power is dispersed through social relations. Accordingly, power is productive and does not flow only from one direction. Mills has accentuated, "this productive model of power is … found useful particularly when looking at ways of thinking about discourse [including stereotypical discourse]" (Mills, 18). This productiveness of power is significant in understanding the dispersal of stereotypical discourse in Adichie. This is because it is anchored in the operation of power in relation to the arbitrariness of the range of discourse. Thus, in spite of overt familiarity, an underlying strangeness emerges. Adichie's narrator positions Ifemelu not only as a character but as the critical eye that sees beyond the familiarity of stereotypes in order to reveal their untruth. This is dramatized in chapter 18 as we return to the time present with the arrival of Mariama's new customer that introduces herself as Kelsey. She arrives in her self-consciousness of herself as one that possesses power. She interrogates Mariama thus,

> But you couldn't even have this business back in your country, right? Isn't it wonderful that you get to come to the US and now your kids can have better life?"
> "Are women allowed to vote in your country" Kelsey asked. (188)

Kelsey is described as "a young white woman … soft bodied and tanned". At work here is a presumptuous subject, Kelsey, animated by a nationalistic fervor. For her, women in Mariama's homeland are shorn of rights. Ifemelu concludes that Kelsey is a product of the "nationalism of liberal American" that expects the outsider to be overly "silent and grateful".

On the basis of Kelsey's liberalist consciousness, she shifts to engage Ifemelu on a dialogue. The subject that emerges in the extended exchange between them is that of reading especially, the difference between reading about, that is reading as "consumption" of preordained assumptions and reading as interpretation, that is

as making sense. Kelsey reads in order to recuperate readymade assumptions about places and people especially about Africa. The narrator reports through the dialogue with Ifemelu that Kelsey reads Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* especially for its portrait of traditional Igbo life as typical of Africa even in the postcolonial context. It is for the same reason for which she reads *A Bend in the River* by V.S. Naipaul as the quintessential African narrative even though the novel is not about African experience. Ifemelu differs in her own sense of reading. While Kelsey reads on the basis of a one-dimensional orbit that espouses a "single story" about others, Ifemelu interrogates the one-dimensional form of knowledge acquired through reading and thereby foregrounds the difference between "why [Kelsey] would read the novel like that" and "I see why you would read it like you did" (189). In insisting on "you would read it like you did" Ifemelu underscores the role of the reader as a subject capable of making sense rather than repetition of universally accepted information, or reading as common sense. For Kelsey reading is common sense because she approaches it from her underlying ideological framework. For Ifemelu, reading is iterative on the basis of the subject's interpretive ability. Through these two characters, therefore, power is dispersed rather than being congealed on a fixed framework.

Bhabha underscores that "the stereotype is a primary point of subjugation" (Bhabha, 107). This it attempts to achieve through the process of simplification. According to Bhabha, "it is a simplification because" it is a false representation of a given reality. Besides, "it is an arrested, fixated form of representation, which by denying the play of difference" (Bhabha, 107) it replicates arbitrariness in its representation of the other. It is this niggling picture that serves as the backcloth for understanding the dialogue and actions of characters like Laura and the guests to Kimberley and her husband's party organized for an aspirant to the U.S. Congress. Chapter 16 (159-170) relates how Ifemelu secures a job as a babysitter with Kimberly. A friendly relationship develops between Ifemelu and the broadminded and genial Kimberly and by extension her cousin, Curtis. At the same time, the account provides insight into the place of the African migrant and through her, the stereotypical view on Africa. The crisis point begins to unfold in connection with Laura, Kimberly's sister. Soon we see that Laura is a representation of the American mainstream.

Ifemelu is baffled at first with Laura's strange interest in her and her background. We are told:

> She did not understand why Laura looked up so much information about Nigeria… It was an aggressive, unaffectionate interest; … to pay so much attention to something you did not like. (163)

Laura sums up Ifemelu in one word, "sassy". She says: "I love how sassy you are!" Ifemelu takes no offence. But Kimberly recognizes the insult from her sister: "I'm sorry Laura said that. I've never liked that word 'sassy'" (162). At the party Kimberly introduces Ifemelu to the guests simply as their babysitter and "my friend". But Ifemelu reveals that the guests have the same strange interest as Laura about Africa. A man retorts, "You're so beautiful… African women are so gorgeous, especially Ethiopians". Then "a couple spoke about their safari in Tanzania". And "two women spoke about their donations to a wonderful charity in Malawi that built wells". In other words, to these guests their idea of Africa is a place of "gorgeous women, safaris, and of a people waiting for donations and charity." What underwrites the picture presented here by the guests is the idea that Africa is a metaphor of emptiness.

For these characters, and also for Laura, Africa is out of history. On the basis of this hypothetical scheme, these characters adopt an anti-dialectical approach in their vision of Africa. Rather than a vision of Africa that is forward-moving, they see Africa that is in stasis, frozen in the past without a present, or a reference point but that which was coined out of the Enlightenment. Thus, they see themselves as the appointed commentators that already know Africa and are armed with a final vocabulary to enact stereotypical images about it. In the face of the comments Ifemelu has the onerous task of redescribing her Nigerian and African world. Her response in the face of these is either to simply "gazed at them" in silence or to adopt an ironist attitude as she responds to Laura.

In the redescription by Ifemelu rendered in her ironist tone vis-à-vis the final vocabulary of the group of guests and by Laura, we witness the dramatization of Adichie's vision of the "danger of the single story". At the same time, Ifemelu's act of redescription is exemplary for other migrants of the new African diaspora. Adichie's reemphasizes that migrating to the West should not be to fit into little

boxes designed by the American mainstream. Here we recall the case of Bartholomew who is said to be disconnected from the homeland. For him, settling in America is the act cancelling out his roots. The group of white upper-middle-class Americans testifies with the view of Mbembe about its arbitrariness and its accompanying elementariness and primitiveness that rendered Africa as "the world *par excellence* of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to series of setback of nature" (Mbembe, 1) while its people and place became, Mbembe further shows, "the object of experimentation" (2).

Americanah has dramatized Adichie's vision of "the danger of the single story" and how its consequent power is disseminated through stereotypical discourse within the context of new African diaspora. By studying the representation of some major characters, we have shown how the narrative redescribes instances of strategies of othering and exclusion in the new African diaspora. Apart from the introduction, the discussion has examined the pattern of action through a foray of it's aesthetic of mobility and the representation of instances of stereotypical discourse in the interactive moments of characters. The overall relevance of this contribution is that it underscores the need to redescribe language games about Africa's place in the global scheme of things. It is in this sense that Adichie's work as part of the discourse of new African Diaspora critically explores African modernity.

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