



CHILDREN'S VOICES IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Abstract

*This paper is a dialogic assessment of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. The paper argues that the novel has been written to exclude the voices of children through its narrative structure, although the story told revolves around children. The exclusion of children's voices consequently results in the fragmentation of the realities which the novel presents, leaving the novel itself greatly flawed. To substantiate these claims, the paper identifies what it calls "dialogic junctions" in the text, and shows that it is children who speak at these junctions. The paper then proceeds to show how the novel has been structured to exclude children's voices, relying on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and Eyoh Etim's infantism for critical ballast. The paper submits, ultimately, that any utterance on human existence from which children's voices are excluded cannot be complete, and therefore, should not be regarded seriously, since children's experiences constitute a vital aspect of human reality.*

Key words: dialogism, infantism, dialogic junction, utterance, fragmentation

Introduction

It would be most productive to commence with a contextualization of crucial concepts. Soyinka (2003) posits that “my voice is the sole guarantee that I may, some day [sic], recover those other parts of me that make me a [full] social being” (p. 3). In literary context, therefore, voice refers to the tools with which people (re)claim their freedom. As such, voice could be words, actions or even textual structures. Children need no particular definition. However, counter to what seems to be the predominant belief, children have always been and continue to be endangered, as Etim (2008) reveals in *The Infantist Manifesto*. It is this endangerment which propels the proposition of infantism as an alternative lens for examining life and literature (p. 6).

Etim (2008) conceived infantism as a theory which will be to the child “what feminism is to the woman” (p. 21), in reaction to the perceived neglect of children, childhood and children's issues within literary discourse. Infantism, therefore, formalizes a conceptual frame work anchored on a more child-centered approach to the study of literature (p. 4). As such, infantism disputes the bland essentialization of childhood as a period of innocence in order to achieve other thematic goals, and strongly opposes the tendency for perfunctory didacticism often expressed by writers of children's literature; rather, it makes the case for the recentring of childhood as a veritable site of literary discourse, with children as legitimate participants in literary works. Etim (2008) explains this thus: “What infantism aims at is to elevate children and children's issues into the mainstream of literature generally ... not having to wait till when a writer has got the time to scribble something for and about children, or he is willing to shorten his successful 'adult' text into what the child should read” (p. 17). An infantist reading of texts thus positions the child as both the subject of literary interaction and the pivot of critical enquiry. Indeed, if children are an indispensable part of the human race, their opinion and perspective are crucial to the construction of conversations on human reality. Consequently, any account of the human story is incomplete if it does not accommodate children's voices. Accordingly, Soyinka (2003) submits that

any approach to reality in which children are only seen, but not heard, is “debatable” (p. 2).

Bakhtin (1981) makes a strong case for plurality of voices in discourse, providing a basis for dialogizing adult monoglossia in favour of children's voices. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) outlines the concept of dialogism, with which he explains the polyphonic nature of the novel. But beyond the novel, dialogism interrogates the interaction of voices in the rendition of the human story. Accordingly, Bakhtin (1981) lambastes “linguistic unity” in favour of “speech diversity” in the novel (p. 321). Emenyi (2005) explains this further: “Bakhtin's theory thrives on the interaction of voices in social context” (p. 24). Childs and Fowler (2006) corroborate this position when they assert that “the polemical thrust of Bakhtin's theory lies in his pervasive suggestion that our hallowed autonomous individuality is an illusion” (p. 52). Duarte (2016) agrees with the foregoing, hence his assertion that Bakhtin's dialogism is centered on “double-voiced discourse,” where “another perspective, another intention, another set of values” is infused in a predominant discourse, thereby forcing the latter into dialogue (p. 9). This is in tandem with Bakhtin (1981), who defined dialogism itself as “the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia” (p. 426), heteroglossia being, as Duarte (2016) proffers, “the multiplicity of socio-ideological discourses making up the life of language in society” (p. 10). Bakhtin's belief is that in constructing discourse, every constituency in the human family should be allowed to speak, and each voice must be accorded due relevance.

Feminist scholars like Bauer (1988) and Hermann (1989) first pointed out the repressive male univocality which muffled the female voice, leading to the formulation of feminist dialogics as an alternate mode of discursive engagement. According to Emenyi (2005), this repression inadvertently produced “the tendency in female writers and critics to subvert the male voice as absolute” (p. 27), in an attempt to arrive at what Eigler (1995) calls “a parody of patriarchal power structures” (p. 193). The implication of feminist dialogics is that the woman is now also speaking, by and large. However, the child is yet to be availed the opportunity to speak. Considering that

the dialogic silence of children produces an incomplete approach to human reality, one must, as Soyinka advises, consider such a reality debatable.

But besides dismissing this reality as debatable, it must be responded to. For only through response can one begin to effect change. Given that most genres of literature associated with children, as Etim (2008) further argues, seem to merely “create a separate department” where children are “dumped to struggle through their growth to adulthood” (p. 20), it is seminal to begin to respond to the depiction of children in mainstream writing, in order to reach a crescendo of utterances where children's voices are equitably represented. It is against this background that this paper subjects Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* to a dialogic assessment. Subsequent paragraphs will reveal that, though primarily centered on children, Adichie's *Americanah* has been gerrymandered in favour of women by authorial power, demonstrating the unwitting proclivity to edge out children's voices from literary discourse.

To make a more formidable claim, this paper deploys the novel concept of “dialogic junctions.” The paper identifies these junctions at strategic points in the novel and reveals the speakers at these junctions to be children. Emenyi (2005) reveals that every work of art is an utterance (p. 18). If this is true, then *Americanah* is a very bulky utterance, because it comprises several chapters which individually demonstratesome level of coherence. These individual chapters are themselves utterances, such that the coalescence of these utterances becomes the overall utterance which the entire novel makes. At every point where there is an utterance, two or more voices are locked in conflict to produce the desired discourse, because, as Bakhtinian dialogics reveals, voices are always striving for superiority. These speaking points are herein termed “dialogic junctions”—junctions at which different voices hold dialogue. This paper's first task is therefore to unmask the speaking children at these dialogic junctions.

1. The Speaking Children of Adichie's *Americanah*

Franklin (2016) notes that “more than race, *Americanah* is about all the ways people form

their identities,” revealing that the novel is mainly about race and identity. Race is first introduced is on p. 14. Ifemelu recounts an experience she blogs about; on a bus, a man asks her: “Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country . . . even the black families don't want them” (Adichie, pp. 14-15).

Children begin the story of race. Symbolically, the post Ifemelu generates from this conversation, titled “Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think”, receives the most views (Adichie, p. 15). The voices in dialogue at this junction are those of the white accommodationist and the black other encased in the metaphor of the unadopted black child. This dialogic junction shows that some members of the white establishment are sympathetic to the black struggle, to the point that their sympathy becomes surprising, as the title of the blog post suggests.

This dialogic junction foreshadows later instances of white support, as demonstrated through the character of Curtis and Blaine. Ifemelu's encounter also raises a relevant question: Is it possible that discourse on race could find more fertile ground if pursued, not from the perspective of the economic subjugation of the black man or the sexist occlusion of the black woman, but the ill-treatment of the black child?

The next dialogic junction *Americanah* projects is the arrival of The General. The General is potent for two reasons: first, he leaves Auntie Uju with a son (Dike) who is central to many issues; second, he concretizes the looming image of the military dictators of Ifemelu's day. The General storms in and out of the plot of the novel: According to Ifemelu, all was going on fairly well “until The General came into their lives” (Adichie, p. 59). Because the narration proceeds from Ifemelu's perspective at this point, the only information on The General comes from scraps of rumour. Only on p. 97 does Ifemelu first meet him, and the first thing Ifemelu notices about him are his “yellowed eyes” which suggest “a malnourished childhood” (Adichie, p. 97).

By revealing that The General suffers a childhood of malnourishment, the novel creates a psychological canvas which accentuates the corruption of the military. It is this

corruption which plunges the nation into the poverty that later forces Ifemelu to America and Obinze to Britain, where they each encounter racism. At this dialogic junction, the childhood of The General proclaims the real cause of the economic crises which force people into the immigrant life where they encounter racism. The novel announces that racism for the contemporary African begins with a childhood of malnourishment. This explains the greener-pastures mentality which has caused mass emigration to Europe and America over the years, and forebodes Ifemelu's family's struggle and near disintegration after her father loses his job. The General disappears from the novel almost immediately he appears. He dies in a plane crash purportedly orchestrated by the Head of State to keep opponents in line, leaving one-year old Dike fatherless (Adichie, pp. 105-106). Aunt Uju and Dike leave for America after The General's death.

When Ifemelu arrives America, she faces different forms of racism. However, more of the incidents of racism are noticeable in the varying social circumstances faced by Dike. Although occasionally provocative, Ifemelu's life is a linear progression that is steady and enjoyable. Neither her freshman experience with Cristina Tomas, her animated classes, nor her times at African Students Association meetings compel emotions as pointedly as Dike's experiences, which are merely glossed over. None of Ifemelu's experiences stings like when Dike is accused of being aggressive, or when he is falsely accused of hacking the school network, because he is black. Certainly, none of Ifemelu's experiences demonstrates the grip of racism like Dike's suicide attempt.

Dike's suicide attempt is particularly significant because it embodies a dialogic shift. With it, the novel indicates a move of beleaguerment from outside in, from lynching to suicide, which demonstrates a switch from externality to internality. This dialogic shift reveals the internal fragmentation of American blacks, as adumbrated by DuBois (1903) through the notion of double consciousness: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness ... [this] two-ness, an American, a negro ... two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body" (p. 9). Double consciousness is

definitive of the black racial experience in America, and it is foregrounded by the fact that Dike braves various forms of racist persecution from different quarters with gallantry, only to make an attempt on his own life. Racism reaches a climax with Dike's suicide attempt. Its gravity owes partly to its suddenness. Due to Adichie's chosen narrative technique, Dike's suicide attempt catches the reader off guard. Even Ifemelu is stunned, as the novel reveals: "she [Ifemelu] stood on the platform for a long time, and wondered what she had been doing when Dike was swallowing a bottle of pills" (Adichie, p. 417).

Another dialogic junction in the novel is Ifemelu's blog. The blog is a symbol of honesty in racial discourse. It is a place where people can loosen up. The post on speaking out—"Open Thread: For all Zipped-Up Negroes"—clearly demonstrates this (Adichie, p. 352). It is more or less a voice market, where black people can buy and sell their personal experiences on being black. The name of the blog is *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* (Adichie, p. 14), which Ifemelu later modifies to *Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America* (Adichie, p. 341). The name is really *Raceteenth*—a linguistic derivative of "race" and "teen." Thus, the blog is subconsciously about race and teenage[rs]—race and children. It is therefore not surprising that teenagers most cherish it. Blaine reveals that they are even writing college essays on it (Adichie, p. 358).

Another major dialogic junction in *Americanah* is Barack Obama. Obama is the only character featured who is a mixture of almost all the races in a way that is pro-black. Blaine states that "[Obama] is a different kind of black" (Adichie, p. 407) because he has a white mother and was raised by white grandparents, and also has Kenya and Hawaii in his story, in a way that makes him "somehow a bit like everyone" (Adichie, p. 407). Obama represents a breath of fresh air for racial discourse. As a black running for President of the U.S., he is a rallying cry for blacks. Even Ifemelu sees eye to eye with Blaine on the subject of Obama. And the Obama in the

novel is a metaphorical child, because he enters into the narrative after Ifemelu reads his *Dreams from My Father* (Adichie, p. 403). Only the title of the book is featured in the novel, and the title points at its writer's childhood by referencing Obama's memories of his father. These memories sway Ifemelu over to Obama's side, just as they sway Blaine from supporting Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Presidential elections. The voice of Obama's childhood towers high in the racial discourse in the novel; it sounds a clarion for people to unite against racism.

But even outside his book, Obama is constantly cast in the mold of a child. Grace remarks: "I can't believe they've talked him into this. The guy has potential, but he needs to grow first" (Adichie, p. 376). Though metaphorical, the idea of needing to grow first points at childhood. Again, when Obama reacts to a video in which his pastor says mundane things about race, it is his childhood that is imprecated: "She imagined him, the boy who knew his grandmother was afraid of black people, now a man telling that story to the world to redeem himself" (Adichie, p. 408). In Obama, the voices of the white and the black are fused in a counter statement to racism, and it is in the subtlety of his childhood that the rallying cry is sounded.

The second issue raised by Franklin (2016) is identity. A closer look at the novel reveals that Dike holds the theme of identity in place. Upon her arrival in America, Ifemelu has to assume another person's identity, so she can work with the person's social security number (Adichie, p. 143). Obinze has the same experience in Britain (Adichie, p. 289). However, Ifemelu's immigration struggles cannot be categorized as identity crisis, considering that her identity is not under threat, having grown up in Nigeria where she never had to worry about who she is. It is clearly stated that "she had grown up not doing, but being" (Adichie, p. 241). Ifemelu knows she is Nigerian/Igbo, and the knowledge is firm enough to joust her into doing away with the American accent she has been faking (Adichie, p. 203). But the opposite is the case for Dike.

Dike exemplifies the mind balkanized by double consciousness. His father dies when he is one, forcing his mother to escape to America with him. His mother names him Dike, after her own

father, and gives him her own surname, disconnecting him from his roots and leaving him internally fragmented (Adichie, p. 104). When he asks about his name, Auntie Uju concocts a story about being a second wife and giving him her surname to protect him, rather than tell him the truth—a move Ifemelu repeatedly kicks against. This lie leads Dike to believe he was rejected by his father, as Auntie Uju herself tells Ifemelu: "This time he didn't ask why he has my name, he asked if he has my name because his father did not love him" (Adichie, p. 200). Dike's struggle to find an identity manifests much later when he visits Ifemelu in Nigeria. He asks her what his father was like and even tries to reconnect with his roots by asking to be taken to the house his father rented for his mother on Dolphin Estate (Adichie, pp. 480-481). Although he perfectly understands Igbo, he wishes he could speak it as well—a pointer to his desire to reconnect with his roots (Adichie, p. 480). This parodies Auntie Uju's position that speaking Igbo to him will confuse him (Adichie, p. 131).

After Dike's suicide attempt, Ifemelu moves over to Auntie Uju's house in order to be closer to him. During one of her conversations with Auntie Uju, she asks her: "Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said 'we black folk' and you told him 'you are not black'? You shouldn't have done that. You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was" (Adichie, p. 432). Dike desires to find an identity, hence the statement, "we black folk." His inability to construct an identity contributes to his suicide attempt. Dike is indeed black, at least in the American racial context. Ifemelu announces this in a post entitled "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby," wherein she declares: "When you make the choice to come to America, you become black" (Adichie, p. 255). If any character demonstrates the struggle with—and for—identity, it is Dike. If there is any voice crying out on the subject of identity, it is Dike's. The theme of identity finds expression in the character of Dike, making him the most vociferous speaker at the dialogic junctions on identity.

If Adichie's *Americanah* is about race, then it is about the children characters described above, of whom Dike is chief. If the novel is about

identity, then it is also about Dike. Nonetheless, due to the author's feminist inclinations, the novel is deliberately structured to exclude the voice of the child, which unwittingly skews its approach to the issues it engages.

2. Narrative Structure, Dialogic Gerrymandering and Incongruent Realities

Americanah is written with a dialogic structure that excludes children's voices. The novel is partitioned into seven irregularly-chaptered parts, and the events are recounted from the perspectives of Ifemelu and Obinze—a woman and a man—deploying the limited omniscient narrative style. Of the novel's 539 pages, 67—between pages 260 and 327 (Part Four)—are recounted from the perspective of the man. The rest are written from the perspective of the woman. None is written from the perspective of the child. The dialogic structure of the novel affords the man and woman speaking spaces, but the child is driven into silence. If the novel were written solely from the perspective of the woman, its feministic bent would be elucidated. But on the contrary, the male and female voices converge to give their opinion on the subjects of immigration, race and identity, but the infant voice is left out.

But more poignantly, the infant voice is gerrymandered to give the female voice more dialogic control over the novel. This gerrymandering is orchestrated by a skillful fusion of the female and infant voices, as first seen in the movie playing on TV when Ifemelu goes to make her hair at Mariama African Hair Braiding (Adichie, p. 19). The novel recounts that “a small TV mounted on a corner of the wall, the volume a little too loud, was showing a Nigerian film: a man beating his wife” (Adichie, p. 20). On the same TV a few moments later, “a father was beating two children” (21). A man beating a woman and a man beating two children on the same TV culls the unification of women and children under the umbrella of patriarchal domination. Adichie therefore commences a dialogic fusion of the female and infant voices by alloying the experiences of women and children, thereby giving the woman the authority to utter the child's reality. From the TV scene onwards, Adichie subsumes Dike's voice in Ifemelu's.

As has been seen, Dike holds the thematic fabrics of the novel in place. He is indispensable to the story. Hence Ifemelu's preoccupation with talking to him. Before she writes the cheque for her house rent, she calls and asks to talk to Dike (Adichie, p. 180). She also decides to stop faking an American accent on the weekend of Dike's birthday (Adichie, p. 203). Ifemelu is deeply infatuated with Dike, as the novel reports: “The highlight of her days was talking to Dike” (Adichie, p. 155). However, whereas the novel tries to explain this infatuation as mere kinship feelings—the novel has it that “she felt, with him, a kinship close to friendship” (Adichie, p. 133)—a close examination of the content of her calls reveals that talking to Dike is a dialogic tactic to coop Dike's voice into hers. For one, it is when Ifemelu calls Aunty Uju to talk to Dike that his identity crisis is first raised (Adichie, p. 200). Even Dike's suicide attempt is communicated on phone (Adichie, p. 416). This way, issues that should have been explored from Dike's independent perspective are summarized in Ifemelu's phone calls. Rather than give him a voice like Obinze and Ifemelu, Dike is tethered to Ifemelu with a telephone cord, making it possible for him to be close enough to add depth to the novel, yet far enough not to attract attention to himself. Tying Dike to Ifemelu makes it possible to escape the spidework of creating another major character and situating that character's voice in the racial discourse explored in the text, especially a voice as resonant as Dike's, with his eventual degeneration to suicide. Of course, the novel would have then had to show what prodded Dike into attempting suicide.

Children's voices are swallowed by those of women. Perhaps, this is because of the assumption that the minds of children are not potent enough to tell their own stories—an assumption which Palmer (1972) fronts when he posits that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* is flawed by the fact that it is narrated from the perspective of a child, Njoroge, since the mind of a child cannot be expected to fathom “the complexity of national affairs” (p. 10). But Soyinka (2003) repudiates this notion when he writes that “when we say, for instance, that children should be seen, not heard, we are saying that children have not yet reached that stage of

maturity at which their existence merits an opinion, a choice, a voice,” and that “that in itself is a debatable approach to upbringing” (p. 2). Dike's voice is gerrymandered and fused with Ifemelu's. This creates a major structural flaw in the novel.

From the outset, *Americanah* promises to be a flawless novel. But towards the end, its chances are stilted because of its refusal to let in the voice of the child. Dike's suicide attempt comes so suddenly, it leaves any keen observer of the flow of his life asking questions. How does a boy whose grades are beginning to go up, who is now playing basketball, who has even taken interest in a girl (Adichie, p. 345), suddenly attempt suicide? How does a boy who finally finds a father figure who loves him to the point that it becomes visible to Ifemelu (Adichie, p. 345), suddenly attempt suicide? How does a boy, for whom racism is gradually becoming less a problem, given Obama's victory at the polls, a victory on which he is the first to comment (Adichie, p. 412), suddenly attempt suicide? Indeed, how does a boy, for whom things are supposedly getting better, suddenly attempt suicide? Although trauma is a complicated phenomenon and has no definable pattern of manifestation, the narrative laid forward by Adichie suggests that Dike is getting better as the days go by. It appears, then, that Dike attempts suicide as his mental health gets better, which is a highly improbable situation. A suicide suggests a struggle so deep that death becomes a viable alternative to life. This struggle is best explored from the perspective of the character involved, and should be handled with utmost care, not simply deployed as *deus ex machina*. As much as possible, it should be shown, not told. By only telling and not showing Dike's struggles, Adichie leaves too many threads hanging.

Emenyi, quoting Helen Haste, writes that 'feminism has produced a pluralistic perspective [to reality]' (p. 32) by introducing the female voice into discourse. But this position is highly contestable because the voices of men and women do not make an utterance multivocal, if the equal humanity of children is taken into account. At best, male and female voices make reality “bi-vocal”. At worst, they produce an adult univocal voice which results in monoglossia. Discourse

can only be truly multivocal when it has in it men's voices, women's voices and children's voices. Children's voices are absent from Adichie's *Americanah*. This makes the novel a strong adult univocal statement aching with things left unsaid.

3. Conclusion

This paper is an infantist cum dialogic critique of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. The article has argued that the structure of the novel excludes the voices of children by forcefully merging Dike's voice with Ifemelu's, rendering him silent and leading to dialogic flaws in the novel. The article submits that for any discourse to be truly multivocal, it must incorporate infant voices as well. As such, Adichie's *Americanah*, like every discourse from which children's voices are excluded, still aches with things left unsaid being only adult monoglossia.

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