

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

THE PRESENCE AND OPPOSITION OF THE RACIALLY
STEREOTYPING GAZE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S
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“There is no doubt that we are all equally human, but the course of history has made it possible for some people to question the humanity of others, which has grave consequences for all of us. And so, we need to combat and challenge and complicate stereotypes.”

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Preface

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” – James Baldwin

My views of racism have drastically changed since I lived in the United States for five months in the fall of 2015. I had four African American housemates and one Indian American housemate. I was the only white person living there. This was not something that I minded because it gave me an opportunity to learn about different experiences unlike my own. What I was not prepared for, however, was that I, too, a white woman, could feel the effects of racism. By that I do not mean to say that my housemates discriminated against me because of my skin color. What I mean to say is that I felt that there will always be a difference, and thereby distance, between us, and that it was not me, or them, who has created that difference and distance. It was created long before we were born by white people, and somehow now, we are left with the consequences of their actions.

This feeling is difficult to describe because it is just a feeling; it is intangible, not concrete. It is the feeling of always knowing that I will be at the better end because of my skin color. I do not have to worry about being pulled over because I am white, or being followed in a store because the staff is afraid I might steal something. I do not have to worry about getting a job, or a good education. I can joke about carrying a bomb, and get away with it a lot easier than my housemates can because I am white. It was only until I lived with them, that I realized that racism affects me too. It enrages me because my housemates and I have become good friends, and we have had honest conversations about racism for which I will always be thankful because they have opened up my mind in more ways than any academic book can, but at the same time, racism stands between us. I feel a gap, and I struggle to get to the other side, to the side my housemates are on because ultimately, I have not been affected by racism as greatly as they have, and that construction will continue to be there in the near future. I

may be an anti-racist person,¹ but that does not mean racism cannot stand in my way. This thesis functions as a way to undermine racism. This thesis will try to investigate how literature can reveal the structures of racism. Ultimately, literature is one of the best ways to make people empathize with people unlike themselves because it gives insight into different experiences. I hope this thesis will give insight into the effects of racism, reproduced by white people, on non-whites.² It is my hope that there will be more awareness around this subject, especially among white people. Racism affects white people too. White people lose some of their humanity, empathy, and emotional comfort if they do not start to face and undermine racism. This is a step towards taking back my humanity and undermining racism.

¹ Yet, Western society has instilled racist thoughts in me, which I have to deal and struggle with. However, every time a racist thought comes to mind, I tell myself that the thought is not true, and that it is based on stereotypes. Thus, when I call myself anti-racist, I do not mean to say that I do not have racist thoughts, because I do, but I always try to negate those thoughts, and that is what I mean by being anti-racist.

² There is debate whether to use the term “people of color” or “non-whites”. Jensen argues that he wants to “frame the issue as white and non-white to highlight the depravity of white supremacy and identify it as the target [...] [the term] ‘white/non-white’ more clearly marks the political nature of the struggle, whereas ‘people of color’ for many tends to shift the focus from white supremacy to the varied cultures of those non-white people” (3). This is why I use the term non-white as well.

Introduction

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.” – Zola Neale Hurston

Much literary theory has been built around a concept called “the gaze”. This gaze serves different people at different times. As Sturken and Cartwright note, “the gaze, whether institutional or individual, helps to establish relationships of power” (111). The gaze is, thus, a possible component when establishing effective power relations. For example, the gaze is a powerful component of racism. Something that makes this gaze so powerful, and racism as well for that matter, is that it seems to be intangible, or invisible for everyone who does not fall under it. In other words, it can seem intangible or invisible to white people. This is not per se a strange occurrence because fact is that white people, generally speaking, do not experience racism.³ This may make it hard for them to see that racism is a structural and institutional construct.

When analyzing racism, usually critics refer to the term “white gaze” (Griffin 197), or just simply the gaze, when speaking of a gaze used by white people to subject non-whites to.⁴ This thesis will not use the term “white gaze” because it does not give the right implications of its effects. Rather the term racially stereotyping gaze will be used because it underlines the notion that racism and stereotypes play a big role when white people are looking at non-whites from certain assumptions and biases. Especially stereotypes play a big part in this gaze, because it is from these stereotypes that people look, and create expectations (Dyer 14).

Americanah, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, was published in 2013. It tells the story of a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, moving from Nigeria to America, and experiencing racism for

³ There are, of course, instances in which white people can be discriminated against. However, the difference is that this is not institutional, and that it does not happen consistently and structurally.

⁴ Another gaze that opposes this white gaze is the oppositional gaze as explained by bell hooks in *Black looks: Race and Representations*.

the first time.⁵ The African experience of racism is different than that of African Americans' (Chude-Sokei 55). Since Ifemelu never experienced racism before moving to America, racism is made much more visible to the reader. This is why *Americanah* is the perfect novel in which to make the existence of racism visible, and more importantly, that of the racially stereotyping gaze.

In chapter one, literary theory will be used to explain the racially stereotyping gaze. In chapters two and three, the novel will be analyzed thoroughly in search of the racially stereotyping gaze, and of the resistance of this gaze.

⁵ The novel is not *only* about Ifemelu. The story is also partly told from her ex-boyfriend's, Obinze, perspective as well, but because I am limited to a certain amount of words, I cannot include his point of view, and will only look at Ifemelu's experience of racism in the United States.

Chapter 1

From Stereotypes to the Gaze

“And it’s probably not his fault because laziness is a trait in blacks. It really is, I believe that. It’s not anything they can control.” – Donald Trump

Stereotypes and Representations

Stereotypes and representations are the foundation on which racism in the United States is justified. By producing the Other, white society has managed to attain a superior position in which it assumes it can speak for, and create stereotypes of the Other. These stereotypes and representations are deemed normal. According to Stuart Hall, “stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (247). Stereotyping, therefore, is an important factor in creating racial difference. It divides the normal and the abnormal. Everything that does not fit the norm will be excluded; that which does not belong is Other. The norm is not concrete or set in stone. Rather, it is fluid. People produce and reproduce this norm. According to Payne, norms “constitute a community’s shared understandings and intentions” (38). It is important to note, however, that since Western society is mostly ruled by white people, the norms that are produced and reproduced are *white* norms. Therefore, these norms are shared understandings and intentions among white people. As will be exemplified in chapter two and three, norms are implied in conversation and in looking at one another. It is during conversation and exchanging looks that norms are present, and that they carry importance as well as power. Stereotyping is a way to other people who fall outside white norms. In other words, stereotyping is a way to establish the boundaries of Us versus Them. Power plays a significant role in these boundaries according to Dyer: “it is not stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve” (12). Ultimately, they serve the interest of white people because it is a way to stay at the top of the racial hierarchical ladder. Stereotypes are part of keeping the racial status quo.

However, it is important to note here that white people do not actively do this in a group effort. It is a subconscious process that is instilled by subtle hints and notions that are learnt from society.⁶ Stuart Hall explains Foucault's ideas about the relationship between knowledge and power. He states that "knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of 'the truth', but has the power to *make itself true*" (33). Therefore, the knowledge that is acquired by society (i.e. in school, from the media, from conversations etc.) assumes itself to be true; and since America, and Europe as well for that matter, has white supremacist societies, this knowledge is used and justified in such a manner that it favors whiteness.

Racial difference and power are two components of stereotyping. Another component is the assumption that the stereotype expresses "a general agreement about a social group, as if that agreement arose before, and independently of the stereotype. Yet for the most part it is *from* stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups" (Dyer 14). This reinforces the idea that stereotyping functions as establishing the boundaries of Us versus Them. The stereotypes reproduce themselves. They claim to have universal truth, a truth that is shared by everyone, but, ultimately, stereotypes do not hold absolute truth, neither do representations. It is like Hall explained; it is knowledge that makes itself true. The same can be said of stereotypes: since they claim to have universal truth, they make themselves true, even though they are not.⁷ According to Perkins, "stereotypes are selections and arrangements of particular values and their relevance to specific roles" (143). Thus, stereotypes are based on specifically chosen parts of non-white people, and subsequently, exaggerated.

Stereotypes are conveyed in literature, media, language etc. through the workings of discourse. Hall explains Foucault's meaning of discourse as "a group of statements which

⁶ To prevent repetition, I will use "society" rather than "Western society". However, in this essay I do refer to Western society when I use the word "society".

⁷ Stereotypes are in part based on "true" differences according to Perkins, but "the 'real' differences are also 'false', partly because of the constitution of the categories men/women as categories with different qualities when really they cannot be so differentiated" (137). Thus, they are based on differences that cannot really be differentiated like that.

provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment [...] Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language” (291). Essentially, stereotypes are a way of showing knowledge, although this knowledge may be faulty, about non-whites. Furthermore, white people communicate with one another through these stereotypes to show their superiority, or to make people aware of the difference between being white and being non-white. Edward Said coined the term “Orientalism” which is one specific theorization of colonialist discourse. He explains for representation in a certain discourse, “the things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation” (21). In chapter two, figures of speech will be looked at and used to show how stereotypes are conveyed.

It is also through discourse that these stereotypes and representations can be deconstructed, and can be proven inadequate. A good example of how these stereotypes and representations are conveyed is America’s belief that, as Alexander argues

anyone with the proper discipline and drive, can move from a lower class to a higher class. We recognize that mobility may be difficult, but the key to our collective self-image is the assumption that mobility is always possible, so failure to move up reflects on one’s character. By extension, the failure of a race or ethnic group to move up reflects very poorly on the group as a whole (13).

Basically, when a non-white person is unable to move up, many people think it is because this person has not worked hard enough for it, or more importantly, because he or she is lazy. This is a stereotype that stems from racism, without realizing that racism is causing these stereotypes. Essentially, stereotypes are one of the devices that are used to keep the systemic structure of racism alive. In Alexander’s excerpt she vocalizes how white people fail to see that it is racism that is disabling this person to move up the social ladder. The fact that it *is*

racism, and that as a result, many non-whites are unable to move up, reflects negatively on them. People assume, perhaps without realizing, that these people cannot move up because they are uneducated. It is a misguided assumption; and the assumption is made, inadvertently, because of racism and because of stereotypes and representations, which ultimately and quite effectively, keep non-whites from acquiring, for example, a good education.

The Racially Stereotyping Gaze

These stereotypes and representations can be interpreted as white society gazing at non-whites. In a sense, white society is imposing these stereotypes and representations on them because of their supposed universal truth. Foucault describes the power of the gaze when he discusses Bentham's prison system called the Panopticon. According to him, society is in "no need for arms, physical violence, [or] material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer" (155). When looking at racism, the gaze of the Panopticon does not work the same way, simply because racism exists outside prison walls, and because racism is not necessarily self regulatory. However, society has produced a similar gaze in which the act of looking can influence the behavior of the person who is being looked at. There is much power in looking because the person who looks, the subject, has more power than the person who is looked at, the object (Sturken and Cartwright 111). Since whiteness has been deemed the norm in society, and since white people hold most of the power (i.e. they have most jobs that include being a boss, they usually decide who they hire etc.), white people determine more or less what is normal, and what is abnormal; and they do it in such a manner, that it favors their positions and views on how to live life.

White people also other non-whites, or stereotype them as a result of fear. A good example of this fear can be found in Fanon: "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" (84). At

first, it amuses Fanon because the boy says “Look, a Negro” (84) three times, but after saying the fourth time that the boy is scared, Fanon becomes aware of the implications of these statements. More importantly, he seems to become aware that being called a Negro means he is becoming part of the history of his ancestors. Like he says, “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors” (84). When the white boy says these things, Fanon is seeing himself through white eyes, and sees how he is part of an institutionalized construct, and that the word Negro implies a stereotype and a history that is part of that stereotype. Furthermore, the white boy’s statement confirms the idea that people learn from stereotypes. The statement seems to imply that this boy is afraid because he is *supposed* to be afraid, and in turn, might actually feel scared as a result of the stereotype, and the knowledge of the stereotype. Essentially, a big part of fear is the fear of losing one’s position, one’s comfortable position, but also the fear of non-whites “taking revenge” for what has been done to them (Jensen 53). This is a reason to keep reproducing stereotypes of non-whites.

Naturally, non-whites feel white society looking at them differently. For instance, when a person of color walks into a store, there is a great chance this person will be followed by security because a non-white person is, supposedly, more likely to steal (Jensen 9). This is an example of white society acting on a negative stereotype of non-whites. In addition, non-whites do not only feel these negative stereotypes and representations, they also feel white views: the way they should behave, should wear their hair or clothes because it is the norm. They have to adapt to white society if they do not want to fall outside the boundaries; what follows is the act of mimicry as explained by Bhabha:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (122)

Mimicry is a strategy conducted by non-whites in order to participate in society. It is not necessarily so that non-whites aspire to be white when they adapt to white norms. It is merely a strategy to get things done. This is something that will be shown in chapter three by main character Ifemelu.

The feeling of being looked at a certain way must have its consequences. There are two things happening at the same time: *One*, society regards stereotypes and representations as universal truths, which it in turn directs at non-whites. *Two*, society also tries to hold non-whites up to white norms. They have to act and dress the way white society does, otherwise they are not normal. These are two contrasting notions. On the one hand, society others and excludes them, but on the other hand, it wants them to act according to its white norms and values. This is one of the reasons why non-whites have to look for approval from white people when it comes to certain situations. Ultimately, “[the Negro] needs a white approval” (Fanon 36). They are being put down by whites, and at the same time have to prove they have white norms and values. Fanon explains what effects this has:

The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the Other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self. This "look, from – so to speak – the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire. (109)

Essentially, Fanon explains his aspiration to fully being French, but he wants to be black as well. Since he cannot fully feel like both at the same time, he feels not whole. He feels split from himself, which causes his double consciousness. The self has to split because it is not considered good enough by white society. It then has to produce another self, a supposed better version, a whiter version. When society forces one to produce a new, whiter identity,

naturally, behavior changes as well. Ultimately, it is this racially stereotyping gaze that is forcing this change of identity, and of behavior. Sometimes the gaze is called the white gaze, like, for example, Griffin does. She explains how the white gaze unselfconsciously thinks it sees reality (197). However, to call the gaze a white gaze is not enough. The racially stereotyping gaze implies more than just unconsciously “recording reality” (Griffin 197). It implies that it works from assumptions, stereotypes, and that it rests on white norms, and that it, subsequently, directs its force onto non-whites through discourse, subjecting them to its powerful gaze; but make no mistake, it is not only white society that is looking. Non-whites can look back as well. bell hooks calls it the oppositional gaze: “Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional” (116). In addition to being oppositional, this gaze is also critical of white domination, and its representations of non-white people. Essentially, this gaze regains agency by opposing the racially stereotyping gaze. It deconstructs white views, and stereotypes and representations of non-whites. It is one of the ways to undermine and oppose the gaze.

Chapter 2

The Presence of the Racially Stereotyping Gaze in *Americanah*

“Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined.” – Toni Morrison

Many books have been written about the subtleties of racism in the United States.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of them. Adichie has managed to make these subtleties visible. Her readers become very much aware of racism. Throughout the novel, white characters look with the racially stereotyping gaze at main character Ifemelu.

This gaze is based on preconceived notions, assumptions, and stereotypes. This chapter will explore the presence of the racially stereotyping gaze.

According to Griffin, “the white gaze is unself-conscious, unaware of itself looking; it believes that it simply, ‘innocently’ records reality, unmediated by preexisting interpretive categories” (197). It is important to keep this in mind when analyzing how white people gaze at non-whites because white people can be unaware that they are doing so.⁸ Furthermore, because whiteness is not seen as a race, and thus, can be regarded as the norm, white people might think that what they believe or see is reality.

Ifemelu faces many problems she had not expected when moving from Nigeria to America. One of the most profound problems she encounters is that she becomes black: “when you move to America, you become black” (Adichie 220). Because of her blackness, people assume Ifemelu is African American. After all, as Auntie Uju says, “all of us look alike to white people” (120). However, Ifemelu’s experience of racism is rather different than that of African Americans. Racism is a new concept for her. It does not exist the same way in Nigeria like it does in America. Moreover, the term “becoming black” implies more than just becoming a color; it implies becoming part of the lowest class of America. Ultimately, it is always better to be poor and white than to be black (Alexander 196). According to Alexander,

⁸ Whereby the act of looking is not problematic, but the assumptions with which one looks *is* problematic.

a racial caste system exists in America. She uses the term racial caste to “denote a stigmatized group locked into an inferior position by law and custom” (12). This caste system was formed during the slavery era, but still exists nowadays, even if it has been dressed differently.

Stereotypes are attached to this caste system since people learn from stereotypes (Dyer 14), and because these negative stereotypes are, amongst others, a cause of why non-whites are in a racial caste. As a result, people unconsciously put non-whites in this caste. This happens to Ifemelu as well when she moves to America. People see she is black, and automatically, yet unconsciously, put her in a racial caste, and start treating her differently as well. When Ifemelu moves to America, she becomes part of this racial caste as a result of her blackness.

Ifemelu’s roommates are the first Americans she lives with. In turn, Ifemelu is the first African her roommates live with. As a result, Ifemelu encounters situations in which her roommates make assumptions based on the fact that she is African. For instance, when Ifemelu tells Elena that she does not like dogs, Elena asks: “Is that like a cultural thing?” (128). Elena implicitly presents Nigerians as non-dog lovers because of her misguided assumptions and lack of knowledge about Nigerian culture. As mentioned by Said, it is important to look at, in this case, figure of speech, and not the correctness of the representation (21). The word “like” is very cleverly put by Adichie because it conveys the ignorance of Elena’s question, thereby making the reader aware of this as well. Content wise, the question demonstrates that Elena does not know much about Africa, Nigeria, or its culture. She just assumes that not loving dogs must be something cultural. The crux is that when a white person does not like dogs, it is because he or she simply personally does not like dogs, but when an African, and in this case Ifemelu, does not like dogs, the thought that this might be for cultural reasons comes to mind. The white norm gets reinforced, thereby racializing everyone, in this case Ifemelu, who does not conform to it. By assuming not liking dogs is cultural, it seems that Elena has the wrong representation of people from Nigeria, or

more generally, Africa.⁹ This is an example of how misguided representations or stereotypes are conveyed through discourse as explained in chapter one.

According to Adichie, this is partly due to the media. She discusses this in her article called “African Authenticity and the Biafran Experience”:

If I were not African, and if all I knew of Africa came from the U.S. media, I would think that all Africans were incomprehensible people perpetually fighting wars that make no sense, drinking muddy water from rivers, almost all dying of AIDS and incredibly poor. This kind of portrayal makes it difficult for outsiders to see an African as fully human, prompting the Westerner to ask, even if secretly, “Is something innately *wrong* with these people?” (45)

Ifemelu feels this implied question when her roommates look at her a certain way: “Jackie and Allison had earlier looked at her when she said she had never gone bowling, as though wondering how she could have turned out a normal human being” (Adichie 128). These roommates seem to be holding Ifemelu up to their own standards, but at the same time they have these views, assumptions and stereotypes about Africans that are reinforced because Ifemelu has never gone bowling before. In this particular instance, it becomes clear that they cannot fathom how Ifemelu has never gone bowling, but at the same time, they expect everyone, including Ifemelu, to have gone bowling at least once in her or his lifetime. The same can be said of Ifemelu not liking the dog. Elena cannot imagine someone not liking dogs, but at the same time expects this to be cultural because Ifemelu is from Africa. Though perhaps not intentionally, Ifemelu’s roommates look at her with a racially stereotyping gaze.

Throughout the novel, there are multiple instances in which Ifemelu is subjected to the racially stereotyping gaze. For instance, when she is babysitting the children of a wealthy

⁹ I make this generalization because most white people from Western countries regard Africa as a whole, as a sameness. They know that it consists of different countries, but generally do not know anything about the culture of a specific country. They may know that, in this case, Ifemelu is Nigerian, but what they remember most is that she is African, and the stereotypes that she deals with are those about Africa, not those of Nigeria.

family, a carpet cleaner comes to the house. As she opens the door “he stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility” (166). The man did not expect a non-white woman to be the owner of a prestigious house. His hostility towards her seems to be of envious nature. According to America’s racial caste system, he should be in a higher caste than her. As soon as she reveals that she is the babysitter, his hostility disappears, and makes room for satisfaction: “His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be” (166). Adichie uses irony in this last sentence. The reader becomes painfully aware that there is a structure playing at hand, and that this structure undermines Ifemelu, or more generally, a non-white woman; and it happens *because* she is not white. The reason the hostility of the white man disappears is because he discovers that Ifemelu is not a house owner, but “the help”, which ultimately means that he is above her, and that she is in a lower caste than him. It is satisfying for him knowing that she is less than him, thereby making him superior, because it keeps white supremacy intact (Jensen 68). His assumptions about in what kind of houses non-white people live are reinforced when he learns that Ifemelu is not the house owner, and these assumptions are based on, amongst others, looks: “As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked” (166). It is because of her looks that he considers her not to be a house owner. In other words, as explained in chapter one, this is an instance in which the norm presents itself, reproduced by the white man. It is not necessarily reproduced by language, but rather by the way his facial expressions change.

It is hard for Ifemelu to find a job. When she has an interview coming up, her counselor tells her to “lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job” (202). In other words, Ifemelu has to aspire to white beauty because an Afro would deviate from that kind of beauty, and would keep her from getting the job. As Robateau states in her article about *Americanah*, “race entraps,

beguiles and bewilders [Ifemelu] because it's an imaginary construct with actual consequences. She discovers she'll be more employable, for example, when she chemically relaxes her hair to get that white-girl 'swish'" (par. 6). Ifemelu feels white norms being imposed on her. On the one hand, she gets othered because of her blackness, but on the other hand, people expect her to aspire to white norms. When Ifemelu decides to stop relaxing her hair, her co-workers ask her questions about her Afro: "Does it mean anything? Like, something political?" (Adichie 211). Again, Adichie uses the word "like" to draw attention to the ignorance of the question. Furthermore, since an Afro is not considered to be part of the norm, as this question makes the norm visible again, having an Afro *must* mean something else. By implying that her hair represents something political, it is almost as if her co-workers think Ifemelu purposefully chose *not* to be like them. They assume she is trying to make a point when she really may just not want to relax her hair anymore. Her co-workers asking whether her Afro means something political demonstrates the presence of the racially stereotyping gaze.

When Ifemelu meets her first employer, Kimberly, she says about Ifemelu's name: "I love multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures" (146). By saying this, Kimberly implies, though perhaps unconsciously, that Ifemelu's name and culture diverges from the norm, thereby reinforcing Kimberly's whiteness, a whiteness that is not regarded as a race, and as a consequence, is seen as the norm. This makes it possible for Kimberly to view Ifemelu's name as "multicultural with a wonderful meaning, from wonderful rich cultures" (146). Again, it is important to look at figures of speech here, rather than the correctness of this representation (Said 21). Adichie uses irony by using the word "wonderful" and "rich". It shows the reader that there is a lack of meaning because "wonderful meanings" could mean anything, and "rich cultures" is an empty phrase as well. The reader knows that Kimberly has revealed her lack of knowledge

about Africa, and specifically Nigeria, when she makes this statement. Her lack of knowledge causes her to use words like “wonderful” and “rich”. She will be more likely to use these positive words because she is speaking to a non-white woman, and she wants to show Ifemelu that she *does* know something about Africa, even though she probably does not. Ultimately, she wants to prove that she can engage in conversation with an African person, which causes her to speak the way she does, even though she does not realize she has misguided representations of people from Africa, and thereby also of Nigeria. To Ifemelu she probably comes across as ignorant, since Ifemelu narrates, “Kimberly was smiling the kindly smile of people who thought ‘culture’ the unfamiliar colourful reserve of colourful people, a word that always had to be qualified with ‘rich’. She would not think Norway had a ‘rich culture’” (146). Adichie demonstrates here that Ifemelu is aware that Western culture is normalized, and therefore becomes invisible. Ifemelu’s culture is “rich” because it is visible, different, other. Through this technique Adichie also wants the reader to reflect on visibility and invisibility of certain cultural objects, or at least to reflect on why some cultures are deemed “rich” and others, usually white cultures, not.

Being in a relationship with a white man subjects Ifemelu to the racially stereotyping gaze as well. When Ifemelu and Curt, her boyfriend, attend a party, he introduces her as his girlfriend. Some women “looked at her with surprise, a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not, and in their expressions was the question ‘Why her?’” (292). At first, it amuses Ifemelu to see these women look at her like that. However, after a while, it becomes tiring: “At that party, as Curt held on to her hand, kissed her often, introduced her to everyone, her amusement curdled into exhaustion. The looks had begun to pierce her skin. She was tired even of Curt’s protection, tired of needing protection” (293). What Adichie does here, is make her readers empathize with Ifemelu. The repetition of the structure of the sentences (i.e. “tired of ... protection”) adds to this because her readers now know she does

not only get tired of it, she gets tired of *needing* it. It is an effective way of making the reader aware of what the racially stereotyping gaze can do to a non-white person. When looking at the content of this citation, it becomes clear that since Ifemelu is not who people expected Curt to be with, she gets looked at differently. It is important to note that these people may not realize that they are looking, and that Ifemelu can read their expressions. According to Griffin, “[the white gaze] comprises that combination of ignorance and power that makes whiteness so dangerous to all that falls under its gaze” (206). The gaze is something of which most people are unaware, and this is what makes it so powerful and dangerous at the same time. It could lead to internalization amongst non-white people, and if that process is not undermined, it could lead to normalization. Non-whites, even though many already have this, can form a double consciousness. They have to form this in order to be black and American at the same time (Gilroy 2556). The racially stereotyping gaze, thus, produces this double consciousness. On the one hand it others, and stereotypes non-whites, but on the other hand, it expects black people to aspire to white norms.

Although Curt loves Ifemelu, he too, subjects her to the racially stereotyping gaze. For instance, when Ifemelu finds out that there is a website for women with coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair, Curt thinks it is great because “it’s like this *movement* of black women” (212). Again, Adichie uses irony and makes readers aware of this irony by italicizing the word “movement”. What Adichie wants to get across to her readers is that Curt seems to miss the fact that it is not a movement, but rather an informative website about different ways to take care of hair for black women. It is not a political website. Curt’s figure of speech, however, turns it into something more than that, thereby exposing Ifemelu to the racially stereotyping gaze. In addition, when Curt finds out Ifemelu has cheated on him, he breaks up with her and says: “How could you do this to me? I was so good to you” (289). Moreover, he asks whether the man was white (288). This proves that he does not want to share her with another white

man. He wants to be the only white man for her. Even though Ifemelu forgave Curt when he cheated on her, Curt is not as gracious because he “was so good to her” (289) and does not think he deserves to be treated like that after all he has done for her. With that comment, he implies that she should be grateful that he wanted to be with her even though she is black and belongs to a racial caste. In other words, Curt “saved” Ifemelu and she should be thankful for it. Curt saving Ifemelu can be found in two more instances. The first being that he “made some calls” (203) to get her a job, and the second being that he stands up for her when a beauty salon refuses to do Ifemelu’s eyebrows: “You are going to fucking do my girlfriend’s eyebrows or I’ll shut down this fucking place” (292). Essentially, Curt can arrange anything for Ifemelu because he is white and she is black. In this sense he “saves” her. His idea of Ifemelu needing him in order to get certain things is based on assumptions and stereotypes as well. Therefore, Curt subjects Ifemelu to the racially stereotyping gaze.

This chapter tried to reveal the presence of the racially stereotyping gaze. The next chapter will explore the consequences of this gaze, and how Ifemelu responds to it.

Chapter 3

The Effects of the Gaze and the Oppositional Gaze

“You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people feel comfortable.” – Ta-Nehisi Coates

The racially stereotyping gaze has a big impact on Ifemelu and other characters of *Americanah*.¹⁰ Since Ifemelu experiences racism for the first time when she moves from Nigeria to America, she goes through different states of mind. At first, she is optimistic about going to college and finding a job. However, she soon notices that most people will not hire her: “I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair [...] If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional” (Adichie 119). She still rejects this notion, however, and keeps her braids.¹¹ However, Ifemelu soon realizes that in order to be taken seriously, she has to make some changes, though she makes them reluctantly. For instance, when she goes to the registration office, the woman there speaks very slowly because of Ifemelu’s Nigerian accent. When Ifemelu says she speaks English, the woman replies, “I bet you do [...] I just don’t know how well” (133). This is, again, an instance in which the norm is present and reproduced by a white person, thereby showing to Ifemelu that her Nigerian accent is not good enough, and therefore will be treated as an uneducated person. In that moment, “Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas’s before she took the forms, she shrank” (133). It is the impact of the statement and Tomas’s gaze that make Ifemelu shrink. She feels humiliated and unrecognized because “she had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate” (133). Because of the painfulness of this experience, she begins to practice the American accent, even though she thought the American accent inchoate (134). However,

¹⁰ I will not discuss how other characters are affected by the racially stereotyping gaze as the length of this essay does not allow me to do so. However, I am aware that not only Ifemelu is affected by the gaze.

¹¹ Though there comes a point when she relaxes her hair in order to get a job (Adichie 203). However, she soon stops doing this.

trying to attain an American accent is *not* a first sign of internalization of white views for Ifemelu. As Chude-Sokei argues, African immigrants do not “imagine themselves ‘white’ or necessarily see whiteness as a position of desirable privilege. Yet they are expected to assimilate into either a white American and/or a ‘black’ social world that may exhibit its own prejudices against them” (55). Thus, Ifemelu does not practice the American accent because she believes it to be better; she does it so that she can participate in society. As explained in chapter one, she is mimicking to get things done, and to be included. It is a strategic and conscious choice. It is the gaze of society that imposes its norms on her, and expects her to assimilate. Ultimately, it is the racially stereotyping gaze that causes her to change her accent.

When after several interviews, Ifemelu still has not been hired, she falls into a depression: “She was swallowed, lost in a viscous haze, shrouded in a soup of nothingness [...] She cared about nothing [...] She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, but she had no energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself” (Adichie 156). Feeling disabled by society to participate, she loses interest in almost anything. It is the racially stereotyping gaze that causes her to fall into this depression. Ultimately, her friend Ginnika manages to get her a job as a babysitter. From that moment on, Ifemelu starts to feel less depressed because she is “allowed” to participate again.

The first time Ifemelu opposes the racially stereotyping gaze is when someone compliments her on her American accent. She narrates:

Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won indeed, but her triumph was full of air. 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 [...] resolved to stop faking the American accent (175).

As Peed remarks in his review of the novel, “never has Ifemelu felt as free as the day she stops hiding her Nigerian accent under an American one, the accent that convinces telemarketers she is white” (par. 5). However, it goes further than that. She never used her American accent to be viewed as white because she never aspired to be white. She merely used the American accent to be able to participate, and be taken seriously in society. Thus, when she gets complimented on her American accent, she reflects on why that is a good thing. Essentially, she seems to have become aware of her double consciousness, and consequently, decides that she should not have to be someone she is not. Her choice to move back to her Nigerian accent is, again, a strategic one. She resists being part of the American narrative. It is her first step to opposing the racially stereotyping gaze. Adichie set up this scene very cleverly by asking a rhetorical question. It opens up a bigger space in which not only Ifemelu, but the reader as well can reflect on why it is such a good thing to sound American rather than to sound like oneself.

As the novel progresses, Ifemelu becomes more and more critical of the racially stereotyping gaze and its effects. The idea to start a blog about racism observed by a non-American black arises, and makes its way into the world under the name “Raceteenth or the Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” (205). She writes, amongst others, about politics (how Obama’s election will not mean the end of racism), white privilege, different experiences of racism between African Americans and non-American blacks, and the hierarchical structure of racism (how it is always better to be Hispanic, Native American, Asian, Jewish etc. than to be black). Ifemelu creates ironic labels, like “zipped-up Negroes” (307) or “special white friend” (361) to get her point of view across. According to Braga and Gonçalves,

the labels [Ifemelu] creates in the blog to describe her experience as a non-American black can only be taken as backlash of her being misjudged by Americans, who fail to

understand ethnic diversity and think of her as African American solely on the basis of her skin color, or at best consider her Caribbean (3).

However, these labels do not only function as backlash. Their function is to ironically make people aware of the different structures of racism and their impact. For Braga and Gonçalves to argue that they can only be taken as backlash seems short minded. These labels are not *only* meant as backlash. They, ironically, unveil structures and functions that are key to understanding racism and the racially stereotyping gaze. It is the irony of the labels that make readers aware something more is going on even if they might not know what it is that they are picking up on. Adichie, essentially, invites her readers to critically think about what invisible structures are playing at hand by creating those ironic labels.

Ifemelu's blog posts can be interpreted as an oppositional gaze. As bell hooks states, "the 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional" (116). Adichie offers critical insights into the structures of racism. Elizabeth Day remarks this as well in her review of the novel: "Adichie is particularly good at exposing the contradictory ebb and flow of America's attempt to reconcile itself with its recent past [...] She does so with a wryness and insight [...] which challenges the reader's assumptions with each carefully crafted sentence" (par. 6). For instance, Ifemelu explains in a blog post that,

racism is about the power of a group and in America it's white folks who have that power. How? Well white people don't get treated like shit in upper-class African American communities and white folks don't get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don't give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don't choose not to hire

somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don't tell white kids that they're not smart enough to be doctors (Adichie 327).

In this excerpt, Ifemelu highlights different aspects and institutions of society through which racism operates. She writes about community, finances, the justice system, job opportunity, and education. Adichie's choice to pile up all the things black people are is very effective because this piece does not make use of commas or full stops. It adds to the summation of all the things black people are denied because of racism. It is a confronting and revealing piece of writing. Essentially, the blog post is looking back at its (white) reader, making him or her aware of what the reality of racism is. At the same time, the (white) reader becomes conscious of how ridiculous some results of racism are. For example, the line "black police officers don't stop white folk for driving while white" (327) signifies the ridiculousness of stopping people because of their skin color. Adichie reverses the roles that black and white people play in these structures, and negates that black police officers would stop white people for driving while white. It gives the white reader a chance to think about what it would be like to be stopped because he or she is white. Simultaneously, stereotypes get challenged since it becomes clear that racism is the cause of black people not being able to get loans, and of them getting worse sentencing in court, having trouble finding a job etc. Essentially, the text stares back at the reader, and tries to deconstruct or challenge the racially stereotyping gaze that he or she may have.

Another argument to be made is that not only the reader subjects the novel, and thereby Ifemelu, to its gaze. The reader is subjected to the novel, and thereby, again, to Ifemelu, as well (Griffin 197). Sturken and Cartwright explain how Lacan argues that "the gaze is a process in which the object functions to make the subject look [...] Not only can objects make us look, but they can also make us understand ourselves as subjects who *want* to look and who cannot help but look" (122). The blog posts, again, function as that which

attracts the reader's gaze, thereby subjecting the reader to the text.¹² The posts provide the reader with different ideas and views about racism, ultimately, trying to deconstruct the racially stereotyping gaze. In addition, not only readers are subjected to the text. White characters in the novel are subjected to look at Ifemelu. Since she does not conform to the norms that those white characters reproduce, and since she is regarded as an Other, they, though perhaps unconsciously, look at her differently. This was evident, for example, when Curt introduced Ifemelu as his girlfriend, and the girls looked at her with surprise (Adichie 292). It is *because* she is racialized that she attracts their gazes, and by being with Curt, she undermines their expectations. This is a way of opposing the racially stereotyping gaze.

Ultimately, this chapter tried to demonstrate how Ifemelu responded to the racially stereotyping gaze, and how she undermined it. In addition, it tried to reveal how Adichie made her readers reflect on the racially stereotyping gaze. Finally, it revealed that white society is not the only one gazing at non-whites. They look back.

¹² Whereby it is important to note that the reader has to be willing to go along with the text. If the reader does not, he or she will not be subjected to the oppositional gaze.

Conclusion

“We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.” – Martin Luther King Jr.

The aim of this essay was to make the term “white gaze” more concrete by calling it the racially stereotyping gaze, and to demonstrate how the main character of *Americanah*, Ifemelu, was subjected to this gaze, and how she, ultimately, opposed it.

At the heart of the racially stereotyping gaze lie stereotypes. They are, essentially, what make this gaze so powerful, and what make it more than just white people looking. Stereotypes are reproduced, in turn, because of norm construction. Norms have the power to determine what is normal and what is abnormal. Norms are not set in stone, but fluid. They appear in conversation and in exchanging looks in cultural practices. This is not necessarily a conscious process, however. Most white people are unaware of these different structures. This makes it hard for white people to recognize what is really happening, and to act accordingly. Furthermore, it is *from* stereotypes that people learn stereotypes. It is the combination of knowledge and power that make these stereotypes supposedly true to some people, and which causes them to look with the racially stereotyping gaze at non-whites.

Throughout *Americanah* Ifemelu gets subjected to the racially stereotyping gaze almost everywhere she goes. She gets generalized and marginalized because of the way she looks and speaks. In addition, white people only know what they know from stereotypes about Africa, and act and speak to her with only that knowledge in mind. Adichie manages to demonstrate numerous times that figures of speech (e.g. the use of the word “like”) add to the ignorance and misguided expectations of the representation of African people. Even though Ifemelu seems to adapt to white norms at first by relaxing her hair and attaining an American accent, thereby mimicking those norms, she realizes, and decides eventually to go against them. She reclaims agency by doing so.

Another important fact is that the racially stereotyping gaze is not the only gaze playing at hand. Non-whites can look back as well through the oppositional gaze. Through blogs Adichie, through Ifemelu, looks back at readers, quite literally, and asks them to think critically about the effects of racism.

All in all, the racially stereotyping gaze is real. It is present; but it can be undermined in numerous ways. Adichie has proven that.

Further research

Even though this thesis tried to be as exhaustive as possible, much research has yet to be done on the topic of the racially stereotyping gaze, and also on *Americanah*. Other characters in the novel have not been looked at in this thesis, although, they had their own important functions and experiences in the novel. In addition, due to the word limit of this thesis, gender and interseccionality have not been taken into account either. The racially stereotyping gaze does not play at hand alone, the male gaze does so as well, and they do so at the same time. It would be valuable to investigate how these two gazes work at the same time.

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