

Prejudice in americanah and the scarlet letter



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Prejudice or alienation is almost always a theme, whether a prominent one or a minor one, within a work of literature. Art is about the human condition, and the human condition only significant because of struggle; a blessed life does not make a story. The novels *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne both explore the theme of prejudice. *Americanah* does so with a direct approach, using the protagonist's blog to specifically explore the prejudice of racism in America. *The Scarlet Letter* does so subtly, by giving Hester, the oppressed character, a humble and accepting nature, which arouses the sympathy of the audience. However, while both novels utilize different intensities when addressing prejudice, they share some of the same methods of arguing against prejudice. In the novels *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, both authors use irony and character development to oppose the barriers of prejudice: racism in *Americanah* and intolerance of fornication in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Both novels use irony to expose the faulty logic behind the types of prejudice. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's blog discusses the wariness of immigrant Africans in being associated with the general African-American community: "admit it - you say 'I'm not black' only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder. And you want none of that" (Adichie 273). The irony is that individuals with darker skin see the way others with the same appearance are treated, and so sub-consciously reject the identity to avoid being treated with prejudice. The "black" identity is immediately recognized as one to be avoided, as society has rejected it. The existence of this repulsion with being associated based on skin color is overwhelming

proof of the ridiculous discrimination based off of appearance. Adichie intentionally shows this idea to enlighten the readers of the realness of racism in America.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, there is irony in the treatment of Hester, who is a publically announced fornicator in a Puritan community. Hester treats all those around her with kindness, and rejects any self-indulgence. However, the community refuses to acknowledge her kindness in light of the poor stigma surrounding 'sexual immorality': "Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those who she came in contact... expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere" (Hawthorne 277). Even "The poor... whom she sought out to be the objects of her bounty, often reviled the hand that was stretched forth to succor them" (Hawthorne 278). She is completely isolated and suffers intense humiliation constantly because the Puritan community functions on a system of hierarchy and superiority, as Hawthorne quietly argues with poignant situational irony.

Moreover, both novels use character development to reflect a growth of character, in terms of recognizing and overcoming prejudice. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu discusses the social responsibilities of being "black" in America, explaining: "When you watch television and hear that a 'racist slur' was used, you must immediately become offended... Even though you would like to be able to decide for yourself how offended to be, or whether to be offended at all, you must nevertheless be very offended" (Adichie 274). Ifemelu shows an understanding of the racial tensions in America, and although she may miss the specific significance of racist activity, she

recognizes it is her responsibility as a fellow black American to reject any of such activity. This is in contrast to her previous ignorance in regards to racial slurs, in the occasion which Ifemelu does not understand why the lady in the store refuses to describe the store girl as "black". Throughout her experience and education of American culture, Ifemelu grows more aware of the sensitivity of race, therefore growing as a character. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan community eventually forgets its bitterness towards Hester, and "in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester's life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (Hawthorne 281). While this is not because the community has a change of opinion regarding the unforgiveable sin of fornication, it shows a softening of heart and a recognition of kindness on the part of the community.

Hawthorne shows the first step towards shifting prejudice: a change in heart.

Though taken from strikingly different eras, *Americanah* and *The Scarlet Letter* both effectively argue against the illogic of prejudice. Novels, by nature, are designed to remove the readers from their own bias and enable them to see a different perspective. Taking advantage of this, the two authors show the reader that a prejudiced society is not hopeless, as a broadening of perspective enables the growth of a community.