

An issue of ethnocentrism in americanah novel



Ethnocentrism is defined as the judging of another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own culture. Although Ethnocentrism is spoken about in a negative manner, there are few cases where ethnocentrism acts in a positive manner. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian author, of critically acclaimed novel *Americanah*, displays how ethnocentrism is present in the United States today. *Americanah* is a novel about a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who travels to America to go to school. Ifemelu, one of the protagonists of *Americanah*, experiences life in America head in her journey. Ifemelu experiences the hardships of ethnocentrism throughout her life in the United States because she is from Nigeria. Adichie uses Ifemelu and the novel to engage readers with an age old question: should immigrants in the United States be at a disadvantage because their culture is not American? In this paper I will provide an analysis of *Americanah* by examining the ways Americans use ethnocentrism negatively towards African nations and immigrants in the United States.

To achieve this goal, I have organized my paper into three main sections, two of which have sub-sections. In the first section, I will provide how ethnocentrism plays a role in the hinderance of African immigrants. I will prove this by using textual support from *Americanah* and by using research from F. Nii-Amoo Doodoo and Polibio Diaz. In the second section, I will provide a refutation source. This refutation source will be backed by Donald T. Campbell's research: *Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*. I will end my paper with a third section that provides even greater backing for my thesis. The third section will contain textual support along

with research by Eric Shiraev and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I also include a Works Cited page that contains all the sources I have used.

In the novel, *Americanah*, ethnocentrism is present throughout the protagonist's life in the United States. Immigrants find obtaining jobs in America difficult because the qualifications they obtain from their nation is perceived to not be up to standards in America. Ifemelu encounters these hardships indirectly when she is waiting for a taxi. While waiting in the taxi line, Ifemelu begins to express her dissatisfaction with Nigerian taxi drivers: " She hoped her driver would not be Nigerian, because once he heard her accent, he would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job, and his daughter was on the dean's list at Rutgers" (Adichie 10). This quote from *Americanah* is very powerful because it shows the hardships many of these immigrants have had to endure. This taxi driver faces ethnocentrism because of where he is from. He has obtained a master's degree but because it was not in America it does not hold the same value. Even though this man may be extremely intelligent, he does not have equal opportunity because he is from Africa. Ethnocentrism is present because if his degree was obtained in America he would not have this problem. The taxi drivers situation in America is common in immigrants and is shown in F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo research: " Assimilation Differences among Africans in America." Dodoo explores the ways in which African immigrants struggle in America. African immigrants face many hardships due to the ethnocentrism of Americans. They can not obtain jobs because they are from Africa despite their high levels of education. Dodoo argues " African immigrants have considerably higher levels of education compared

to the other immigrants groups. Controversely, related to their high levels of schooling and relative youth, Africans have the lowest levels of working experience" (Dodoo 533). As Dodoo asserts, African immigrants face hardships despite many of them being very well educated. These immigrants face ethnocentrism in the American workplace due to the preconceived notions culture of Africa.

Preconceived notions lead to many stereotypes about Africa that are present throughout Americanah and in the world today. These stereotypes tend to be negative due to American's ethnocentric views. Ifemelu encounters many stereotypes about Africa when she's at a job interview for a nanny position with her friend Ginika. Ifemelu arrived at the house to meet her future employer, Kimberly and Kimberly's sister Laura. At the job interview, Ifemelu noticed Laura's ethnocentric views about Africa in her comments. At one point during the interview Kimberly asks, "Ginika said you left Nigeria because college professors are always on strike there?' Laura nodded knowingly. 'Horrible, what's going on in African countries'" (Adichie 181). Later in the conversation the two women muse about Africa: "' I'm sure back home you ate a lot of wonderful organic food and vegetables, but you're going to see it's different here.' ' Kim, if she was eating all of this organic food in Nigeria, why would she come to U. S.?' Laura asked" (Adichie 182). In this conversation we can see how Laura is very ethnocentric towards Africa. She's talking about Africa in a very negative tone, even though she knows little about Africa. Laura's viewpoint of Africa is common among Americans because of their ethnocentric views.

Polibio Diaz reveals the ways Artists address issues such as ethnocentrism in their work in his research, *The Emerging Canon: Artist and their Art*. Diaz examines the work of many great artists such as Asof Aviidian, Franco Sacchi, Rafael Rozendaal, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Due to their life time experiences these artists illuminate the injustices committed all over the globe. due to their life time experiences. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer, speaks out on many problems and prejudices against people from Nigeria. According to Diaz, Adichie observes:

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie observed that poverty and exoticism are ' the single story' of Africa. Stereotypes are not necessarily untrue, she says, but they are incomplete. When the West looks at Africa it seems incapable of going beyond the stories of war, AIDS, and safaris. Relying solely on this reality to describe an entire continent robs people of their dignity. (31)

These stereotypes are directly related to Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is shown because many people who are making the accusations present in Diaz's argument aren't entirely informed in the matter. The Ethnocentrism used in these stereotypes are very negative and can be detrimental to many African immigrants. As stated in the article these stereotypes rob a whole continent of their dignity. Ethnocentrism in this case creates an extremely unfavorable position for African immigrants entering America. Although, ethnocentrism may cause great hardship, it may also be the leading cause for good in many situations.

The belief that ethnocentrism should not exist in a society is not entirely true. Ethnocentrism has been proven to be a positive force in society. Donald T. Campbell's research, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*, discusses many aspects of ethnocentrism. Campbell argues while ethnocentrism does reveal many wrongdoings it can also prove to be productive in a society. Campbell's explores the positives in his research: "Several theories propose a positive relationship between complexity of social, economic and/or political structure and ethnocentrism in general... establishment of stronger and stricter ingroup cohesion and coordination" (Campbell 223). Also Campbell argues that ethnocentrism plays a positive role in "family structure as it impinges on the developing Child" (Campbell 148). Lastly, Campbell argues that ethnocentrism promotes patriotism and nationalism within a society (Campbell 21). Campbell's research proves that ethnocentrism can play a positive role as it allows cohesion within a society, strong family values to remain among its members and promotes patriotism and nationalism within a society. In Campbell's argument he does prove the ways ethnocentrism can benefit a society instead of disabling it. However when that ethnic person migrates it causes great difficulty to assimilate in a new culture. This situation is common among African immigrants and the once positive ethnocentrism works against them. In America, many African Immigrants struggle due to ethnocentrism.

In the novel, *Americanah*, the hindrance on African Immigrants was displayed by Ifemelu on her first day of school in America. Ifemelu experienced ethnocentrism first hand when she encountered the women in

charge of registration, Cristina Tomas. When Ifemelu arrives, Christina Tomas tries to help Ifemelu when she asks “ ‘ Good Afternoon. Is this the right place registration?’ Ifemelu asked Cristina Tomas, whose name she did not know then. ‘ Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?’ ‘ Yes’ ‘ You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office’ ” (Adichie 163). Then Ifemelu wanted to know why Cristina Tomas was speaking like that; “ She realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling. ‘ I speak English’ she said. ‘ I bet you do,’ Cristina Tomas said ‘ I just don’t know how well’ ” (Adichie 163). This caused Ifemelu to shrink and made her feel inferior even though she had spoken english all her life and led the debating society in secondary school. Cristina Tomas shows American ethnocentrism when she assumes Ifemelu could not speak proper english due to her accent. Cristina Tomas spoke to her as if she were speaking to a child. Ifemelu’s experience is relatable to Eric Shiraev research A History of Psychology: A Global Perspective. where he Eric speaks about his experience in the field of Psychology, and how ethnocentrism affects many people in this field. In Shiraev’s research, he states: “ One of several factors contributing to ethnocentrism was the language barrier... Researchers who have limited knowledge of english or no access to international journals, unfortunately, have a diminished opportunity to be recognized” (Shiraev 23). Shiraev research shows how the language barrier can cause ethnocentrism and discredit the knowledge of many very intelligent individuals. Similar to the researchers study, Ifemelu was discredited by Cristina Tomas even though she is a very intelligent woman.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's research African "Authenticity" and Biafran Experience explores the ways in which, ethnocentrism is present throughout the world today. In this research, Adichie explores her own personal experiences and how her work exposes social ill all over the world. In the novel and elsewhere, Adichie describes how ethnocentrism can play a negative role in the form of stereotypes. In Adichie's own life experience she faces ethnocentrism when she meets her new roommates in America: "They were surprised I knew who Mariah Carey was; they had assumed that I listen to what they called 'tribal music' (Adichie 43). Adichie encountered ethnocentrism first hand when she first came to America because her American roommates believed only they listened to that kind of music. Later in her study she explores how these stereotypes can be detrimental; "The problem with stereotypes, however, particularly in literature, is that one story can become the only story: stereotypes straitjacket our ability to think in complex ways" (Adichie 43). This quote is very powerful and shows how stereotypes can be harmful and create many ethnocentric views. Adichie proves how these ethnocentric stereotypes can harm many individuals in America. As Adichie states these stereotypes can straitjacket individuals and create great hardships for individuals to encounter. Ethnocentrism causes many hardships on African Immigrants around the world and creates a rift between cultures.

In this paper I will provide an analysis of Americanah by examining the ways Americans use ethnocentrism negatively towards African nations and immigrants in the United States. In the world, there are many different cultures that coincide with one another. No culture is better than another;

some cultures are simply different. Ethnocentrism is present all over the world today and perhaps one day the rifts between cultures will cease to exist.