



# DE-STEREOTYPING AFRICAN REALITIES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH AND BELKACEM MEGHZOUCHENE'S SOPHIA IN THE WHITE CITY

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## **Introduction**

Heavy media, often known as corporate or traditional media, according to both Adichie and Meghzouchene, has done a considerable damage to both Africa and its people. Inaccurate and gross generalizations of African realities can be easily qualified as crude stereotyping and downright essentializations. Despite the fact that in most cases colonial powers have retreated and African nation states have been formed, corporate Western media still approach African realities with stereotypical gazes. An example of this category of narrative delineates African individuals as too naïve to be engaged in nation-building and unthinkingly succumb to the lure of extended stays in the global north. Hence, Africans are all potential émigrés, whose hearts and minds

stay insensitive to nationalistic aspirations of social betterment and economic progress. These two authors are keen to decry the nefarious effects of heavy media and meanwhile explore the potential of social media, like Facebook and blogs hoping it can serve as a counter measure against heavy and traditional media.

Given this stance, the two texts do not share a number of characteristics and aspects. Adichie's comes as her fourth major publication, while Meghrouchen's is his first. One is authored by a woman and the other by a man. This latter is an Algerian author and his work has been celebrated as the first Algerian novel in English. Algeria had been a French colony for 132 years, and with more than half a century of independence now, there exists a deeply entrenched and established tendency in Algeria to write fiction in French, not English. Therefore, the fact that Meghrouchen decides to write in English underlines his awareness of the need to reach not only British or American audiences but world-wide readership. This again contributes to the de-stereotyping agenda that Algerians and Algerian realities are often portrayed in either French or Arabic. Such demarcation from traditionally-enmeshed linguistic means of expression relates to the author's dissatisfaction with easy and categorical classifications of peoples and their experiences. While Meghrouchen's character never has a metropolitan experience, Adichie's Ifemelu is a returnee from America. This detail is

significant as a rare example of a Nigerian's experience of not migration, but return.

The two texts share nevertheless the vivaciousness of the principal characters. Both Ifemelu and Ramice are two identifiable people. They are economically independent and successful. They do not recourse to the comfort of either corporate business or the safety often sought in salaried government positions. Both are comfortable with the liberal jobs they have themselves created: one runs a blog, the other, an e-magazine. While Ifemelu works alone, Ramice has a team and charges to pay. Their exemplariness proves that with a certain amount of will and intelligence entrepreneurial activity can be still a viable option for African youth. The thriving of their individual passions and their talent in making this passion sell remind aspiring African migrants that a life opportunity can still be located in an ever-closing global economy shaping late capitalism. Defying the strictures of their respective local markets, and their ability to expand beyond mere survival is a mindset which the present article finds worthy of pursuit. For both authors do not seek to simply say that material gains and cutting a margin is still possible. On the contrary, the two novelists seek to banalize the idea of success through their characters' resilience. Remarkably, opportunity and cutting a margin happens to be in social media: the sector probably the least expected to render either personal or com-

munal rewards. Probably, both in Nigeria and Algeria social media has not been taken seriously in the sense that ordinary Africans in these countries still approach social media as mainly entertainment. The narrator of *Sophia in the White City* explains that Algerians actually swarm to newly founded cybercafés only to grab whatever opportunities (fake or genuine) they can to flee their country. As the paper explains, such counter-productive costs of social media do not downplay the fact that the authors chosen for the scope of this study insist on painting a different picture about life and reality in either Nigeria or Algeria through social media. Aware of the possibility of a relapse, the principal characters gain the wealth and status they subsequently enjoy through hard labor and creative passion. As role models, their careers seek to galvanize other members of their respective communities into constructive actions. Once this is massively considered, Africa can step as an actor in its own fate and start putting an end to lethargy and self-blame.

### **Reviewing *Americanah* and *Sophia in the White City***

One needs to underline the fact that both novels have received scanty critical attention. Apart from critical appraisals in reviews, the inhibitive impact of the media industry and how it continues to shake Africans'

trust in themselves remains largely untouched in full-length studies. The present study proceeds by means of the following questions: What kind or genre of social media do the two novels deploy? How are they used? Towards which end are they triggered? And, to what extent one is certain that the type of social media considered for action never boomerangs?

For purposes of exploring how media is deployed in the two selected texts by Adichie and Meghzouchene, one notes that each author refers to social media in his or her own terms. While Ifemelu prefers to replicate her American blogging skills in Nigeria, Ramice who does not enjoy a life-experience in the metropolis starts as an editor-in-chief of French-language weekly on-line magazine: *Hebdo-Sciences*. Instead of hitting walls in the manner of 'a hittist' who in the Algerian colloquy refers to graduates who long after the end of their formal studies remain jobless, like thousands of Algerian graduates or elaborating on the brain-drain syndrome which actually marks Africa, Ramice opens his own cyber café and soon starts a scientific e-magazine that keeps abreast of news of discoveries and innovations in three major sections: archaeology and anthropology together; physics, astronomy and chemistry comprise the second section; the bio sciences and medicine the third. In spite of the bureaucratic hurdles, Ramice fights teeth and nail to find his own business. The narrator reports: "But the hard truth was

that one must have gone through the teeth and fangs of awful bureaucratic meanders to make things struck. Connections mattered too much. A vitality in Algeria. And Ramice was not an exception to eke out his own living. Damn it.” (3) The refrain ‘Damn it’ repeatedly peppers the text, suggesting how suffocated Ramice often is with the bureaucracy and the state officials’ sabotaging reflexes.

Adichie’s Ifemelu, too, takes matters in hand, and instead of behaving like other Americanahs by pretentiously complaining about difficulties of readjustment to life in Nigeria and missing some cherished consumer amenities decides to critically account for moral and social degeneration among rank and file Nigerians. She too chooses an aesthetically appealing place to live in; she uses its panoramic view as a background picture in her blog named: The Small Redemptions of Lagos. Mark that the word ‘small’ insinuates that besides the massive chaos and ugliness, patches of beauty are still left and redemptions, however small, are nevertheless possible. Such a socially reformist conception of art and society in general and fiction writing in particular, however lofty and inspiring, does not appeal to the sensibilities of certain critics, one of whom is Ashleigh Harries. The latter observes that as far as literary form is concerned, Adichie’s and others’ “body of writing is capitulating to a notion of literary form ... is not in dialogue with African everyday life and as such

eliminates Africa as one of the sites upon which form is (globally) contingent.” (Harris, 4) However creative writing programmes sponsored by U.S. universities cannot have the last word on form. Indeed, while this reviewer may or may not have a point in advancing his defense for authentic conceptions of African works of art, an editorial piece like this one risks missing the point in search of formal perfection that is often reduced to essentialisms.

## **Metaphors versus Historical Depth**

Probably one observation regarding literary technique in Adichie’s *Americanah* and Meghzouche’s *Sophia in the White City* is the consistent evasion of metaphors either in character development or in setting construction. Readers notice that the authors are tacitly not comfortable with and cannot trust the elastic meanings that everyone seems to draw when flooding an artwork with parables, fables, symbols and allegories. For to consistently carry on their distrust of metaphor, they have resorted to lengthy but close historical accounts, all aiming to lift whatever confusion readers might encounter while following the progress of the principal characters as these characters work towards their successive and appealing careers. Technically considered, the setting of Adichie’s novel is quite simple: the major character, Ifemelu, has finally decided to move back to



Nigeria after a-thirteen-years-stay in the United States. Readers meet her first on her way to a hair salon outside Princeton, part of her eventual return to Nigeria. As she is braiding her hair, each moment at the salon brings reminiscences and details from her high school years in Lagos down to flashes from her early stay in the U.S., all the way till she becomes an Americanah, a returnee. The merits of Adichie's technique are better articulated in the following account of Walter Benjamin's technique: "Benjamin's [and by extension, Adichie's] images functioned like switches, arresting the fleeting phenomena and starting thought in motion or, alternately, shocking through a standstill and setting the reified objects in motion by causing them to lose their second nature familiarity." (Buck-Morss, 102) Despite its simplicity, the surprising and disturbing qualities of the plot ensure an exemplary interaction with readers as they fully acknowledge, appreciate and supply erstwhile missing details pertaining to Ifemelu's life before, during and after her experience in America. Similarly, Meghzouchene leaves readers with no opportunity for guess work about Ramice Taslent, the principal character. The young novelist sets a story in limited time and space frameworks. All the actions of the story take place within less than a fortnight between late October to mid-November 2006, and almost all are located in Algiers, nicknamed the white city. Sophia's scheduled visit to join her father who represents a German science publisher in Algiers'

book fair and subsequent stay in the North African city punctuates the entire drama in the novel. After a brief sketching of Ramice's typical day and brief background before he starts his internet space and hitting on the idea of *Hebdo-Sciences*, the author tactfully evokes the 1990s (otherwise known as the black decade in Algeria). Ramice is portrayed as a former conscripted army soldier who fought terrorists in the mountains of Cheria, and whose brothers in arms fell as victims. The reference to 1990s shows Meghzouchene's infatuation with Yasmina Khadra's fiction, an Algerian novelist using French as his medium of expression, and who too worked in the army during the bloody nineties before he eventually left for a career in fiction writing. References of this sort do consolidate elements of passion and resilience in Ramice. Anybody who overcomes odds of such magnitudes and returns alive from what can be considered as the Algerian Vietnam is an exception, not the common. Still exceptional is Ramice as he declines the glamour of fleeing to France on the pretense of pursuing an academic career like his former classmate, Yacine Ledjeni.

This desire to leave the country, based on the unchecked assumption that life elsewhere must be better than that in the country, without inspecting the root causes of suffering in one's own society, is something that the novel repeatedly explores:

Nabil [Ramince's Cybercafé manager] managed to deal with nocturnal Internet surfers who rushed in by scores after day work or study, predominately youngsters who, short of unyielding visas, would look up and down the Internet chatting portals in hope of a winning bargain (8).

These lines illustrate how Algerian youth vindicate their frustrations in social media. The latter is rarely used for research or cultural exchange, but instead as a means that apparently guarantees their entry tickets to Europe or the Americas. Though this mindset can be traced to an age long before the discovery of Internet, Internet and the social media in particular have fueled this perception as applications like Skype and Facebook have become more and more democratized. Aware of the fact that social media can exacerbate the problems facing Algeria, the author shows that as a two-edged stick, Internet can be deployed for constructive purposes like galvanizing consciousnesses to a more active resistance against instrumentalized reason.

Meanwhile, there lies undeniably an ironic twist about title 'Americanah'. To begin with, the wording is drawn from a famous American novel with more or less the same title: *Americana* (1971), by Don DeLillo. The letter 'h' which Adichie adds only accentuates Adichie's exploration of DeLillo's theme which is how the media inflames already festering issues in a given society. The difference between the two works however is that

while DeLillo satisfies himself with exploring how media does a lot of damage than good, Adichie exceeds in providing an alternative and procures a solution. Hence the word 'Americanah' which is a metaphor widely circulating in Lagos about Nigerian returnees from England, but mostly from America. The irony about Americanahs is that they are individuals who often cover their personal shortcomings and frustrations with endless nostalgic musings about amenities and services they claim they miss in Lagos. Yet this metaphoric layer of understanding does not apply to Ifemelu as she is not a typical Americanah. Every aspect of her life choices so exuberantly detailed throughout the novel contradicts the solid yet pretentious convictions of the rest of Americanahs. She complains both of Lagos and of America, but not in the way typical Lagosian Americanahs do; her complaints are not effusive nostalgia feeding on an abashed ego aspiring for notice and recognition. Hers, though, are critical views that are historically grounded and not easily digested by either Americans or fellow Nigerians. The content of blogs she writes does not even attempt to cater to the egos of her respective audiences. Instead, her writing finds the egos of the audiences of CNN or NBA ridiculed; therefore, it assesses such egos as inhibitive and destructive, and through its illuminating insights tries to break free and subvert this destructive drive. Only in this connection the metaphor is distrusted and displaced in favour of in-depth historical accounts.

Now, what makes Ifemelu critical of both Nigeria and America is the intended (never accidental) lack of depth in abundant portrayals of realities and historical experiences of Africa and Africans, and whose cost is the perpetuation of reification. For Ifemelu, the media industry reduces historical experiences and sells targeted audiences a false and shallow notion of self. As a matter of fact, clichés and stereotypes keep people (Nigerians and Americans) unauthentic about themselves and the lives they are confronted with. The fact that Ifemelu has been a communication major at university and lands a job in the hearts of the media industry fits in with the purpose and trajectory of the narrative. Similarly, her encounters with blogs and websites like [HAPPYKINKYNAPPY.COM](http://HAPPYKINKYNAPPY.COM) (a website that offers useful tips to do African American women's hair) is an early incentive in her subsequent campaign. Indeed, most of the cultural commentaries Adichie draws in this novel originate from observations about hair. Hair in *Americanah* stands as an extended metaphor that demarcates two different cultures and mindsets, but the demarcation is never processed with the purpose of erecting closures. The hustle and bustle inside the hair salon where readers meet the central character for the first time can be considered a reflection of the power of the media industry and its role in shaping sensibilities and tastes. As readers we are confronted with a number of ups and downs in Ifemelu's life before she is finally reconciled with her Afro hair. "I have natural

kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair—there are enough sources of cancers in my life as it is" (297).

An element that must not be downplayed is that in order to be taken seriously for a job interview and thus cast a professional look, Ifemelu had to indulge in a lot of chemicals in terms of moisturizers. After some months into this denaturalizing situation, Ifemelu decides to call off this pretention and goes back to her original appearance.

For three days, she called in sick. Finally she went to work, her hair a very short, overly combed and overly oiled Afro. "You look different," her co-workers said, all of them a little tentative. "Does it mean anything? Like, something political?" (211)

Ifemelu's eventual reconciliation with her Afro style is in fact a reconciliation with nature, her nature. This is not easily appreciated by media-hypnotized coworkers. Adichie portrays this shift within Ifemelu as a kind of a leap of faith, probably living up to the origins of her name Ifemelunamma meaning: 'made-in-good-times' or 'beautifully made'. (69) The ingrained allusion to beauty delineates the aesthetic formula which Adichie highlights and proposes as her cultural model. Afro-hair becomes a culturally charged symbol that be-

trays Ifemelu's dissatisfaction with the global media as it publicizes the Western paradigm of women's beauty as a norm that fits all women regardless of origin.

Other instances of denaturalization caused by media abound, but none of them offer are so significant. Early on in the novel, Ifemelu observes that for her secondary school boyfriend Obinze Maduewesi, a statement like: "You look like a black American was his ultimate compliment'...Manhattan was his zenith. He often said 'It's not as if this is Manhattan' or 'Go to Manhattan and see how things are'" (67) Like many of his Nigerian peers, this young secondary school student has been raised to think that only American fiction is true fiction, speak only American English in earnest, not only for the sake of appearing smart and sophisticated, but presumably as second nature. Emenike, another classmate of Ifemelu and Obinze, upon another classmate's—Kayode—return from a trip to Switzerland "...bent down to caress Kayode's shoes, saying 'I want to touch them because they have touched snow'". (65) Ifemelu prefers her father speaking Igbo because "...his mannered English bothered her as she got older, because it was costume, his shield against insecurity." (47) At one occasion, Ifemelu is astonished at Obinze being familiar with some Igbo proverbs: "Many guys won't even speak Igbo, not to mention knowing proverbs" (62) The early part of the narrative details how the newly Nigerian rich try to beat each other in

choosing foreign schools operating in Lagos because the Nigerian school system is not deemed to be as professional and competitive. Offended and bored with such pretensions, Obinze ridicules Kosi and her patronizing friend in a party when the topic of his daughter's schooling was broached upon: "Didn't we all go to primary school that taught Nigerian curriculum?" The women looked at him; their puzzled expressions implied that he could not possibly be serious. And in some ways, he was not." (29)

Euphemisms of this sort are indicative of how far Nigerians are caught not only in egoistic and dead-end pretensions, but far worse in the reification of their collective consciousness. Exposure to denaturalizing media industry deliberately demeans and ridicules one's sense of being by systematically endearing ordinary Nigerians to foreign schools, books, tastes and styles of life. Even Obinze's obsession with America and his presumed need to leave for America is initially nursed, even fueled with the amount of Hollywood films he watched, the books he read and the magazines he glossed over. One needs to account for the amount of damage taking its toll on Obinze, the second major character in the novel, in the excerpt below:

It had always been America, only America. A longing nurtured and nursed over many years. The advertisement on NTA for Andrew Checking Out, which he



had watched as a child, had given shape to his longings. 'Men, I'm checkin' out,' the character Andrew had said, staring cockily at the camera. 'No good roads, no light, no water. Men, you can't even get a bottle of soft drink!' While Andrew was checking out, General Buhari's soldiers were flogging adults in the streets, lecturers were striking for better pay, and his mother had decided that he could no longer have Fanta whenever he wanted but only on Sundays, with permission. (232)

Not only does the narrator draw on the central character's dissatisfaction with classical forms of films, shows and women magazines, but goes further to locate the ways in which this media shapes a parallel or alternate reality for ordinary Nigerian youth of whom Obinze is but an example. Ever since childhood, Obinze has been conditioned to exteriorize his disappointments with the cost of staying forever blind from finding out the reasons for the absence of simple pleasures like Fanta. Hence his constant but unaware borrowing from the ad's character: 'Men, I'm chekin' out'. Of course his mother's pampering has a hand into his not seeing why Nigeria denies him a simple joy like a bottle of Fanta, but the advertisements, the books and the magazines he has been exposed to and consumed throughout his formative years all amount to his accute experience of reification. This reification translates into the deliberate distancing from one's immediate (Nigerian) historical setting and an awkward identification with an alien and unwelcoming context. The least provocation

in terms of shortage, crisis or any other mundane inconvenience becomes for young men like him a justified call for 'I'm checkin' out': an extended metaphor uncovering how young men deserve a better place and better standards (not because they have worked to deserve these places and standards, but merely as an inherent right) than what already exists, drawing an ahistorical and unfair comparison between two countries: Nigerian and America. With a visa application rejected, Obinze lives a pathetic life until his mother forges a UK visa application. After three and a half years, he is deported, and even with his taking part in the national game and the sudden wealth years later, Obinze keeps an apathetic attitude *visa-à-vis* life because of his misguided childhood and media-induced longings.

Meghzouchene's narrative also provides ample evidence of how media, mainly Algeria's state TV, agitates stymied Algerians to leave their country for good. Half through the novel, readers find Ramice Taslent together with Sophia and his old friend Abd al-Halim attending a press conference by Algeria's renown literary giant Yasmina Khadra, in 'the Literary Café', part of the cultural activities of Algiers' book fair that year. The three were all excited and satisfied with Khadra's erudite answers. Later that day, Ramice and Abd al-Halim expect a decent journalistic coverage in the evening news. To their disappointment, the TV airs little images of the writer with no words. Ramice's comment is

that this is “sheer ostracism in his [Khadra’s] country he so loves”. Subsequently “he [Ramice] changed channel in distaste of the infinite affront.” (71) Such unprofessional, intelligence-insulting and even suffocating TV contents make Algerians seize the event of the book fair not as an opportunity to boost their knowledge and expand on their culture, but simply as a way to vindicate their frustrations vis-à-vis women. With huge crowds of Algerians visiting the different foreign stands of the fair, Sophia is duped to think that this reflects a population eager for culture and learning. Ramice quickly corrects her: “Don’t be astonished, Sophia. Algerians are the world’s most curious people vis-à-vis foreigners. Above and beyond, they’ve got bags of frustrations about women.” (27) Denied of a chance to visit these foreign countries, representatives of international publishers become natural targets for inquisitive and curious Algerians, not necessarily because Algerians admire the content presented in the stands. The day Ramice shows Sophia his cyberspace and editorial office, nearly all clients stood aghast as they could not conceal their sick admiration of the German beauty. The narrator keenly observes that “The Internet surfers present that afternoon unglued their eyes from the monitors to set them on the blonde who had walked past them. Curiosity. Always Algerians’ killing curiosity” (31). One notes that the context in which Ramice refers to Algerians’ curiosity is vilification. Denied of visas, a European or American in flesh and blood

walking down the streets of Algiers becomes the materialization of all the frustrations amassed from years of watching Hollywood films. Nabil, Ramice's Cybercafé manager, is no exception and his reaction is representative of a large section of uncultured Algerian youth, who in the absence of informative and inspirational media shows and programmes slip into moral degeneration:

As Ramice and Sophia drew nearer, Nabil feigned ignoring the German female. Her perfume drifted to his nostrils, making his heart beat at high speed... Nabil could not resist licking with his eyes, stealthily, the German beauty as she gave him her back when stepping out of the cybercafé. (35)

A pathological response like this one indicates how alienated he is and by extension how degraded the moral standards of large sections of Algerian youth have become. Obviously, this is not a naïve indictment on the part of Meghzouchene on the youth of his country, as much as an indictment of the state media coverage. Indeed, this kind of media keeps Algerians intimidated with shiny facades and encourages naïve yearning for foreign countries as the ultimate dream of their empty and vilified lives.

The distinction between the two novels is that Meghzouchene's principal character makes his mission the banalization of scientific news (disseminating the

state of art in the sciences), while Adichie's finds daring ways of uncovering Nigerians' alienation from themselves. From the outside, both can be seen as working towards different ends, but when considering the inner dynamic of each narrative, we realise that both share a keen interest in carrying out campaigns of inspiring, self-trusting and impressive intelligence. Both show that the new heroes of Africa do not succumb to the survivalist strategies dictated by either local or global pressures. Both can be leaders, independent in their judgments and course of action, but still humane with no toxicity towards anyone around in their lives.

Most critical reviewers of *Americanah* (since the novel has not been studied in full length academic articles or book chapters yet) point to the fact that the major preoccupation of the text is racism. More precisely, reviewers point out how America is prejudiced against Africans and how the color line is still a dividing issue in the United States today. However, the niche which the present study claims to have established is that in as much as racism is highlighted in the novel, Adichie's principal foci lie rather in the economy of race. The problem of race, according to the author, is exacerbated by the ways in which media covers stories pertaining to race. Put differently, the portrayal of race as carried on in heavy media impairs not only African Americans but even new arrivals from Africa: Nigerians, Kenyans, Ugandans, Malians, Senegalese etc. Centuries of rac-

ist conditioning has engendered a stale culture of race where both 'whites' and 'blacks' equally become its victims. Characters and the situations in which these characters are enmeshed in leaves readers with little doubt as to the role which the stereotyping and prejudice-generating machinery of the media plays. Differently put, the role which the media plays is but one variation of reified consciousness that keeps connections and relationships always tense and stranded. The successful blog Ifemelu keeps can be better approached as a living manifestation of Adorno's non-identitarian dialectics heralded in *Negative Dialectics*. Through her two blogs (both the American and the Nigerian one), Adichie demonstrates how social media can be mobilized in the task of resisting the inhibitive forces of racialised cultural modernity. When consistently and brilliantly deployed, social media make conscious people realize that consumption, global capitalism and racism cannot be embraced as fate.

### **Can Social Media be Truly Subversive? Potentials versus Limitations**

In *Americanah*, the idea of starting blogs and thus making use of social media is genuine and does not follow an already prescribed pattern or trend as Ifemelu's need for expression is urgent and unpretentious. Her U.S. job in press editing, press releases and the

copy editing of press releases functions as a necessary background experience and helps her subsequently to locate what is missing in the business of corporate media. When her white boyfriend Curt complains of the racist innuendoes which he presumably finds in *Essence* magazine as it features only black women, Ifemelu insists they go to the bookstore where they “took down copies of the different women’s magazines from the display shelf” (294). What follows next is an erudite argument about how unfair and racist these magazines can be, and the need for a counter and alternative pattern to the approach and the conception of female beauty.

She spread the magazines on the table, some on top of the others. ‘Look, all of them are white women. This one is supposed to be Hispanic, we know this because they wrote two Spanish words here, but she looks exactly like this white woman, no difference in her skin tone and hair and features. Now, I’m going to flip through, page by page, and you tell me how many black women you see.... So three black women in may be two thousand pages of women’s magazines and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can’t get clues for make up from these magazines. (295)

What is rather impressive in this exchange is Ifemelu’s exceptional capacity for synthesis. Not everybody is able to deconstruct large details with far-reaching

hints and allusions, and at the same time remain capable of retaining a personal opinion that is well informed and meticulously articulated. Even the courage to say it loudly and clearly to liberal Americans at the risk of appearing eccentric must not be undermined. A day after this exchange, Ifemelu sends one of her former Kenyan classmates, Wambui, an email about what she thinks that fuels the problem of race in America. Indeed, it is this former classmate who encourages her to start a blog as her opinions are widely relevant and can be helpful to large audiences. It is worth noting that the idea of the blog is to begin a reversal of the status quo, the one tightly observed by corporate media. Remarkably, it has all started from this accurate articulation of how women with kinky hair can be left with no clues for make up by conventional magazines. Breaking the monopoly over beauty as strictly defined by white media and locating alternatives of non-white beauty seems to be Ifemelu's initial step in stipulating a decent outlook for African women. This is already subversive of the capitalist outlook that exercises exclusion through its media. As put by Ifemelu, it does not need a lot of intelligence to see that black women are not considered worthy of attention: in short, they apparently do not qualify for inclusion within the concept of beauty as defined by corporate media. Through their careful choice of words—like, everyone and curly—their deliberate evasion of tips for kinky hair, these magazines commit primarily an aesthetic violation



amounting to racism, however minor or insignificant this may look. As the text explains:

In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. ... Here's the thing: the manifestations of racism has changed but the language has not. ... Or may be it's time to just scarp the word "racist." Find something new. Like Radical Disorder Syndrome. And we could have different categories of sufferers of this syndrome: mild, medium, and acute. (315)

Overall, there is an emphasis on the deeply entrenched culture of racism that is aggravated by the media. For apart from having lucid details about the functioning of racism in the United States—having racism as a solidly integrated culture that goes unnoticed, and hence largely unquestioned—there lies the element of sarcasm in suggesting a purely medical treatment. 'Radical Disorder Syndrome' derides mainstream American tendency for scientific categorization of a problem of such dividing consequences. Certainly racism cannot be seriously approached from the perspective of medical attention. Instead, it is the culture that needs to be revisited and reversed, and in order for this to happen social media has to be implicated in such dynamic.

Near the end of *Sophia in the White City*, Ramice declares before Sophia what can be considered his 'I-have-a-dream' speech: "I have a dream of making science information a treasure endeared for by Alge-

rians" (138). Of course this testimony echoes Martin Luther King, the African American civil rights leader. While some readers may find these echoes to be unnecessary effusions of needless romantic sensibilities that downplay the seriousness of the novel, still others can put things in contexts and see why science stories of inventions and achievements of dreams when largely disseminated can indeed animate a sense of pride and mission to despaired and suffocated Algerians.

Again, Ramice insists on his dream in spite of his constant recourse to swearing. While requests for bribes exacerbate Ramice's plans, his determination never wanes. As noted earlier, terms like 'Damn it' are frequently interjected in the text to indicate how sensitive he is to state officials' indifference to his magazine. Further, the term also gives authenticity to Ramice's sufferings. Algerians with no connections complain of the devices which crooked officials deploy in order to win bribes:

But the hard truth was that one must have gone through the teeth and fangs of awful bureaucratic meanders to make things stuck. Connections mattered too much. A vitality in Algeria. And Ramice was not an exception to eke out his own living. Damn it. (3)

These are mounting difficulties of exceptional magnitude and they are aggravated by the homogenizing representations in the media. Sophia affirms,

To Europeans, the Maghreb is all the same; geographically, historically, culturally, and politically. Due perhaps to the fact that they just visit it for a short period of time. If they were to stay longer, differences would emerge clear-cut as to Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania and Libya. (19)

An infuriated Ramice also adds,

Some mongrels and no-hopers beyond the Mediterranean and the Atlantic would turn a blind eye to last decade's hecatombs of innocent Algerians. They would jibber along the way of butcheries. Daily butcheries. Until 9/11 blasted their burlesque faces out of calculated hibernation of the sense of right and wrong. They realized that terrorism wasn't Algeria-only matter. Global terror is the vocabulary they now use... (19)

The coverage of the Western media according to Meghzouchene is rarely analytical. Fatalist accounts desperately try to sell the idea that acts of butchery are ingrained in the Algerians' genes and chromosomes. The overall impact is often adding salt to injury. Differently put, though sometimes informative, the portrayal cannot be helpful in the task of nation building. It robs Algerians of the right to dream. This last is a necessary incentive to start constructive work. In this sense readers can see how Ramice's scientific magazine can switch Algerians to the beautiful and more intimidating side of their country. Social media lessens some of Ramice's burdens and helps him massively inspire

Algerians in being agents of their own fate, thus obliging media industry in the long run to draw a positive outlook.

This is true for Ifemelu in Adichie's text as well. With her subsequent return to Nigeria, Ifemelu seeks a job first at a women's magazine known as *Zoe*. Beside the fact that this experience offers more or less similar conclusions as to the inhibitive costs of corporate media, it nevertheless sheds light on other layers as to why commitment to social media is compulsory for pumping new blood in a country such as Nigeria. As she soon understands, *Zoe* is caught in a diatribe competition with *Glass*. Each seeks the expansion of readership and advertisements to beat one another. Ifemelu's approach is that as far as their content is concerned both are vapid and commercially not business savvy at all. There is no creative passion either in conception or in the editing process of each. Both feature interviews with supposedly successful ladies, but under Ifemelu's critical gaze that personal success is simply mired in corruption and fraud. The ladies featured are reported successful simply because their husbands are intricately involved in the national politic-economic order. They are wives of army generals, general managers of leading national banks; they are over pretentious and Ifemelu is often suffocated with their religious overtones. By the time she learns that these women actually pay (not give donations to the magazine in which

they figure) the editor in order to be featured, Ifemelu decides to leave the magazine for good. In addition, her new reconciliation with Lagos leaves Ifemelu ample time to seriously think of working independently by starting her blog. She starts it under the title: 'The Small Redemptions of Lagos'. The religious overtones of the blog title: 'redemptions' cater to the pretentious religious culture shaping life in contemporary Nigeria. The awkward beginnings do not stop her from adjusting to her new setting and improving afterward. The word 'Redemptions' also suggests that there is no intention on the part of Ifemelu to seek unwelcome attention that can backfire or raise unnecessary alarms of megalomaniac officers.

## **Are Academics Intellectuals? The Modern Intellectual as a Cultural Worker**

If social media can alleviate, however partly, the inhibitive cost of corporate media the authors feel entitled to explain why only a few people are involved in the corrective work of social media. Why academics, for example, cannot seize the potential which this alternative media offers? Towards this end, Adichie distinguished between academics and cultural workers. Some of the comments Ifemelu draws help readers understand Adichie's position regarding U.S. black academics: "They wanted to stop child labor in Africa. They would

not buy clothes made by underpaid workers in Asia. They looked at the world with an impractical, luminous earnestness that moved her, but never convinced her” (313-4). It is interesting to note that Blaine, the African American Yale professor of political sciences and Ifemelu’s boyfriend does not take Ifemelu’s blog very seriously. In his self-righteous zeal for books and films that ‘push the boundaries’, he could not perceive what boundaries her blog is breaking. The narrative, however, keeps on reporting the blog’s success: commentaries, advertisements and even donations. Ifemelu also gets some remunerations and she gets regular invitations for talks at diversity workshops throughout the U.S., and live radio interactions with listeners. One indication of her blog’s success is that she resigns from her well-paying job at the press editing and supports herself entirely from the blog. Without his self-righteousness, Blaine and his group of literati would have been more receptive and less critical of Ifemelu’s efforts. The African American academics’ colleagues are but a varied extension of Blaine’s personality and state of mind: their misguided sense of righteousness and child-like earnestness are part of the cost of the culture of racism; overall they cannot be part for a catalyst for a major change. To take one example, Nathan, Blaine’s Literature Professor colleague, complacently states that he does not read any fiction published after 1930, because according to him taste simply relapses ever since then. Later that day, Ifemelu announces to Blaine her

verdict “academics were not intellectuals, they were not serious, they built their solid tents of specialized knowledge and stayed securely in them.” (323-4)

Only Boubacar, the newly arrived Senegalese professor at Yale, stands atypical from this category of impractical academics. He insists Ifemelu to apply for the Princeton fellowship and recognizes the propitious change she is trying to establish, suggesting “it is the only way to change conversation [about race]” (340). Because of such openness and readiness to step aside from the ivory tower, Boubacar can be qualified as an organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense. Adichie hints at the fact that probably Boubacar’s upbringing, his experiences of Francophone culture and recent arrival in the densely racist U.S. culture made him a truly cultural worker. He is immune to racism and not entirely consumed by the racist culture in the way African American academics are.

Meghzouchene’s Ramice is also an exception. Indeed, the exemplariness of Ramice when considering the Algerian case is undoubtedly vital for Meghzouchene’s cultural project in the novel. Ramice has been conceived by the author as a fictional variation who comes against a background marred in lethargy, self-blame and violence. In line with his ‘I-have-a-dream’ philosophy, Ramice is too preoccupied with the good work for his community: “While his fellow men strived to

go abroad and got arranged marriages in order to settle legally in Europe or the Americas as ‘husbands’ of permanently resident wives, Ramice saw the inverse scenario taking stage for him” (12). Indeed, it is Sophia who arrives in Algiers, not him travelling to Berlin, seeking his love and care. Remarkably, Sophia confesses her love for him twice, yet he prefers to take his time and weigh things. Though he has sincere feelings for her, he is never in a hurry. Readers finish the novel, yet Ramice has neither confessed, nor is his thinking of Sophia taking a toll on his time or efforts. The magazine remains on the top list of his priorities. This is so because Ramice’s type of intellectuality works toward cultural regeneration as outlined in the following statements:

The magazine he had given to was a labor of love. The Algerian media landscape had been inundated by opaque politics, limping sports and domestic tabloids. Not a single public-focused science magazine did exist. Ramice was itching for pioneering such an enterprise in Algeria. (85-6)

Given the entire pathetic cultural climate, finding the Algerian parallel to major American and European science publications is no a small step at all. Indeed, it is this spirit that compels Sophia to tell her father: “His keen talk about Algeria underscores his love to his homeland. He isn’t the sort of guys who would endanger their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea and



live therefore underground in Europe” (23). While Sophia underlines Ramice’s exceptionality as an individual, her father situates that same exceptionality in its exact historical context. Algeria, according to Gerd Weize cannot be constructed with dollars only from the oil and gas industry. Almost every forward-looking community needs, before engineers, architects and doctors, loving, earnest and dedicated people who generate hope and give people a dream for a better possibility. Indeed, every aspect about Ramice suggests that he as a character is conceived in direct opposition to the prevailing image of Algerian youth in Western, mainly French media. See how aspects of Ramice’s intellectuality can cure the damaging consequences of the harrowing experience of 1990s Algeria:

The new situation that all Algerians had to face after 1992 putsch was the sudden irruption of political violence into their lives. The outbreak of guerrilla activities coupled with the arbitrariness of state policies weakened and destroyed long-standing formal and informal social and political arrangements. People came to believe that political violence was the main engine of change and that they had no choice but to take part in this necessary evil if they wanted to remedy the social, economic and political inequalities that affected them. This ‘democratisation’ of violence also reinforced the perception of the state as a ‘predatory’ one and of the guerrillas as organised criminality. (Volpi, 93)

Indeed, the beauty of Meghzouche's narrative is that capacity of transcending the violence dissipated in the everyday culture. *Sophia in the White City* reappropriates that violent culture in the Ramice's resolute ethical choices. The merit of a text of this quality is the readers' capacity to locate instances of individuality that resist despite all odds the encroaching forces of instrumental rationality. Other people in Ramice's shoes would not think twice before moving to France or elsewhere as life in Algeria is indeed troublesome. Therefore, resisting the temptation to leave it all at that and escape with Sophia, shows an intellectual of exceptional quality and undying spirit.

## Conclusion

Through their tactful and masterful use of social media, both authors illustrate that resisting global forces of capitalism, within their limited local contexts, is indeed possible. The capacity of the principal characters in both novels in drawing their own synthesis, despite the stereotyping reflexes that mark their respective cultures, demonstrates that resistance is tenable. Ifemelu's blogs and Ramice's e-magazine, together with their rising audiences are living instantiations of the much needed work characterised as deanaestheticisation of people's consciousness. The two novels incite the need to bypass prejudiced media portrayals as such portray-

als are less constructive and more antagonizing. Narratives, like Adichie and Meghzouchene's are needed not only by Africans, but Westerners as well. In suggesting that there is some human activity of interest and value carried on in either Algeria or Nigeria; that here too men and women think, work and laugh and fail, but ultimately succeed, African youth may have the incentive to stop postponing their legitimate dreams of the life they dream until they settle in either Europe or the United States. Similarly, giving Africans some of their stolen centres back can encourage non Africans, and mainly Westerners, to respect Africans and co-operate with them more on equal grounds. Everyone can observe that Sophia's relationship with Ramice in Meghzouchene's novel is tensionless and easy. However distant such representation may be, in the face of the adverse conditions of current reality, it does not impeach the two novelists' right to dream and envisage a better world.

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