

# AMERICANAH

## Set Work Review



**'Americanah'** is local slang for a Nigerian who has spent time in America and returned with American affectations and attitudes.

**The English Experience Set Work Review: an introduction to the novel, its themes and reasons why it is a great text to teach Grade 12 students.**

### At a glance

**Title:** Americanah

**Author:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

**Date Published:** 2013

### Key Themes:

- Identity and belonging
- 'The West' versus Africa
- Migration, culture and racism
- Love, betrayal and shame
- Privilege and oppression

### Why choose this novel:

- Modern classic of African literature
- Fascinating exploration of 'Westernised' cultural norms
- Contemporary setting and fluent style of writing make the novel easily accessible
- Protagonists' attempts to 'find themselves' and integrate into a globalised society will captivate young adult readers

### INTRODUCTION

How do you stay true to yourself when the accepted definitions of identity are being constantly challenged and changed by the people and cultures around you? How can the politics of race be negotiated when you don't know the rules? Can love survive a betrayal that cannot be named? These are just some of the intricate issues that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie probes in her eye-opening third novel, *Americanah*.

Ifemelu, a smart, strong-willed and unapologetic young woman, leaves behind love and familiarity in her native Nigeria to pursue the promise of possibility in the United States. In a story that spans decades and continents, she discovers that home is 'the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil'.

*Americanah* has been highly acclaimed by critics. The novel was recognised as one of the '10 Best Books of 2013' by the editors of the prestigious *New York Times Book Review*. It was also awarded the '2013 National Book Critics Circle Award' and short listed for the '2014 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction' (formerly known as the 'Orange Prize for Fiction'). It is, without doubt, already a 'modern classic' of African literature.

### PLOT SUMMARY

Adichie's novel is, ostensibly, a love story: Ifemelu leaves behind her teenage sweetheart Obinze in Nigeria with the promise that they will, one day, find a way to be together again. When desperation and poverty force her to commit an act of ultimate betrayal, her shame prompts her to cut off all contact with him. Their transcendent bond never falters, however, and, as the years pass and their lives trace different paths, their hearts and minds constantly return to each other. More than a decade after parting, they are reunited – and must make a choice that will alter their destinies for good.

While Adichie provides poignant insight into the complexities of the heart, *Americanah* is so much more than a bittersweet love story. It is a wry, scathing and piercingly insightful social commentary that effortlessly encompasses a global perspective. Adichie has drawn on her own experiences as a Nigerian expatriate in America to expose the arbitrary constructs of cultural and racial identity in the modern Western world.

*'There are some novels that tell a great story and others that make you change the way you look at the world. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah is a book that manages to do both.'*

— The Guardian

**ACCESSIBILITY**

While beautifully written, *Americanah* is not unnecessarily complex or convoluted, and will prove highly accessible to a teenaged audience. Its contemporary themes and interrogation of 'Western cultural norms' are both insightful and compelling. The novel focuses on the challenges faced by two young, modern Africans as they leave the shelter of school and family life behind and attempt to integrate into a globalised society — challenges with which most matriculants will identify as they enter a similar phase of their lives.

Adichie's novel explores the important and topical subject of cultural and racial identity in a globalised, Westernised world. Racism, casual discrimination, identity and self-worth are explored in a way that is universally significant, and relevant to South African teenagers who are exposed, on a daily basis, to Western media and politics.

Ifemelu and Obinze, the protagonists of the novel, are complex, yet accessible characters. Their struggles to negotiate the complications of young adulthood, while simultaneously trying to find their place in the world and realise their aspirations, will resonate with matriculants.

Adichie tackles difficult topics with rare insight and sensitivity, and her writing style is poetic and engaging without being convoluted. Her themes of identity, culture, race, loneliness, dislocation, migrancy and thwarted dreams are universal in their scale and importance, but still highly relevant to the South African context.

**KEY THEMES****Identity and belonging**

*'Even she had once been somebody else.'*

Both Ifemelu and Obinze struggle to find their place in a globalised society that has already made its assumptions about who they are, before they have even discovered that for themselves. They spend much of the novel in a space that is undefined and uncertain, even as they resist the definitions that have been foisted upon them. As African migrants, they are forced to negotiate cultural norms that are wholly unfamiliar and which push them to the fringes of society.

The politics of identity, race and class are profoundly disorientating for both characters. Though she is unaware of her own 'blackness' before arriving in the States, Ifemelu finds her identity is suddenly channelled almost exclusively through external cultural and racial funnels. As the blows of casual prejudice chip away at her, it is only through her commitment to authenticity that she is able to reclaim her self-worth.

Her sweetheart Obinze, meanwhile, is pierced by a sense of loneliness and dislocation during his ill-fated tenure as an illegal immigrant in

England. Even when he returns to Nigeria and establishes himself as a successful businessman, he is still overwhelmed by the conscious emptiness that claimed him as a victim of predetermined social hierarchies of class and race in London.

*'Race is such a strange construct because you have to learn what it means to be 'black' in America. You have to learn that watermelon is supposed to be offensive.'*

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

**'The West' versus Africa**

As well as exploring the idiosyncrasies of life in America and England, Adichie's novel lays bare the stark and difficult realities of life in contemporary Nigeria. Despite being one of the economic powerhouses of Africa, it is a country still wracked by political instability and the consequences of a chequered past. It is a place where business is booming, but even the most basic commodities of modern life, like water and electricity, are in short supply. Ifemelu and her friends are gripped by the drive to leave its borders behind and seek their fortunes elsewhere: it is not war and poverty they are fleeing, but rather a crippling lack of choice and opportunity.

*'Americanah is witheringly trenchant and hugely empathetic, both worldly and geographically precise, a novel that holds the discomfiting realities of our times fearlessly before us. It never feels false.'*

— The New York Times

**CONCLUSION:*****Why choose this novel?***

- Its characters are complex and intriguing, and the crises of identity they negotiate will be familiar to any teenager.
- Adichie's contemporary setting and fluent style of writing make the novel easily accessible.
- The novel deals with issues of globalised culture and the politics of identity, which are highly relevant to Grade 12 students.
- It provides a sharp, yet sensitive insight into contemporary societies in America, England and Nigeria, exploring ideas of migration and 'the West versus Africa' that students are likely to find fascinating.



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