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## RETRIEVING SELF-DIGNITY: TO BE A CREATIVE NON-VICTIM IN AMERICANAH

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### ABSTRACT:

Margaret Atwood propounds four basic victim positions in her memorable work *Survival*. In position one the victim rejects his or her own victimhood. Position two denotes the passive acceptance of victimhood. Position three describes the overcome of one's victimhood. The final position is for the non-victims or ex-victims. The novel, *Americanah* surpasses the Position Four by affirming the hope of retrieval of one's own identity. The protagonist Ifemelu is able to reach Position

Four after gaining the varied experiences of the previous victim positions. She is successfully able to move from Position Three repudiation, since her meaningful return to her own country Nigeria suggests the fact of that she sheds off the internal and external causes of racial victimization which has been threatening her so far. In her quest of reclaiming her identity, she spends considerable time making a living in contemplating and compromising situations in the immigrant country and goes back to Nigeria and survive there. She can be claimed as an ex-victim for she no longer connects with the oppressive racial discrimination of America. It is also implied that Ifemelu is an exemplary woman who provides the inspiration for the contemporary women to aspire for complete liberation.

**KEYWORDS:** *Self-Dignity, Creative, Non-victim, Americanah & Liberation.*

### INTRODUCTION:

They look unblinkingly at the challenges they confront while also creating visions of a more positive future, using writing to bear witness to oppression, to document opposition struggles, and to share successful strategies of resistance. (AWWR 3)

Margaret Atwood propounds four basic victim positions in her memorable work *Survival*. In position one the victim rejects his or her own

victimhood. Position two denotes the passive acceptance of victimhood. Position three describes the overcome of one's victimhood. The final position is for the non-victims or ex-victims. Atwood's Basic Victim Position Four is "a position not for victims but for those who have never been victims at all, or for ex-victims: those who have been able to move into it from Position Three because the external and/or the internal causes of victimization have been removed." (Surv 35). The novel, *Americanah* surpasses the Position Four by affirming the hope of retrieval of one's own

identity. The protagonist Ifemelu is able to reach Position Four after gaining the varied experiences of the previous victim positions. Moreover, as Atwood mentions, "In an oppressed society, of course, you can't become an ex-victim – insofar as you are connected with your society – until the entire society's position has been changed." (Surv 35), Ifemelu, on deciding to move from America, becomes an ex-victim, who feel the air of truly free environment in Nigeria. She is now an ex-victim of the racial prejudices of America, who has been successfully able to move from

Position Three repudiation, since her meaningful return to her own country Nigeria suggests the fact of that she sheds off the internal and external causes of racial victimization which has been threatening her so far.

In her quest of reclaiming her moral identity, she spends considerable time making a living in contemplating and compromising situations in the immigrant country and goes back to Nigeria and survive there. She can be claimed as an ex-victim for she no longer connects with the oppressive racial discrimination of America. Ifemelu's revelation of Position Four can be marked early in the first chapter of the novel when she was about to "braid her hair for the journey home" (Amer 8). Tuned by the bitter experiences while having to imitate and cope with the living style of the Americans, she begins to observe the tremendous negative changes in her physical, psychological, and intellectual space. Ifemelu gathers the energy to cleanse her influenced mind before it is too late. She strives to utilise her freedom of choice, channelizing her constructive anger about the discrimination of black African women.

Ifemelu fathoms the thought of returning to her homeland Nigeria after thirteen years, since she learns that she has been ignoring all her originality to become a real American. She thinks: "Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil." (Amer 6). She closes down her famous blog, gives up the speaking fees, leaves the privileged fellowship at Princeton and abandons the good relationship with Blaine for the strong desire to go back to Nigeria hoping to re-join her boyfriend Obinze. As Atwood says "Energy is no longer suppressed", Ifemelu begins to think exclusively for her and her development in life, refreshed by her return to where she original belong to. When Ranyinudo comments she no longer behaves like an Americanah, "Ifemelu felt pleased to hear this." (Amer 395). She only feels happy and confident that she has got back her own self. Regaining self-confidence, she is more assured to achieve anything in her own nation, where one cannot refer to her as "lost" (Amer 116) into America, as the natives say about men going to America for survival and has not think about their own soil to return to.

Ifemelu finds a job as a features editor in a Nigerian women's magazine called *Zoe*, and set out to visualize her own progress in the future of herself along with the future of the magazine. She has endearing plans with innovation and freshness that are exclusively address to Nigerian women's welfare: "she already imagined taking over the running of *Zoe*, turning it into a vibrant, relevant companion for Nigerian women, and – who knew – perhaps one day buying out Auntie Onenu. And she would not welcome new recruits in her home." (Amer 392). Ifemelu gets herself boosted up to face challenges, ready to execute feminist ideals. Creative activities of all kinds is possible for her, for she wishes to replace the idea of lethargic Westernised lifestyle of Nigerians with the more original recreation of Nigerianness. By defamiliarising the notion of acculturation, she heads towards developing and establishing pridefulness on valuing the indigenous culture. This is relevant to the writer's comments: Adopting local ways of dressing, eating or entertainment was also deemed to signify the loss of the European racial-cultural attributes, a dilution of the purity of the Western race – and thus attracted considerable opprobrium. (PSCD 112).

Her writing becomes the performative act for creating progressive change in the society she lives in. Ifemelu becomes more optimistic soon after she stepped in Lagos. Racial prejudice, which becomes the internal and external cause of her victimization is now removed. She feels somehow she have escaped the source of victimization that has been making her feel so less about herself. She shares the sense of contentment with Curt, who asked about her blog after she left him. She simply says, "she begins to write blogs "just about life. Race doesn't really work here, I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black." (Amer 476). The physical return to Nigeria, represents her reclaim of spiritual return, to be able to breathe the air of freedom, free of the suppressing racial elements that occupied her thoughts. As Atwood says, Ifemelu does not "even have to concentrate on rejecting the role of Victim, because the role is no longer a temptation" for her. (Atwood 35). Ifemelu finds herself energized with full of plans to alternate the image of the Western accustomed lifestyle of women and wants to change the stereotyped values that are highlighted only for women. Ifemelu has now found success in Nigeria, and this is a kind of victory over her ongoing restlessness and struggle for identity.

She feels comfortable and confident with herself as both an American and a Nigerian now, having found her place in the world with Obinze. As she has the freedom to write about what she wants, and can both observe and humorously critique daily life in Lagos as a semi-outside observer. She focuses on the culture of materialistic romantic relationships as she is finally starting to feel comfortable and confident in Nigeria again. Her suggestions voice the need for change in every aspects of life, to shed imitations, by lifting indigenous values: “stop lifting foreign magazine pieces. Most of your readers can’t go into the market and buy broccoli because we don’t have it in Nigeria, so why does this month’s *Zoe* have a recipe for cream of broccoli soup?” (Amer 392). Ifemelu becomes dissatisfied with the magazine as she observes the upper-class Nigerians’ overt sophistication about wealth and pompousness that only comes out of falsity. Nigerians’ craving for wealth and power makes the country economically weak that it suppresses the poor and praises the rich. She notices that her employer of the magazine runs it for her own publicity out of a selfish competition with another women magazine run by her rival. She leaves the job with many effective plans for her own blog about her own country. She begins to imagine the design and content of her own blog which will truly reflect the issues of her country to gain awareness among women:

The blog posts would be in a stark, readable font. An article about health care... A piece about the Nigeropolitan Club. A fashion article about clothes that women could actually afford. Posts about people helping others, but nothing like the *Zoe* stories that always featured a wealthy person, hugging children at a motherless babies’ home, with bags of rice and tins of powdered milk propped in the background. (Amer 417)

Like criticising the modern day racism in America, Ifemelu is also well aware of the persisting colonial mentality of her country. She had observed American culture with an outsider’s eye, and now she is doing the same thing with Nigerian culture, since so many years have passed that it feels foreign to her. Adichie turns her critical eye on the materialistic culture of Lagos, and the unhealthy romantic relationships that are based on money and power instead of love or mutual respect. Her criticism is always direct and demanding for change to pull out Nigeria’s prevailing ignorance of its mere inclination for imitating the American as well as European ideals, its previous colonial masters.

Ifemelu faces serious obstructions from the native women for her openness in her blog about their counterfeit graciousness towards the poor for the sake of publicity. Her questioning attitude draws more challenges that she takes them as positive signs of development. As a revolutionary, unconventional woman, she tries to influence and change her female counterparts who live in Position Two trapped attitude for they all subject themselves unconsciously. Her rebellious attitude reminds of Atwood’s point that “anger and the desire for change depend on the assumption that change will be for the better, that is in fact possible to achieve not only individual but social freedom.” (Surv 274).

One could find the anger against the institutional biases of the white against the Afro hair as they supposedly perceive it one of the main threatening carriers of African culture in contradiction to theirs. The problem of racial predispositions is quoted by Banton who points out how institutions fail to treat the employers impartially:

‘Institutional Racism’ consists of the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage ethnic minority people. (CR 81)

She faces the same institutional racism consequently leads to her resignation. She is able to perceive “her own new American selves”, which is indeed the role of victim that she now wants to get over. On the process of discovering her true identity, she decides to quit imitating the American way of speaking English, while she feels ashamed by the appraisal of a young telemarketer that she speaks exactly like an American. On the process of self-assurance, she realises she has been seeking “victimization even when there’s no call for it.” (Surv 34). It can be disclosed that her speech has been out of her voluntary act:

Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent...she had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters... the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will, it took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. Since she realises that she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. (Amer 173-74)

Atwood's Position Four talks about all-encompassing freedom including the liberation of language that means the freedom of writing and speaking language with all its contexts. Such notion explains the true freedom away from the constraints of the society. In *Americanah* too language plays a major role. Ifemelu writes a blog, though anonymous, it provides striking criticism of American racial prejudices. The expression of language enhances sharing knowledge and inspiration for support among the members of the oppressive society, seeking appreciations and support for Ifemelu, since she echoes the dissatisfaction of the massive two different black communities such as Black Americans and American Blacks.

Ifemelu tries to conciliate her moral contemplation whenever she feels tempted by the outward realities, which display sophistication. The self-empowered women in Adichie's stories, like Ifemelu, diverge themselves from the tradition, thereby making their own dictates. They do not place themselves to be desperate or impoverished, as they tend to find solutions from their own experiences. They take charge of their life impermeable against the factors that threaten to suppress them. She does not want to be like the "apologetic and self-abasing" (Amer 108) women she comes across in her life. Ifemelu is not the one who compromise her freedom and dignity for love or belongingness. Ifemelu takes responsibility of her own life and sexuality as she creates the life she believes it to be. It reminds of Atwood's description about the non-victims: "Since he does not see life as something that can only be maintained inside a fortress and at expense of shutting out Nature and sex, he is free to move *within* space rather than in a self-created tank against it." (Surv 63). Ifem does not shut herself into nature or sex or takes up the role of a "self-sabotager" (Amer 287), but now, "she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being." (Amer 475).

The expression of racial issues to the wide online world keeps her spirited to share her awareness towards deconstructing the stereotypes which are falsely created about black women's nature and activities. It shows her authenticity to tackle her predicaments concerning her racial identity. She uses her creativity in her blog to share her views on behalf of black African women, who seriously experience abuses regarding their race. "you are able to accept your own experience for what it is, rather than having to distort it make it correspond with other's versions of it (particularly those of your oppressors)" (Surv 36). Her blog is only way to empower her activism to create room for her community to share. It gives her voice and a platform to express her worldview to unify strength to oppose racial discrimination. By placing value on honouring the self-worth of black identity, she spreads the hope for the better future.

In the way of "making explicit the experience of being a victim" (Surv 269) in a western imperialist culture, *Americanah* raises the female consciousness which can be channelized for the productive, healthy ideological avowals that strives to approve the worth of black women. Though returning to the homeland which has some crucial issues to be rectified and improved, it gives her hope to belong to her own country to bring a positive change. On her quest for empowering Nigerian women, she finds the inner strength to achieve success to transform into a well-balanced society which promotes equality of sexes. Ifemelu's decision to start a blog ensures her creative talent with a nationalist purpose of empowering women of Nigeria. Sharing her art of blogging is essential for her persistence to do more than just survive, as she keeps her creative vision alive. Ifemelu's stance reflects the potential for self-redemption while she makes herself as a representative of her society.

Ifemelu's realisation on the value of identity keeps her feeling authentic and responsible to herself and her society. Her thought processes are always directed towards her own nation, in fact, they strengthen enormously soon after she happened to face the indifferences in America. Through Ifemelu, Adichie constantly, and indubitably suggest youngsters that there is always a possibility for change to eradicate the feeling of inferiority of one's indigenous culture, and the degradation of self-contentment,

and dignity of one's own country. Well aware of the colonial influences which misguide the spirited youth to admire western ways of living, Adichie gives hope by advocating the choice and need of return to one's roots. Adichie's practical statement on the plentiful disadvantages of living in a society full of corruption does not underestimate her suggestion of return. She implies that men and women can make difference and it may start from the choice of an individual. Ndaka's assertion on Ifemelu's writing corresponds to that of her Position Four stance:

The blog presents the possibility of productive engagement, a freeing space where the narrator refuses to be censored and to be complicit. This movement away from silence, to voicing, to polyvocality is transformational and liberatory in its refusal of containment, its articulation of the incoherence of nationalist, patriarchal and racial imperatives and its disruption of... understandings of womanhood, Americanness, and transnational subjectivity. (Rupturing 119)

Through Ifemelu, Adichie has reconstructed the definitions of female, energizing and ascertaining her audience to revitalize their lives through eliminating the suppression and exploitation by the Nigerian ruling class, as well as the traditional patriarchal middle-class community. Ifemelu's will for creative activity possess a self-discovery and aspiration to reform the corrupted country suggesting that a forward, better society can be imagined and made possible. Ifemelu's blog insinuate its audience to re-evaluate the need for acknowledgement that there is problem about race, and there is a problem about gender that should be considered necessarily urgent.

Ifemeluturns to accept her own body as part of life's process, including sexuality, as part of this process, accepting too the flexibility the process requires. Since she does not see life as something that can only be maintained inside a fortress and at the shutting out Nature and sex. Since, the cause of her victimisation no longer exist as a threat, she is, in Atwood's words: "free to move *within* space rather than in a self-created tank against it." (Surv 63). It is clear that she is not satisfied to return to America because it is against her true wish, that if she makes a choice to go, she has to kill her inner self, which pushes her into self-deception. The fourth basic victim position insists on the self-containment, that resulted from accepting the world as it is with all its complexities, and a broad, forward perception to take life as a process.

They themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again. Here, Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself. (Amer 139)

It is implied that that if the people of the same group unite they could set up recognizing and exploring their own tradition, which in turn creates a healthy interaction that could help for a better change or transformation. The mocking and criticising of one's own stories reflect a common concern and responsibility of rejuvenating, and rethinking the social change that values self-respect and capability. Through Ifemelu, Adichie invites the readers to participate and involve in their struggle for retrieving, and redefining Africa, with all its power of youth.

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