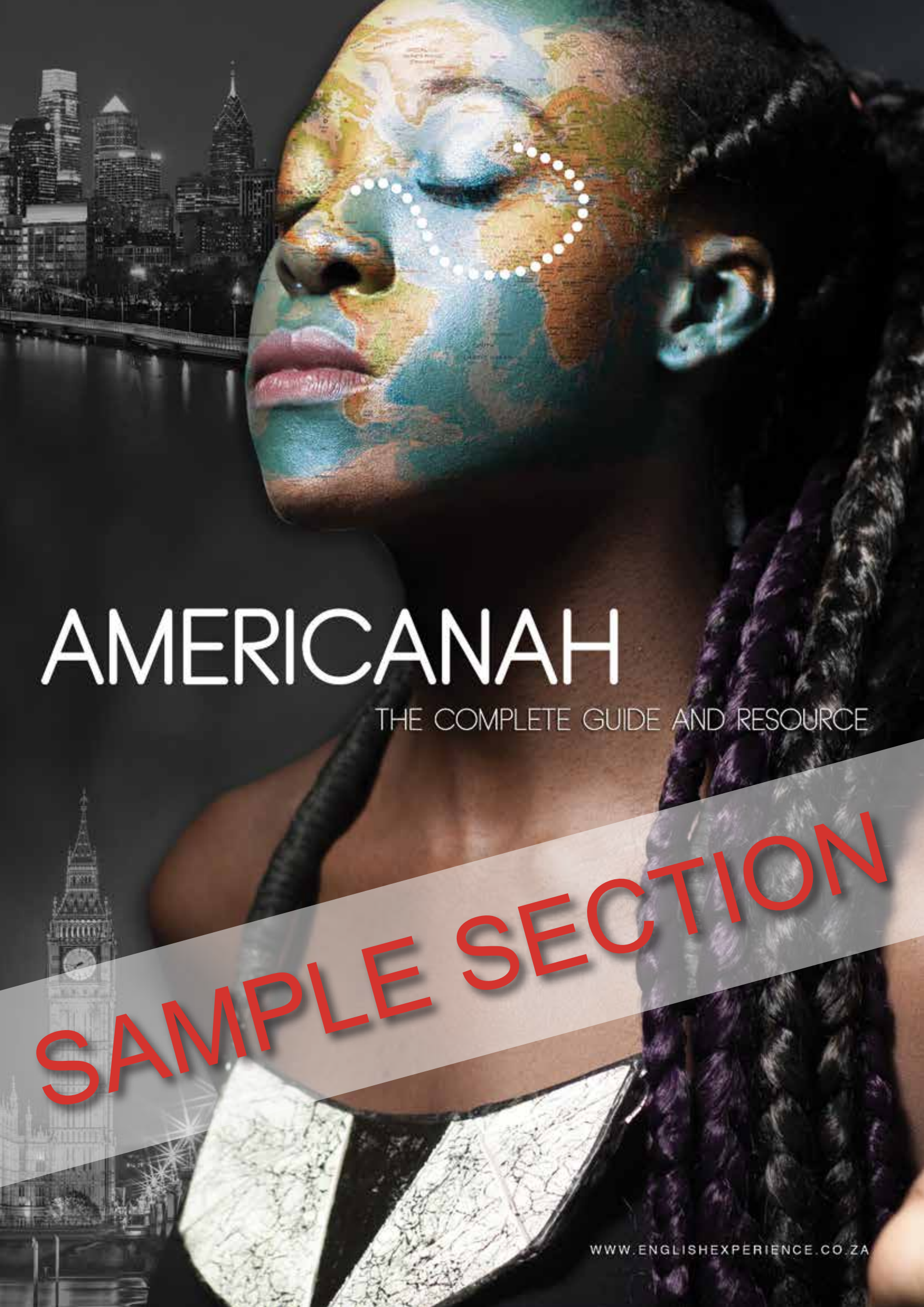
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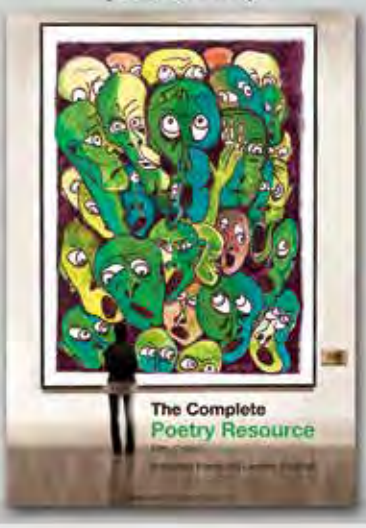

Essential Guide to the IEB English Exam for Grade 12 (Fifth Edition)

The Complete Life Orientation Resource for Grades 10-12

The Complete Poetry Resource for Grades 10 & 11

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the English experience

AMERICANAH

Complete Guide and Resource

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All references made to the novel in this resource and the companion disc refer to the Fourth Estate edition of the novel (ISBN 978-0-00-735634-8)

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Foreword

About The English Experience

The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for IEB educators and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind The English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate — enriching and challenging both educators and students — without losing sight of the important goal of examination readiness and success.

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource The English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features — including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials — designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields, such as South African fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proofreaders and obsessive fact checkers — together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While examination readiness and success is a non-negotiable, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.

Visit **www.englishexperience.co.za** to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code to launch the site on your phone automatically. Please note, you will need to have the free 'Tag reader' app installed, which you can download from your app store or by visiting https://www.scan.me/download/

Our approach

Perhaps the toughest challenge with teaching literature to modern students is convincing them that the extra effort required in reading a novel — compared with the passive immediacy of movies and TV shows — is worth it. Decoding the language and bringing the text to life in the imagination can be taxing for young adults so it's perhaps not surprising that many of them see novels as works through which they have to slog to pass an examination.

This resource has been written with this reality in mind. Even though the language and settings of the novel are likely to be easily accessible to Grade 12 students, particular attention has been paid to providing the kind of context and insight necessary to help them fully empathise with the characters and their struggles.

We passionately believe that studying literature rewards us with a broader, deeper understanding of ourselves and those around us. Our experience of this rewarding understanding is why this resource does more than provide students with a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the text. It also encourages them to engage with the novel on a personal level and to uncover their own responses through the extensive chapter-specific questions, enrichment tasks and essay topics.

Throughout this resource, students are challenged to agree or disagree with both the characters and events in the novel and the analysis that has been provided. By formulating and expressing their own responses to the opinions, ideas and themes explored in the novel, students are encouraged to reflect and grow as individuals, as well as students.

In the end, we have approached *Americanah* the same way we approach every text: with two, interrelated goals in mind. The first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and success. The second ambition is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the work being studied.

Using this resource

This comprehensive resource includes: an extensive introduction to the novel, the author and its historical background; detailed summaries; rich literary analyses; diverse, chapter-specific short questions; challenging essay questions; and stimulating enrichment tasks — in short, everything needed to study the novel intensively and to bring it to life.

Background to the novel

We recommend working through the 'background to the novel' section first so that students become familiar with the author, the novel and its historical context.

While much of *Americanah* is set in the United States and England, the novel finds its beginning, its end and its thematic heart in Nigeria. As a result, a brief knowledge of the historical, political and social complexities of Nigerian society will greatly help students to understand what drives and motivates the characters.

This section includes an introduction to the important concept of 'blackness' as well, which is one of the central themes of the novel.

The 'introduction to the novel' segment completes this section, giving students an initial overview and appreciation of the plot, characters and themes of the work, before they engage with the text itself.

By working through this comprehensive introductory section first, students will be prepared, engaged and able to read the novel with the right mindset.

Critical commentary

Once students have been prepared and have read through the novel, the chapter-by-chapter summaries and analyses provided in the 'critical commentary' section ensure that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid.

Each chapter is summarised and analysed separately. We have used the past tense for summaries of chapters in which Ifemelu is thinking back to her early days in America and the present tense for summaries of chapters that take place after she has returned to Nigeria in the latter half of the novel.

Extensive glossaries are included and students are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. Students can then methodically build on this foundation, only dealing with the whole novel once they have worked through it step-by-step.

At the end of the summaries, there are also a series of enrichment tasks and a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students also tackle the novel in its entirety.

Literary analysis

The 'literary analysis' section includes analyses of the plot, narration and structure, characters, themes, motifs and symbols. It also highlights key quotations from the novel, together with suggested explanations.

Literary essay

To ensure examination readiness and success, the resource also features an extensive section on the 'literary essay'. This section provides guidelines on writing literary essays, two annotated examples from which to learn and a selection of essay topics. It also includes suggested further reading, a useful revision reading quiz and suggestions on how to prepare for the final examination.

We hope you enjoy using this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

KEY TO USING THE BOXES IN THIS RESOURCE:

Definition or Glossary

Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text

Information

Provides additional details or facts about a topic

Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention

Quirky Fact

Fun, interesting, extraneous information

Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily

Pull Quote

An important quotation from the novel

Background to the novel

Author biography

The pathways of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's own life journey have left indelible traces in the pages of her third novel, Americanah*. Much like her characters, Nigerian-born Adichie left her home as a teenager to carve out her future overseas. As an adult, she splits her time between America, her adopted home, and Nigeria, the country in which she has sunk her roots.*

'Nigeria is where my heart is; it's where my soul is buried.'

The fifth of six children, Adichie was born and raised in the town of Nsukka in South East Nigeria. The house in which she grew up was once home to imminent writer and intellectual Chinua Achebe. Her **Igbo** parents were both prominent academics at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. Her father was a professor of statistics who later became Deputy Vice-Chancellor and her mother was the first woman to hold the post of Registrar at the university.

Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka.

Adichie herself began studying pharmacy and medicine at the University in Nsukka, but she was offered a scholarship to study communication at Drexel University in Philadelphia a year and a half into her studies, at the age of 19, and she left Nigeria for America.

She later transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University (to be near her older sister who had a medical practice in the area) and graduated in 2001 with the highest honours in political science and communication.

i

The **Igbo** are the second-largest group of people living in southern Nigeria. They are one of the three major tribes in Nigeria. They consist of many subgroups and are known to be socially and culturally diverse. The Igbo invented a calendar to facilitate religious celebrations and commerce, based on a four-day week and 13 months, each consisting of seven weeks or 28 days. The Igbo blacksmiths of Awka are renowned for their skills as ironsmiths throughout Nigeria.

Nigerian footballer John Michael Nchekwube Obinna (pictured right), known as John Obi Mikel, is a member of the Igbo tribe. 'Obi' is a hypocorism or diminutive of the Igbo name 'Obinna', which means 'Father's heart'.

Two novels in two years

Two years later, Adichie went on to complete a Master of Arts degree in creative writing at the prestigious Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. That same year, her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was released to widespread critical acclaim and received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in 2005.

Also in 2005, Adichie was offered the Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University and, in August of the following year, she released her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. A heart-wrenching story set during the Nigerian Civil War, the novel went on to win a slew of awards, including the Orange Prize for Fiction. It was later adapted into a film starring Chiwetel Ejiofor and Thandie Newton, which was released in 2014.

© Slate Films and Shareman Media

The poster for the 2014 film adaptation of Adichie's second novel,* Half of a Yellow Sun*. The Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board only allowed the movie to be released in Nigeria once its portrayal of the Biafran War had been moderated.

The 'Genius Grant' and *Americanah*

Adichie earned her second Master's degree, this time in African Studies, from Yale University in 2008. She was subsequently awarded the highly prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the 'Genius Grant', a substantial monetary grant bestowed on exceptional individuals as 'an investment in a person's originality, insight and potential', according to the MacArthur Foundation.

By the time she was 30 years old, Adichie had established herself as a formidable intellectual and a gifted writer. Her collection of short stories, *That Thing Around Your Neck*, was published in 2009 and, the following year, she was recognised by the *New Yorker* as one of the best fiction writers under the age of 40 in the world.

In 2011, she took up a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, which gave her the opportunity to complete and release her third novel, *Americanah*, in 2013. In addition to being named one of the '10 Best Books of 2013' by the *New York Times Book Review*, *Americanah* won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and was shortlisted for the 2014 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction.

From TED talk to Beyoncé

Adichie is an engaging, poised and compelling speaker who gives talks at various workshops and symposia. At the end of 2012, she delivered a lecture at TEDxEuston entitled *We should all be feminists*. The 30-minute talk has been viewed almost three million times on YouTube. It garnered further attention in 2013, when it was sampled by Beyoncé in her song *Flawless*. An adapted transcription of the lecture was published in 2014 and is given for free to every 16-year-old in Sweden.

In May 2016, Adichie was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by her *alma mater*, Johns Hopkins University, in recognition of her exceptional achievements in the field of literature.

© TEDxEuston

Adichie delivering her lecture at TEDxEuston entitled* We should all be feminists*. The talk can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc

> *'I think of myself as a storyteller, but I would not mind at all if someone were to think of me as a feminist writer. Sometimes I find myself pushing against labels, only because they can become prescriptive. But at the same time, I'm very feminist in the way I look at the world, and that worldview must somehow be part of my work.'* — Interview with Janell Hobson for *Ms.* Magazine

FLAWLESS FEMINISTS

In 2013, singer Beyoncé sampled a section of Adichie's acclaimed TEDxEuston talk, We should all be feminists*, in her song* Flawless*, in which Adichie says:*

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller
We say to girls: 'You can have ambition, but not too much
You should aim to be successful, but not too successful
Otherwise, you will threaten the man'
Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage
I am expected to make my life choices
Always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important
Now, marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support
But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage
And we don't teach boys the same?
We raise girls to see each other as competitors
Not for jobs or for accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing
But for the attention of men
We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are
Feminist: a person who believes in the social
Political and economic equality of the sexes

© Kevin Edwards (Flickr)

Singer Beyoncé performing during* The Formation World Tour *in May 2016.

Adichie on Adichie: The author in her own words

On *Americanah*:

© Kenart-Creation

'I have found that the older I get, the less interested I am in how the West sees Africa and the more interested I am in how Africa sees itself.'

'I have for a very long time wanted to write an unapologetic love story, but one that is very much set in a practical world affected by things like getting a visa and paying rent.' — Interview with Megan O'Grady for *Vogue* magazine

'The novel is very very loosely based on my experiences, not so much mine as the experiences and stories of other people. … I think largely that my experience was milder than the character's, and also because my life is fairly boring. So if I wrote a book based on my life, it wouldn't be very interesting. But like the character, I became black in America. I didn't think of myself as black when I was in Nigeria because there was no need. We identified based on different things, like religion and ethnicity, but not race in Nigeria. And to come to the US and discover that this new identity had been thrust on me — it wasn't so much about having this new identity, because I think that we take on new identities depending on where we are — but it was discovering that this new identity came with a lot of negative baggage; that to be black in America meant certain things, many of them really negative things.' — Interview with Emily Reddy for Pennsylvania State University

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'[M]uch of Ifemelu's character is shaped by being disconnected from home for so long. I quite like that she is a female character who is not safe and easily likable, who is both strong and weak, both prickly and vulnerable.' — Interview with John Williams for the *New York Times*

On identity and stereotyping:

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*'I recently spoke at a university where a student told me it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel [*Purple Hibiscus*]. I told him that I had recently read a novel called* American Psycho*, and that it was a shame that young Americans were serial murderers.' — The Danger of a Single Story*, TED Talk

'Show a people as one thing, only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.' — The Danger of a Single Story, TED Talk

On race:

'To confront race as a person who has grown up in a place where race is not central to identity is a very interesting thing. I think there's a sense in which I am outside of things, in a way. So it's

easy to see things, and also to laugh at things, even things that I think are very serious or sad or horrible. But also, there's an absurdity to a lot of the things that surround race in America.' — Interview with Emily Reddy for Pennsylvania State University

'The books and novels I've read about race didn't satisfy me… it says something about the way no one is honest about race. It's not that people aren't thinking those things, it's that they're not saying them.' – Interview with Anupa Mistry for *Hazzlit*

'I think that immigration into places like the U.S. for Africans is always about shifting identities. When I go back to Nigeria, one of the things I like to joke about with my friends is that I get off the plane, and the heat is crazy, but I drop my race baggage. Race just doesn't occur to me in Nigeria. You become something else, though there are still labels.' – Interview with Susan Van Zanten for *Image*

© DeeperDarker

On being African:

'Nigeria is where my heart is; it's where my soul is buried.' — Interview with Emily Reddy for Pennsylvania State University

*'We have a long history of Africa being seen in ways that are not very complimentary, and in America being seen as an African writer comes with baggage that we don't necessarily care for. Americans think African writers will write about the exotic, about wildlife, poverty, maybe Aids. They come to Africa and African books with certain expectations. I was told by a professor at Johns Hopkins University that he didn't believe my first book [*Purple Hibiscus*, published in 2003] because it was too familiar to him. In other words, I was writing about middle-class Africans who had cars and who weren't starving to death, and therefore to him it wasn't authentically African.*' — Interview with Stephen Moss for *The Guardian*

'What I find problematic is the suggestion that when, say, Madonna adopts an African child, she is saving Africa. It's not that simple. You have to do more than go there and adopt a child or show us pictures of children with flies in their eyes. That simplifies Africa. If you followed the media you'd think that everybody in Africa was starving to death, and that's not the case; so it's important to engage with the other Africa.' – Interview with Stephen Moss for *The Guardian*

© mDantheMan

On religion:

'As I was growing up, we went to church every Sunday. I was drawn to religion, but I was the kid who just wouldn't shut up. I had questions. Everybody else went to church and came home. I wanted to go to the sacristy and talk to the priest about why he said that, I'm sure much to my father's irritation. … I do [still] go to mass sometimes, but I've also been known to get up and stalk out when I felt the priest was being ridiculous. My last heated argument with a priest was in Nigeria about a year ago. After mass I went to speak to him about what I felt was his misogyny, because his entire mass was about attacking women for what they wore. … I remember feeling that this was the problem I had with religion as a whole, that this man had been given so much power. An immense power comes with being a priest, and particularly in an area like Nigeria, where there's an automatic hero worship of religious figures and an unwillingness to criticize them.' — Interview with Susan Van Zanten for *Image*

Enrichment tasks

Exercise 1: Visual literacy

Consider the following cartoon by Barry Deutsch, an American political cartoonist, and answer the questions that follow:

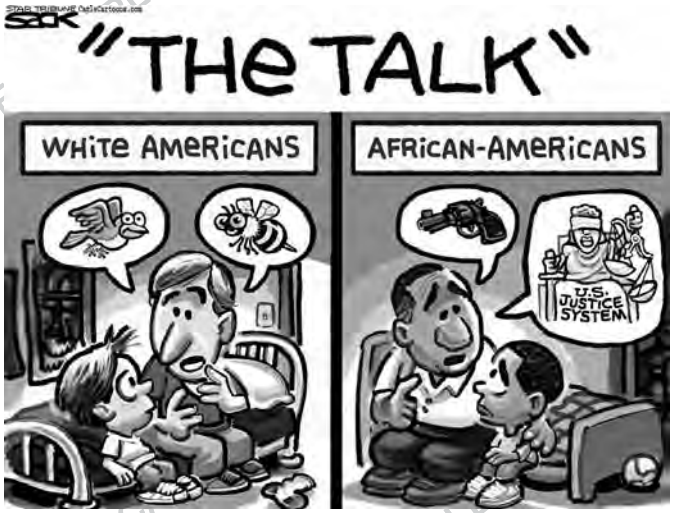
1.1 Identify and define the Figure of Speech used by Deutsch to create humour in his cartoon, and explain how it functions in this context. (4)

1.2 Explain the meaning of the idiom 'a foot in the door'. (1)

1.3 What is Deutsch suggesting about the history of race relations in America, and how does he achieve this? (4)

1.4 Who does the character 'Bob' represent in this cartoon? (2)

Consider the following cartoon by Steve Sack, the Pulitzer prize-winning editorial cartoonist for the *Star Tribune* in the United States, and answer the questions that follow:



1.5 What is the meaning of the phrase "The Talk" as it is used in the context of this cartoon? (2)

1.6 Identify and explain the common idiom alluded to by the pictures contained in the speech bubbles of the first panel. (2)

1.7 How does Sack suggest that the content of the "The Talk" differs for the African-American father and son in the second panel, and what is the reason for this difference? (4)

1.8 How does Sack use the facial expressions of his characters to reinforce the message of his cartoon? (2)

1.9 By referring to both of the cartoons provided, identify some of the social and political issues that have been interrogated by each artist, and explain the mutual social message that they convey. (4)

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Exercise 2: Nigerian poetry

Like most African poetry, **Nigerian poetry** has undergone a remarkable transformation since the country gained independence almost 60 years ago. Diverse cultural influences have fused within the art form to establish a uniquely Nigerian 'voice', which draws on the traditions of African oral poetry. The end of colonialism saw Nigerian poets throwing out the defined styles of Western poetry and replacing them with new forms and themes. Today, Nigerian poetry is often inspired by social and political awareness of the issues and crises facing the country. According to Nigerian poet Odimegwu Onwumere, 'Against the backdrop of what can be described as formidable, Nigerian poets represent the opposition to the ills of the society.'

Some of the most well-known poets from Nigeria include:

- Wole Soyinka
- Chinua Achebe
- Godspower Oboido
- Christopher Okigbo
- Remi Raji
- Lola Shoneyin
- Toyin Adewale-Gabriel

Consider the poem "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed" by Gabriel Okara and answer the questions that follow:

"You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed"

In your ears my song
is motor car misfiring
stopping with a choking cough;
and you laughed and laughed and laughed.
In your eyes my ante-
natal walk was inhuman, passing
your 'omnivorous understanding'
and you laughed and laughed and laughed
You laughed at my song,
you laughed at my walk.
Then I danced my magic dance
to the rhythm of talking drums pleading, but you shut your eyes
and laughed and laughed and laughed
And then I opened my mystic
inside wide like the sky,
instead you entered your
car and laughed and laughed and laughed
You laughed at my dance,
you laughed at my inside.
You laughed and laughed and laughed.
But your laughter was ice-block
laughter and it froze your inside froze
your voice froze your ears
froze your eyes and froze your tongue.
And now it's my turn to laugh;
but my laughter is not
ice-block laughter. For I
know not cars, know not ice-blocks.
My laughter is the fire
of the eye of the sky, the fire
of the earth, the fire of the air,
the fire of the seas and the
rivers fishes animals trees
and it thawed your inside,
thawed your voice, thawed your
ears, thawed your eyes and
thawed your tongue.
So a meek wonder held
your shadow and you whispered;

'Why so?'
And I answered:
'Because my fathers and I
are owned by the living
warmth of the earth
through our naked feet.'

GLOSSARY

ante-natal (line 5-6): before birth

omnivorous (line 7): an animal that eats both plants and meat OR taking in or using whatever is available in an indiscriminate fashion

meek (line 38): quiet, submissive, gentle

Gabriel Okara (1921 -) is a Nigerian novelist, poet and playwright whose work frequently appears in international anthologies. His poems draw heavily on Nigerian folklore to explore everyday life, and frequently feature circular or repetitive patterns. He is also concerned with the influences of Western culture in Africa. Okara was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1979.

2.1 Explain whom the speaker is addressing as 'you' throughout the poem, providing evidence from the poem as a whole to substantiate your answer. (4)

2.2 What does the use of the word 'ante- / natal' (lines 5-6) suggest about the addressee's perception of the speaker? (2)

2.3 Comment on the way in which the speaker plays on the double meaning of the word 'omnivorous' (line 7) in the second stanza, and indicate what this reveals about the addressee. (3)

2.4 What effect is created by the use of repetition throughout the poem? (4)

2.5 Explain the literal and figurative meanings of the phrase 'but you shut your eyes' (line 12) and comment on what this phrase suggests about the attitude of the addressee. (3)

2.6 Provide a synonym for the word 'mystic' (line 14) as it is used in this context. (1)

2.7 Identify **two** Figures of Speech used in line 15 of the poem, and explain the effect created by the two working together. (5)

2.8 What effect is created by the speaker's description of the addressee's 'ice-block / laugher' (lines 21-22)? (2)

2.9 Identify and explain the function of the punctuation mark at the end of line 25. (2)

2.10 Define the term 'extended metaphor', and explain how, and to what effect, the speaker uses this Figure of Speech in stanza 9. (5)

2.11 Using your own words, paraphrase the final stanza of the poem. (3)

2.12 Consider the poem "Still I Rise" by African-American writer Maya Angelou. Compare this poem to Okara's "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed", commenting on form, poetic devices and themes. (6)

"Still I Rise"

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

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Critical commentary

Preparation

Reading novels for academic analysis

When reading a novel that you are required to analyse for academic purposes, it is best to approach the text in a slightly different way than you would if reading a novel for pleasure. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when reading novels for academic analysis.

- It may sound obvious, but **make sure you are paying attention** when you read. If our attention wanders while we are reading, we are unlikely to take in what it is that we're reading. Be sure that when you are reading a novel for academic purposes, your attention stays focused at all times and that you are not distracted by your phone, television, friends or family members.
- **Make notes** in the page margins as you read. Marking important passages as you read them will help you save time when you are looking for them again later and will also help to keep you focused as you read.
- **Underline unfamiliar words** so that you can look up their definitions and make a note of their meanings.
- Keep the novel's **themes** in mind as you are reading and keep asking yourself how these themes are being conveyed and developed in the narrative. Make notes of any recurring **motifs and symbols** and what these represent in the text.
- Remember that you are reading for **meaning** (*what* is being said) and for **form** (*how* it is being conveyed). Literary analysis is about detecting patterns in the text and determining how these patterns convey particular messages.

Patterns of meaning

What is the text saying? (i.e. Themes)

- How is the plot structured? What happens in the narrative, and in what order?
- Where and when does the story take place?
- Who is the subject of the story?
- What are the recurring themes in the narrative?
- What message is being conveyed?
- How do you feel about what is happening in the story?

Patterns of form

How is it being said? (i.e. Technique)

- Who is the narrator of the text? When or on what occasion(s) is this narration taking place?
- How does the point of view from which the story is being told affect our understanding?
- How are the characters developed throughout the text? How do they interact with one another, and why?
- Is the narration sequential or achronological? Are there flashbacks or flash-forwards? Why is the narration structured in this way?

- What kind of symbols and motifs recur in the text? What do these symbolise, and how do they reinforce the themes of the novel?
- What do the title and chapter headings tell us about this narrative and how we should interpret it?

GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT LITERARY TERMS

archetype, archetypical: a very typical or common example of a particular type of person or thing.

bildungsroman: a genre of literature in which the protagonist, usually an adolescent, undergoes spiritual, intellectual, moral, psychological and/or social growth throughout the course of the narrative and, in doing so, achieves maturity (also known as a 'coming of age' story).

catharsis: the often painful process through which a character heals, usually through the release of strong or repressed emotions.

connotation: an idea, association or feeling that is evoked by the use of a particular word, in addition to its literal meaning.

context: the 'things around the text'; the particular circumstances that form the setting for a narrative event, statement or idea.

denouement: the climax or finale of a narrative in which the various strands of the plot are drawn together or resolved.

diction: the choice of words used.

discourse: written or spoken communication or, in literary terms, the treatment of a particular subject within the narrative.

foil: a character who contrasts starkly with another character, usually the protagonist, in order to emphasise the particular qualities or traits of the other character.

form: the structure or design of a particular literary work.

genre: in literary terms, a genre is a particular and distinguishable category of writing that employs distinct, common conventions that are recognisable across all works of the same genre.

ideology: a system of beliefs or ideals that often forms the basis for a political or economic policy, for example, apartheid.

irony: a perceptible inconsistency (sometimes humorous) in an apparently straightforward statement or situation that, given its particular context, takes on the opposite meaning or significance. In the case of **dramatic irony**, the reader or audience may know more about the character's situation or circumstances than the character and is able to recognise a sharply different or contrasting meaning to the character's statements.

metaphor, metaphoric: a Figure of Speech in which one thing is taken to represent or symbolise something else, in order to transfer particular associations or qualities on to the thing or idea being represented.

paradox, paradoxical: a statement that is so obviously untrue or contradictory that it leads the reader to consider alternative contexts in which it may be considered accurate; *or* a situation, person or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities.

point of view: the position or vantage point from which the events of a story are presented to the reader.

protagonist: the main/central character in the narrative.

syntax: the particular arrangement of words or phrases to create sentences, which may carry particular emphasis or connotations.

theme: the central message, idea or insight of a literary work.

Summaries and analyses

Using this section

Working through the novel chapter by chapter ensures that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid, and then gradually and effectively expanded. Students are not required to deal with the entire novel until they have worked through it in a methodical, step-by-step manner.

Each chapter and sub-section is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included and learners are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. At the end of the summary section, there is also a series of enrichment tasks and a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students tackle the novel in its entirety and are prepared for the final examination.

Part 1

The cement in their souls (Chapters 1-2)

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 (p.3-18):

In the opening chapter of the novel, we are introduced to Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman living in Princeton in the United States. Ifemelu is a fellow at Princeton University and runs a successful blog about race in America. She has recently been struck with homesickness and a desire to return to Nigeria, 'the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil' (p.6). She finds that she often thinks of her first love, Obinze, though she hasn't spoken to him in years.

Ifemelu's American boyfriend, Blaine, is shocked and grieved when she breaks up with him to move back to Nigeria. He wants to know why, but there is no one single cause, just a deep-seated feeling of discontent that motivates her.

In preparation for her journey home, Ifemelu travels by train to a neighbouring town to get her hair braided, as there is no braiding salon in Princeton. She arrives at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon in Trenton, a shabby, neglected shop front in a rundown neighbourhood. The owner, Mariama, welcomes her and tells her to wait for one of the braiders, Aisha, to finish with her current customer.

© Orange Hair Braiding

A typical hair braiding salon, much like the one Ifemelu visits in Trenton.

Aisha is Senegalese and her demeanour is oddly discomforting. She is critical of Ifemelu's choice of braids and her preference of wearing her hair naturally rather than relaxing it. When she learns that Ifemelu is Igbo, Aisha tells her about her Igbo boyfriends and complains that they won't marry her.

To curtail their conversation, Ifemelu calls her nephew, Dike, and leaves him a long message. On an impulse, she decides to email Obinze to tell him that she is moving back to Nigeria.

When Aisha persists in making conversation with her, Ifemelu tells the braider that she is leaving America for home, and Aisha is surprised. This is the reaction that Ifemelu has grown used to by now — her aunt and parents were equally shocked by her decision. Ifemelu lies to Aisha and tell her that she's returning to Nigeria to see 'her man' (p.17).

EXCUSE ME?

During the colonisation of Africa many European people struggled to pronounce the 'gb' sound and, as a result, 'Igbo' is often misspelled and mispronounced as 'Ibo', even today.

> *'[S]he began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself.'* (p.5)

Chapter 2 (p.19-36):

In Lagos, Obinze receives Ifemelu's email with a jolt of excitement, and reads it as he sits in the traffic. He recalls their most recent, rather curt exchange of emails, and lingers over the memories of their relationship in secondary school and university. The thought of her with other men still upsets him, even though he is now married with a child.

At that moment, his wife, Kosi, calls him as she is concerned they will be late for their social engagement at Chief's house that evening. He soon arrives at his opulent, richly furnished home, which is staffed by several employees, including a driver, gateman, nanny and house girl. It is a home that is pervaded by 'the undisturbed air of well-being' (p.21); however, Obinze has begun to feel weighed down by his own material success and comfortable lifestyle; he is unsure whether 'he liked his life because he really did or whether he liked it because he was supposed to' (p.21).

Obinze is greeted by his beautiful wife and his two-year-old daughter, Buchi. He goes to the bedroom to change for the party at Chief's house, noting with vague distaste the extravagant designer caftan that Kosi has laid out for him. The couple chat about his work, but Kosi is only superficially interested. Obinze is bored by Chief's parties, but has been attending them since the first time his cousin Nneoma took him to one after he returned from England.

An ostentatious, flamboyantly wealthy businessman, Chief commands the attention of a slew of sycophantic followers hoping to earn his favour. As a favour to Nneoma, Chief offered to help Obinze (who was unemployed at the time) by having him act as the frontman of a dubious property deal. Obinze agreed, and quickly found himself accumulating a vast amount of wealth.

DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

©Talking Drums Blog

A caftan is a type of robe worn by men in West African countries. It is usually ankle-length, with long sleeves and is worn with matching drawstring pants.

When they arrive at Chief's party, Kosi mingles with the guests and revels in the attention that her good looks draw. Obinze reflects 'how important it was to her to be a wholesomely agreeable person' (p.28), to have everyone like and admire her. Obinze is impatient to leave the party so that he can reply to Ifemelu's email; he wonders whether her decision to return to Lagos means that she has broken up with her American boyfriend. Again, he becomes lost in his memories of her, and his musings about her life now.

When they return home, they are greeted by the new housegirl, Marie. Obinze remembers how Kosi had fired the previous housegirl as soon as she had arrived, because she had found condoms in her bag. The previous housegirl had quietly explained that her previous employer used to rape her on a regular basis, but Kosi was unsympathetic and threw her out. Obinze was disconcerted by his wife's lack of compassion, but noted the fear and insecurity in her eyes as she looked at him. Obinze believes that she has nothing to fear, however, as he is not like other wealthy Lagosian men, who have frequent affairs.

In his study, Obinze plays a CD of Fela, an artist that he and Ifemelu often listened to together, as he carefully composes a reply to her email. He goes through several drafts and purposely doesn't mention his wife. Suddenly emotionally exhausted, he steps outside onto the verandah, feeling 'as if he could float, and all he needed to do was let himself go' (p.36).

© Ventures Africa

Fela was a Nigerian singer-songwriter, musician and political activist. He was constantly embroiled in a series of controversies, which included marrying 27 women and founding a political party called 'MOP' (Movement of the People) in which he vowed to 'clean up society like a mop'. He was arrested on two separate occasions: once for smuggling currency and once with his band members for murder. His career came to an end in 1997 when he died from an AIDS-related illness.

> *'They fascinated [Obinze], the unsubtle cowering of the almost rich in the presence of the rich, and the rich in the presence of the very rich; to have money, it seemed, was to be consumed by money.'* (p.25)

ANALYSIS

Chapter 1 (p.3-18):

One of the most important themes in the novel — the construct of race and the burdens of racial prejudice — is introduced in the first chapter through the description of Ifemelu's lifestyle blog. The blog, which is rather cumbersomely named *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, is based on

GLOSSARY

brine (p.3): salt water

effusive (p.3): expressing feelings of gratitude or pleasure

piety (p.4): faithfulness, holiness

irreverent (p.5): disrespectful, mocking

reify (p.5): to make something real

amorphous (p.6): formless, shapeless

nuance (p.7): fine or subtle difference or distinction

epiphany (p.7): a sudden insight or realisation

eponymous (p.10): the person after which something is named

proselytizer (p.12): a person who tries to convert others to their beliefs

histrionics (p.13): a theatrical display of emotions

irrevocably (p.17): permanently

frisson (p.20): a sudden feeling of excitement

languorous (p.20): lazy, relaxed

colonnaded (p.21): featuring a row of columns supporting the roof of a building

caftan (p.22): a long, belted tunic worn by men

fop (p.24): a man who is excessively concerned with his appearance

pontificating (p.24): expressing an opinion in a pompous, self-important manner

garrulous (p.26): talkative

arbitrage (p.26): the buying and selling of commodities to profit from a discrepancy in prices

semblance (p.27): an outward appearance or show

supercilious (p.28): arrogant, condescending

mollifying (p.30): placating, making peace

gaucheness (p.31): awkwardness, shyness

polysyllabic (p.31): containing many syllables; a long word

intemperate (p.34): excessive, extreme

lassitude (p.35): weariness, lack of energy

Ifemelu's observations of race relations in modern America from her perspective as an immigrant or 'outsider'. The material on which she based her posts was mainly gathered from her interactions with strangers; she readily admits, however, that her assumptions about people would often prove incorrect once she had spoken with them.

©Neo-Anima

Ifemelu's blog tackles a wide variety of issues that black people in America face on a daily basis. These issues range from advice about natural hair to experiences of racism.

Even though her blog was successful and she had even been hired for speaking engagements based on its popularity, Ifemelu has decided to close it down. Her decision is prompted by her desire to move back to Nigeria, which in turn introduces two other important plotlines in the novel: Ifemelu's almost inexplicable longing for home, and her love affair with her teenage sweetheart, Obinze.

A cement in her soul

Ifemelu's inner conflict over her return to Nigeria is made clear from the outset. It is not a decision to which she comes quickly, or for one particular reason; rather, it is a response to the 'layer after layer of discontent [that] had settled in her' (p.7), forming a 'cement in her soul' (p.6) that she at first ignored. It is this spiritual and emotional weight of which she wishes to unburden herself by returning to the country of her birth.

She is also motivated by a reticent desire to see Obinze again, although she cannot quite articulate this longing. There are clearly

unresolved feelings between the two; Ifemelu was filled with a kind of 'faded sorrow' (p.14) when she heard that he was getting married, and was forced to admit to the 'still-burning light' (p.14) of her feelings for him. Though she had cut off contact with him before, she recklessly decides to email him with the news that she is returning to Lagos, clearly hoping that the two of them will reconnect.

As she prepares to leave America, Ifemelu reflects on her perspective as an immigrant in the country, and observes the demeanour of fellow immigrants. America is a place where she 'could pretend to be someone else' (p.3), someone more sure of herself and her place. Her fellow African immigrants similarly adopt new personas as they grasp at better lives for themselves. Although, superficially, their shared background gives them a sense of community, there is a tension that exists between African immigrants in America. This tension is rooted in a desire to be 'taken seriously' (p.16) and seen as successful, and Ifemelu observes a sense of 'humiliation' (p.8) in those who have resorted to menial jobs.

Since their inception in the late 1990s, **blogs** have become one of the most popular sources of entertainment and information on the internet. Blogs are a kind of online diary; they are usually run by individuals who update them regularly with posts about their personal experiences or innermost thoughts. They are informally written and intended to create the sense of an intimate relationship between writer and reader. In recent years, with the rise of **participatory** or **community journalism**, the blog format has also become a social-political tool in the hands of activists and social commentators.

BLOGGED DOWN?

Does Ifemelu's blog sound a little serious for your liking? Try some of these blogs, named by *The DailyTekk* as some of the best on the web:

- www.genius.com — crowd-sourced music titbits and song lyrics
- www.expertenough.com — bite-sized information on becoming an expert at anything
- www.theeverygirl.com — fashion, beauty, culture and wellness
- www.clickhole.com — the home of all things viral
- www.mathwithbaddrawings.com — an alternative guide to understanding maths
- www.nothingcooler.com — the best videos on the web

Chapter 2 (p.19-36):

In the second chapter of the novel, the reader is introduced to the artifice that is Obinze's life in Lagos. He is wealthy, well-respected, lives in a spectacular house and has every comfort for which he could wish, yet the materiality of his life is weighing him down, and part of him longs to 'prick everything with a pin' and 'be free' (p.21). His uncertainty 'whether he liked his life because he really did or whether he liked it because he was supposed to' (p.21) suggests that he is enacting a kind of performance, playing the role of the successful Lagosian businessman, husband and father, but that he is not truly happy.

Even Obinze's marriage is, in many respects, somewhat artificial. His wife, Kosi, is the model partner of a successful businessman. She is beautiful, eager to please and wants to be liked by everyone, but her easy-going personality is an affectation that she has adopted, and not truly genuine. She loves Obinze, but she also loves the life that he provides for her; her compliant nature bores him, and he wishes she would 'ask a question or challenge him' (p.22). He realises that 'all she wanted was to make sure the conditions of their life remained the same' (p.23) and that she is interested in little else beyond that.

The artificiality of Obinze's life is symbolic of the affectedness that characterises the wealthy and up-and-coming Lagosian classes. This pretension is also embodied in the character of Chief, who surrounds himself with sycophantic hero-worshippers interested only in their own fortunes. Like Obinze, Chief enacts a particular role — the magnanimous boss of big business — but there is an insincerity about his behaviour and he is overly concerned with appearances. His parties are an opportunity for him to show off his wealth and bask in the attention of his admirers.

The Lagos that Obinze describes is one in which success depends on the ability to 'hustle': the skill of propelling oneself forward through smooth talking and smart moves. Almost by accident, and with apparently very little effort, Obinze has found himself amongst the Lagosian elite. The people with whom he now rubs shoulders are all hustling to keep up the appearance of success, from dressing in designer labels to sending their children to the 'best' schools.

The reader catches a glimpse of the more sinister underbelly of Lagos, too. Sexual violence and indiscretions are hinted at throughout the chapter. Chief, for example, offers one of his guests a plot of land in exchange for his girlfriend, as though she is a commodity to be traded. Kosi, meanwhile, callously disregards her new house girl's revelation that her previous employee raped her on a regular basis. Kosi herself is deeply insecure, though Obinze has never given her reason to be. As a young and wealthy Lagosian businessman, it seems that he is expected to indulge in extramarital affairs. Kosi goes so far as to join a church that holds a prayer service for 'Keeping Your Husband' (p.35).

Although Obinze claims that Kosi has no reason to fear infidelity, it is clear that he still harbours feelings for Ifemelu. Her email to him is a jolt to his system; he spends the hours that follow indulging in nostalgic memories of her and, later, he painstakingly crafts a reply to her. Even though they do not realise it, they share a common restlessness and emotional fatigue: while she is discontented with her life in America and feels the weight of 'cement in her soul' (p.6), he describes a 'draining lassitude that numbed the margins of his mind' (p.35). Both are searching for something they cannot name — something that will reawaken their spirits and lighten their burdened souls.

i The residential area of **Lekki**, where Obinze lives, is the home of the wealthy in Lagos — and some of the most expensive real estate in the world.

A residential home in Lekki, Lagos.

©Amen Estate

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, explain why Ifemelu's lifestyle blog eventually made her feel as though she was 'naked and false' (p.5). (4)

2. How would you describe Ifemelu's relationship with Blaine? Provide evidence from the text to support your answer. (3)

3. What do Ifemelu's interactions with the women in the braiding salon reveal about immigrant life in America? (3)

4. What is suggested by Obinze's reactions to Ifemelu's emails, both the most recent one and the message she sent just before he got married? (3)

5. What does Obinze mean when he says that there 'was something immodest about [Kosi's] modesty: it announced itself' (p.28)? (2)

6. Using your own words, describe Lagos society as Obinze depicts it in Chapter 2, using evidence from the text to support your answer. (5)

[20]

Literary analysis

Plot analysis

The following is intended as a brief exploration and suggested interpretation of the events that occur in the novel. For more in-depth analysis and commentary, see the detailed summaries and analyses in the preceding 'Critical commentary' section.

> *Please note that we have used the past tense for summaries of chapters in which Ifemelu is thinking back to her early days in America and the present tense for summaries of chapters that take place after she has returned to Nigeria in the latter half of the novel.*

A love that spans continents

Americanah is, at its core, a love story. Ifemelu and Obinze meet and fall in love as teenagers living in Lagos, Nigeria. When circumstances rip them apart, their love and sense of belonging to one another endures, despite years of silence and geographic separation. When they rekindle their romance 13 years later, both have changed in so many ways, but it is only with each other that they find true happiness.

© Shauna Niequist

For much of the novel, however, Ifemelu and Obinze's love story merely forms a backdrop for the exploration of the struggles of identity within a globalised culture. When political upheaval drives each of them to seek better opportunities overseas, they are forced to negotiate unfamiliar cultural norms and resist the categories of race and class that are foisted upon them. Their respective journeys are characterised by a piercing loneliness and a vague, yet unsettling, sense of restlessness.

The only place in which she could 'sink her roots'

At the opening of the novel, Ifemelu is introduced as a successful and self-assured young woman who has made a name for herself as an academic and blogger. Her blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, has earned her recognition and respect as an astute social commentator on the issues of race and racism in America. She has also been serving a fellowship at the prestigious Princeton University.

Despite her success, however, Ifemelu has decided to return home to Nigeria. Her decision was not prompted by any one event, but rather a sense of 'discontent [that] had settled in her' (p.7) and made her realise that Nigeria was 'the only place she could sink her roots in' (p.6). She has

left her American boyfriend, Blaine, and is now preparing for her return to Nigeria by getting her hair braided at a salon in a neighbouring town.


© tomatomatomato (Deviantart.com)

The salon is owned and staffed by African expatriates, who quiz Ifemelu on her life in America and in turn share something of their own struggles as immigrants in a country that is not wholly welcoming of them. As her hair is braided, Ifemelu reflects on her compulsion to return to the country of her birth, and it emerges that she is motivated, in part, by a repressed desire to reunite with her teenage sweetheart, Obinze. She impulsively sends an email to him, telling him that she is returning to Lagos.

In Nigeria, Obinze is stirred by a jolt of emotion when he receives Ifemelu's message. He is now a wealthy property developer and married with a child, but his reaction reveals his lingering feelings for his first love, Ifemelu. While he is materially prosperous, he often feels weighed down and 'bloated by all he had acquired' and longs 'to be free' (p.21).

Both Ifemelu and Obinze are plagued by a sense of restlessness, a feeling of needing more from life despite their apparent successes.

Tracing the paths that lead them there

The chapters that follow hark back to the past, and chronicle the paths that brought Ifemelu and Obinze to this point. Ifemelu was raised in relative poverty by her fanatically religious mother and her sensitive, seemingly pragmatic father, who suffered deep disappointments in his life. Her relative, Aunty Uju, was one of the most influential figures of her childhood, playing the role of big sister and advisor.

Aunty Uju was a qualified doctor who was determined to better her life by any means necessary. She became involved in an affair with a married man known as 'The General', who ranked highly in the military government and ensured that she was well looked after. Soon after the first birthday of their son, Dike, The General was killed in a plane crash, and Aunty Uju was forced by his family to flee with Dike to America.

Ifemelu, meanwhile, met and fell in love with Obinze, who had recently moved to Lagos with his mother, a university professor. Like most of their friends at secondary school, Obinze was determined to leave Nigeria once they had graduated. The dire living conditions and continuous civil and political upheavals in the country meant that their future prospects were bleak. They were a generation of young people 'who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else' (p.276).

Separation and struggle

The bond between Obinze and Ifemelu deepened as they entered university, but their studies were disrupted by continual strikes by their professors and endless interruptions of basic services. Unlike Obinze, Ifemelu had never really entertained ideas of emigrating, but when the opportunity arose for her to apply for a scholarship at an American university and she was successful, she and Obinze parted ways, with promises to meet up again once Obinze had secured the means to follow her.

Ifemelu arrived in Brooklyn to stay with Aunty Uju and the difficulties of immigrant life in America quickly became clear to her. After four years, Aunty Uju was still struggling to convert her medical degree while working three jobs to financially support herself and Dike. Her desire for security had prompted Aunty Uju to marry another Nigerian immigrant, Bartholomew, who was clearly a misogynist and did not deserve her.

Ifemelu was disorientated and even disappointed that American life did not live up to the expectations she had formed from watching television shows. She stayed with Aunty Uju for a short while before her university term started and formed a close bond with her cousin, Dike.

© zigbone (Deviantart.com)

Disorientated and desperate, Ifemelu fell into a deep depression shortly after she began university in America.

Disorientation soon turned to desperation for Ifemelu. Her school friend, Ginika, helped her to find an apartment near her university, but despite going to dozens of interviews over the course of several weeks, Ifemelu was unable to secure a job. As her savings depleted and her roommates hounded her for her share of the rent, she was driven to prostitution to meet her financial obligations.

Feeling sickened with herself and the depths to which she had been forced, Ifemelu plunged into depression. She isolated herself and cut off all contact with Obinze, unable to bring herself to face him after what she saw as a terrible betrayal of his trust. Finally, she was offered a job as a babysitter with a local woman named Kimberly, a kind-hearted, but, ultimately, ignorant woman who was at pains to demonstrate her liberal and charitable character.

Cultural clashes

In addition to her financial worries, Ifemelu also had to negotiate the bewildering American cultural codes with which she was wholly unfamiliar. Everything about her environment — from the ways in which people interacted with each other to the foods they ate — confused and isolated her.

© MelanoidInk (Deviantart.com)

Ifemelu started dating a wealthy socialite, Curt, and entered a world of ease, comfort and endless travel to exotic locations.

Race is yet another cultural construct that Ifemelu was forced to internalise. She was unaware of her own 'blackness' until her arrival in America, only to find that the colour of her skin almost exclusively defined her in her new home. The sensitive politics of race and history that preoccupied so many of her African American classmates baffled her. She was confused and disturbed by the fact that no one was willing to talk about or acknowledge race, but it clearly played a defining and very damaging role in American society.

As she slowly began to acclimatise to life in America, Ifemelu became accustomed to the rhythms of her new life. Her employment with Kimberly afforded her a glimpse into a very different sector of American society, peopled by wealthy and ostensibly charitable individuals who regularly betrayed their prejudices and ignorance. Ifemelu realised that Kimberly was a deeply unhappy and insecure woman, despite her outwardly sunny and optimistic demeanour.

It was through Kimberly that Ifemelu met Curt, the wealthy and easy-going young socialite who immediately and unabashedly

showed his interest in her. The two began dating and Ifemelu was ushered into a very different kind of world: one of ease, comfort and endless travel to exotic locations. Ifemelu slipped easily into the role of 'Curt's Girlfriend' (p.196), and found that with him, '[s]he laughed more because he laughed so much. His optimism blinded her' (p.196). He was relentlessly upbeat, optimistic and light-hearted.

Ifemelu found that wealth did not just buy a comfortable lifestyle; it also opened bureaucratic doors. While her friends battled to find the means to stay in the country after graduation, Curt was able to arrange a job and a work permit for Ifemelu with just a few simple phone calls.

Restlessness

Life in America continued to be a struggle for Aunty Uju. Though she had finally secured her qualification to work in America, Bartholomew's chauvinistic, demanding attitude was wearing on her and their marriage was failing. She and Dike both faced daily blows of racist behaviour from the people in their community and Dike was quietly grappling with his sense of identity as a black African immigrant in a primarily white neighbourhood.

Ifemelu eventually realised that she did not feel as strongly about Curt as she would wish. She cheated on Curt with a neighbour for whom she had no real feelings and, in the weeks following their break-up, she battled to adjust to life on her own again. Feeling restless and dissatisfied, she quit her job and started her blog on race and racism in America.

Her astute, thought-provoking posts quickly earned her attention and she began to receive invitations to give workshops and talks on diversity. At a blogging convention, she was reunited with Blaine, an African American professor she had a chance encounter with on a train almost a decade earlier. The two reignited the spark of attraction between them and were soon in a committed relationship.

Blaine was wholesome and righteous, ever conscious of living an ordered and disciplined life. Ifemelu allowed herself to become subsumed in his world, though she never really felt that she truly fitted in with his political, virtuous friends. Though their shared ideals keep them together for some time, Ifemelu eventually tired of his self-righteousness. The inevitable failure of their relationship, together with an increasingly gnawing sense of doubt in the authenticity of her blog, prompted her decision to leave America.

© zigbone (Deviantart.com)

Feeling restless and dissatisfied, Ifemelu quit her job and started a blog on race and racism in America.

Suspicion and success

In the meantime, Obinze's tenure in England was less successful than Ifemelu's time in America. After several failed attempts in applying for an American visa, and with no prospects of finding work in Nigeria, he became increasingly despondent. His mother contrived for him to accompany her on a research trip to England, where he remained illegally, working menial and degrading jobs on a borrowed identity document.

Obinze met up with several old acquaintances while living in London and was surprised at the changes he saw in them. His cousin, Nicholas, and his wife, Ojiugo, had become thoroughly dull and suburban in their aspirations to fit in with the British middle-class. His school friend, Emenike,

had abandoned his Nigerian roots entirely in favour of the sumptuous lifestyle he enjoyed with his British wife.

Obinze observed that all immigrants battled in the harsh environment of post-9/11 Britain. Immigrants were treated with suspicion and even open hostility in England. They were also susceptible to exploitation, given their vulnerable and powerless position.

Such was the case for Obinze, who was forced to pay an extortionate amount of money to an Angolan syndicate to arrange a sham marriage for him so that he could remain in the country legally. The authorities were tipped off on the day of his wedding, however, and he was deported back to Nigeria under a cloud of shame.

© erhanarik (Deviantart.com)

Obinze observed that immigrants were treated with suspicion and even open hostility in post-9/11 Britain.

After languishing in self-pity for some time, Obinze was introduced to Chief, a self-made business tycoon who took a liking to Obinze and helped to set him up in business. Obinze quickly found that he was becoming a wealthy man. Before he had fully grasped what was happening to him, though, he got caught up in his new lifestyle and married a beautiful, but unchallenging woman, Kosi, whose conventional values and subservient character came to disturb him.

Rediscovering old rhythms

It is at this point in their lives that the paths of Ifemelu and Obinze begin to fuse once more. Ifemelu prepares to return to Nigeria, although her homecoming is delayed when she receives a disturbing phone call from Aunty Uju with the shocking news that Dike has attempted suicide. She remains at the side of her cousin to ensure his wellbeing.

When she eventually does arrive in Lagos, she delays contacting Obinze, feeling anxious about seeing him again. In the meantime, she reconnects with her old friends Ranyinudo and Priye and finds work at a women's magazine called *Zoe*.

Zoe is owned and run by Aunty Onenu, a rich socialite who spends her days carefully grooming her appearance and reputation. Ifemelu is determined to overhaul the magazine in an effort to make it less superficial and vapid in content. Though she initially gets on well with her colleagues, Zemaye and Doris, her attitude eventually aggravates Doris, who accuses her of being 'snarky' (p.414) and 'judgemental' (p.415).

Ifemelu settles into a new apartment and is adjusting once more to the rhythms of Lagos life. She does not tell her friends that she has broken up with Blaine because she has noticed that they are all obsessed with marriage and she doesn't wish to become the object of their scrutiny or pity. Feeling dissatisfied with her job, she starts another blog about Lagos. Dike visits her and seems to be making an attempt to reconnect with his Nigerian roots.

© MelanoidInk (Deviantart.com)

Ifemelu settles into a new apartment and starts another blog about life in Lagos as she adjusts to being back in the city.

Reunion

Finally, Ifemelu puts aside her fears and calls Obinze. The two meet up and immediately re-establish the sense of intimacy and trust between them. It seems almost inevitable that they will rekindle their romance, despite the fact that Obinze is now married. Ifemelu confesses the reason that she cut off contact with him while she was in America and his forgiveness brings about a sense of healing and resolution for them both.

Their affair is intense and heady with romance. The reality of Obinze's marriage soon catches up to them, however. Ifemelu becomes insecure and resentful, and Obinze is wracked with guilt. When he realises that he cannot live without Ifemelu, he resolves to tell Kosi the truth and ask for a divorce.

He is shocked when Kosi tells him that she has known about the affair all along and refuses to divorce him. He has a responsibility to her and their daughter, she tells him. She pretends as though the conversation never happened. Obinze's resolve to leave is weakened by the thought that he will not be a part of his daughter's life.

Ifemelu is enraged by Obinze's weakness and their affair comes to an end. She is deeply grieved by the loss, but, at the same time, she finds solace in her writing and in immersing herself in life in Lagos. The eternal sense of restlessness that has always plagued her has finally abated and she feels she has 'spun herself fully into being' (p.475). In the months that follow, Ifemelu contacts both Curt and Blaine, resolving any bad feelings between them. She tries to date other men, but feels none of the passion and love she shared with Obinze.

At the close of the novel, Obinze returns to her, breathless with emotion and determination, and asks her to take him back. Though he had resolved to fulfil his responsibility to his family, he has realised that he cannot be happy or complete unless Ifemelu is in his life. She is taken aback by his sudden appearance, but invites him into her home — and back into her heart.

At the close of the novel, Obinze returns to Ifemelu and asks her to take him back. He has realised that he cannot be happy or complete unless she is in his life.

relationship with Curt. Part 2 ends on a significant note: Ifemelu hears that Obinze has moved to England and the mention of his name brings a rush of tumultuous emotions for her.

- **Part 3** is narrated from Obinze's perspective. It details his struggles in England and ends with his deportation back to Nigeria.
- **Part 4** chronicles the latter years of Ifemelu's time in America, including her break-up with Curt, the establishment of her blog, her relationship with Blaine and her decision to return to America. The end of Part 4 marks a dramatic climax in the novel as Ifemelu leaves the hair salon and hears the news of her cousin Dike's suicide attempt. This discovery also marks a shift from the 'past', back into the 'present' of the action of the novel.
- **Part 5** is focused on Obinze's anticipation of Ifemelu's return to Nigeria and his anxiety that she may have changed.
- **Part 6** deals very briefly with Ifemelu's reaction to Dike's suicide attempt and its aftermath.
- **Part 7** of the novel details Ifemelu's return to Nigeria, her initial struggle with reacclimatising to life in Lagos and her eventual reunion with Obinze. In the same way as in Part 1, the perspective of the chapters contained in Part 7 shifts between Ifemelu and Obinze, as he grapples with the decision to leave his wife for Ifemelu.

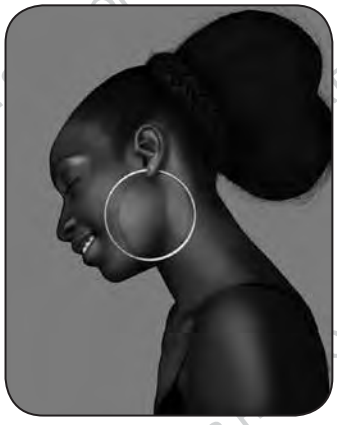
Character analysis

Who are the people in Americanah *and what are they like? This section provides succinct descriptions of the main and supporting characters, focussing on their personalities, relationships and roles in the novel.*

The protagonists

Ifemelu

Ifemelu is the female protagonist of the novel and the 'Americanah' of its title. She is a deeply complex and often contradictory character, moulded by the profoundly troubled economic and political realities of her childhood in Nigeria and, later, the subtler battles of racial identity and cultural conflicts during her young adulthood in America. She is, by turns, strong-willed and compliant, self-righteous and hypocritical, introspective and impulsive, loving and self-absorbed.



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Restless and discontent

There is one constant and defining characteristic of Ifemelu's journey throughout the novel, nonetheless: a sense of restlessness and discontent. A childhood spent negotiating her mother's wildly changeable religious fanaticism and her family's uncertain financial crises, together with her own natural disposition, results in a deep-seated distrust of happiness. Happiness and contentment is a state of being that Ifemelu does not expect to last and, on several occasions in the novel, she seems to sabotage her own happiness actively and pre-emptively.

Many of the life-altering decisions that Ifemelu makes in the novel are spurred by this deep-rooted sense of restlessness and driven by indefinable impulse. Even the decision to leave America

after 13 years and return to Nigeria is not prompted by a single incidence, but is rather the result of 'layer after layer of discontent [that] had settled in her' (p.7). Unable to fully rationalise the decision, even to herself, Ifemelu allows herself to be swept along by the tides of her own restlessness.

Her relationship with Curt, too, is brought to an end by a rash decision to cheat on him because 'she had not entirely believed herself' and her 'spirited easy life' (p.287) with him. In the wake of the end of their relationship, Ifemelu grapples with her destructive behaviour.

Identity and authenticity

Her 'incomplete knowledge of herself' (p.289) seems to be at the heart of her inner struggles. In the wake of the end of her relationship with Curt, she 'stumbled around, trying to remember the person she was' (p.299). This uncertainty over the true nature of her identity is reflected in her almost mindless adaptation to her lovers' values and lifestyles – the ease with which she slips into the 'role' of 'Curt's Girlfriend' (p.196), and her adoption of Blaine's virtuous habits (p.311).

The instability of Ifemelu's sense of identity is exacerbated by the struggles of racial politics in America, a quagmire of cultural codes and historical hurts into which she was not born and does not fully comprehend. Before emigrating from Nigeria, she was wholly unaware of the supposed 'fact' of her race, but in America she was almost entirely defined and pre-judged based on the colour of her skin.

Ifemelu becomes increasingly aware of the nuances of racial politics as she is subjected to regular inflictions of casual (and, sometimes, not-so-casual) racism. Her blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, earns her a reputation as a leading social commentator on the issues of race in America.

The very title of the blog identifies her as an outsider, a 'Non-American'. Though she is subjected to the realities of racism, she seems unable to wholly invest herself in the struggle of racial politics. During her early days in America, she is unable to grasp the heavy burdens of history that so incense her African American peers. Even though she is defined by her race in America in a way that she never has been before, she is simultaneously excluded from that definition by virtue of her immigrant status.

This feeling of being an outsider is something that Ifemelu carries with her throughout her time in America and prevents her from truly committing to her life there. In the lead-up to her decision to leave America she had come to doubt the sincerity of her blog and was increasingly feeling 'naked and false' (p.5).

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Ifemelu discovers that she is defined by her race in America and tries to fit in with the standards of beauty and acceptability that are imposed upon her, but only feels herself when she abandons these practices and embraces her natural hair and accent.

Like her chronic sense of restlessness, her aversion to inauthenticity is a defining characteristic of Ifemelu's character; for example, though she initially cultivates an American accent and relaxes her hair in order to fit in with the standards of beauty and acceptability in her new home country, she later abandons both of these practices. By embracing her natural hair and the accent that she grew up with, she feels 'truly her[self]' (p.175).

Contentment and completion

It is only once she returns to Nigeria that she is truly able to realise her sense of self. When she first returns, she is 'stifled' (p.411) by her job at *Zoe* magazine, a publication that she finds vapid and which does not align with her own values. Feeling that familiar 'encroaching restlessness' (p.411), she quits her job and concentrates on establishing her new blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* (p.418), in which she posts stark and real observations about the beauty and foibles of her home city.

Ifemelu's blog flourishes while her renewed affair with Obinze flags. After he leaves her, she is pierced by the 'pain of his absence' (p.475), yet, it is during this period that she realises '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' (p.475).

The realisation of her true identity and the accompanying sense of contentment and completion have come not through her relationship with a man, but her bond with her home and commitment to her true values. She is no longer weighed down by the restrictive identities and bewildering cultural codes foisted upon her in America; she is not defined by her relationship, nor is she held back by a job in which she doesn't truly believe. She is independent, authentic and fully committed — and, finally, that sense of restlessness has abated.

Obinze

If Ifemelu is defined by restlessness, Obinze, the male protagonist of the novel, is characterised by disappointment. The optimism of his youth is blighted by unfulfilled hope in better opportunities and degradation that he never dreamed possible. Though he finds material success as a grown man, his spirit and sense of self-worth are irreparably damaged by his experience as an immigrant in England.

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When Ifemelu and Obinze first meet, she is struck by his 'air of calm and inwardness' (p.55). The attraction between the two is instant: she is drawn to his quiet self-assuredness, while he 'admired her for being outspoken and different' (p.66-7). When Ifemelu is presented with the opportunity to study abroad, it is Obinze who encourages her to pursue it (p.99). He is unwavering in his belief that he will one day join her there.

Rejection and despondency

It is the unexpected obliteration of this staunch optimism for the future that leaves Obinze so devastated when his plans do not come to fruition. His love of American culture and his knowledge of the country is encapsulated in his belief that 'America is the future' (p.70) and, moreover, that America is *his* future. He applies for a visa soon after graduation, but in the wake of the September 11 attacks, 'Americans

Obinze is a driven, ambitious young man who has the optimism and enthusiasm of his youth slowly chipped away by the harsh misfortunes of life as an immigrant.

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are … averse to foreign young men' (p.233) and his application is rejected after only the most cursory consideration.

Obinze is 'stunned and unbelieving' (p.233) that his future has been so summarily and casually snatched from him. As the months pass, he applies three more times, but is repeatedly rejected. His job applications in Lagos also come to nothing and this purposeful, driven and optimistic young man is reduced to a frivolous existence. Desperate to rescue her son from his state of despondency, his mother offers to help him enter the United Kingdom on a six-month visa under the false pretence of being her research assistant.

Fear and loathing

Though he is glad to leave Nigeria, Obinze is acutely aware of the fact that he was not able to achieve this on his own merits and 'he felt, even before he left, like a failure' (p.234). His experiences as an immigrant in England over the months that follow further erode both his optimism for the future and his own sense of self-worth. He is forced to take on menial, degrading jobs and is treated with contempt and even open hostility by some of his co-workers.

Obinze is 'withered by sadness' (p.237) and the disappointments he suffers alter his fundamental character. Gone is the positive, optimistic young man who 'believed the universe would bend according to his will' (p.232), replaced by a blighted spirit who 'had never felt so lonely' (p.259).

As an illegal immigrant, Obinze is also plagued by the constant fear of being discovered by the authorities and is vulnerable to being exploited by unscrupulous criminals who take advantage of his desperation. Obinze is both powerless and invisible. By the time the authorities are tipped off about him and he is arrested — just moments before his sham marriage is solemnised — he has been reduced to '[a] thing to be removed' (p.279) as though he is not even human.

Discontent success

Obinze returns to Nigeria as a dehumanised, broken-spirited deportee. It is in this state that he meets The Chief, a business magnate who, for reasons Obinze does not understand (p.27), decides to help him establish himself as a property dealer.

From this point, his life takes on a momentum that he does not fully comprehend. He suddenly finds that he is a successful and extraordinarily wealthy businessman with very little effort on his part; still blighted by the disappointments he has suffered, however, he seems unable to enjoy his successes. His wife, his wealth and his status all seem to have been foisted upon him almost unwittingly and, like Ifemelu, he is afflicted by a feeling of profound discontent.

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Obinze is determined that Ifemelu is the antidote to all of his unhappiness and discontent.

To stay or to go?

Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze believes that the antidote to his unhappiness lies in another person: Ifemelu herself. With her, he feels 'amused, alert, alive' (p.455). Though they both revel in the happiness of their affair at first, the reality of Obinze's marital status soon catches up to them and, when it comes time to make a firm decision about the woman he wants to be with, Obinze finds himself faltering.

Ifemelu accuses him of being a coward and Obinze himself realises this indictment to be true. While his hesitation is in part due to his guilt over reneging his responsibility to his wife and child, 'there was indeed a cowardliness in his fear of disorder, of disrupting what he did not even want: his life with Kosi, that second skin that had never quite fitted him snugly' (p.456). Unquestionably, the uncertainty of his life in England was a source of misery for him and, even though he is now financially secure, he is anxious about the major disruption that ending his marriage would entail.

Obinze's choice is between the seemingly selfish option of leaving his family for another woman or condemning himself to a life of 'endless, joyless tedium' (p.465). His love for his daughter prompts him to stay with his wife for several more months, but, ultimately, his need to live a full and contented life drives him back to Ifemelu. It is her presence in his life that pulls him out of the depths of disappointment and lightens his spirit once more.

Family and lovers

Obinze's mother

Obinze's mother represents to Ifemelu the kind of strong, intellectual woman that she aspires to be. It is unsurprising, given the example he has in his mother, that Obinze 'admired [Ifemelu] for being outspoken and different' (p.66-67). Throughout the course of their relationship, Obinze's mother is a voice of reason and advice, even on the occasions when they would rather not hear it.

Ifemelu is struck from the beginning by the close relationship that Obinze and his mother share: '[i]t was free of restraint, free of the fear of consequences; it did not take on the familiar shape of a relationship with a parent' (p.69). The two women become close and it is Obinze's mother who advises Ifemelu to 'wait until she own[s] [herself] a little more' (p.72) — to know herself truly — before committing to a sexual relationship with Obinze.

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'She was everything I wanted to be': Ifemelu considered Obinze's mother to be a strong, principled woman who knew herself fully.

Obinze's mother is an example for Ifemelu of a woman who knows herself fully — she is strong and principled — and does not waver even when those qualities prove unpalatable to those around her. Obinze's mother's one weakness is her unwavering love for her son. It is she who comes to his rescue when he is stuck after graduation, jobless and with no prospects, by coming up with the plan of pretending that he is her research assistant so that he can accompany her to England.

Like many Nigerians, she is profoundly disappointed in the degeneration of her country and 'did not understand what had happened to Nigeria' (p.234). Despite her determination to live an ethical and exceptional life, she grew increasingly despondent 'with her job and with life on the campus' (p.370).

Her death devastates both Obinze and Ifemelu, but her life has a lasting legacy that lives on through their memory of her. Ifemelu writes to Obinze that '*[s]he was everything [Ifemelu] wanted to be*' and that he was *'so fortunate to be raised by her*' (p.371).

Aunty Uju

Aunty Uju is one of the most significant figures in Ifemelu's life. She is the cousin of Ifemelu's father, but because she is only 10 years older than Ifemelu, the two share a close bond from the

time Ifemelu is just three years old. Aunty Uju serves as both a big sister and motherly figure to Ifemelu, guiding her through the pains of adolescence and giving her practical advice about boys and clothes.

Aunty Uju is a complex character, in that she is a strong and self-sufficient woman who, nonetheless, feels the need to rely on men. When Ifemelu is still a young girl, Aunty Uju — who has just qualified as a medical doctor — embarks on an affair with a married general, who is powerfully placed in the military government. She is conscious of and pragmatic about the transactional nature of their relationship; she seems to have no qualms about being a 'kept woman' and enjoys the benefits that their relationship brings her, such as a free house and a desirable job that he arranges for her.

Ifemelu notes, however, that there is a romantic side to Aunty Uju, and that she is 'more consumed by The General himself than by her new wealth' (p.74). She is generous with her wealth and does not hesitate to ask her lover for what she needs, but they share a genuine affection for one another that seems to soften the reality of their relationship. When Aunty Uju unexpectedly falls pregnant, the arrival of baby Dike solidifies their relationship and brings them both happiness.

Aunty Uju is genuinely 'bereft' (p.86) when The General is killed in a plane crash rumoured to have been orchestrated by the Head of State. With no money or property to her name, Aunty Uju is forced to flee with Dike to America to avoid the vengeful wrath of the family of The General's wife.

The difficult reality behind the 'American Dream' is revealed through Aunty Uju's struggles. When Ifemelu joins her four years after she first arrives in America, Aunty Uju is working three jobs and earning very little money while she tries to convert her medical degree so that she can practise in the country. Ifemelu is disturbed to see how 'subdued' (p.110) Aunty Uju has become, how little she cares about her appearance and how the stress of her life has worn her down.

Finding herself in a desperate situation, Aunty Uju once again turns to what she perceives as the security of having a man in her life. She marries Bartholomew, a fellow Nigerian immigrant whom Ifemelu quickly realises is 'jarringly unsuited for, and unworthy of, Aunty Uju' (p.116). Their marriage eventually fails when Aunty Uju tires of his misogynistic treatment of her, perhaps suggesting that she has finally realised her own worth and independence.

Aunty Uju's experience of small town America is also revealing of the currents of racism that permeate their communities. While the racism they endure profoundly affects her son, Dike, Aunty Uju is more pragmatic — though still enraged — in the way she deals with it. She acquiesces to the Westernised standards of beauty deemed necessary for her to be considered 'professional', for example, telling Ifemelu: 'You do what you have to do if you want to succeed' (p.119).

It is this line that sums up Aunty Uju's character: she is tenacious, gritty and determined to succeed. She privately rages about the racism she endures, but publically holds her tongue rather than cause damage to her professional relationships. She recognises hypocrisy, but will go along with it if she can benefit in some way. While Ifemelu may not always agree with her, she realises that Aunty Uju simply wants the best for herself and her son, no matter what the cost.

'You do what you have to do if you want to succeed': Aunty Uju is a tenacious, gritty and determined character, but also someone with a strong romantic streak and a need to rely on men.

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Dike

Dike is the son of Aunty Uju, the product of her youthful affair with The General. Ifemelu develops a close bond with her bright young cousin and his suicide attempt temporarily derails her plans to return to Nigeria. As a Nigerian immigrant who has been raised in America, Dike is a consummate outsider: neither truly Nigerian nor American. His identity crisis is symptomatic of the liminal space he occupies between two clashing cultures.

Ifemelu grows close to Dike when she stays with him and his mother upon first arriving in America. Dike is a bright and engaging child, whose 'laughter was so warm, so open' (p.107). As the years pass, however, Ifemelu begins to notice a 'guardedness' and 'sadness' (p.183) in his expression and he seems 'to have become more reserved' (p.183) each time she sees him.

Having never known his father and being raised in America, Dike suffers from a profound identity crisis, never quite feeling truly Nigerian or truly American.

It emerges that Dike is grappling with his sense of identity. He frequently asks questions about his father and whether or not he loved him and he begins to behave aggressively in class. He is also acutely aware that he 'sticks out' (p.172) as being different in his new, small-town community, which his mother describes as 'so *white*' (p.171).

Dike relays a series of small incidences that are seemingly insignificant examples of how he is treated differently by his teachers and peers because of the colour of his skin. Dike typically brushes off these incidents with his characteristic sense of humour, but Ifemelu can tell that her sensitive young cousin is upset by it, particularly when he tells her that he 'just want[s] to be regular' (p.184).

Aunty Uju is dismissive of her son's inner struggles, as she claims he is merely reacting to 'the kind of thing they teach them here' (p.217): she believes that identity crises are a Western invention and not truly genuine. She consciously denies him access to his Nigerian roots by not allowing him to learn Igbo (p.109), but, at the same time, makes sure that he knows their family will be judged more harshly and are more likely to be the object of gossip because of the colour of their skin (p.215).

When Dike attempts suicide, Aunty Uju insists that he is suffering from clinical depression. Ifemelu realises, however, that the unresolved questions he had over his identity, coupled with the persistent racism he endured on a daily basis, resulted in a 'growing pea plant of trauma' (p.380) that eventually overwhelmed him.

She points out to Aunty Uju that she denied him his birth right — his Nigerian heritage and identity — while actively preventing him from associating himself with 'these people' (p.380), meaning African Americans. Ifemelu tells Aunty Uju: 'You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was' (p.380).

Dike's visit to Lagos, once Ifemelu has returned to Nigeria, provides him with the opportunity to explore this facet of his identity that he has never before confronted. Ifemelu is somewhat disturbed when he tells her that he wishes he spoke Igbo, but immediately dismisses it as 'already too late' (p.424) to learn. He seems to feel that this fundamental aspect of his identity, namely, his Nigerian heritage, has already been fundamentally disconnected and lost to him.

Dike's journey ends on an optimistic note, nevertheless. After asking Ifemelu if they can go and see Dolphin Estate, where he spent the first year of his life, he drives her car back through the frenetic Lagos traffic and Ifemelu realises that this 'meant something to him that she could not name' (p.425). It is as though, through this small act of negotiating the notorious Lagos traffic, he has marked himself as a true Nigerian.

Kosi

Obinze's wife, Kosi, is a foil to Ifemelu's character: the two are unalike in every aspect of their personalities. Though she is the model wife of a successful businessman — compliant, eager to please, attractive and likeable — she bores Obinze and he is acutely aware of how incompatible they truly are. He wishes she would 'ask a question or challenge him' (p.22) and, though she seems to love him genuinely, she values the life he can provide for her more.

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Kosi is the model wife of a successful businessman: compliant, eager to please, attractive and likeable.

Kosi fully subscribes to the values of the upper-class Lagos set with whom they socialise. She is concerned with appearance and reputation, and esteems Westernised culture and education above her own. She also holds alarmingly antiquated ideas about gender equality. After the birth of their daughter, Obinze is horrified when she assures him that they will 'have a boy next time' (p.458), as though expecting him to be disappointed with the sex of their first child. It is then that he realises Kosi 'did not know him at all' (p.458) and that they communicate only on the most superficial of levels.

When Obinze finally admits to his affair with Ifemelu and asks Kosi for a divorce, he is stunned that she already knows of his infidelity and has been pretending otherwise. She is not angry with him, but insists that he does not leave her — she tells him that they 'have to keep this family together' (p.464). Her supplication sickens Obinze and 'he wished she would be furious instead' (p.464) as anger would, at least, show some genuine depth to her feelings for him.

After his confession, Kosi eerily behaves as though nothing has happened; Obinze realises that she 'wanted to will normalcy back' (p.466). It is this great desire for normalcy that lies at the heart of Kosi's character. She is not malicious or vindictive, but she is not passionate or authentic, either. The appearance of a happy marriage and a prosperous life matter more to her than reality.

Curt

Curt is Ifemelu's first serious boyfriend in America and, appropriately, he represents the all-American boy: he is carefree, optimistic, impulsive and chronically cheerful. Her relationship with him marks a dramatic turning point in her life in America, as his wealth affords her the 'gift of contentment' (p.200) and alleviates the serious financial struggles she endured as an impoverished, unemployed student. Moreover, his connections mean that she easily finds employment after graduation and qualifies for the green card that allows her to stay in the country.

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Ifemelu becomes freer and more light-hearted with Curt — '[h]is optimism blinded her' (p.196). While she genuinely cares for him, she also finds him 'infantile' (p.196) at times and eventually realises that she 'longed, with Curt, to hold emotions in her hand that she never could' (p.287).

Curt represents a particular brand of liberal white American. He is aware of the inequalities that exist between black people and white people, as well as between men and women, but does not always fully grasp the implications of these inequalities. He is able to recognise racism in certain situations, but not in others.

It is not that Curt is maliciously or wilfully ignorant to the workings of racism in America; rather, his position of privilege as a wealthy white male means that he is not in a position to understand or recognise its repercussions. It is not until Ifemelu deliberately points out certain instances of entrenched racism that he admits to them and, even then, '[t]here were, simply, times that he saw and times that he was unable to see' (p.294).

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she contacts Curt to make amends for their painful break-up. She discovers that he is just as upbeat and optimistic as ever and, for a moment, 'she imagined getting back together, being in a relationship free of depth and pain' (p.475). These few words encapsulate Curt's character or, at least, Ifemelu's attitude towards him: he is uncomplicated and easy, but, ultimately, lacking in any real emotional depth.

Blaine

Blaine is Ifemelu's second serious boyfriend in America, the preppy American professor with lofty ideals and virtuous habits. She first meets Blaine on a train a few years after arriving in America and is immediately attracted to his 'earnest and sincere' (p.176) manner. Some eight years later, they meet up again at a conference and quickly fall into a serious, committed relationship.

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Blaine was earnest, intelligent and idealistic, and Ifemelu often felt unworthy of him and his lofty greatness.

During the intervening years, Ifemelu came to idealise Blaine. In many ways, Blaine *does* seem too good to be true: he is highly educated and well-versed in politics and global issues; he is fastidious about his diet, exercise regime and personal hygiene; and he surrounds himself with earnestly intellectual friends who are as privileged and well-meaning as him. In the early days of their relationship, Ifemelu often felt unworthy of him and his lofty greatness and, when he looked at her, 'his eyes warm and loving, she felt something like relief' (p.314).

Blaine's rigid perfection comes to wear on Ifemelu, nonetheless. Although Blaine represents an intellectual and lifestyle ideal to which Ifemelu aspires, trying to live up to his standards eventually proves exhausting. Their shared ideals — specifically, their ardent desire for Barack Obama to win the presidential race — makes their relationship endure longer than it should. He is 'too good, too pure' (p.475) for her and she eventually leaves him behind in America, along with everything else that did not quite fit her.

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Shan intrigued Ifemelu, but made her feel self-conscious and uncomfortable.

Shan

Shan is Blaine's sister, whom he describes as a 'really special person' (p.316). Shan is, indeed, special, albeit in a slightly sinister and discomforting way. Her mysterious sense of self-possession seems to draw people to her and Ifemelu is simultaneously intrigued and discomfited by her. It becomes obvious that 'Shan dripped power, a subtle and devastating kind' (p.319). Shan's mysterious power means that everyone around her, including her brother, seems compelled to defer and pander to her. She holds the attention of a room effortlessly, but regularly demonstrates a latent streak of malicious cruelty.

Shan is privileged and well-educated, like Blaine, but she is also infuriatingly entitled and insincere. She complains of feeling diminished and undervalued because she is African American, but, in turn, she diminishes Ifemelu by suggesting that '[Ifemelu] doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about' in her blog because she's 'writing from the outside' (p.336).

Friends and co-workers

Ginika

Ginika is one of Ifemelu's closest friends in secondary school. Not long after Ifemelu begins dating Obinze, Ginika's family decides to move to America.

Some years later, when Ifemelu starts university in Philadelphia, it is Ginika who helps her find her feet and acts as a kind of teacher and cultural interpreter, ready to 'scoop Ifemelu up and into the real America' (p.122). She immediately notices the changes in Ginika, who is 'much thinner, half her old size' (p.122) and possesses 'a metallic, unfamiliar glamour' (p.123).

The character of Ginika is a symbolic site in the novel of the pervasiveness of Western culture. Ifemelu notes that 'Ginika had come to America with the flexibility of fluidness of youth, [and] the cultural cues had seeped into her skin' (p.125). She is fully 'Americanised' and Ifemelu is amused by her love for fashions she can't understand and her fluent knowledge of things like Tobey Maguire and bowling (p.125).

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Impressionable Ginika symbolises the overpowering pervasiveness of Western culture and many of the complexities of immigrant life.

There is a more destructive side to these Western influences, however. Young and impressionable, Ginika bowed under the pressure of Western standards of beauty and 'started losing weight almost as soon as [she] came' (p.124) to America. The bullying she had to endure at school for being slightly overweight meant that she came 'close to anorexia' (p.124). Moreover, she had to negotiate racial politics of which she was wholly unaware before and tells Ifemelu that she 'didn't know [she] was even supposed to *have* issues [about her race] until [she] came to America' (p.124).

Ginika's struggles foreshadow some of the issues that Ifemelu has to negotiate as she acclimatises to life in America. Westernised standards of beauty, racial politics and cultural codes of language and behaviour are just some of the complexities of immigrant life and, when Ifemelu first arrives, it is Ginika who guides her through some of these difficulties.

Ranyinudo

Ranyinudo is another secondary school friend of Ifemelu, but it is not until Ifemelu returns to Nigeria as an adult that Ranyinudo plays a significant part in the novel. Just as Ginika served as a guide and cultural interpreter to Ifemelu when she first arrived in America, Ranyinudo helps Ifemelu to reacclimatise to life in Lagos when she returns there over a decade later.

Ifemelu is pleased to be reunited with her old friend when she picks her up from the airport. She notices that Ranyinudo is no longer a gangly teenager, but 'a big, firm, curvy woman' (p.386) who has retained 'the excitable, slightly reckless air' (p.386) of her youth. Ranyinudo is working for an advertising company and living in her own one-bedroom flat in Lagos. Ifemelu 'felt something

between fascination and longing for Ranyinudo's life' (p.390) as she seems so secure in her expectations and comfortable in her own skin.

Ranyinudo, Ifemelu realises, is living what she views as the rather clichéd life of an upwardly mobile Lagosian woman. She has a job, but it is not enough to pay for her lifestyle (though it is not particularly extravagant) and relies on hand-outs from her rich, married boyfriend, Don. Like Aunty Uju so many years before, she is a Lagosian mistress whose ultimate goal is to find her own rich husband.

Like so many of the women Ifemelu knows in Nigeria, Ranyinudo is obsessed with marriage. While this is in large part due to social pressure, it is also the result of an impoverished economy that offers little in the way of job security or opportunities. For Ranyinudo, 'men existed only as sources of things' (p.395-396), and a wealthy husband represents security and an escape from the state of 'choicelessness'.

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Ifemelu is fascinated by Ranyinudo because she seems so secure in her expectations and comfortable in her own skin.

Emenike

At secondary school, Emenike is the object of quiet ridicule. Ashamed of his impoverished background, Emenike was 'immersed in his need to invent a life that was not his' (p.66) as a teenager, habitually inventing 'stories of rich parents that everyone knew he didn't have' (p.66). Emenike's lies were a means for him to escape the harsh realities of his life, allowing him to hope for opportunities and a future that did not really seem possible.

As a young man, Emenike was possessed by a 'coiled, urgent restlessness of a person who believed that fate had mistakenly allotted him a place below his true destiny' (p.247). He would interrogate friends who had recently returned from overseas, 'his eyes feral with longing' (p.246). Obinze was drawn to 'the audacity of him' (p.246) despite the 'many things he did not know about Emenike, things he knew not to ask about' (p.247), and the two became close friends. Obinze suspected that Emenike was involved in shady dealings and, indeed, he 'never knew how [Emenike] got a visa' (p.247) to live in England.

When Obinze himself arrives in England some years later, Emenike is, naturally, the first person he contacts, in the hopes that his old friend 'would take him in, show him the way' (p.247). Emenike evades him at first, but when he finally meets up with Obinze, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate that he has finally achieved his ultimate goal: he is wealthy, well-travelled, married to a British woman and enjoying a prosperous life in a first world country.

Emenike does not fit comfortably or naturally into his new world, however. He is clearly more concerned with appearance than substance and his need to show off how wealthy and sophisticated he is betrays a deep sense of self-consciousness and even unworthiness.

Emenike was ashamed of his impoverished background and it made him dishonest, but Obinze was drawn to his school friend's audacity and determination.

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Emenike seems to want to divorce himself from the suffering of his impoverished past, even if it means divorcing himself entirely from his heritage. He has no desire to return to Nigeria, even though his wife expresses a wish to visit; Obinze notes that 'the man considered himself British' (p.272).

Interestingly, Emenike's marriage to a wealthy, self-sufficient lawyer, who provides him with a luxurious lifestyle and an escape from the state of 'choicelessness' he would have endured in Nigeria, mirrors the marriages to which so many of the Lagosian women in the novel aspire.

Zoe staff

The three women with whom Ifemelu works at *Zoe* magazine embody some of the tropes of womanhood in Lagos. While none are particularly well-rounded or developed characters, they represent the extremes of the culture of womanhood in Nigeria.

Aunty Onenu, the owner and publisher of the magazine, is a rich society woman who appears to have achieved the goal that so many Lagosian women are desperate to realise: she has found a wealthy husband, lives in an ostentatious home and spends her days carefully grooming her appearance and reputation. The magazine is little more than 'a hobby' (p.391) for her, a means of competing with another rich society lady with whom she is feuding. Ifemelu appears to consider Aunty Onenu as vapid and superficial as the content of her magazine.

Doris, the editor, is a slightly eccentric woman who immediately establishes that she and Ifemelu are 'members of the same superior club' (p.402) because they were both educated in America. It is Doris who introduces Ifemelu to the Nigerpolitan Club, where Nigerians who have lived overseas meet to network and, usually, complain about the petty failings of Nigeria.

Doris is the one who eventually loses patience with Ifemelu's attitude towards the magazine. She is usually relatively even-tempered, but Ifemelu's superior attitude and subtle put-downs goad her into losing her temper. She accuses Ifemelu of being a 'judgemental bitch' (p.419) who wants to dictate the content of the magazine according to her own preferences.

Zemaye, the assistant editor, is at constant loggerheads with Doris. Zemaye is a stylish and perfectly groomed woman who adopts a superior and slightly contemptuous countenance. The 'mutual dislike [between Doris and Zemaye] was a smouldering, stalking leopard in the room' (p.404) and manifests in petty arguments, such as an on-going disagreement over the temperature setting of the air conditioner. It appears that their contempt for each other is rooted in the fact that each woman assumes that the other believes herself to be superior.

Villains

Vincent and the Angolans

Vincent is a fellow Nigerian expat who agrees to let Obinze work using his identity card in exchange for 35 per cent of Obinze's earnings. When Obinze ignores his demands for a 'raise' (p.261) a while later, thinking to call his bluff, Vincent makes good on his threats and tips off Obinze's boss about his illegal immigrant status, resulting in Obinze losing his job.

The Angolans, meanwhile, are two crooked expatriates who promise to arrange a sham marriage for Obinze so that he can stay in the country legally. Obinze pays them an extortionate amount of money and they become aggressive when they feel Obinze is asking too many questions.

The sports coach

After dozens of unsuccessful job applications, an impoverished Ifemelu is driven to desperate means to pay her rent during her early days in America. She answers an advertisement for a personal assistant to a sports coach, who tells her that the job is to 'give [him] a massage, help [him] relax' (p.143). Realising the implications behind this, Ifemelu initially rejects the position, but she is later forced to return to him when she runs out of other options.

While he does not force her to have sex with him, she has to allow him to touch her intimately and yields as he guides her hands between his legs. Feeling disgusted with herself, Ifemelu sinks into a state of depression in the weeks that follow.

Though he is only a minor character in the novel, the incident with the sports coach is a major turning point in Ifemelu's life and, specifically, her relationship with Obinze. It is the reason that she cuts off contact with Obinze and brings an end to their relationship as she feels that she has betrayed him and is no longer worthy of his love.

Minor characters

Ifemelu's mother

Ifemelu's mother is fanatically religious and her fervent faith results in some erratic and irrational behaviour. She believes that her faith will grant them a better life.

Ifemelu's father

Ifemelu's father has suffered disappointments in his life as a result of the economic realities of Nigeria. He speaks in a formal, elevated English, which he uses to mask the fact that his educational aspirations never materialised.

Nicholas and Ojiugo

Nicholas is Obinze's cousin and Ojiugo is his wife. They were the most popular students at Nsukka in Nigeria, with a reputation for being rebellious. Now, as a married couple in London, they are acutely aware of their immigrant status and go to great lengths to 'fit in' to their new suburban community. They have great aspirations for their children and place a great deal of value on their education.

Kayode

Kayode is one of Obinze's friends from secondary school. Ifemelu has a chance encounter with him at a mall in America. Seeing Kayode prompts hurtful memories of her past and of Obinze.

Esther

Esther is the fanatically religious secretary at *Zoe.* She aspires to a higher station in life and her ultimate goal is to find a husband.

Nigel

Nigel is Obinze's friend from London. When The Chief advises Obinze to hire a General Manager to front his business, Obinze asks Nigel, knowing that he can trust him unconditionally. Nigel moves to Nigeria to throw himself fully into his new job and remains a close and trusted friend of Obinze.

Kimberly

Kimberly is the wealthy mother that gives Ifemelu her first job in America as the babysitter for her two children. Although, at first, Kimberly's family seems to be the perfect, wholesome and privileged American family, Ifemelu comes to realise that Kimberly is deeply unhappy. Kimberly is at pains to prove that she is open-minded, charitable and unprejudiced. She frequently reveals her own ignorance and is guilty of a particular brand of racism that is openly hostile and betrays a belief in her own superiority.

Don

Don is Kimberly's husband and his manner suggests that he is hiding a sinister secret.

Taylor and Morgan

Taylor and Morgan are Kimberly and Don's children. Morgan is unsettled and her wild behaviour is a means of expressing her disappointment with the adults in her life.

Laura

Laura is Kimberly's rude sister. Laura is not concerned with keeping up an appearance of open-mindedness and civility, but rather openly displays her racist beliefs and unhappiness.

Cleotilde

Cleotilde is the young woman who is roped into the sham marriage with Obinze by the Angolans. She is young and innocent. She admits to Obinze that she agreed to the marriage in order to help her mother financially.

Aisha

Aisha is the Senegalese woman who braids Ifemelu's hair as she prepares to leave America for Nigeria. It is revealed that Aisha is working illegally in America and she was unable to go home to see her father before he died. Although Aisha is initially an unlikeable character, her breakdown reveals a softer side to her character with which it is easier to empathise. Her troubles are a reminder of the plight of immigrants who are not as privileged as Ifemelu has been.

Priye

Priye is one of Ifemelu's friends from secondary school. She is a successful and highly sought-after wedding planner. Priye views marriage as a transaction and cynically advises her friends to marry the man that can best maintain them and their lifestyles.

Tochi

Tochi is another friend of Ifemelu's from secondary school. Although Tochi has achieved the ultimate goal of many Lagosian women and married a wealthy lawyer, it is revealed that she is a deeply unhappy woman.

Annotated essay examples

Essay topic 1:

In an essay of approximately 600 words, examine the way in which hair functions as a symbol in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's ***Americanah***, commenting particularly on the way in which it develops the central thematic concerns of the novel. (30)

NOTES ON THE ESSAY TOPIC:

- This question requires you to **examine** the symbolic significance of hair in the novel.
- Your analysis should focus on the **importance of hair in developing some of the central themes** of the novel specifically.
- **Key words** include 'examine', 'symbol', 'significance', 'develops' and 'thematic concerns'. You should try to use some of these words in the essay itself.

ESSAY	COMMENTS
Whether it's natural and kinky, braided through with a weave or straightened with chemical relaxers, hair represents more than a personal style choice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*: it functions as a symbol for some of the most important thematic concerns of the novel. As Ifemelu quickly comes to realise when she arrives in America, the style of her **hair reflects and reveals the racist cultural mores of her new home country, which have a profound impact on her own sense of identity**. The Westernised standards of beauty to which she feels pressured to adhere not only disadvantage her as a black woman, but automatically deem her inferior.	Note the structure of the introductory paragraph: the thesis statement is indicated in **bold** (this is the main argument to which we will refer throughout the essay). The underlined sentences give a 'preview' of the argument, as these are the topics that will be discussed in the body of the essay.
In the novel, **hair represents the imposition of Westernised standards of beauty.** Ifemelu observes that particular physical traits are considered to be attractive in America: skin should be as light as possible, and hair should be straight. As a black woman, however, Ifemelu has naturally kinky hair and dark skin, and observes in her blog how the qualities that are deemed beautiful and desirable immediately disadvantage her and other black women. As she points out to Curt, black women are systematically excluded from what is considered the norm of beauty. She demonstrates this by showing how 'racially skewed' (p.295) beauty magazines are, in that black women are vastly under-represented in their pages and the products they advertise cater almost exclusively for white women.	In the second paragraph, the sentence in **bold** indicates the topic sentence. This is the point with which this paragraph will deal. The quotations and examples from the text support the claim being made by the topic sentence. The underlined sentences form the analysis or elaboration of this point, and explain its relevance to the thesis statement. Note how direct quotations can be integrated in different ways; in this paragraph, the quote is grammatically incorporated into the sentence.

The debasement of black women through the imposition of Westernised standards of beauty reveals the inherently racist values of American culture. The style of a black woman's hair not only determines whether she is considered attractive; it can also impact on how her character is perceived by others. In order to be considered as 'professional sophisticated, … normal' (p.297), as Ifemelu discovers, black women need to ensure that they look as 'white' as possible, and this means using chemicals on their hair to achieve 'the white-girl swing' (p.203). Both Aunty Uju and Ifemelu are advised to remove their braids and relax their hair when they apply for jobs, and though '[n]obody says this kind of stuff' (p.202), the unspoken implication is that if a black woman wants to be considered as a desirable candidate for a job position, she cannot look 'too black', as her employers will automatically equate undesirable traits with her race.	Take note of the 'T-E-A' structure of this paragraph (Topic sentence — Evidence — Analysis). The sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point. Providing a page reference may not be possible in an examination context, but you should still alert your examiner to the fact that you are quoting or paraphrasing from the novel.
The politics of race and beauty, which are symbolised in her struggles with her hair, have a profound impact on Ifemelu's sense of identity — another important thematic concern of the novel. Ifemelu unconsciously internalises the Westernised standards of beauty imposed on her by American culture, and spends years 'battling to make [her] hair do what it wasn't meant to do' (p.208). This battle is a metaphor for her struggle with her identity in a culture that automatically devalues her based on the colour of her skin. The chemical burns that she sustains on her scalp from the hair relaxers are a physical symbol of the mental anguish inflicted by that racial prejudice.	Note how this paragraph brings together the two points made in the previous paragraph to drive home the main argument.
Hair is 'the perfect metaphor for race in America' (p.297) and the impact that the social construct of race has on the psyche of the individual. **Kinky hair is a physical reminder of the racial prejudices that burden black people in the novel; like so many black women, Ifemelu is compelled to relax and straighten her hair to conform to 'whitewashed' standards of beauty in an effort to distance herself from those prejudices.** It is only when she takes the advice of a friend to 'go natural' (p.208) and embrace her roots — quite literally — that Ifemelu is able to realise a sense of self-acceptance in the face of societal pressure.	It is sometimes useful to support your conclusion with a relevant quote from the text that encapsulates your main argument. The concluding paragraph sums up the argument, drawing on words and phrases used in both the question and the introduction, but restated in an original way. The sentence in **bold** indicates a restatement of the thesis statement.

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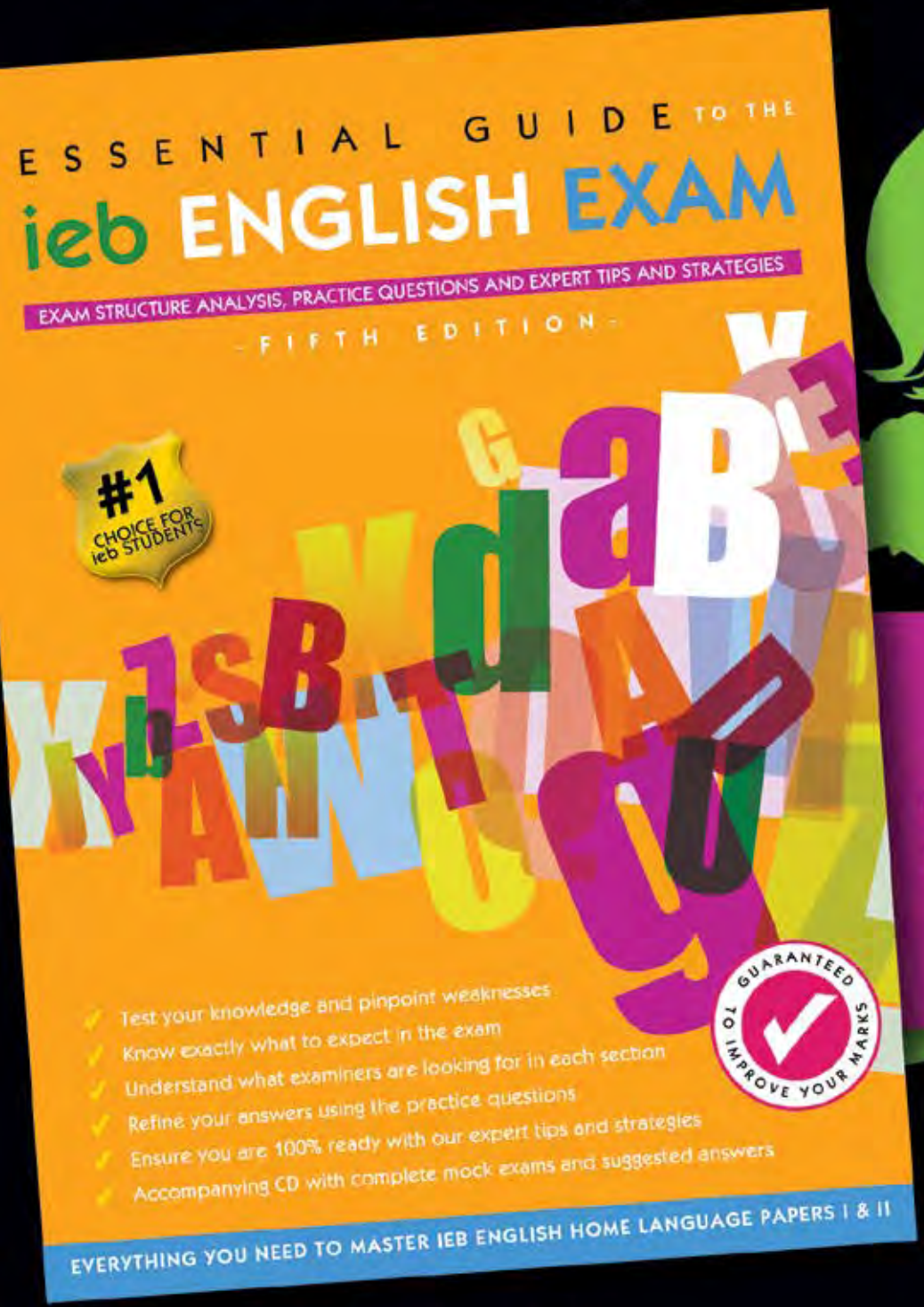

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