Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the author of 477 pages of narrative on love and other things: on Nigeria and being Nigerian; on being both Nigerian and American; on being a Nigerian living in America; on global citizenship, race, Obama and black hair angst. For the purposes of tracing her sphere of influence, she is Nigerian, from Nigeria. Not African please! Being African has come to mean many different things, but being Nigerian is more tangible. The distinction is important not because one is trying to be difficult but because the real intention of definitions must be to make things clearer and not more convoluted. Adichie’s new book, AMERICANAH, IS ABOUT DEFINITIONS.
She is near sacrosanct for well-grounded reasons – a beautiful Igbo woman, brought up by middle-class academics and, as often mentioned, on a university campus in Southeastern Nigeria. I reiterate her beauty because it is relevant. She straddles two continents with a luminosity that can’t be described by simple words, such as “confidence”, because a great deal of that has to do with her beauty. There is a concrete magnetism in her even row of white teeth, with that winsome gap in the upper row. Her skin glows, her eyes move like feathers in soft wind. Her voice is like crème caramel, lower octaves, self-consciously articulate and paced. She graduated summa cum laude from Eastern Connecticut State University and has two Master’s degrees from two other US universities. She has three fellowships and counting, and numerous awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship (aka the “Genius Grant”). For the Western, liberal world, there is no doubting the uniqueness, the intelligence and the power of this woman of letters. But her positioning is the real crux of the matter: Adichie has swum the undercurrents of Americanah and she is invested in every nuance.

There is a leap over her last book of stories, The Thing Around Her Neck, to underscore the success of Half of a Yellow Sun. This makes sense since in Americanah, as in Half of a Yellow Sun, she has chosen a tendentious anchor of a theme or themes. It appears that Adichie wants to be associated with clever themes that go bang. Nigerians have been traversing the world for centuries, from lying down in slave ships more than 200 years ago, to swaggering, in our time, through immigration borders with a “we’ve come to take over” attitude.

Choosing the theme of migration is ambitious enough, but there’s more. There’s self-discovery in a kaleidoscope of contexts: in the unique hyperactivity of Nigerian living; in a young Nigerian woman’s body exploring all the uses and expressions of feminine sexuality; in the combustible environment of hormones, sexuality, cliché adult advice and choice; and in the intimidating unfamiliarity of American cultural complexities. Adichie is perhaps attempting too much. She turns the definitions on the definers. She makes myriad political statements. She is mirroring the awkward expressions of political correctness and attempting to do so on three continents. She is everything: chronicler, social commentator, whiner and storyteller. The potential is exciting, commendable, besieged and untidy.

The book opens atmospherically, with a sensory introduction to American cities: “Princeton smelled of nothing, New Haven of neglect... Philadelphia of burnt asphalt.” These descriptions are opinionated, heartfelt promises. Ifemelu – the voice that carries us through the book – is Nigerian, dark-skinned, self-absorbed and overwhelmed by hair issues. She is headed to the “African hairdressers” to have her hair braided. You learn that she is preparing to return home to Nigeria. There is a secret here being offered that appeals intensely. Adichie insinuates the organic connection between the braiding of black hair, the telling of stories and the transferring of ideas from the braider to one whose hair is being braided; her stories and ideas are being braided into our black hair.

We then begin to encounter all that makes up Ifemelu through the lens of interspersed flashbacks from the hairdressers to Nigeria and back. We are introduced in slow detail to her life, her family; to Obinze, her estranged love interest and his wife, Kosi; to Ifemelu’s intelligence and outspokenness; and to her unease with what it means to be a young Nigerian woman. Chapter Four is fresh, vivid and easy. It marks the real beginning because Adichie brings everything into sharp focus here. She wants us to concentrate on these two young, clever individuals – Ifemelu and Obinze – who wear the fabric of love effortlessly. The reader will find no real difficulty acquiescing.

Even from this early point in the book, America is presented as a dazzling sun in the Nigerian firmament. It is the embodiment of everything aspirational and desirable. Obinze is obsessed with America, with American books, with the American pronunciation of English words. It is his dream to “go abroad”. Adichie rambles through the large house of nuance made up of paired words, the contextual uniqueness, the contrasts between here (Nigeria) and there (North America and the United Kingdom), and the blind Nigerian idealisation of “there”. The first nine chapters of Americanah are Adichie waiting to mount her soap box; a prelude in which she successfully carries us along with the expectations of Obinze, Ifemelu and their peers. The weight and quality of these expectations are authentically portrayed.

One of the troublesome things about Americanah is the number of conversations being attempted at the same time. Adichie catalogues issues incessantly. Some, embodied by her characters, are prematurely cut off as Adichie loses interest. Certain themes don’t always feel as if they have lived and died a natural death. There is an innate hyperactivity to the narrative and a hurtling rush towards judgement and conclusion. In this is both the symptom that she is attempting something new and the problem that it could have done with more refining, more room for the reader to exhale, to decide.

Aunty Uju, an ‘unofficial’ relative of Ifemelu, has sized up her life and has decided that she doesn’t want romantic love. Her men are not chosen for companionship, sexual exclusivity or for short-lived passion. Their utilitarianism is what qualifies them. Uju is a powerful opportunity that Adichie alights on and then trivialises. She tries to conclude the discussion efficiently by telling us that Uju has settled for what is familiar, but the conclusion is too hasty. Since she has brought up the matter: Why are the wheels of romantic Nigerian tales different, made of unromantic textiles like money, necessity and the need to bear children? In the middle of the narrative, Uju finds herself in a house with a view of woods and galloping deer, but she is so engulped by worries, she can’t enjoy the view. Her whining, her blaming of others for the decisions she has made, sounds very human; her
dissatisfaction reads like grounded fiction, yet you can feel Adichie's boredom with the whys of her fiction. You can feel her constant coaxing that you return to Ifemelu's self-absorption. It is in fact Ifemelu's brand of romance that is fiction-familiar.

One of Uju's boyfriends in America is Bartholomew. He is a brutal caricature in Adichie's hands. He is one-dimensional, a Nigerian accountant who writes "sour toned" and "strident" posts on nigerianvillagers.com. As a way of introducing him, Adichie talks about a type of Nigerian writer who lives in bleak houses in America, their lives deadened by work, nursing their careful savings... so that they could visit home in December for a week... bearing suitcases of shoes and clothes and cheap watches, and see, in the eyes of their relatives, brightly burnished images of themselves. Afterwards they would return to America to fight on the internet over their mythologies at home... at least online they could ignore the awareness of how inconsequential they had become.

Adichie's vicious censure of this migrant 'type' is typical of her cut, dried and packaged treatment of many themes, especially Nigerian. She makes a conclusive statement about migrating Nigerians that sticks out like an ugly disfigurement but also has no counterbalancing view. Here, Adichie foregoes her own injunction against the single story. There is only one kind of Bartholomew and he wears "striped humourless shirts... buttoned up, stiff, caged in the airlessness of immigrant aspirations". She applies this same treatment to Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity, which she writes like many other Nigerians have written it: fervour, fanaticism, loudness, madness, with no new dimensions. Kosi, Obinze's wife, is described as having "something immodest about her modesty... It announced itself". The earnest cultural interpreter would also acknowledge the appropriateness and necessity of Nigerian immodest modesty... but Adichie has moved on. Reading Adichie can be as intense as watching her express herself in real life: "All women should be feminists."

The underscoring of the view of a hole in Ifemelu's father's underwear is done just as Aunty Uju is giving him some money: "At the flat, Aunty Uju handed Ifemelu's father a plastic bag swollen with cash. 'It's rent for two years, Brother,' she said, with an embarrassed casualness, and then made a joke about the hole in his singlet." And again we feel the pressure; wish that Adichie would allow us to decide whether a hole in a man's vest means poverty or the love of comfort. You feel the strength of the suggestion. It is more than a suggestion, a sermon. Where Adichie might balance holding a conversation and interpreting culture, she often throws away necessary subtlety.

Ifemelu is a tiresome protagonist. She is too invested in Adichie's agenda. You can hear Adichie every time she opens her mouth – suffused with a scathing intolerance. Ifemelu's self-loathing is woven mercilessly through the pages of Americanah, spread thickly and enthusiastically on everyone she meets. We are offered this hostility, this standing apart in rooms and deciding what boxes people fall into, as strength or acute intelligence or Nigerian Philip Roth. Adichie might be attempting to write a strong black woman who makes her own way and mistakes, but the portrayal of strength becomes excruciating, the interruptions of mother Adichie grating.

Both Obinze and Ifemelu are experts at determining the choreography of other people's lives. Their opinions are sure on people's motives, on other people's goodness or badness. They are almost never wrong: "Tanned, broad featured succouring face, the face of a person who could not abide conflict..."; "Ferdinand had a steely amoral face; if one examined his hands, the blood of his enemies might be found crusted under his fingernails..."; "He walked with too much rhythm in his step, which suggested to her a certain fickleness of character. A man not worth paying any attention to..."

Ifemelu and Obinze are written as Nigerian intellectuals who cannot be convincingly accused of being part of the elite and are set apart because they have intelligence and exclusive insight. To that omniscience, Adichie has unfortunately added condescension. Ifemelu goes to the US and gains a broader perspective, becomes an astute observer of human nature and culture. She writes a clever, humorous blog on race. When Ifemelu reaches America, we feel Adichie becoming fluent and more confident. The cultural interpreter is almost flawless here. Her lens expands, exposing the complexities of interactions between races: between Nigerian 'Africans', liberal whites, African Americans; on how race and otherness informs and impacts on relationships; and how growing up with race awareness differs from meeting racial ideas as an adult.

The cataloguing of experiences, of anecdotes that defy the fabric of coincidence, intensifies. Adichie must have her say on everything: on A Bend in the River, on the word "nigger", on black hair. Her promise to John Snow on the BBC that Americanah is about hair is only seriously addressed 200-odd pages into the book and she again taws the familiar. There is nothing new: black hair angst, the choice between having 'ethnic hair' and being taken seriously in corporate America; the irresoluteness of the eventual decision to own natural hair. There is an expectation that all the mention and discussions of black hair will lead to a powerful statement. It does not.

To protect the elevation that she has afforded her two favourite characters, Ifemelu and Obinze, Adichie supervises as a matriarchal police officer guarding over the thoughts of the readers. On many occasions, she directly addresses our thoughts. We might think Ifemelu's mouthpiece role judgemental and condescending. Ifemelu blogs about racism: "Racism is absurd because it's about how you look. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair." Yet, for 400 pages, Adichie consistently makes value judgments about people based on how they look.
Adichie will find a way to tell you that you must in fact believe that Ifemelu is opinionated and strong, and that if you think otherwise, there is something wrong with you. What the elevation achieves, in fact, is to dehumanise these characters. They are widgets fulfilling Adichie’s social commentary agenda, loudly articulating her politics, but we, as readers, are disconnected. Obinze is markedly more human than Ifemelu. This juggling of political correctness is very real in *Americanah*. Adichie is fond of playing games: new world versus old world games, Nigerian versus American, provocative generalisations.

Ifemelu’s expression of her sexuality in the book is notable. Whenever Ifemelu feels out of her depth, whenever she feels disdain or anger, or even boredom, and the opportunity presents itself, she uses her sexuality as a weapon: “You gave him what he wanted,” Curt said. The planes of his face were hardening. It was an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say.

Adichie understands at a core level that she is provoking a reaction from her Nigerian audience. She is doing so and daring them to be provoked. Her politically correct audience is set and contrasted against her politically incorrect one. She also understands intricately that her politically correct audience has the lead in voluble discourse. What she doesn’t acknowledge is that different worlds own their own brand of political correctness. Adichie can barely contain her disdain for her audience in the playing of these games. *Americanah* is a case study in the balance of generalisations in fiction, the single story she abhors. Surely, fiction should give generalisations more breathing room. *Americanah* is full of them. They are in every nook and cranny and armpit. They might be Adichie’s way of catching up and overtaking the definers, but she has not mastered their incorporation into her fiction: “Nigerians have confidence but they have no dignity...” And this is true of every single Nigerian! Even in fiction, it doesn’t work and it doesn’t have the forgivable sentimentality of declaring: “Floral perfume and exhaust fumes and sweat; she smelled of Nigeria...”

Ifemelu’s self-loathing is mirrored in Adichie’s writing on Nigeria and vice versa. The familiar, low-key whine that feels almost obligatory to the process and the integrity of writing about Nigeria is also present in *Americanah*, addressed in the references to the usual suspects of 419 pastors, university lecturers’ strikes and corruption. Nigeria is really ‘just’ the preamble to a place where real self-awareness detonates, to America where life breaks up into many vibrant colours and to Obama. And Obama in *Americanah* reads like a pinnacle. You feel the book straining toward it and then relaxing back again. It is a global picture that is passable. In reality, the lens of the world moves in the direction of the US elections with a force that touches every continent. But Adichie has got the shape of the Nigerian world wrong. She has also underestimated its size and its complexity. Africa is immeasurable. It is a living, muscular bricolage flexing and expanding backward and forward through all the manifestations of time and space. It owns every manifestation of everything. The African continent is not just a part of the world. Conceptually it is the same size as the world.

Reading *Americanah*, you get the feeling that ‘we’ are not really the point she is getting at. *Americanah* is not ‘the great Nigerian novel. Again this matters intensely because Adichie chose to stretch the capacity of her writing beyond mere fiction, to politics. She gave herself the responsibility to write Nigeria, and write it accurately she must. We are not just a preamble to Obama. And the resolutions of our complexities are not just as she says they are: “Remember people are not reading you as entertainment, they are reading you as cultural commentary. That’s a real responsibility.”

There are moments: Ifemelu is given a beautiful unsteady one, when, in the newness of America, she decides not to kill a cockroach that she sees in Aunty Uju’s kitchen because it is an ‘American’ cockroach. She is close and human. Chief, the cynical, worldly, eulogising man of means who initiates Obinze into the Nigerian way of doing business, who gives him an opportunity to fashion Nigerian aspirations to replace his broken American ones after being deported back to Nigeria from the United Kingdom, is skilfully written. Everything about him works. Adichie uses him to present a novel idea of friendship. Chief offers Obinze his friendship. Here, Adichie delicately and effortlessly describes what this means. It is friendship but it is not. Storyteller, cultural interpreter and social commentator merge seamlessly; and the final chapters of the book are redemptive and warm – Adichie relaxes and allows the reader to breathe sensuality. Chapters 44 to 55 read as good, strong wholesome fiction. The relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze has an intense appeal. The writing is drawn tight and satisfying, even if the ending is, in contrast, gaudy.

In writing *Americanah*, Adichie set herself very high standards. The result is that there is, perhaps, too much at stake. She is running from the single story. She is running from the labels. But, she has a political agenda. She is answering queries that her editors have brought up, and she doesn’t like being edited. The fact is that people are reading her, and reading her. Her writing is too self-conscious and there is too much game playing, too much name dropping and providential mapping of how the late Chinua Achebe is connected to Adichie by a straight, strong and firm Igbo line.

The truth is that Adichie writes very well and should keep writing in clear view as a primary premise. She might need a lifetime to hone the balance of her craft, voice and politics. Fortunately, she has time.