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What am I, what are you?
A pedagogical analysis on how C.N Adichie’s novel “Americanah” comments on the postcolonial features; alterity, identity, and racial prejudice, and their use in the EFL classroom.

Author: Julia Hollertz
Supervisor: Anna Thyberg
Examiner: Anna Greek
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Abstract
The Swedish school has grown multicultural due to the recent years’ migration and globalization of society. This place higher demands on the school’s responsibility to educate students who are accepting and understanding towards each other, no matter their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. With application of postcolonial theory and its features; alterity, identity and racial prejudice to C.N Adichie’s novel Americanah, it is argued that the inclusion of postcolonial literature in the EFL classroom may help students in developing an understanding for democratic values, and in exploring their roles in a diverse environment.

Keywords
Literary didactic analysis, EFL teaching, Upper Secondary School, students as democratic citizens, Americanah, postcolonial theory, alterity, identity, racial prejudice
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1 Introduction

The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. (Adichie 290-1)

This candid declaration comes from one of the characters in the award-winning Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel Americanah¹ (2013), which presents a story of race, otherness and identity of the two Nigerian emigrants, Ifemelu and Dike. In the novel, the reader follows the protagonist Ifemelu, and the secondary character Dike’s everyday life as African immigrants in contemporary America, and how they suddenly become aware of the ‘importance’ of their African backgrounds in the eyes of the Western world. The two perspectives of Ifemelu and Dike differ in that the two characters immigrate to America at different ages and stages of their lives. Thereby, the reader is presented with two different, and modern ways to view postcolonial influences in a literary piece.

According to Beach et al. it is highly rewarding for everyone to attempt to see the world from another perspective than their own. However, for many adolescents, this is particularly challenging as they “sometimes have difficulty recognizing that others may perceive the world differently from themselves” (Beach et al. 9). Yet, the Swedish school has indeed grown multicultural due to the last few years’ migration and globalization (“Facts and statistics on migration”). This places high demands on students’ abilities to see the world from the perspectives of others, and “to live with and appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity”, in order to create a successful integrated and democratic society (Nat. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4). Consequently, this increases the Swedish school’s responsibility to educate students to have acceptance towards ethnic diversity, and to have understanding towards others and their respective backgrounds (Nat. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4). Further, according to Elinor Pohl, when incorporating postcolonial perspectives, and discussions of ethnic diversity in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, teachers may provide their students with the opportunity to understand themselves and their role in their diverse

¹In 2013, Americanah won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.
environment by dealing with these issues “through fictional texts that reflect the global English-speaking community” (379). Based on this, there should be no doubt for the need of integrating postcolonial studies in the EFL classroom.

Accordingly, the aim of this essay is to investigate how Adichie’s novel *Americanah* comments on questions of ethnic diversity, and creates understanding for others and their ethnic backgrounds, using postcolonial studies as a point of departure. This, as postcolonial theory aims to comment on racial disciplinary bias, identity, and the self and the other, or in other words; alterity (Pohl 380-1). These are aspects which are widely presented and discussed in *Americanah*, therefore, the literary analysis will look at how *Americanah* depicts questions of alterity, identity and racial prejudice as concepts of postcolonial theory. Thereby, postcolonial studies is made highly relevant to this investigation, as it enables a concentrated analysis of the political and cultural issues expressed in Adichie’s novel, and provides suggestions on how these issues are relevant to bring up in multicultural education. The analysis will be carried out through a close reading of *Americanah*, which entails careful and detailed attention to a literary text.

Moreover, this essay includes a didactical analysis, where Adichie’s novel is analysed through applying postcolonial theory considering pedagogical ramifications. This, in order to investigate how and why *Americanah* could be used in the EFL classroom in the Swedish Upper Secondary School for English level 7, to teach students about the importance of understanding others, as well as have acceptance towards ethnic diversity. Therefore, this essay will argue that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* depicts, and raises awareness for the postcolonial features: alterity, identity, and racial prejudice. Additionally, this essay investigates the possibility that by including *Americanah* in EFL teaching, students will work towards developing strategies for understanding societal issues, democratic values and different perspectives, as is part of the learning objectives stated in curriculum, and the syllabus.
2 Postcolonial studies

This section presents the theoretical, and pedagogical implications which will be used as a base in the forthcoming analysis of the novel *Americanah*. Accordingly, I have chosen to base my investigation on postcolonial theory, with some influxes of didactic theories, in order to attempt to explain the relationship between postcolonial literature and education.

2.1 The emergence of postcolonial literature

In the early 20th century, race became an important factor in literary studies, as former colonized writers from The Caribbean and Africa “refused to be denied, on the basis of race, by the dominant white culture” (Bertens 193). As stated by Hans Bertens, these writers began to re-work their cultural definition and self-view, which had been formerly brought up on them by the white society, in order to make it more coherent with their personal view of themselves and their cultural influxes (193). This became the coin of the term postcolonialism, which, in short, “is a condition that arises out of political independence” and thereof provides a possibility to embrace cultural self-determination (Edwards 10).

Pursuantly, Justin Edwards notes, “all cultural works affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” are to be considered postcolonial (10). Yet, it is important to mention that one of the main indicators to whether a literary piece is postcolonial or not, is from the perspective from which it is written. Therefore, postcolonial literature demands a shift in focus from colonial writing. That is, from the British colonizers stories of their experiences of colonization, to the formerly colonized native population portraying their experiences of how colonization has shaped the societies in which they live today (O’ Reilly 7).

In the 1960s, the postcolonial literary movement (the literary movement of cultural self-definition, political self-determination, and independence) was further established due to the international escalation of interest and desire for cultural and political autonomy for the black population. Thereof, a larger quantity of writers emerged from the former colonies and began to tell their own stories of their respective countries, regions and cultures. Bertens explains that, this became the “confirmation of new national literatures”, and a marker of the former colonies liberation from their respective colonizers (194). However, Edwards adds, it is important to point out that the decolonization and end of the British Empire, also played a contributing part to this upsurge of attention (9, 11). This is an especially important note for African writers.
coming from countries like Nigeria, that was formerly under British ruling (Bertens 196), such as for Adichie herself, being a Nigerian author.

2.1.1 Commonly expressed aspects of postcolonial literature
As implied above, postcolonial writing often attempts to represent a more accurate description of the colonized people’s living situations, cultures and immediate environments, with critical eyes aimed towards dominant hegemonies, such as the former British Empire. The general aim of postcolonial literature is to undermine ideas which presented colonialism and subordination of people based on racial differences in a good light. Therefore, the plot in postcolonial writing tends to be “deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division” between the black and the white population (Edwards 11). According to Dennis Mischke, this idea of exclusion and division in postcolonial literature is referred to as alterity, or most often; otherness (323). Hence, this is one of the main aspects of this investigation, and experiences of this kind will be given careful attention throughout the essay.

Subsequently, due to experiences of otherness, many postcolonial writers find it problematic to write in the colonizing language. Hence, another characteristic in contemporary postcolonial literature is the influx and inclusion of native language in literary pieces written in the colonizer’s language (i.e. English or other Western European languages). Some writers have stopped writing in English altogether, while others settle for adjusting the language, and writing in their own version of what was previously the colonizers’ language (Ashcroft et al. 40-41). Bill Ashcroft et al. refer to this process of tweaking the colonizer’s language as appropriation. The purpose of this type of narrative technique is to retrieve the cultural and linguistic expressions which were taken from them by the colonizers, as well as demonstrating independence and mastery over a language which was initially not their own (37-39). However, the inclusion of native language in postcolonial writing also becomes an act of expressing a postcolonial identity, liberated from imperial oppression (53). As questions of identity are part of the analytic aspects in this essay, language becomes a meaningful aspect of the understanding of a postcolonial identity bias.

What is more, Christopher O’Reilly explains that postcolonial literature also aims to comment on aspects such as displacement and the reality of living in-between cultures, which is an aspect of identity created as a consequence of the diaspora, a concept which describes the voluntary, or involuntary, migration of a population from their respective homelands (11-12). However, these are concepts which will be
described more in depth further below, as identity crisis as a result of displacement is one of the analytical tools in this essay.

Moreover, postcolonial literature also attempts to present a different view of Developing Countries, that is to say, an opposition to what has been “presented on the television screens of the West” (O’Reilly 6). Thus, according to Carole Gerster and Laura Zlogar, films and television productions have become influential media in the means of distributing beliefs and behaviours of ethnic diversity and difference, in present day society. Thereby, visual media carries much more responsibility when it comes to the spread of prejudicial views and otherness (7). Accordingly, this is an issue that Adichie as a postcolonial author seeks to remedy in her writing.

2.1.1.1 Alterity as a means of experiences in postcolonial literature

As stated by Mischke, alterity, or otherness, is an analytical concept which refers to the Western, most often, prejudicial views of a formerly colonized population. Still, the idea of otherness and of an individual as an ‘other’, always starts with the way in which people look upon themselves. Based on this, the idea of alterity is in philosophical terms based upon differences which separate individuals from each other (323-4). Further Edwards explains, these differences do not necessarily have to include ethnic differences, such as skin-colour, rather it includes other types of social differences as well, which have the possibility to create thoughts of the self and the other. Consequently, experiences and thoughts of alterity may also occur in societies with an ethnically homogenous population (17). Still, when alterity is looked upon from a postcolonial perspective, both ethnic and social differences most commonly have a contributing role to play. For instance, Edward Said explains alterity from the postcolonial and more critical point of view, looking at the Western prejudicial view of the self as rational, able and good, while in contrast, the other is the embodiment of the irrational, ignorant and chaotic (7, 37-40).

Moreover, Ashcroft et al. note that the investigation of alterity is a complex one, since when looking at this aspect in texts, one has to analyse the very experiences which the text provides, and portrays through characters. Accordingly, alterity can be seen as a narrative technique, which is used to generate, but also illustrate, feelings and experiences of segregation and difference to the recipient. Thereby, this way of writing becomes an opportunity for postcolonial authors to “attempt to control the process of writing”, that is, writing back at the British Empire, as a sign of liberation and independence (Ashcroft et al. 77).
2.1.1.2 Questions of identity explored in postcolonial literature

As aforementioned, displacement is a common issue in postcolonial literature, as it is within this concept, where the “post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being” (Ashcroft et al. 8). In other words, displacement concerns the experience of rootlessness, which in turn causes a sense of alienation of the self, that is, feelings of not having an active and valid sense of one’s ethnic identity. However, Ashcroft et al. describe this type of reaction as result of the voluntary, as well as the forced migration of people, which is commonly referred to as the diaspora. Consequently, this transfer of people has a tendency to trigger an internal crisis of the self-image, which brings the affected to seek a “differentiated identity” and appropriate values that are more compatible with the society surrounding these individuals (Ashcroft et al. 9). This type of search and construction of a new ethnic identity is commonly occurring within the first generation of the migrated population (Ashcroft et al. 9-10). This, as they are attempting “to find order in their world, looking for the centre” (O’Reilly 12).

According to Edwards, the differentiated identity is commonly referred to as ‘double consciousness’, which is a hybrid identity based on an intertwining of two different types of cultural identities. This double consciousness may cause confusion within the individual, which is a direct consequence of a way of living that is placed in-between two cultures. However, the double consciousness allows affected individuals to orient themselves in both cultures within the mix (139-40). Thus, this hybridity is also a sign of the resistance and downfall of the colonial authorial grip, since the double consciousness challenges the colonial idea of a “single voice of a cultural authority” (Edwards 141). Accordingly, the concept of double consciousness has become an important aspect in postcolonial literary analyses that seek to consider the relationship between identity and postcolonialism. Therefore, double consciousness is relevant to this essay in connection to the matter of identity.

2.1.1.3 Racial prejudice as a possible aspect of postcolonial literature

Although questions of race and racial prejudices are foremost seen as analytical concepts within the field of African-American studies, Timo Müller states that the discussion of race is highly relevant to include in postcolonial theory as well. Because, an inclusion of African-American studies offers a complexity and global contribution to postcolonial theory, which makes it more applicable in present day society (Müller 135-6). Subsequently, questions of race and racial prejudice as concepts within American-Studies are particularly relevant to include in the analysis of Americanah in this regard,
as the novel is set in the American society. Additionally, Ashcroft et al. state that when examining the characteristics of postcolonial literature, one should take the Black writing model into account, which “proceeds from the idea of race as a major feature of . . . discrimination and draws together writers in the African diaspora” (Ashcroft 19).

According to Lincoln Quillian, when talking about racial prejudice, one is referring to the preconceived opinion or attitude (unlike discrimination which is presented in a behaviour), of someone based on their ethnic origin. This preconceived opinion does not rely on reason or actual experience. Based on this, racial prejudice is what commonly creates generalized stereotypes of ethnic groups (300). Moreover, Justin Healey states that racial prejudices have a contributing effect to acts of discrimination, as well as racist behaviour towards an individual. Such behaviour would be defined as the political, cultural, social, and economic distinction, exclusion, preference, or restriction of an individual based on their ethnic origin. Thereby, this type of treatment has the power to impair and debar an individual’s opportunity to get an equal foothold in the surrounding society (8).

However, while racist behaviour and racial discrimination are extensions of racial prejudice, nevertheless, they do not derive from the same context. Racism is a combination of racial prejudice and discrimination, as it involves both beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Subsequently, racism is embodied by thoughts of perceiving one’s own race is superior to another, behaving aggressively or offensively towards an individual because of their ethnic background, and “believing everyone should behave according to certain” ‘national’ values (Healey 11). Additionally, racist beliefs and practices allow one group to uphold racial domination over, what this group believes to be, an inferior and subordinate ethnic group (Quillian 301). With this in mind, it is fair to argue for what Müller says about including questions of racial prejudice, when examining a novel that is set in the U.S from a postcolonial point of view (136).

2.2 Inclusion of postcolonial literature in the EFL classroom

As previously indicated, the Swedish school has grown to become a significant venue for integration and multicultural meetings. This development places higher demands on the schools’ mission to raise students who are open minded, and accepting towards ethnic diversity. According to Leslie Roman, one of the school’s most important missions is to make sure that all students and teachers work in the spirit of democracy, as democratic civilians. This has become even more important during the last years, as present day societies have become more globalized, with more refugees and migrants in
circulation all over the world (75, 84). Pursuant to Nieto and Bode, this development stresses the importance of making all education as inclusive as possible. However, this does not merely mean to involve abstract issues of culture, power, race or aspects of identity and difference, but rather to confront them through critical eyes of equality and justice. Otherwise, the words become ineffective and learning will not be lasting or meaningful to the students (5).

Vanessa Andreotti suggests that by incorporating readings of postcolonial literature in their teaching, teachers may open up for such meaningful learning. This, as postcolonial literature enables students to become familiarized with questions of identity and otherness, as well as help them “unpack the resulting assumptions of cultural supremacy” to gain a proper understanding of the postcolonial, global, and politicized society in which we all live, and of their own roles in it (262). Additionally, Pohl mentions that, the EFL teaching presents a suitable arena for discussions of ethnic diversity and postcolonial perspectives, as it provides opportunities to read “fictional texts that reflects the global English-speaking community”, which includes perspectives from formerly colonized population (379).

However, Wisam Abdul-Jabbar states that teaching of postcolonial literature is a daunting mission for many teachers, as it often includes themes and influxes of language which students might not be familiar with. Accordingly, students may be reluctant towards reading literature which they feel that they initially know nothing about (222). Still, the reading of postcolonial literature is very valuable to include in educational contexts, as it depicts experiences of minority groups, and thereby initiates a dialogue for tolerance, understanding and respect of difference (Abdul- Jabbar 226).

In addition, when looking at the use of literature as an educational tool, the founder of the reader-response based research, Louise Rosenblatt, suggests that literature can have a strengthening effect on the reader’s imagination. In return, the imaginative effect will enable the reader to see the world from an unfamiliar and different perspective, and thereby understand other people’s living conditions (8, 176). Further, Rosenblatt notes that the ability to understand things from other people’s perspectives are one of the essential factors to create a well-functioning democratic society (Rosenblatt 186, 261-2). Based on this, there is no reason to see the inclusion of postcolonial literature in the EFL classroom as an infeasible mission. Furthermore, Abdul-Jabbar suggests that to deal with students who are reluctant to reading postcolonial literature, teachers could attempt to contextualise the text for the students,
Likewise, when turning to the core content of the syllabus for English level 7, it is said that students should be given the opportunity to encounter subjects of societal issues and cultural expressions, such as political, historical, and cultural conditions in parts of the world where English is used. Based on this, the students should also be given the chance to express their thoughts, ideas, and experiences about these matters, as well as for cultural expressions in both modern and historical times, such as literary periods. Further, through attending English level 7, students should have encountered both older and contemporary literature, as well as developed an understanding for how written language is built up, and how it can be used as a stylistic and rhetorical tool for different purposes, such as exercise power. In addition, students should also have been given the time to develop “strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes, and values, and to understand implied meaning” (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Syllabus En 7” 11). That is, to practice their analytical skills.

2.2.1 Educational frameworks commenting on alterity, racial prejudice and identity

When it comes to the matters of alterity and racial prejudice, these two aspects are interconnected in the fundamental values of the Swedish curriculum for Upper Secondary School. Accordingly, the curricular document states that all education should aim to foster democratic citizens, and therefore, students must be given the opportunity to acquire knowledge about democratic values and respect the equal value of all human life. Further, the curriculum also states that it is important that students are given a sense of what it means to be just and tolerant towards people in their surroundings, no matter what their ethnic origin may be. Moreover, as aforementioned, the Swedish school is subject to the internationalisation of the Swedish society. Therefore, it is of great importance that the school raises students’ awareness of the values that are inherent in a society of cultural diversity, in order to create a successful, integrated, and democratic society, where no one is “subject to discrimination on the grounds of . . . ethnic affiliation . . . , or to other forms of degrading treatment” (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4).

When it comes to the matter of identity (which is presented more uniformly than the other aspects), the curriculum explains that another major task of the school is to
give students “a secure identity and awareness of one’s own cultural origins and sharing a common cultural heritage strengthens the ability to understand and empathise with the values and conditions of others” (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4). Therefore, it is stated that the school should be a place where students are given an opportunity to develop an understanding for their own identity, as well as the one of others, and be encouraged to explore their personal uniqueness and individuality (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4).

3 Postcolonial aspects in *Americanah*

This analysis will present how *Americanah* (2013) depicts, but also helps to undermine experiences of alterity, racial prejudice, and identity, as well as create understanding for the notion of double consciousness and what it is to be treated as other. This, with the help of postcolonial theory. As alterity is an analytical concept which has its base in the Western prejudicial views of formerly colonized people, there is an evident connection between racial prejudices and experiences of alterity (Ashcroft et al. 77). Likewise, experiences of double consciousness and identity crises are also tied to questions of alterity, as such behaviour is triggered from living in a world that one is both a part of, yet simultaneously, segregated from (Edwards 139-40). Due to the close relations between the aspects of investigation, they will be analysed as a coherent part in the literary analysis, in order to make their relation to the novel as clear as possible.

As it is after the two characters of interest have immigrated to America, that the readers encounter true experiences of alterity, identity issues, and racial prejudices, the analysis will mostly be focused to the parts where Ifemelu and Dike are situated in America. Therefore, although Dike is a secondary character, he is still important to put focus on, as it is through his character that Adichie lets the concept of displacement, double consciousness, and the “post-colonial crisis of identity come[s] into being” (Ashcroft et al. 8). Thus, Dike’s character offers a significant contribution to the analysis of the identity aspect.

3.1 The reflection of alterity, racial prejudice, and identity in *Americanah*

The first time an experience of racial prejudice, as well as creation of alterity appears in the novel, is when Ifemelu goes to register for classes at the University in America, where she encounters a white American lady named Christina at the reception desk. Yet, Christina exhibits a strange behaviour towards Ifemelu, she speaks to her in an extremely slow pace. At first, Ifemelu believes the woman to be suffering from an illness that affects her way of speaking. However, it does not take long before Ifemelu
realizes that there is nothing wrong with the woman, rather it appears that the woman believes that there is something “wrong” with her as “she realized that Christina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling” (Adichie 133).

Pursuant to Quillian, Christina’s behaviour indicates that she has a preconceived opinion about the language proficiency of coloured foreign students, which has brought her to create a generalized stereotype connected to skin colour and faulty language (300). Yet, what Christina does not realize, is that a large part of Africa is fluent in English, due to the fact that these parts of the world, like Nigeria, used to be under British ruling (Bertens 196) and thereby have English as an official language. Hence, Christina’s behaviour and preconceived opinion do not have any relation to what is actually true, nor has she spoken to Ifemelu before, and therefore, her behaviour towards her cannot rely on actual experience (Quillian 300). When taking Healy’s definition of racial prejudice into account, one may note that Ifemelu in her meeting with Christina becomes subject to degrading and discriminating treatment due to racial prejudice, based on her ethnic origin (8). Christina’s discriminating and offensive behaviour can even be identified as an act of racism, as she treats Ifemelu as if she was inferior to her; depending on the colour of her skin (Healey 11).

In this situation, the reader understands that Ifemelu experiences feelings of being other, as Christina makes a clear distinction between them, based on their differences concerning skin colour, which is their ethnic differences. Thereby she assumes Ifemelu to be ignorant, and herself to be more abled than her. This fits into what Edward Said says to be characteristics of alterity and viewing a person as other, in postcolonial theory (Said 37-40). However, as the reader is never invited to follow Christina’s perspective, one can never be entirely sure that this was her intention. Still, as Ashcroft et al. mention, when examining questions of alterity one has to analyse the reaction and experience of the person who is affected by the action itself, which in this case is Ifemelu, and not Christina. Thus, one has to look at Ifemelu’s reaction to the situation, which indeed indicates feelings of otherness (Ashcroft et al. 77). Accordingly, through this sequence, Adichie displays how acts of racial prejudice may lead to the construction of alterity. Hence, she contributes to raising awareness of the importance to meet all individuals with respect, and not to judge them based on their appearance. That is, to not commit acts of racial prejudice which may generate experiences of alterity.
However, a situation where mainly issues of racial prejudice is noticeable, is when the dog of Ifemelu’s American room mate Elena steals her bacon. Ifemelu then asks her friend to watch her dog better; Elena is aggravated and tells her “You better not kill my dog with voodoo” (Adichie 152). Elena’s outburst has a strong upsetting effect on Ifemelu, and she goes to her room where she explains that she:

had wanted to slap her dissolute room-mate not because a slobbering dog had eaten her bacon but because she was at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her. (Adichie 152)

This part of the narrative relates well to what O’Reilly states about postcolonial literature attempting to present a different view of the Developing World from what has been presented on the Western television screens (6). Because, as the reader has come to know Ifemelu, and to some extent Nigerian culture, they understand that voodoo has nothing to do with the colloquial life in Nigeria. Accordingly, this is a sign that Adichie has managed to present her readers with an accurate description of the Nigerian culture and self-definition, and established a stand for a postcolonial perspective to the novel (Bertens 193). Unfortunately, Elena is not as informed as Adichie’s readers. Rather, it seems that she has a racial prejudice which proclaims voodoo to be a common practice for coloured people from Africa. Thus, it is likely that this prejudice has been created from watching stereotypic films or TV shows that have portrayed voodoo as something mundane. Subsequently, Elena has established a preconceived view of African culture. According to Gerster and Zlogar, this would be a valid assumption to make, as film and television productions often have an influential effect on the beliefs and behaviours of ethnic diversity of its audience (7). Hence, this section of the novel presents the readers with a chance to reflect over the reason behind Elena’s actions, and how it may be connected to different types of media that we encounter in our everyday life. This way, the novel opens up for a discussion about how thoughts of alterity and racial prejudice can be distributed to people unconsciously, which makes it important for everyone to be critical towards all information that pass their minds on a daily basis.

Yet, this situation does not exclusively depict racial prejudice, but also construction of alterity issues. As noticeable in the quote, the reader understands that Elena’s outburst has made Ifemelu feel that she is at war with the world, and that everyone she meets is against her. These types of feelings indicate that Elena’s behaviour has caused Ifemelu to feel differentiated from the rest of the world around her, like she is not seen as a part of them. Pursuant to Ashcroft et al., these types of
feelings are what generates feelings of otherness in an individual (77). Thereby, Elena’s behaviour constructs experiences of alterity. As the reader is following Ifemelu’s perspective, one can see how Elena’s outburst touches her, as well as it portrays the understanding for the difficulties with living in a country that is not your own.

Accordingly, this might be Adichie’s way of writing back at the empire, by demonstrating one of the many consequences to differentiation, and consequently feelings of alterity may have on people. By doing so, Adichie is expressing liberation and independence from colonial times and colonial writing (Ashcroft et al. 77), which would not have presented Ifemelu’s perspective on the matter. Thereby, Adichie points out the damage that acts of racial prejudice and alterity may cause, as well as demonstrating how the past century’s colonization has come to shape present day societies (O’Reilly 7).

When considering the matter of identity, Adichie shows grand postcolonial authorial skills. For instance, many of the most interesting situations where this is presented, is when Ifemelu has returned to Nigeria after living in America for 15 years. This is especially prominent during a restaurant visit between Ifemelu and her friend Obenize (who has also lived abroad), where Ifemelu asks the waiter if the French fries to her dish are made out of real potatoes, or if they are imported.

The waiter looked offended. “It is the imported frozen ones.” As the waiter walked away, Ifemelu said, “Those frozen things taste horrible.” “He can’t believe you’re actually asking for real potatoes,” Obenize said drily. “Real potatoes are backward for him. Remember this is our newly middle-class world. We haven’t completed the first cycle of prosperity, before going back to the beginning again, to drink milk from the cow’s udder.” (Adichie 444)

From this quote, the reader understands that Ifemelu and Obenize have mixed feelings about their home country, due to a change in their respective cultural identities. While living abroad, Ifemelu and Obenize have tweaked their former Nigerian identities in order to adapt themselves to their new Western surroundings and thereby appropriated some of the Western values (Ashcroft et al. 9). Yet, they have maintained some of their Nigerian values, as they are still able to understand the waiter’s point of view of the situation. Pursuant to Edwards, Ifemelu and Obenize have developed a double consciousness, that is, hybrid identities that have intertwined their two cultural identities, i.e. their Nigerian cultural identity and their Western cultural identity (139-40). As stated by Ashcroft et al., this is a common reaction for people that are part of the
diaspora, which both Ifemelu and Obenize have become due to their voluntary migration to the Western world (9). Accordingly, with this scene, Adichie displays one of the ways in which the diaspora may come to affect formerly colonized people, in terms of identity and ability to live between two different cultures (Edwards 140).

Yet, by appropriating their hybrid identities, Ifemelu and Obenize have started to view their home country and fellow Nigerians from a more Western point of view. If they had stayed in Nigeria, they would never have asked the waiter for fresh potato fries, because then, they would also have seen the imported fries as the better, more exclusive alternative. Instead, they are now looking down at the waiter for reasoning the way he does, and making him into something irrational and chaotic, while they see themselves as the rational and orderly people, who really know what is best (Said 7, 37-40). Thus, they construct difference between themselves and the waiter, and come to the conclusion that they are superior to him, since they possess the Western way of thinking. Hence, Ifemelu and Obenize are treating the waiter as the other, and thereby construct a situation of alterity, even if the waiter comes from the same ethnic background as themselves (Edwards 17). This, as a consequence to the assimilation of their differentiated identities.

Subsequently, this event becomes a clear statement of the fact that segregation and creation of alterity are not necessarily tied to ethnic differences, and may very well occur in all different types of societies (Edwards 17), and for that reason should not be accepted, no matter who it is aimed at. Further, this scene also displays the downfall of the colonial authorial grip, as Adichie lets her characters challenge the colonial idea of a “single voice of a cultural authority” through appropriating their hybrid identities (Edwards 141).

Moreover, Adichie presents further issues of identity and alterity through Dike, Ifemelu’s younger cousin. When Dike was a toddler, his mother brought him to America as she sought a better life for them. However, Dike’s mother, Uju, does not want Dike to behave or believe that he is like the African-American children. Therefore, she puts him in a school where he is the only coloured child. Consequently, through attending this school Dike is for the first time confronted with the thought that he has a contrasting skin colour from his white class mates. This becomes evident to the reader as Dike expresses concern about an event that happened in school, where all children, except him, were given sunscreen as they were outside playing. Ifemelu then asks Dike if he had wanted his teacher to give him sunscreen as well. Dike answers: “‘I guess so’, 


he said with a shrug. ‘I just want to be regular’” (Adichie 184). Until now, Dike has not been aware of the fact that he is ‘different’ from the other children in his school in terms of appearance. However, this realization has made him look upon himself differently. According to Mischke, alterity and feelings of otherness are, in philosophical terms, based upon the way in which we look upon ourselves (324). Thereby, in his teacher’s unintentional separation of him and the other children, Dike gains a new insight of the world around him, and consequently starts to think of himself as different, and even abnormal. Therefore, Dike becomes a subject of alterity (Mischke 323-4).

After this realization, Dike starts to question his role in the world, his self-image, and identity. Throughout the novel, the reader understands that Dike’s character mediates rootlessness, as he lacks an active and valid sense of his ethnic identity (Ashcroft et al. 9). This becomes especially visible during Dike’s childhood where he asks constant questions about his father, who died when he was a baby. For example, Ifemelu and Dike’s mother have a conversation about Dike’s desire to know more about his background, just after he has been accepted to his new school:

“He was asking about his name again.” . . . “You know, he never asked me this kind of thing before we moved here.” . . . “This time he didn’t ask why he has my name, he asked if he has my name because his father did not love him.” (Adichie 170-1)

This quote provides the readers with an idea of why Dike asks questions about his Nigerian background, and how this has become more relevant to him after the placement at his new school. Pursuantly, with support from O’Reilly, Dike’s character becomes the personification of displacement, that is, what it means to be living between two different cultures, constantly searching for a centre (11-12). That is to say, Dike appears to be suffering from an internal identity crisis, which according to Ashcroft et al., is a common reaction for first generation of children of the diaspora (8-10).

Furthermore, Dike has never been taught how to speak Igbo, as his mother believed that “Two languages will confuse him” (Adichie 109). Even if Dike’s mother herself grew up speaking two languages, she argues that things are different if you speak two languages when living in America. Based on this, one might think that Dike will have had a more American dominated upbringing, yet, his mother has also made sure to fill him with many of the Nigerian values that she has grown up with. This mix of cultural identity influxes causes Dike to constantly express confusion over who his surroundings expect him to be, and who he really is. Additionally, one might argue that this reaction of his, may have been triggered by the fact that he does not know how to
speak his native language (Igbo). Because, according to Ashcroft et al. native language is a part of expressing a proper postcolonial identity (53).

Thereby, it is fair to argue that Uju’s attempt to foster her son into both the Nigerian and American ways of living, but simultaneously keeping him away from true knowledge about his native background and language, has given Dike a sense of alienation of the self. In return, this has caused him to seek a differentiated identity that offers a mix of his two cultural influxes and is more compatible with his surroundings (Ashcroft et al. 9, 53). This means, that Dike, much like Ifemelu, has developed what Edwards refers to as the double consciousness, a hybrid element of identity which allows him to orient himself freely in both the American and to a large part, the Nigerian culture. Yet, as previously indicated, the double consciousness also generates confusion and frustration within Dike (Edwards 139-40).

Eventually, due to his alienation of self, Dike attempts suicide when he is 15 years old. Luckily enough, he does not succeed. After this tragic event, Ifemelu invites him to come stay with her in Nigeria for a while, and that decision becomes Dike’s salvation. Because, it is when returning to Nigeria, he first begins to make sense of himself. When he first lands in Nigeria, the first thing he bursts out is: “Oh my God, Coz, I’ve never seen so many black people in the same place!” (Adichie 420). This cry of happiness gives voice to Dike’s relief and fascination of finally finding a home where he is just one in the crowd, which he has not been during his upbringing in America. In being surrounded by people who share his skin-colour and native language, at the same time as he visits his father’s old house, Dike finally gains a clear image of where he comes from and who he is. Yet, when it is time for him to leave, he expresses a yearning for more:

“I wish I spoke Igbo,” he told her after they had spent an evening with her parents. “But you understand it perfectly,” she said. “I just wish I spoke,” ”You can still learn,” she said, suddenly feeling desperate, unsure how much this mattered to him, thinking again of him lying on the couch in the basement, drenched in sweat. (Adichie 424)

Here, Adichie uses Dike’s character to display how double consciousness, as an issue concerning the postcolonial identity may come to damage an individual up to the point of attempting suicide, due to the complexity of the diaspora. Thereby, Dike helps to raise awareness for the importance of knowing one’s native language and roots, as one otherwise becomes an unliberated subject to the imperial oppression that postcolonial writers fight to overcome (Ashcroft et al. 53). More specifically, this quote indicates
that Dike will never be able to feel complete until the day he learns to speak his native language. In contrast to Dike, Adichie offers the readers Ifemelu’s alternative character, who constantly allows Igbo words to enrich her English expressions, to further comment on the important role that language plays in expressing one’s cultural identity. Hence, Adichie demonstrates how tweaking of the colonizers language grant formerly colonized population independence from neo-colonial oppression (Ashcroft et al. 37-39). That is, the significance of postcolonial literary ideas, to express political independence and embrace cultural self-definition (Edwards 10).

Furthermore, through making Dike’s character into such an important part of the story, Adichie allows her novel to comment on African-American, as well as contemporary issues of today’s world. Therefore, as Dike is a second generation immigrant, his character comes to represent the complexity of living in a global and diverse society (Müller 136), where more refugees and migrants are in continuous circulation (Roman 84). This way, Americanah helps to raise awareness and, possibly even understanding, for the thousands of migrants, and refugees who themselves may be affected by the same identity issues and crises as Dike.

4 The use of Americanah in EFL teaching

The Swedish curriculum for the Upper Secondary School, advocates for the importance that all teaching must aim to provide students with knowledge concerning democratic values, justice, and tolerance towards ethnic variety, in order to create a well-integrated society (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4). More specifically, one of the school’s most important missions is to make sure that all teachers and students work, and are surrounded by a spirit of democracy and acceptance (Roman 75). However, the educational frameworks do not suggest any concrete material to use in order to fulfil this mission. Accordingly, a novel like Americanah may come to good use as it is “deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division” (Edwards 11). Thereby the novel becomes an accurate representation of postcolonial literature that provides its readers with knowledge about what it is like to live as a migrant in present day society, what effects it may have on a person to be treated as other, or to be subject of struggles of identity and racial prejudice.

Pursuant to Pohl, the EFL classroom is an ideal venue for discussions of ethnic diversity and postcolonial perspectives, since it allows the reading of literature to function as a reflection of “the global English-speaking community”, which indeed has a past affiliated with imperial oppression that has affected the world as we know it to
this day (379). *Americanah*, a postcolonial literary piece written by an author of a formerly colonized population, presents plot, and characters that portray accurate descriptions of a postcolonial world that undermine ideas of racial differences, subordination of people, and other dominant hegemonies that are still traceable from the former British Empire (Edwards 11). Through these political influxes that the novel contains, students are provided with the possibility to achieve parts of the learning objectives from the syllabus for English 7. That is to say, gaining knowledge about societal issues, cultural expressions, political, and historical conditions of the English speaking world, as well as encounter and become familiarized with postcolonialism as a literary period through a contemporary literary piece like *Americanah* (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Syllabus En 7” 11). Thereby, *Americanah* may enable students to gain deeper understanding of such democratic issues, and is undoubtedly a suitable addition to the EFL teaching.

On account of the school as a multicultural centre and subject to the integration of the Swedish society, where students from different ethnic backgrounds meet and learn from each other every day, the ability to understand and empathise with others has become even more important (Roman 75, 84). Rosenblatt even suggests that this is one of the key factors of creating a well-functioning democratic society (186, 261-2). As both Dike and Ifemelu are characters in around the same age as the students, who portray the challenges that immigrants encounter when having to integrate and orient oneself in a new society and a postcolonial world, there is a chance that students who find themselves to be in a similar situation may identify themselves with them. In return, through reading *Americanah*, these students may find security and understanding in their own identity, in the knowledge that they are not alone.

Therefore, to read Adichie’s novel may be a way for these students to find, and develop their personal uniqueness and individuality, as is one of the general aims stated in the curriculum (4). Accordingly, as implied by Andreotti, *Americanah* as a postcolonial novel may help students to familiarize themselves with questions concerning alterity and identity, as well as guide them into a proper comprehension of the postcolonial, politicized, and global society in which they live. In return, this may create a meaningful teaching experience that provide students with the tools they need to orient themselves in this world, and find who they are in it (262). Based on this, reading and working with *Americanah*, with focus on the characters Ifemelu and Dike, may be used as a didactic strategy to raise awareness among students about the cultural
origins and identities of themselves, as well as of others around them. In return, this “strengthens the ability to understand and empathise with the values and conditions of others” (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4).

Subsequently, according to Beach et al., the practice of empathic abilities may indeed be considered a necessity, as adolescents’ abilities to see the world from other people’s perspective than their own, tend to be quite scarce (9). Thereby, there may be a risk that not all students will feel the same connection and understanding towards ethnic diversity, and what it is like to be treated as other. However, this is not necessarily a problem. Because, according to Rosenblatt, reading literature may strengthen the students’ imagination, which in turn will enable them to see the world from a different perspective than their own, and thereby, they will practice their empathic abilities and come to understand what it is like to be in the shoes of someone else (8, 176).

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that by merely reading the novel students will start to broaden their reference frames of tolerance and democratic values. There is still a possibility that students may find the novel, and its characters too complex for them to read. For instance, Americanah is set in the American society, which is different from Sweden in many ways. Thus, it may be difficult for Swedish students to see the connection between Ifemelu and Dike’s experiences of otherness and racial prejudice in an American setting, and their own lives. Based on this, and as stated by Abdul-Jabbar, students may express reluctance towards reading a novel which they initially may feel has nothing to do with their lives (222).

Still, Americanah presents characters of different ethnic backgrounds, ages, and identities, who struggle with issues such as race, identity, and the value of accepting differences. Accordingly, these are themes that are highly relevant and current in any contemporary society (Abdul-Jabbar 226), and especially in a Swedish educational context that aims to foster democratic citizens who understand the value of growing up in a diverse environment (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Curriculum” 4). Therefore, the reading of Americanah may initiate an educational dialogue about such themes and matters.

However, according to Nieto and Bode, the aforementioned themes are indeed abstract and may be difficult for students to grasp, and should therefore be examined through critical eyes in order to provide the students with a meaningful and abiding learning experience (5). Moreover, the English didactic scholar Bo Lundahl, states that educational readings of fiction should aim to support the students’ understanding of texts through cooperation and interaction (409). Pursuantly, one may argue that one of
the best ways to work with a postcolonial novel like *Americanah*, would be through frequent and deliberate book-talks, where students can ventilate their thoughts, ideas, and experience of the text, as well as practice their analytical skills, as is part of the core content for English level 7 (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Syllabus En 7” 11). Likewise, such book-talks would also enable teachers with the possibility to scaffold the students by contextualising the novel for them, and explaining how and why the characters, plot, and setting may be related and relevant to their lives, which according to Abdul-Jabbar is of great importance when trying to prevent students from experiencing confusion or reluctance towards literature (226).

Yet, *Americanah* includes frequent code switching between Igbo and English, which may be considered a problematic reading disruption that may make students reluctant towards the novel (Abdul-Jabbar 222). However, as aforementioned by Ashcroft et al., this postcolonial narrative technique is used by postcolonial authors to retrieve cultural and linguistic expressions that were taken from them by colonizers (37-39). Therefore, this way of writing becomes part of an expression of a postcolonial identity and liberation (53). This is undoubtedly worth explaining to the students if they are to understand and identify with the secondary character, Dike, who struggles with an identity issue due to his lacking language proficiency of his native language. Whereas the protagonist Ifemelu mixes her English with Igbo expressions, and thus becomes a great representative for the postcolonial literary movement, which involves establishment of cultural and political self-definition, and independence (Bertens 194).

Pursuantly, teachers may use both Ifemelu and Dike’s characters as examples of how a postcolonial world still comes to affect people in their everyday lives. This, in order to develop their students’ abilities to understand how language can be used as a stylistic and rhetorical tool for different purposes, such as demonstrating inferiority, power or even liberation (Natl. Ag. for Ed. “Syllabus En 7” 11). Subsequently, it is suggested that to include *Americanah* in the EFL classroom, with its continuous code switching, should not merely be looked upon as problematic. Rather, it demonstrates a proof that this novel would indeed be an adequate choice of literature, when aiming to teach students about postcolonialism and its effect on the world as we know it today.
5 Conclusion

The aim of this literary didactic essay has been to analyse and discuss how Adichie’s postcolonial novel *Americanah* depicts and raises awareness for the postcolonial features: alterity, identity, and racial prejudice. Additionally, this essay has investigated whether or not *Americanah* is a novel that would be worth including in EFL teaching which aims to foster democratic citizens, who will have developed strategies for understanding societal issues, values, and different perspectives. This, according to the learning objectives stated in curriculum, and the syllabus for English level 7.

Firstly, this essay claims that *Americanah* does help to bring questions of alterity, identity, and racial prejudice into light through presenting characters and plot that, in one way or another, display these aforementioned postcolonial features. Through following Ifemelu’s narrative perspective, the reader may become well acquainted with the effects, and possible harm that racial prejudice, and the creation of alterity may have on an individual, and how the colonial past still affects present day societies.

Secondly, Ifemelu’s perspective, along with the secondary character Dike, also opens up for a chance for the reader to further understand the many ways in which the diaspora may come to alter an individual’s identity. More specifically, Ifemelu depicts the power that may be found in an identity which is affected by the double consciousness; to challenge and undermine the past colonial authorial grip. While in contrast, Dike reflects the damage that may be caused when one is excluded from one’s cultural and linguistic heritage, and thereby becomes an unliberated subject to the imperial oppression. Therefore, through assimilating their hybrid identities as a result of living between two different cultures, Ifemelu and Dike present two sides of the same coin; identity issues related to the complexity of the diaspora. Thirdly, this essay has, however unexpectedly, come to explain the close relationship between the aspects of investigation, and how they build on the creation of each other. This is especially evident in the case of alterity, which is created from acts of racial prejudices, whereas it may also come to trigger identity changes, such as the double consciousness.

In conjunction, all of the previously mentioned aspects would indicate that *Americanah* will guide its readers into gaining a more profound understanding of the concepts alterity, identity, and racial prejudice and their respective effects on people and society. However, there are a few problematic aspects when it comes to the use of *Americanah* in the EFL classroom, such as the American setting and context, as well as
the code switching between English and native language, aspects which might make it challenging to use Americanah in a Swedish educational context.

Yet, with the help of a teacher who offers scaffolding and contextualisation of the novel to his/her students, the teacher may prevent students from experiencing reluctance or confusion towards the novel. Because, despite these problematic aspects, Americanah indeed initiates a dialogue for abstract issues of race, identity, and acceptance, themes that are important and recognizable in any contemporary society. Owing to this, the essay also argues that reading and critically examining Americanah may enable readers to familiarize themselves with democratic issues related to understanding of values, societal issues, and the perspectives of others. Accordingly, these are abilities which may be considered a necessity in order to grasp and orient oneself in our postcolonial and highly politicized world. Thereby, the novel may indeed be applicable in EFL level 7 teaching that aims to mediate awareness, understanding and acceptance towards ethnic variety and multiculturalism.

Nonetheless, it would be undoubtedly interesting to examine the novel’s linguistic expressions and code switching more in detail for future research. Although this essay has explained language to be a part of a person’s identity, it has merely been examined at a more general level. Even so, the use of native language in postcolonial literature is seen as an expression of a postcolonial identity, and liberation from former imperial oppression. For that reason it could be made highly relevant to specifically and exclusively analyse the linguistic aspects in Americanah, and their possible effect, or rather contribution to the plot, characters, and particularly its readers.

All things considered, Americanah does certainly raise awareness of alterity, identity, and racial prejudice through presenting plot, characters, and to some extent linguistic expressions, that in one way or another comment on, and portray these postcolonial features. Thereof, the novel would indeed be appropriate to include, and critically analyse in EFL teaching that aims to raise students’ awareness and understanding towards societal issues, the perspectives of others, as well as ethnic variety, and migration. This, with the hopes to raise democratic and accepting citizens of the world, who will have gained a better comprehension for others, themselves, and their respective roles in our diverse Swedish society.
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