

Stories Within Stories Tell Tales of Ideologies Within Cultures

Authors writing from different perspectives often utilize similar stylistic devices in their stories. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie are written using a frame narrative, but they overlap in more ways than style. Although written a century apart, the novels both speak to the literary conversation regarding race and colonialism.

Each of the novels follows a main character that leaves the country that they are familiar with to enter an entirely new world. In *Heart of Darkness*, published 1899, an unnamed narrator is present on a ship where five sailors reunite. Marlow, one of the sailors, tells the other sailors about his colonizing mission to voyage up the Congo River. He was hired by a Belgian company to bring Mr. Kurtz, who has fallen ill, back to Europe. The main narrative of the book comes through Marlow, who shares his experiences of his trip down the Congo orally with the other sailors. The unnamed narrator actually frames Marlow's narrative by explaining the circumstances in which Marlow shares his story.

Heart of Darkness was written during the height of the British Empire, and the cultural views present during that time are expressed throughout the novel. A century after *Heart of Darkness* was published *Americanah* was added to bookshelves. The story begins from Ifemelu's point of view and is set in a Trenton braid salon. The story follows Ifemelu's experience moving from Nigeria to the United States to complete her university education. During the story Ifemelu begins writing a blog, her story within the larger story of *Americanah*.

The literary technique of writing a frame narrative facilitates an author's ability to tell a story within a story. The technique is not new to literature and has been the foundation of many stories we still study today. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is an early example of a novel that uses frame narrative. Marlow has had many years to reflect on his experiences while journeying down the Congo before actually sharing his accounts of his travels. An unnamed narrator is telling the story of Marlow who is telling his story to the sailors on the boat. This allows the unnamed narrator to share his own judgments about Marlow. However, frame narrative does not require a story to be told from another character separate from the main narrative voice.

A character can both hold the primary narrative voice as well as frame another voice of theirs within a piece through the stylistic approach of writing a frame narrative. Recently Adichie's *Americanah*, published in 2013, introduces us to a new approach to writing a frame narrative. With recent advances in technology, literature has expanded into the virtual world in the form of blogs on the Internet. Adichie makes use of this as an opportunity to incorporate blog writing into her novel. Although it is a new approach to an old literary device, incorporating blog posts throughout the novel is a form of frame narrative.

At first sight the novels overlap because both novels use this stylistic device. While the frame narrative structures each novel, analyzing the content of the two texts exposes the cultural connections between *Heart of Darkness* and *Americanah*. Contextualizing the novels is key to understanding the implications of each story.

The novels both directly approach the idea of colonialism. *Heart of Darkness* was written during the imperialistic movement and the story frames a colonizing mission where British colonizers entered Africa to bring ivory back to Europe. *Americanah* on the other hand addresses colonialism after the fact. Nigeria itself is a result of the colonizers intruding Africa and creating their own boundaries. It was not until 1960 that Nigeria became an independent country, which means that Adichie wrote the novel in the aftermath of the colonizing project. Although Conrad and Adichie wrote at very different times, their novels both contribute samples of cultural commentary into a literary discussion about race.

Thoroughly understanding the historical background and context of each novel allows the reader to connect important ties between *Heart of Darkness* and *Americanah* such as the cultural views they represent. Each novel addresses race from completely opposite perspectives- *Heart of Darkness* from Marlow's pro-colonization view and *Americanah* from a postcolonial standpoint. The texts each represent colonialism at different stages. Therefore it is extremely important to understand the ideologies that emerged from colonization and in what ways they linger in present societies.

In 1978 Edward Said published *Orientalism* to inform readers of the artificial boundaries that Europeans created in order to separate themselves from those that they considered as "uncivilized" people in Eastern countries. Said says colonization was justified by this artificial boundary created by Europeans who segregated themselves from those countries they were colonizing. He explains that Europeans justified colonization as their duty to help civilize the rest of the world. Said says,

“Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine,” (Said). He explains the influences on society during the British Empire by emphasizing the huge effects that media, literature and scientific studies had on shaping cultural views. He explains that “Orientalism” is an idea entirely made up by Europeans who viewed Orientals as a phenomenon that possessed particular characteristics. Said explains how Europeans delegated a particular mentality, genealogy, and atmosphere to Orientals in order to strengthen the distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority. Understanding historical and cultural influences on literature allows for a more grounded reading of *Heart of Darkness*. To an extent this background information explains the lasting racism expressed throughout *Americanah*, not to say that this racism is by any means acceptable. The clearly racist distinctions that Westerners created between themselves and the underdeveloped eastern countries became the foundation of Europe’s single story.

In 2009 Adichie addressed the problem of only hearing one side of a story. She opened her TedTalk titled “The Danger of a Single Story” by sharing one of her own experiences where she created a single story of something. She explains that early in her literary journey she had been convinced that, “books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify,” (Adichie). She explains that since she had only ever had access to English books written by Europeans, she had never read about things she was familiar with. Both Africans and Europeans read books written by European authors. This historical context creates a distinction between the European and

Nigerian cultures of Marlow and Ifemelu. What this means is that while young African readers were learning about English cultures, young English readers were reading about things with which they were familiar, never taking time to understand people from different parts of the world. The colonizing perspective blindly accepts the “orientalist” ideology as an accurate depiction of colonized peoples, neglecting to understand the point of view of those peoples being colonized.

In her TedTalk, Adichie addresses the “danger of a single story” while explaining the influence that colonization has had on her development as a reader and writer. She says, “This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature,” (Adichie). Adichie shares that after reading many English books about snow, eating apples, and drinking ginger beer- convinced this was representative of all literature- she eventually discovered African Literature by writers like Chinua Achebe that helped to shift her concept of literature as an expression of art. Discovering African literature helped Adichie avoid having a single story of the world. Adichie’s personal experience with forming a “single story” teaches us to approach problems through many perspectives. Adichie’s first understanding of literature shows the ongoing effects that the European restrictions explained in Said’s *Orientalism* have had in modern societies. Adichie’s speech consequently reinforces Said’s explanations of the colonial ideology as it is defined in *Orientalism*.

The problem of the single story is truly alarming. Interpreting Said’s explanations we can infer that the suppressed nations were not accurately

represented. In fact, their voices were silent to the colonizers. Some Nigerian languages such as Hausa and Yoruba have literary traditions dating from the late nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century, (Dodgson). However, this did little to inform Europeans about the African perspective. Most Europeans would not be bothered to translate the literature into English or to learn African languages so that they could expand the range of literature they were reading. Europeans were negligent to consider the experience of the colonized. Recently scholars have compiled literary histories for these colonized peoples that explain that African literature has had a long history. Nevertheless most pre-twentieth-century works were part of the oral tradition and were not taken down in writing (Dodgson). Europeans read literature produced by other Europeans that reinforced the ideologies supporting colonization.

Heart of Darkness came about at the very end of the 19th century, alongside many other pro-colonization works that neglected to express the standpoint of those being colonized. It is hard to formulate judgments against a culture when the experiences of those peoples are silenced. While Conrad's book is told from the perspective of a European exploring the heart of Africa, the Africans he describes as, "savages" were still passing down stories through the oral tradition. Therefore Europeans had no understanding of the negative effects that their colonization had on the Africans. English speaking Europeans had not yet heard the story of imperialism through an African perspective. This barrier between the Europeans and Africans represented in *Heart Of Darkness* emphasizes the danger of hearing only one side of a situation that involves two major groups of people.

Eventually the colonizers were able to implement a new language into the societies they were colonizing. Nigeria became an English-speaking nation and the native languages of Nigeria became secondary. This means that the recent stories that we read from Nigerians are written in English as a result of colonization. This draws another comparison between Adichie who writes in English as an effect of imperialism and Conrad who decided on his own to learn to speak and later write in English during his early twenties. Nigerians required to learn English lost a basic connection to their roots that had allowed them to take pride and indulge in nationalism for years before they were no longer communicating through their traditional languages. Nigerian writers are challenged to convey their stories in a foreign language that has been forced upon them. Forcing a nation to adopt a new language presents major challenges to descendants of the culture who may feel confused when trying to sort out their identity.

In *Americanah* Dike, Ifemelu's cousin, is an example of an Igbo who has been raised speaking English. Dike clearly faces confusion when Ifemelu says to him, "Dike, I *mechago*," (Adichie 134). Aunty Uju, Dike's mother, quickly asks Ifemelu not to speak Igbo to Dike. She says that speaking two languages will confuse him. When Ifemelu argues that she and Aunty had spoken two languages growing up, Aunty Uju responds, "This is America. It's different," (Adichie 134). This scenario is an example of the confusion that postcolonial subjects experience as a result of the colonizing project. Dike moves with Aunty Uju to the United States and demonstrates a liminal character struggling with his identity as an Igbo native living in a country that identifies him as an African American. His experience lays out the confusion of a

child trying to understand their identity as a cultural hybrid. When Ifemelu shares Igbo words with Dike she encourages him to embrace his roots and to approach life in the United States through an interstitial postcolonial identity, creating his own hybrid of the two cultures. Auntie Uju fears the negative effects that Dike will experience if he does not simply learn to be American and discourages him from hanging on to their Igbo heritage through language.

This is an example of the transition from their native languages to English that eventually led Nigerians to begin sharing their side of the story with Europeans. “The imposition of British rule and the English language on Nigeria resulted in the use of English as Nigeria’s official language,” (Edokpayi). The concept of writing in English as a second language again ties Conrad and Adichie’s works together. Conrad was Polish and did not learn to speak English until his twenties. He eventually wrote in English. Adichie writes in English, a language that Nigerians were forced to adopt. Adichie occasionally incorporates Igbo words into the dialogue of *Americanah*, but not very often. Adichie’s prose seems flawless and is even more impressive when considering that she uses the language of another culture to express Igbo ideas, concepts, world-view, and experiences. This cultural barrier creates various problems for the author (Edokpayi). Adichie uses an outside language to describe the perspective of a Nigerian native.

It is unfortunate that Nigerians were stripped of their native languages and forced to learn English. However Adichie’s writing successfully brings a Nigerian perspective to bookshelves so that finally English speakers such as Europeans and Americans might read, understand, and take into consideration the experiences of

Nigerian peoples. Adichie's efforts as an author have advanced the conversation regarding racism since Conrad's account in *Heart of Darkness*, which does not offer any African views of the situation. Adichie is actively working to provide another side of the ongoing story of racism. She specifically addresses the struggle of language in relation to race when Ifemelu meets Cristina Tomas.

Adichie exposes the misconceptions of Americans regarding Africans and their language in Chapter 14. Ifemelu arrives at a United States university and is instantly faced with a racist encounter. Ifemelu approaches Cristina Tomas at the front desk on the first day of school to get information about registration. When Ifemelu asks Cristina a question, Cristina responds in choppy sentences that Ifemelu interprets as Cristina having, "some sort of illness that made her speak slowly," (Adichie 163). Quickly we learn that Cristina simply thinks that Ifemelu will not understand English unless it is spoken slowly. When Ifemelu explains that she speaks English, Cristina responds, "I bet you do. I just don't know how well." On the following page Ifemelu admits that despite speaking English for her whole life, in the following weeks she began practicing an American accent to avoid similar judgments. This shows how forcing English on Nigerians as their national language has had lasting negative effects. It also shows the desire of colonized peoples to assimilate in order to blend into new societies.

We see racism from a different approach in Marlow's storytelling. Throughout *Heart of Darkness* it becomes clear that Marlow has little sympathy for the colonized peoples. It is likely that his fellow colonizers have influenced Marlow's view of the natives. Marlow reflects on the natives, "the worst of it- this suspicion of

their not being inhuman,” continuing later that, “the thought of their humanity- like yours- the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar,” concluding that this idea is “Ugly,” (Conrad 36). Marlow’s view of African natives demonstrates an early colonial commentary on race. These lines clearly indicate that Marlow prefers to separate the natives from humanity. Marlow’s perception of the Africans during his mission to find Kurtz offers early racist commentary into the literature available to read at the time of its publication.

In an essay titled *Two Visions in Heart of Darkness* by Edward Said, he says, “the almost oppressive force of Marlow’s narrative leaves us with a quite accurate sense that there is no way out of the sovereign historical force of imperialism,” adding, “what Marlow does is contingent, acted out for a set of like-minded British hearers, and limited to that situation,” (Said 424). Said does not attempt to justify Conrad’s racism laced passages in *Heart of Darkness*, but instead expresses the effect that the ideology of the colonizing project had on Marlow’s perspective through which he shares his experiences.

The early racist comments by Conrad were hardly scrutinized due to English readers’ acceptance of the orientalist ideology at the time of publication. Many years passed before Nigerian authors were able to offer a rebuttal to such dehumanizing characterization of their people. Nigerians still face major challenges because of their race. “In creating literature, Nigerian authors are expected to express their African/Nigerian world-view, ideas, concepts, and experiences and to project African life and culture,” (Edokpayi). This challenge comes up when Adichie refers to a college professor who told her that her novel lacked African authenticity.

Adichie reflects in her TedTalk, “The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.” This example of American expectations based on orientalist ideology demonstrates the modern struggles that Nigerian authors face. It challenges the reader to consider whether Conrad’s depiction of Africans could be considered authentic or if it should be disregarded entirely.

Adichie’s speech “The Danger of a Single Story” therefore implicitly explains the importance of analyzing books like *Heart of Darkness* and *Americanah* comparatively. Her personal examples of experiencing racism in a country that claims to support equality and freedom help to inform her readers that racism still exists. Both novels address the experience of a person entering another country where they are both unfamiliar and a minority figure within a new land. Marlow and Ifemelu experience similar journeys, which give accounts of the racism present within the societies of each text, during the time when each novel was written. The stories, written a century apart, are a perfect example of the importance of getting more than one side of a story.

Adichie’s discussion of the problems that come with having a “single story” of a nation seems to be connected to an earlier literary criticism by Chinua Achebe. Achebe was a huge inspiration to Adichie, likely due to his achievements as an African author, “Chinua Achebe is probably the most representative of modern African writers,” credited for his, “representation of pre-colonial Igbo society and how it was affected by the coming of colonialism in *Things Fall Apart*,” (Dodgson).

Achebe both represented his experiences as a Nigerian in novels and offered highly regarded literary criticism.

Achebe responded to *Heart of Darkness* in an essay titled *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*. This essay opens with Achebe sharing a quick incident where he bumped into a man on his walk to the parking lot from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts. He says that after he told the man that he taught African literature the man responded that, "he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff," (Achebe). This experience of Achebe's is an example of "the danger of a single story." Understanding that Achebe wrote about similar topics prior to Adichie offers her more credibility as an author.

Achebe's analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* suggests that Conrad's approach to literature was strongly influenced by a "need" in Western psychology, "to set Africa up as a foil to Europe," he goes on, "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist," (Achebe). He points out particular examples from within the text of the novel to support his claim. He says, "Towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman." He says that the reason why Conrad justifies spending so much time on "This Amazon," is that, "she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval." He adds that she, "fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story," (Achebe). He brings forth a very important idea. Achebe explains that Conrad does not neglect to credit the colonized peoples entirely, but does so only if he makes a European comparison as well. When describing the African woman Marlow mentions that, "She walked with

measured steps,” and, “She carried her head high,” (Conrad 60). This depiction of the African woman implies that Marlow sees her as being strong and calculated. This view remains in modern societies based on Ifemelu’s discussion of the portrayal of African women featured in *Americanah*.

Until chapter 41, the braid salon where Ifemelu opens the story serves as a frame through which the novel is told. The novel opens with Ifemelu going to the salon where she sits as most of the story is told through flashbacks. Ifemelu reflects on teenage memories from when she lived in Nigeria and reflects on her experiences after moving to the United States. The story eventually returns to the salon where Ifemelu is having her hair braided during her flashbacks. The salon itself leads to conversations with other customers and staff, often times about race and culture. This interwoven story line of scenes at the salon interspersed with flashbacks from her life creates a literary braid that accentuates the thematic and dramatic resonance across the scenes in the novel. The salon does not serve as the only example of a framed narrative within Adichie’s piece.

Adichie uses a spin on frame narrative to deliberately capture a raw and bold recount of Ifemelu’s experiences in America through her blog posts. Ifemelu’s blog allows her to comment anonymously on the modern view of African women based on American perspectives that Ifemelu has encountered during her time studying in America. In a blog post titled “In America, You Are Black Baby” Ifemelu comments that, “In describing black women you admire, always use the word ‘STRONG’ because that is what black women are supposed to be in America,” (Adichie 274). This commentary contributes to a later explanation of Oprah’s role representing

African women. It also creates awareness in the reader of the implications that specific comments have in regards to race.

Adichie is admirable for writing on the subject because, "Women writers in Africa, as elsewhere, are in the minority. Women have less access to education, and illiteracy is high among African women. Women's writing, with a few exceptions, dates from the 1960s," (Dodgson). This historical evidence implies that representing a woman as educated in *Americanah* is a huge step towards changing the conversation about African women as well as African women authors. Adichie does more than just characterize Ifemelu as educated. Adichie adds in Ifemelu's anonymous blog posts so readers have access to Ifemelu's boldest statements regarding her interpretations of America. Ifemelu's blog post serves as a modern response to the characterization of black women represented by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Blogging facilitates Ifemelu's story within a story where she compares views of the colonized and colonizers through a modern medium via the Internet.

This draws a connection between Achebe, who points out that Conrad contrasts European characters with the colonized, and Adichie, who follows a similar structure within Ifemelu's blog. In a blogpost titled, "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism" Ifemelu writes about the four kinds of tribalism present in America as she has experienced it. She writes that the four categories are class, ideology, region, and race. She writes that in undergrad there was a guest speaker and one classmate mutters to another that the speaker looks so Jewish. Ifemelu goes on to say, "Jewish to me was something vague, something biblical." Her innocent and nonjudgmental interpretation of whatever it

means to be Jewish allows Ifemelu to express the perspective of a non-racist in a country where racism is so embedded into the cultural foundation.

Although there are many distinctions between the two novels, critically analyzing them as part of a larger conversation concerning race allows the reader to draw many comparisons from the stories. Through the use of the frame narrative, Marlow and Ifemelu share societal commentary regarding race. Many of the explanations by Marlow and Ifemelu overlap, allowing a modern reader to trace the remnants of racism in contemporary societies.

Each novel shows examples of white views on black men in power. The cringe worthy elaboration done by Marlow and Ifemelu speak directly to the same conversation, separated only by time. Marlow describes his initial arrival to Africa and introduces, "six black men," before dehumanizing them to, "black shapes," a page later. Later he references more Africans as, "two more bundles of acute angles," (Conrad 15-17). As Marlow recounts his interactions with the Africans, he progressively distances himself from the men, troubled by the idea of belonging to the same species as them. Of course this incredibly racist depiction of the Africans was only one commentary demonstrating Marlow's European imperialistic perspective present throughout *Heart of Darkness*.

When faced with a black man in charge Marlow makes clear his imperialistic interpretation of the scene. The black man held some authority over the several others Marlow mentioned before. Marlow says, "Behind this raw matter [the other Africans] one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently carrying a rifle by its middle," (Conrad 16). This quote is packed with

colonial ideology. First Marlow starts his sentence by dehumanizing the several Africans to nothing more than “matter.” He calls the African in charge “reclaimed,” as if to say that he had at one point gotten away and was only now back in his proper role. He seems to boast when he adds that this authority figure is a “product,” an object created by the European colonizers. This commentary indicates the pride felt by colonizers, certain they were working for a just cause. Perhaps the most disheartening portion of the quote is where Marlow uses “it” as a pronoun for the African man. The portrayal of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* is a first hand example of the kind of literature that Said explains has formed the European prejudices against Africans. Although there have been improvements upon prejudices in modern societies, racism remains a prevalent problem.

In *Americanah* Adichie describes a modern white outlook on black men in power. It is as if Adichie is updating us with the small advancements made in the fight for equality when Ifemelu asks her boyfriend Blaine’s sister to be a guest writer for her blog on race. Shan accepts and writes a post titled, “Obama Can Win Only If He Remains the Magic Negro,” which discusses how Obama’s pastor has made his opinion clear, “that American Blacks (certainly those his age) know an America different from American Whites; they know a harsher, uglier America,” (Adichie 398). The blog post goes on to explain that the problem with Obama’s pastor saying this is twofold. First, “You’re not supposed to say that, because in America everything is fine and everyone is the same,” secondly, “if Obama thinks so then he isn’t the Magic Negro and only a Magic Negro can win and American election,” (Adichie 398). The blog post jumps into the conversation with direct

honesty. Shan addresses the fact that Obama's election could fail due to his pastor exercising a right, freedom of speech. Obama may be discredited because of something another black person has expressed. This all leads up to Shan's attempt to define a "Magic Negro," through the white American perspective, "The black man who is eternally wise and kind," pressuring the reader to question how many white men are eternally wise and kind. Shan continues, "He never reacts under great suffering, never gets angry, is never threatening," implying that white men think that they are able to show these same qualities. Although it is possible, it is uncommon for any human to never get angry. This wild expectation is Shan's way of putting white people's unrealistic expectations out in the open. I particularly cringe at, "Never reacts under great suffering," as I try to imagine what experiences white men have had with suffering in comparison to the black people they are criticizing. Lastly, I will conclude with Shan's comment, "He always forgives all kinds of racist shit." Shan tackles the problem head on and points out unintentionally through this quote, just exactly how much of the "Orientalist" ideology is still present and swept beneath the rug in modern society.

In the unframed portion of the narrative Ifemelu and friends are discussing Obama's candidacy. Her friend Grace says, "If he wins, he will no longer be black, just like Oprah is no longer black, she's Oprah," (Adichie 442). Although right now I can hear a million white people squawking, "That's not true," I am very sure that this holds more truth than Americans are willing to admit. This very idea that Oprah is not black, but instead simply Oprah, provokes me to understand the ways that the Oriental ideology has been instilled in my own understanding of the world through

modern media. I recall many times hearing people rave over Oprah, always having to add, "For a black woman she has been very successful." While in the past I had not thought much of these comments other than that the speaker was trying to say something nice about Oprah, now I realize the implications of such a comment riddled with an ideology best left in the past. What makes it an unintentionally degrading comment is that by bringing up the fact that Oprah is both black and a woman, the speaker restricts her to that identity. You don't hear people say that, "For Armenians, the Kardashians have been very successful." This is an example of the problematic ideologies present in modern American societies.

Analyzing these two texts together reinforces the fact that literature never simply stands alone. Authors write in an attempt to add to literary conversations. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Adichie's *Americanah* share structural approaches while contributing to a larger conversation regarding race. There are countless examples of racial commentary present in *Heart of Darkness* and *Americanah* that overlap. Though it might at first seem a reach to compare two novels written nearly a century apart, the more reviews and commentary read, the clearer it is that *Americanah* is greatly influenced by *Heart of Darkness*, or at least the society by which *Heart of Darkness* was produced.

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