SOCIAL MEDIA AS A LITERARY TECHNIQUE IN IGONI BARRET'S *BLACKASS* AND

CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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DEDICATION

To the memory of my late father, Philip Rono

for your love for education

To my mother Lydia Rono

a strong tower of love

and strength

For Lennon

my inspiration

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ABSTRACT

Social media is part of the lifestyle of the twenty first century. Its phenomenal growth owes itself to the ubiquitous presence of the internet and its ability to keep users engaged and entertained for hours on end. Writers are making use of the internet to disseminate their writing as well as experiment with new forms. Barret's *Blackass* and Adichie's *Americanah* deploy social media elements. The choice of social media is in keeping with the narrative turn. This research begins by identifying the specific social media elements deployed. The study looks at the functions of the social media technique and its effectiveness in communicating the writers' concerns. The study concludes that Barret and Adichie use the social media technique to foreground themes. A close reading of the two texts reveals the manipulation of the social media technique to bring forth a story. The research draws on the theories of narratology and intertextuality to examine how social media can be invoked as a technique and site to tell stories. An analysis of the kind of stories that proliferate on social media sites is examined. The stories told fall under the category of small story genre and they are drawn from the narrators' personal experience. The stories are imbued with a chronological order thanks to social media's timestamp which fixes the reported events with a time and date. A constant reference to an experiencing agent enables a unifying interpretive framework across individual episodes. This research adds to the studies done on Barret and Adichie through the examination of new forms of writing.

<center>**CHAPTER ONE**</center>

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Writers employ several narrative strategies to achieve certain artistic and emotional effects to a story. A narrative strategy is a device or technique an author uses to tell a story. According to Mieke Bal (2009), the purpose of narration is to tell a story. This entails relating a sequence of events in order to make a stand or implied point about the significance of the events. To achieve this, writers employ narrative techniques as part of their craft to tell a story. The question of narrative production in terms of how stories are produced and experienced and a range of narrative concepts, such as plot, event structures, and temporality in relation to matters such as interactivity, immersion, and agency (Bronwen et al, 2011) has evolved from the propositions of classical narratology to the recent developments in digital technology which has played a significant role in the transformation of narratives. Mieke Bal's definition of a narrative text as "… a text in which an agent…conveys to an addressee a story in a particular medium" (5) facilitated later work on texts far beyond the literary canon, including those that would appear in digital media. The evolution of narratives told using digital media has provided a range of alternative story-like forms.

The form and content of fiction have been experimented with throughout the history of fictional literature, which has given rise to genres like detective fiction, science fiction and the use of popular culture in literature. Narratives have been one of the most effective techniques to communicate issues. More so, "narratives draw their authenticity and absorbent capabilities through their experimental nature as any narrative is a cumulative result of the writer's personal experience and predecessory influence of pre-existing master narratives"(Kirti,150). In addition to allowing for expanded experimentation with literary devices, technology development has brought the question of "digital media into narrative and narrative processing and led to the popularization of inter-disciplinary approaches to narrative analysis (Lyons,

122). Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas (2011) argue that the Twenty First Century has seen a rise in stories that exploit the capacity of digital media. Similarly, increased access to and usage of the internet has also influenced the creation and reception of narratives in new media. All these have given rise to distinctive and innovative ways of storytelling modes. The rise of technology, particularly the advent of social networking sites, has seen writers such as Igoni Barret and Chimamanda Adichie tap into the potentialities offered by this "new media." Following what Tanure Ojaide 2009, Barret and Chimamanda deploy social media elements into their writings as an aesthetic choice in response to social realities.

Social media, sometimes referred to as social networking sites are an increasingly prominent form out computer mediated communication that promote social interaction between participants. The first decade of the Twenty First Century saw a rapid rise and advancement of the range of technologies that constitute social media becoming mainstream internet activities. Access to and patterns of internet usage have widened the range of narratives available in digital media. This goes to show how narratives evolve in response to changing technologies.

Ruth Page (2012) sees the conversational formats of social media as acts of storytelling. Social media delivers content via a network of participants where content can be published by anyone but is still distributed across potentially large scale audience. The content represents stories of personal experiences that proliferate in blogs, discussion forums and social networking sites shared by users and they demonstrate the artistic endeavors of electronic literature. Often interwoven between offline and online contexts, the stories told in social media as Ruth Page argues "constitute the storytelling potential of social media" (9) Interactions in social media are emergent, that is, "they are distributed across textual segments (such as blog posts, comments, forum threads, [and] updates to a social network site)" (27). For Page, the episodic nature of these interactions draws attention to the processes of storytelling. This implies that the content posted by users on social media forums constitute a narrative often told in fragmented, open-ended ways, a feature that characterize postmodern narratives that often are "open out

into fragments and bricolage in content, plot and style" (Walker, 2004). The stories presented in social media contexts can thus be analysed for their narrative potential.

Born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria in 1979, Adrian Igonibo Barrett is a Nigerian writer and author of *Blackass* as well as a winner of the 2005 BBC World Service short story competition. His first book, a collection of short stories entitled *From Caves of Rotten Teeth*, was published in 2005 and reissued in 2008. His second collection of stories, *Love Is Power, or Something Like That*, was published in 2013. The novel, *Blackass* (2015) is about a young Nigerian man, Furo Wariboko who awakes the morning before a job interview to find that he has been transformed into a white man. Told in a "Kafkaesque" style, *Blackass* is a satirical novel that tackles issues such as race, identity and social media.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born in 1977 in Nigeria, is an award winning novelist and social commentator. Her work has been translated into thirty languages and has appeared in various publications. Chimamanda has written three novels; *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013), a short story "Transition to Glory" found within the anthology *African Love Stories* (2006) edited by Ama Ata Aidoo, a collection of short stories *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009) and an article "We Should All Be Feminists" (2014). *Americanah* won the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction in 2014. *Americanah* is the story of Ifemelu, a young immigrant from Nigeria to America and Obinze her boyfriend who goes to London and stays there illegally hoping to regularize his status but this does not happen because he is deported. The novel captures the complexity and range of Nigerian experiences through the eyes of immigrants living in the diaspora by presenting the story of the two main characters. The novel details the character's immigrant experience, love, separation and eventual reunion.

It is intriguing that Barret and Adichie employ social media in their latest fiction. Whereas Barret employs Twitter in *Blackass*, Chimamanda uses blog in *Americanah*. This research explores the deployment of social media into fiction. It is an inquiry into the consequences of employing social media as a narrative strategy and how this bears on the narrative in terms of plot, event structures, characters and issues raised. In addition, this research also aims at establishing how social media is invoked as a narrative site and the effectiveness of the site in communicating themes. Furo's sister in *Blackass* uses Twitter to publicize her search for her missing brother. In *Americanah*, one of the characters sets up blogs at various points in her life. Ifemelu initiates a popular blog about her growing racial and gender consciousness of being a black migrant woman while in America.

My background reading on the two writers reveal a preoccupation with technology and the internet. In an interview with *Flood Magazine*, Barret revealed that he learnt how to write stories through a community of online writers. Similarly, Adichie explores the affordances of the internet to disseminate her writings. Her official website "The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website" contains news and updates of her works and recent publications. She used the website to disseminate her article "We Should All Be Feminists." It is of critical interest therefore that the internet manifests itself in the two writers' latest fiction.

1.2 Definition of terms

Social media

Internet based applications that promote social interaction between participants. Examples include discussion forums, blogs, wikis, podcasting, social network sites, video sharing and microblogging. As an emergent, collaborative and dialogic site, social media allow the creating and sharing of information and content via virtual communities and networks.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The Internet presents a fertile territory for fiction writers. This research investigates the deployment of social media as a narrative device in Barret's *Blackass* and Chimamanda's *Americanah*. It is an inquiry into how social media has been exploited as a narrative strategy and how the technique bears on the narrative in terms of structure, plot, character and issues raised.

1.4 Objectives

The research was guided by the following objectives:

  i.   To examine the deployment of social media as a narrative technique.

  ii.   To establish how social media can be invoked as a narrative site and evaluate its effectiveness in communicating the author's concerns.

1.5 Hypotheses

The research tested the following hypotheses:

  i.   Social media has been deployed as a narrative technique in *Blackass* and *Americanah*

  ii.   The writers invoke social media as a narrative site to tell a story and communicate the author's concerns.

1.6 Justification

African literature continues to grow and develop. This growth is marked by experimentation particularly with new forms of writing. Responding to an interview question on the major trends among youthful African writers, Ngugi admits that contemporary writers like Chimamanda, though they express "… a sense of continuity" from writers like Chinua Achebe, their writing "… indicate some new developments" (10). On the question of the role played by the internet in African Literature, Ngugi says that "… there is nothing wrong in using the internet" (10). Barret and Chimamanda display this "sense of development" in

their writing in the way they have deployed social media in their latest fiction. I think it is worth paying attention to this style of writing exploited by the two writers.

A survey of the critical research on the writing of Chimamanda and Barret reveal a preoccupation on the themes, language and how their works reflect social realities in terms of the issues raised. However, there is scant attention paid to narrative techniques. I argue that narrative techniques are often used in contemporary literature as part of their systematic building of the issues addressed (Sharma et al, 32). Writers employ narrative strategies to bring forth specific issues. Social media, as an emergent site for writing, traditionally removed from the spaces of writing literature but also engaging with it allows for expanded experimentation with new literary devices. Like other writers, Barret and Adichie have demonstrated their creative prowess by deploying social media in their writing. Though by different authors, *Blackass* and *Americanah* exploit social media as a narrative device by pushing the boundaries of narrative consequently defining audience while commenting on the social and political issues in the society. The narrative technique is important in understanding the issues addressed in the two texts.

The study of new ways writers continually experiment with form and content is a useful contribution to the ever growing body of African literary criticism. Contemporary narrative trends are expanding the literary canon. This calls for an open mind and not biasness when new forms emerge. Barret and Adichie's choice to use social media within their novels is a clear indicator of how the internet affects the way writers tell their stories. A study into the social media technique facilitates an exploration of the changing trends in writing.

Studies have been carried out in other fields like sociolinguistics on social media and how it has impacted in spheres of life and on issues like identity. Social media has been given little attention when it comes to literary studies. This is in spite of the fact that writers are making use of internet facilities to disseminate their writing and interact with their audience. This study therefore is not only a contribution to the works

done on Barret and Adichie, but also an addition to the studies done on the impact of digital media and the internet on narratives.

1.7 Scope and limitation

This study is limited to the two primary texts *Blackass* and *Americanah*. However, reference to other works by Barret and Adichie has been made where necessary. In this project, I am concerned with the way Barret and Adichie deploy social media in the two selected texts. I examine the way social media functions as a narrative technique. I look at the functions of the technique and its effectiveness in communicating themes. The study also examines the effectiveness of invoking social media as a narrative site.

1.8 Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a context for this research. It begins with a review of relevant discourses on the internet and social media. Then a review of the works done on Igoni Barret's fiction will follow. Finally a review on the critical works done on Chimamanda Adichie's works is provided.

Ruth Page (2010) examines the narrative potential of Facebook status updates. For Page, the status updates are a self-contained unit that can be interpreted as bearing certain narrative properties. Page notes that the status updates illustrate a consistent reference to a named individual (often the writer who reports his/her experience). The reference functions as "a unifying interpretive frame across individual episodes, which are narrated over the course of time as marked by Facebook's timestamp and thereby imbued with chronological order" (435). The stated name "is crucial information for both narrative production (self-representation) and reception (for the audience to know who the update is about)" (423). Page observes that though it is relatively rare to find sequences of status updates that are thematically connected to a particular topic, it is possible to find updates that follow a thematically connected topic. This implies that

the narrative interpretation of these updates is enabled because status updates are part of an ongoing archive which unfolds over time. This study models this approach in examining how Barret and Adichie invoke social media as a narrative site. The study takes note of the strategy adopted by the two writers to bring forth a story.

Following Page's propositions, Agnieszka Lyons (2016) examines the narrative potential of text messaging. She argues that though "texting may not immediately strike us as bearing narrative potential, a closer look at the content allows us to place them alongside other narrative-like texts" (124). Focusing on space and location in the context of storyworld construction, Lyons argues that "a single text-message can imply not only a single event or state, but rather a whole sequence of events or states" (125). This study adopts Lyons approach in examining content posted in the social media platform.

Jarmila Mildorf (2016) examines the influence the internet as a new medium has had on "… the nexus of narrative and identity" (257). She notes that the internet is a recent medium where issues of identity construction play out. She analyses oral history interviews conducted for Internet databases to determine and explore "how speakers engage the minds of their interlocutors and of the Internet audience in and through their narratives" (257) thus creating identities for themselves and perform these selves for others by inviting the audience to "follow, understand, and empathize with their life stories"(257). Based on this observation, this study aims at establishing the consequences of exploiting social media as a narrative technique and what it means for the narrative in terms of plot, characters, themes and audience.

While examining narratives of illness Page (2011) establishes that blogs as "a fastest growing online platform for personal storytelling have much to offer narratology."(222). She notes that blogging is not a solitary occupation. It takes place within a community of web users. This interactive potential of the blog distinguishes it from its offline counterparts such as the diary or an autobiography. Audience can interact with a blog directly as they are invited to comment on an individual post. Page concludes that blog posts

can be analysed for their narrative potential. This study aims at examining how the writers invoke social media as a narrative site and thus examine the narrative potential of social media.

Laila Al Sharaqi (2016) examines Twitter fiction, which has gained a new momentum and increased in popularity since its introduction. Laila notes that Twitter, which encourages a diversified readership and interactive storytelling through its revolutionary platform, has now become "a frontier medium that allows a unique mode of digital storytelling that facilitates creative literary experimentation." (16). Twitter offers a unique freedom to writers insofar as a tweet can be "an entire bite-sized story or even a snapshot of a story [that] requires readers' active imagination to complete" (18). This observation is relevant to this study because the internet facilitates creative expressions with new forms.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) describes the concept of heteroglossia as:

> A diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purpose of the day, even of the hour…(262-263)

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia is important to this research. The study seeks to examine the deployment of social media as a strategy to create a polyphonic novel. In this regard, Barret and Adichie exploit social media with a view of adopting a language that is reflective of the social realities of the society.

Amimo Maureen (2014) has done a study where she examines the literary strategies Tony Mochama employs in his works. She identifies the strategies of language, plot, setting, narration and characterization. She argues that Mochama makes deliberate choices in regards to literary choices as the

strategies adopted essentially allow the writer to foreground certain issues. She adds that the literary strategies adopted enhance the beauty of the works. Amimo's study is important to this research because the study seeks to demonstrate how the writers manipulate the social media technique to foreground pertinent issues they wish to address. The study also notes that the use of social media technique is a deliberate choice by Barret and Adichie.

Orabueze, Oghazi and Ezema (2014) examine the way in which poets use language to foreground issues in the society. They conclude that the poets' use of linguistic foregrounding and foregrounding of imagery of violence is a strategy drawn upon to concretize issues like violence in society. Though their study deals with poetry, their findings nevertheless have a bearing when it comes to analyzing the language adopted over social media sites. This research investigates structure of language and diction appropriated over social media and how it is manipulated to tell a story and concretize the writer's concerns.

Yvonne Vera's views of writers' continual "need to invent and banish" are clearly identifiable in *Blackass* and *Americanah.* In *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing,* she establishes that this inventing and banishing involves defiance. Though the anthology deals with women's' writing, Yvonne Vera's views are nevertheless applicable to Barret's work, who is a male writer. This study seeks to demonstrate Barret and Adichie's defiance of narrative conventions. It is worth noting that the two writers have embraced the need to "invent and banish" through their writing which involves invoking social media as a narrative site.

In an interview with Ted Hodgkinson for the *Granta Magazine*, Igoni Barret says that the internet present possibilities for fiction writers. He notes that the internet hints at the evolution of narrative styles and it can be exploited in terms of creation of characters. This study aims at examining the use of social media, which is an internet facility as a narrative technique.

In another interview with *Graywolf Press*, Barret talks about his preoccupation with technology in his stories. He observes that his use of social media is reflective of the way writers respond to the available technologies in fiction. He points out how Cervantes used windmills to great effect in Don Quixote which were considered modern at the time the book was written. He notes that social media is integral to our lives as windmills were to Cervantes's era. Barret concludes by stressing the fact that the twenty first century writer could do worse than incorporate existing technology into writing.

Writing about Chimamanda's style, Heather Hewett (2005) explores Chimamanda's selected works and classifies them as "emerging third generation writing" (77). She notes that the writings of third generation writers (born after 1960) are distinguishable from other generations, especially the first generation writers (like Chinua Achebe) in terms of style and content. Emphasis on this research is to explore new narrative techniques employed by writers and how the internet has facilitated this exploration with new narrative styles.

As argued by Kirti Jha (2016) Chimamanda "is the new age narrator-cum-chronicler who weaves her tales in and out of contemporary Nigeria" (151). Terming *Americanah* distinctive, Kirti calls for an investigation of Chimamanda's works because of the uniqueness of the writer. Kirti's study is important for this research as it seeks to establish social media as reflective of Chimamanda's uniqueness in writing. Kigiru Doseline (2012) argues that Chimamanda's works need to be studied because they address issues relevant in the contemporary society like racism, which is a main theme in *Americanah*. She argues that Chimamanda is a unique writer. Her uniqueness is demonstrated through the use of different aspects of style like extensive use of untranslated Igbo language. The present study bases its argument on this proposition by identifying social media technique as a unique aspect of style in *Americanah*.

Jacqueline Kubasu Ojiambo(2014) has done a study in which she views blogs as a new form of narrative embedding. Ojiambo takes on a narratological inquiry to examine the nature and function of the embedded narratives. Largely devoted to the theme of racism, Ojiambo's study does not give consideration to Chimamanda's use of blog as a narrative style. While appreciating Ojiambo's study, this research aims at establishing blogs and by extension social media, a potential narrative technique that not only enhances the aesthetic qualities of the text, but also as a device manipulated to bring forth a story.

Margret Koskei (2014) examines the challenges female African immigrants undergo in the West. She notes that the challenges arise out of race, class and gender differences. Koskei looks at blogging as a forum through which resistance towards these challenges can be expressed. Her study considers Ifemelu's blogging as a way of responding to and attacking racist attitudes. My study aims at establishing blogging as a narrative site the writer invokes to tell a story.

Patrycja Koziel (2015) examines the characteristics of narrative strategies used by Chimamanda. She identifies the use of Igbo language as a narrative strategy in *Americanah*. She argues that the writer's use of Igbo language could be interpreted "as the method of manifestation of different self-identifications, global identities and a dynamic sense of belonging" (96). The use of Igbo language as a narrative strategy depicts the "speaker's preferences and creative behavior" (99) and the strategy can also be seen as an indicator of the "author's manifestation of the process of creating identity" (99) for the migrants living in the West. This research observes that blogging is one of the narrative strategies adopted by Chimamanda which further demonstrates the writer's artistry.

Scholastica Wabende (2014) takes on a stylistic approach to identify and investigate features of style in Chimamanda's *Americanah*. Her thesis investigates the features foregrounded in the novel. These features include textual medium, sociolinguistic code, transitivity, point of view, textual structure and intertextuality. She concludes that these features of style, given prominence in the text "prove the

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uniqueness or otherwise of Chimamanda's stylistic bend" (9) and this can serve as basis to studying emerging trends of writing. Wabende's study is crucial to this research because blogging is an emerging trend of writing which Chimamanda employs in *Americanah*.

Miriam Musonye (2007) discusses the tragedy of Africans who migrate to America in pursuit of the American dream. Musonye explores escape routes immigrants undertake to purge pressures of immigrant life. Having failed to achieve the American dream immigrants like Happiness settle "into a life of make-belief in which happiness is his self-assigned role in the drama of his life" (58). Others take refuge in religion while some like Ezendu, though successful, take into politics. Musonye observes that:

> Ezendu's passion in politics and for all his devotion of transforming his country if and when he eventually goes back home, it still emerges as a form of escape. He is using politics to try and gain access into the socio-political life of America but with dismal results. (59)

Although Musonye deals with Ike Oguine's novel *A Squatter's Tale* to highlight the challenges immigrants deal with, her paper is applicable to this study. The study investigates the use of the internet particularly by immigrants as a social empowerment tool.

From the literature review it is clear that studies have been done on the internet and narratives. Adichie's *Americanah* having been published earlier than Barret's *Blackass* has received more critical attention. Studies done on Adichie and Barret's works focus more on thematic concerns. Even the ones that touch on narrative techniques tend to neglect emerging trends of writing such as social media. This study aims to fill the gap by examining the use of social media as a narrative device in fiction.

1.9 Theoretical framework

The theory of Narratology and the postmodern theory of intertextuality form the interpretive grid of this research. The theory of Narratology according to Mieke Bal (2009) entails the study of narrative structure and the way they affect the readers' perceptions. Bal perceives the narrative as comprising of two parts that she identifies as "story" and "fabula." She defines story as "a fabula that is presented in a certain manner" and a fabula as "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (5). Bal defines a narrative text as a "a text in which an agent…conveys to an addressee a story in a particular medium" (5). This definition demonstrates that a story can be channeled through various media. Therefore, media is equally important when it comes to an analysis of narratives.

Narratology posits that the narrative is divided into two parts: the story which is an account of the events and discourse which is the process through which the story is told. Gerard Genette's contribution to the theory of Narratology identifies narrative as constituting of three fundamental aspects: story, text and narration (25-26). Genette focuses on not just the narrative itself but how it is told. According to Saymour Chatman (1980) any narrative text has two major components namely the story which is the content and discourse which is "the means by which the story is communicated" (19). This implies that both the story (what) and discourse (how) contribute to interpretation and meaning-making in any narrative.

While talking about narrative discourse Peter Barry (2002) says "It isn't just the plot in the narrow sense which is at issue, but style, viewpoint, pace and so on, which is to say, the whole packaging of the narrative which creates the overall effect" (215). Thus technique together with point of view and other embellishments that complete a text is important when it comes to the theory of narratives. By examining the story channeled through the social media platform, the effectiveness of invoking social media as a narrative site will be examined. In addition, narratology helps me examine how the narrative in *Americanah* and *Blackass* is packaged and how the social media technique impacts on narrative structure,

plot, character and issues raised. Bal singles out the narrator as the most important aspect of the narrative. She defines a narrator as "an agent that tells a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, building, or a combination thereof" (5). This is because "the identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character"(18). By looking at the choice of the narrator, the study examines the story constructed in the social media context.

Intertextuality, a term coined by a Bulgarian/French theorist Julia Kristeva, expresses a connection or a parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style. Talking about Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of a "polyphonic novel" she says, "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (quoted from Clayton and Rothstein, 20). Intertextuality is not, however, a single mechanical connection, but rather a creative transformation of the referred texts in different linguistic and cultural contexts.

 Describing the features that characterize social media, Ruth Page argues that the social network sites "are not understood as isolated static pages but instead as shared spaces that enable collective contributions in the form of content, comments and edits" (27). Intertextuality is relevant to my research because social media is a social phenomenon which Barret and Adichie exploit as a narrative technique in their fiction. Furthermore, the story unfolding in this particular space creates meaning by making references to other texts and to social realities.

1.10 Research methodology

The study is concerned with the deployment of social media into fiction. To achieve my objectives, my methodology included close and comparative reading of Barret's *Blackass* and Adichie's *Americanah*. I examined the two works paying close attention to the social media entries. My key focus was on how Barret and Adichie exploit social media as a narrative technique.

The study applied the theory of Narratology and the postmodern theory of intertextuality. Narratology concerns the theory of narratives and it outlines concepts that qualify stories as narratives. Narratology was relevant in the analysis of how the story is packaged since technique is part of narrative discourse. Following Peter Barry's ideas, I studied the texts to identify the specific social media elements deployed and the functions of the elements in constructing the narrative in *Blackass* and *Americanah*. Questions on the consequences of deploying the narrative technique in terms of narrative structure, plot, characters and issues raised have been looked at. By focusing on the choice of the narrator, an analysis of how social media can be exploited as a site to tell a story was looked at. Narrative voice is integral to narratives and the choices made by a writer regarding which agent to use lend the text its organic unity. Narratology posit that a story can be channeled through any media; therefore the story brought out in the social media site was examined in terms of its narrative potential. Questions concerning narrative voice, narrative structure and audience drawn to the internet space were addressed.

The theory of intertextuality was helpful in determining the narrative potential of social media. Intertextuality is used to foreground elements like pastiche, allusion and parody. The content and the form of the story invoked through the social media platform makes meaning in reference to other texts. Barret and Adichie draw on social realities to enrich the content posted on the social media platform.

Furthermore, relevant secondary materials were reviewed. Critical works dealing with social media and stories were useful in shedding light on the subject of invoking social media as a site to tell a story. Critical works on Barret and Adichie were also reviewed. Through close reading of the two texts I was able to further the arguments advanced or deviate based on my research findings.

1.11 Chapter outline

This project research report has three chapters. Chapter One introduces the study and provides background information on Igoni Barret and Chimamanda Adichie. It also comprises of the statement of the problem, objectives, hypotheses, literature review, theoretical framework and the methodology used in the research.

Chapter Two deals with identifying the specific social media elements deployed in *Blackass* and *Americanah.* It interrogates how Barret and Adichie exploit social media as a narrative technique. This involves an identification of the functions played by the social media technique in relation to narrative concepts not limited to plot, structure, characters and themes. The chapter also addresses the use of social media technique in crafting a polyphonic novel.

Chapter Three makes an inquiry into how social media can be invoked as a site to tell a story. Within this chapter, I examine the kind of stories people tell on social media and what the tellers hope to achieve. The chapter also deals with evaluating the effectiveness of social media technique in communicating the writer's concerns.

Chapter four provides the conclusion of the study and the recommendations for further study.

<div style="text-align: center;">**CHAPTER TWO**</div>

THE SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNIQUE

2.1 Introduction

This section explores the deployment of social media into fiction. This analysis is in a bid to interrogate how social media can be exploited as a narrative technique. The chapter deals with identifying the specific social media elements deployed. The chapter also examines the functions social media technique performs in the narrative of *Blackass* and *Americanah.* Seargent Philip and Tagg Caroline define social media as those "internet-based sites and platforms which facilitate the building and maintaining of networks or communities through the sharing of messages and other media" (3). Social media facilitates a creation of online community where ideas, information, personal narratives and other content are shared.

2.2 Summary of the novels

Blackass is the story of Furo Wariboko, a Nigerian youth and his predicament after waking up to find he has transformed into a white man. The novel opens in a Kafka style. Furo Waribiko's unemployment status is a reflection of a wider problem prevalent in the Nigerian society and which threatens to stifle and crush the career prospects of many youth in Nigeria. After his job applications are rejected severally by prospective employers, one sales company invites him for a job interview. He wakes up on the day of the interview with plans to head into Lagos for the interview only to discover that he has metamorphosed into a white man.

Unlike Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* who hides in his room awaiting his family to come to terms with his transformation, Furo in a state of panic dresses for his job interview and sneaks out of his house. Realising that he would never be able to explain his transformation to his family he resolves to never return.

Having managed to escape his family, Furo soon realises that his new identity attracts undue attention. An "Oyibo", strolling down the streets of Egbeda is a rare sight. His presence in the neighbourhood raises suspicious eyebrows from people he long considered friends and neighbours. However, Furo soon learns that his new identity comes with certain privileges and he can use it to his advantage. His new identity compels attention and respect. He gets a job, with a company car and a driver, a salary "fifty thousand more than he'd expected" (28), and a place to sleep in one of the posh places in Lagos. But a mishap in his transformation might spoil the overwhelming aura of sudden authority and importance that comes with his whiteness. Despite having a white skin, green eyes and red hair "his ass was robustly black" (255). Also, his accent and his name, all markers of his true identity continue to plague him. In addition to addressing the issue of identity, *Blackass* also tackles other issues such as race, corruption, unemployment and life in the city. Barret uses the palimpsestic technique in the packaging of *Blackass*. A palimpsest is a French term referring to the practice of writing of a new text on the layers of the old. Barret (re)writes Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* putting it in a different linguistic and cultural context.

The novel is divided into five sections each with a title. The frame of the story is rendered by the transformation which forms the central drama. The narrative voice oscillates between the third person omniscient point of view and first person point of view. The third person omniscient point of view takes a simultaneous narrating while the first person point of view is told from an interpolated perspective.

A whole section of the novel is told in tweets. Twitter is a social networking site that allows registered members to broadcast short posts called *tweets*. The choice of twitter is in keeping with the narrative turn. Writers respond to available technology in their writing and several authors have embraced different styles technology affords. Aside from being a social platform for the exchange of ideas, news, and information, Twitter has also emerged as an experimental platform giving rise to what is called Twitter Fiction "where users explore creative realms of poetic and narrative content, albeit in 140 characters" (Laila, 16).

Whereas *Blackass* is largely set in Nigeria, *Americanah* traverses three nations. The novel opens in Princeton where we meet Ifemelu as she heads to Trenton to get her hair braided. Through a series of flashbacks the story of Ifemelu and her childhood friend Obinze is brought out. The story of Ifemelu and Obinze begins in their childhood while in school. An experience of their love relationship alongside the story of a country facing challenging times under a military government is narrated in retrospect. Ifemelu, moves to the United States after a sequence of strikes at universities in Nigeria. In America, Ifemelu has to deal for the first time with racism, and also the burdens of life as an immigrant woman. The novel explores Ifemelu's life and her relationships with Curt, a rich white man and Blaine, a university professor. While in the US, Ifemelu launches a blog about race. At the opening of the novel, she has made up her mind to close the blog and return to Nigeria. Obinze intended to join Ifemelu in the United States, but after failing to secure a visa to the US due to the stringent immigration policies in America after the 9/11 attack, he moves to England as an illegal immigrant. Years later, he is deported. He later becomes a successful wealthy man in Nigeria. The novel closes with a reunion of the two lovers. The novel addresses a myriad of issues including race, love, corruption and identity.

Americanah has a seven part structure that holds fifty five chapters. There are blog posts spread throughout the novel. The frame of the story is rendered by the braid salon in chapter one narrated in the third person omniscient, the camera cinematic on Ifemelu. Chapter two is told from Obinze's perspective. The time period rests on two temporal planes: the present showing the current lives of Ifemelu and Obinze represents one plane while events that took place thirteen years earlier in Nigeria constitute the other. Chimamanda uses an interesting non-linear narrative structure, in which every part is focalized on either Ifemelu or Obinze, with a third-person narrator exposing the much more intricate and complex universe of these characters.

The choice of social media as one of the techniques employed in the two texts is very significant. Social media allows a unique mode of digital storytelling that facilitates creative literary experimentation. Barret and Adichie draw on Social media's principle of anonymity to criticise and satarise the ills in the society presented in the two texts. Furthermore, visitors to the blog and twitter sites read the entries, make comments and share them so that other people can see and read them. This widens the audience.

The narrator in *Americanah* furnishes us with background information on the blogger and the blog. The reader is introduced to the blog from the very first chapter. Similarly, the narrator in the second section of *Blackass* offers an introductory explanation on the introduction of twitter. This is an indication to the reader to prepare to meet social media entries in the two novels. It is also an indicator that social media is an important aspect in the two novels.

2.3 Functions of social media as a narrative technique

Authors use several techniques to advance their arguments. There are a number of strategies at a writer's disposal. Writers also respond to available technology in their writing. Like other writers, Barret and Adichie deploy social media elements and manipulate them in crafting the narrative in *Blackass* and *Americanah* respectively. This study focuses on how social media can be exploited as a narrative technique to bring forth a story. The technique of using twitter and blog is significant in that it offers the writers a unique way to get in sync with the world of internet. The strategy adopted is deliberate and it is meant to evoke emotion and thought from readers. Whereas Barret exploits twitter as a narrative technique in *Blackass*, Adichie uses blog as a literary device in *Americanah.* In addition to serving as a method of characterization, social media technique serves other functions like plot device, creating vocal multiplicity, adding to the complexity of structure and defining audience.

2.4 Sharpening characterisation

Writers employ a number of strategies for purposes of characterization. A number of strategies have been exploited in *Blackass* and *Americanah* to enhance characterisation including social media. Responding to an interview question on the use of the internet by fiction writers, Barret says that the internet provides a fertile territory for fiction writers and it can be exploited in creation of characters who want to hide behind their own mask of making. Looking at *Blackass,* Barret has exploited social media to create characters and also sharpen characterisation. Barret depicts characters that are tweeting. One of these characters is @Igoni who appears to be a fictional version of the author. The character Igoni bears the same name as the author. He even quotes from interviews Barrett himself has given.

The writer through a metafictional turn brings out the events that brought Igoni and Furo together at a shopping mall. But it is through social media that his character is further developed. Puzzled by "a white man with a strong Nigerian accent, stranded in Lagos without a place to stay, without any friends…and with a job as a bookseller for a company so small"(77) Igoni develops an interest in Furo's predicament not just as a writer but also as a character in search of his own identity.

Intrigued by Furo's strangeness Igoni turns to the internet for help. The search results lead him to the social networking sites; Facebook and Twitter. He turns to twitter and in this platform he found what he was looking for after stumbling upon this tweet:

> Pls help RT. This is my missing bro Furo Wariboko in the pic. He left home Monday morn& no news of him since. pic.twitter.com/OJ9xt5WaW (78).

The family, having realized that Furo has gone missing, launches a search for him. Tekena takes to twitter to publicise the search for her missing brother. To get the details concerning Furo's predicarment, @Igoni decides to "follow" @pweetychic-tk, on twitter:

> I followed her on Twitter, of course, and going through her timeline hour after hour and day by day, reading her tweets for hidden meanings in her abbreviations and punctuation choices, and

searching for mood flaggers…I began to get some insight into a part of Furo's story that cannot be told better than by the family he left behind. (78).

This marks the beginning of the tweets exchanged between Tekena and Igoni resulting in an establishment of friendship. There are other characters who are also tweeting and following the hashtag Furo Wariboko. Their tweets serve to bring into focus Tekena's character. Her reactions to other character's tweets give an insight into her digital persona.

Jarmila Mildorf (2016) argues that the internet is a medium where issues of identity construction play out. This is evident in *Blackass* with respect to Tekena's digital persona. Characters create digital identities and they perform these selves to the audience designed, while inviting them to "follow, understand and empathize with their life stories" (257). Igoni thinks that Tekena's digital persona is misleading because, as the narrator says, here is "a young lady whose full-blood brother has gone missing (busy) collecting and trading jokes on Twitter" (81). The writer positions Igoni at a vantage point where he can observe Tekena's character through her tweets and communicate hi sjudgements to the reader.

Barret exploits the technique in creating the character of Igoni and setting a platform for his transformation. The search for Furo's story catalyses Igoni's transformation creating a different character—Morpheus whose character is further developed later in the novel. Igoni undergoes gendered transformation prompting a change of name. not only does he change his name but also his physical appearance. He dresses a woman. Furo does not immediately recognize Igoni when they meet the second time.

Social media as a technique has been exploited as a method of characterisation. The twitter platform has been used to further build the character of Tekena. Tekena's character is largely brought out through a description by Furo and Igoni, but her tweets offer the reader a chance to judge her character without having to rely only on authorial description and/or other character's judgements:

14:59 | Without @efyouaruoh the house is lonely. Mum & Dad are looking for him. I'm getting afraid. Maybe something has really happened.

16:01 | I miss@efyouaruoh. Where are you? mum & Dad went to the newspapers today. This is not funny any more oh. #Furo

Tekena's tweets illustrate that she is a caring person obviously worried about her missing brother. This counters Igoni's description of Tekena as uncaring, with a personality that is misleading. However, the tweets below underscore Igoni's description of Tekena as an opportunist taking advantage of the hashtag Furo to trade jokes and collect followers:

12:51 | For all you tweeps who RTed my #COCK tweet, I meant CHICKEN! The aboki keeps a big fat chicken as a pet. #gotcha #LWKMD

11:44 | I just lost 3 followers. WTF. Why can't I get to 2000???

The writer explores the technique to further sharpen Tekena's characterisation. Authorial description brings her out as a bold, determined brilliant character. The following tweets further illustrate her courageous and bold character.

12:27 | It STINKS inside!!!! Twitpic.com/c4knnIP #mortuary'

13:05 | RT 'enugu2coventry: This is unspeakably shameful. RT @pweetychic-tk: THOSE ARE DEAD PEOPLE!!! twitpic.com/bzs24bp #mortuary

She does not fear speaking her mind and openly criticizing authorities for abuse of office and how they neglect their responsibilities. Her tweets about the state of the mortuary bring out her bold and outspoken character.

The twitter platform brings out @Igoni as an opportunist and a schemer. "We are all constructed narratives," (83) @Igoni tells us, while noting his "distrust of digital personas" and adding that "calculation always trumps sincerity on social media" (89). He befriends Tekena with the motive to dig out Furo's story so that he can use the information to write a book. He ponders "… on the approach most likely to succeed, while at the same time studying (Tekena's) timeline for any clues" (89). Knowing that they speak the same language, Igoni greets Tekena in Kalabari and offers to buy her ice cream.

Igoni's character trait as a schemer and an opportunist is further illustrated when he visits Furo's home later in the novel. He lies to Tekena that he will be in Egbeda so that he can get a chance to visit her home. Granted his wish, it is evident from the way he describes Furo's parents that he is only there for the story and not to inform them of Furo's whereabouts. He says, "I knocked at her gate. She came to open it and we went into the sitting room, where I spotted those two objects of my rampant curiosity: Furo's mother and father" (166). He calls Furo's parents "objects." He does not see them as parents agonizing over their missing son, rather as a source from which he can extract information from. Furo's family is vulnerable at this point especially since they have not heard anything about Furo from the police or from anyone who has seen him. Igoni takes advantage of this vulnerability to mine information about Furo. His only interest is to gather information about the main protagonist in the book he intends to write. But Furo's parents could not offer much. Igoni resolves to look for Furo and get the story from him. It is worth noting that Furo at this point is conflicted about decision to never return home. He misses his home, his parents and his sister. He desires to go back home but he does not know how he will explain his transformation to his family. Igoni knows and understands Furo's metamorphosis. He is the link between parents who are agonizing about their missing son and a son who wants to come home but does not know

how. The humane thing would be to re-unite the two parties but Igoni demonstates he is less interested in this. He is only thinking about his book, imagining how he will craft a story about Furo.

Americanah begins with a temporal disruption. This is significant as the disruption immediately alerts the reader of a major upheaval in the protagonist's life. Ifemelu has decided to close her successful blog and move back to Nigeria. The narrator brings forth her conflicting thoughts and feelings concerning this life changing decision. Ifemelu "had become her blog" (306). Closing it made her feel like she had lost touch with a part of herself. The blog has been an important part of her life. It enabled her edge a living for herself while in the US.

After moving to the United States, Ifemelu starts a blog called "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America". She later changes the name to "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) by a Non-American Black". Ifemelu writes on various subjects ranging from Afro-hair, Obama, the meaning of Hispanic to matters touching on race. The blog quickly becomes successful, receiving comments and even donations. Consequently, Ifemelu is invited to speak at various forums and events and paid for it. The blog helps her to make a living. The blog is a central presence in the novel and in Ifemelu's life since it portrays her experience as an immigrant in the United States. She uses her blog to express her opinions about race. Ifemelu is able to write her blog because she is an outsider. She is African, not African American, which means she can openly talk about race without being labelled as Shan says, "She's writing from the outside… So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she'd just be labelled angry and shunned" (336). Adichie exploits the blog set up by Ifemelu to further develop her character. Young and unsure of herself when she first arrives in America, Ifemelu grows and affirms herself with every blog entry she writes. The blog platform instills a sense of authoritative confidence in her, something she lacked when she first came to America.

The idea of starting a blog further illustrates her outspoken character. The journey towards the launching of the blog is narrated about half-way in the novel in "…a moment of heightened chronological complexity" (Guarancino, 14). A series of anecdotes from the life of Ifemelu and her white boyfriend Curt illustrate her growing sense of racism. Their relationship sparked disapprovals adding to her growing sense of dissatisfaction. Ifemelu shares these with her university friend Wambui in a long e-mail. Wambui replied to say, "This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a blog" (295). The starting of the blog hence coincides with Ifemelu's breakup with her white boyfriend Curt. The breakup impacts on her self-confidence. She starts doubting herself wondering how she will make it in America without her white influential boyfriend. The blog helps restore confidence in her and it contributes in shaping a wider moment of racial self-awareness of which the blog is the elaboration in writing.

The blog acquires a large number of followers within no time. It features various posts mostly about the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. Through the blog, Ifemelu is able to express her opinions on the issue of race in an environment riddled with silences on the subject of race. Adichie exploits the blog as a device to empower Ifemelu who authors the blog from a point of experience:

> "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."(290)

The quotation above hints at the kind of hardships African immigrants undergo in the US. Racism is not experienced among Africans in Africa. It is until they move into a cultural environment in which race 'conditions' their lives thus 'othering' them. Caught up in this hypocritical environment, Ifemelu turns to social media to break the silences. The blogosphere is the only space Ifemelu can talk about race without having to mask her real feelings and thoughts. She has freedom to criticise and attack the various ways by which she feels oppressed in this space. In consequence, these blog entries serve her to express her true feelings towards a society where "racism exists but racists are all gone" (390).

The blog serves to sharpen her personality. Describing the role played by the blogs towards construction of Ifemelu's identity in an environment riddled with racism and gender biasness, Jessica Arévalo Hidalgo says,

> … on the one hand, (the blog) becomes the protagonist's escape via a place where she can confide her feelings and experiences regarding 'race' and gender issues once in the U.S. On the other hand, the blog allows her to establish a closer relationship with those who are in the same situation while becoming a role model and a person to look up to. (8)

In this respect, the blog serves to keep in check her personality ensuring that she does not get swayed into accepting the falsehood surrounding the race issue in America. People do not like talking about racism openly. A certain level of pretentious attitude can be discerned in the American society when it comes to establishing whether racism exists or it long died. Ifemelu knows too well that racism is still a factor in this society. She uses her blog to try and address racism objectively. The blog facilitates different voices from different speakers who converge at this space to talk about racism.

The blog also serves to give her voice enabling her to speak for herself and for people of African descent especially women. It is at this space where Ifemelu can unburden the pressures of an immigrant life. She uses the blog as an escape route. Nervous and scared at first, she soon learns to navigate between negative and positive responses, some angry and others quite encouraging. In a way, the blog allows her to express her feelings freely, without having to think about what other people would say about her. The blog becomes her most powerful tool in confronting racism.

The blog impacts on other characters as well. Ifemelu, by telling her experiences becomes a way of helping others who undergo racial prejudice. Visitors who read the blog learn that their experiences are not unfounded and uncommon. The shared experiences generate an affectual response resulting in social empowerment. The blog plays a therapeutic role in their lives in that it serves as a platform where they

can vent their frustrations. A commentary on her new blog after she moved back to Nigeria "The Small Redemptions of Lagos" illustrates how much readers appreciate that she speaks out on issues. The comment reads "Thank God somebody is finally talking about this" (421).

2.5 Plot device

Plot refers to the sequencing of events. There are various strategies at each writer's disposal in relation to building a plot of a story. A story can take the linear plot form where events follow each other in a chronological order or the climatic plot where the story begins in *Medias Res*. Whichever form writers use, a plot of a story is significant as it foregrounds thematic concerns. Writers also embellish plot by using various techniques like inserting a song, a letter or a diary. With the advent of technology new forms such as emails, text messages and Facebook posts have found their way into fiction. Barret and Adichie have deployed tweets and blog posts in *Blackass* and *Americanah* respectively. Social media has been exploited as a means to advance the plot. In this respect both the blogs and tweets take an actional function.

The novel *Blackass* utilizes the frame story technique in the sense that the tweets exists as a space both embedded and the site exists independently to tell its own story. The frame story technique is where there is an overall unifying story within which one or more other stories exist. This concept of double narration can be seen in *Blackass* where the main story is the story of Furo Wariboko. Within this is the story of Igoni. The social media technique is crucial as it serves to connect these two parallel plots. Sections exploring Furo's story are told in the third person omniscient point of view, while Igoni's story is narrated from a first person point of view. The use of different points of view makes the story appear fragmented, a characteristic of postmodern narratives. Social media technique acts as a unifying technique driving the plot, bringing the two parallel plots together. The plots converge at one point. This convergence is seen where Igoni, who has changed his name to Morpheus meet Furo, who has also changed his name to Frank Whyte.

In *Blackass*, Igoni's tweets to Tekena contribute to the progression of the plot as it sets a series of events that follow each other. Since twitter is a site for sharing information and the most recent news, Igoni taps into this in pursuit of Furo's story. His obsession with Tekena's Twitter account yields a chain of events. Tekena tweets about her brother who had gone missing in Lagos. Realising that this could be the Furo he had met earlier, Igoni befriends Tekena and offers to buy her ice cream. Five days later the two meet at 'The Palms' in Lekki to eat ice cream. The two then proceed to watch a movie after an unexpected distressing encounter with a man at the box office.

The ice cream sharing moment serves as a causal incident for the actions that happen later in the novel. After interrogating Tekena about her brother, Igoni asks Tekena if he could visit her at her home in Egbeda. When Igoni later visits Furo's home, Tekena introduces (her) to her parents as "a new friend she had met on Twitter" (167). This illustrates how the author has exploited the social media platform bringing two characters together; a significant event in the progression of plot.

Igoni could not source much from Furo's parents concerning their missing son as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> All those nuggets I had hoped to excavate from Furo's story, those subtexts of self-identity and self-gyre of our parents' colonial hang-ups, all of these were destroyed by a mother who showed up my fraudulence in a few quiet words. (169)

He resolves to look for Furo and ask him about his transformation. Furo, now Frank Whyte and Igoni, now Morpheus later meet and the two share stories about their new lives after the transformation.

As Barret explains during an interview with *Granta Magazine* the internet can be exploited for "modernistic literary forms such as the micro story and the hypertext haiku."(n.p). Barret uses twitter to craft a flash fiction. Several events take place within the narrative unfolding in this space and these events directly or indirectly impact on the primary narrative. The events range from Furo's parents visiting a

police station to a visit to the mortuary. These events do not directly impact on the plot of the macronarrative. However, the ice cream sharing moment has a direct bearing on the primary plot. Igoni tweets Tekena asking if she could buy her ice cream. The two later met at The Palms where they proceeded to watch a movie after eating ice cream. It is at this meeting where Igoni asks Tekena if she could visit her at home. Although the story appears fragmented, the parallel plots converge at one point. This convergence is seen when Frank Whyte and Morpheus meet.

One common technique used in postmodern literature is metafiction. Metafiction means drawing attention to the fictionality of fiction making it apparent to the reader. Authors employ the technique of metafiction for various reasons. Some common uses include undermining the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling. *Blackass* deploys social media and exploits it in a metafictional way to advance the story in a unique way.

In a metafictional turn, Barret introduces the character Igoni who appears to be a fictional version of the author. The first section of *Blackass* is told from a third person omniscient point of view but the narration shifts to the first person to capture the story of @igoni. The narrator directly addresses the reader offering an explanation on the introduction of twitter entries. @ Igoni is a writer in search of his own identity like the main protagonist of the novel. While searching for Furo's story on Twitter, he undergoes a transformation resulting in a change of name and physical appearance. Later, the reader learns that the lines from an interview @igoni grants a magazine overlap with the responses the author (Barret) grants an interview he did with Granta. Thus the introduction of the character @igoni, a shift in narration and direct addressing of the reader become metafictional elements through which Barret emphasizes a fictionality of his fiction, draws a reader to participate in the construction of meaning, and progresses the plot.

In *Americanah* to the extent that other characters interact with the blog serves to advance the plot. Shan talks about the blog, "Raceteenth" and how her Nigerian friend who is a writer thinks that the Non-American Black (author of the blog) is a Caribbean because "Africans don't care about race" (318). Similarly, Paula reads Ifemelu's blog post to her friends at Marcia's Birthday party. In addition, she also requires her students to read Ifemelu's blog. Ranyinundo gets upset after reading one of Ifemelu's blogs about "the expensive lifestyles of some young women in Lagos." Obinze also reads all the archives of "Raceteenth." When Obinze and Ifemelu reunite a discussion about her new blog "The small redemptions of Lagos" form part of their conversation.

Blaine contributed to the blog by influencing Ifemelu to be conscious of what she writes since people were reading her as a "cultural commentary" and also because "there were kids writing college essays about (Ifemelu's) blog" (312). To the extent that other characters either directly or indirectly contribute to the blog gives it an actional function.

2.6 Structural device

The way a plot of a story is assembled is significant as it affects the story's overall meaning. Structural partitioning is a strategy adopted by writers to draw attention to issues raised. Authors carefully arrange content paying attention to introduction of characters and any alteration in their behavior. Changes in time, changes in place of action and changes in the pace of the story are all markers of structure. The language used is also significant with respect to structure. The deployment of social media elements into the two texts is a strategy to enhance the complexity of structure.

Blackass is partitioned into sections. Although the story follows a linear form, the writer has partitioned the narrative into sections with titles for each section. This form of presentation is not very common in novels that follow the linear form. This form ensures that in the reading of the novel, one's attention is

maintained throughout. The partitioning ensures the novel has some element of order and it enhances the novel's ability to be focusing on a single issue at a time.

Instead of dividing the sections into chapters, Barret uses titles. The first section is titled "Furo Wariboko." In this section we meet Furo, the protagonist of the novel waking up in the morning to find that he has transformed into a white man. The section introduces us to the protagonist and the main drama in the text. The last section is titled "Metamorphoses." This naming of sections gives the reader an idea of what to expect for instance the title of the last section signals to the reader that they are about to encounter characters who have metamorphosed. In this section we come across Furo who has changed his name to Frank Whyte going over to meet Igoni who has also changed his name to Morpheus.

The second section is what I would like to dwell on more because it is at this section that the narrative moves to the digital space. The second section of the novel is infused with twitter entries introduced by the title @Igoni. This title is significant because it signals to the reader the shift towards the internet space. The title also introduces the character Igoni. A shift in the place of action to the digital space adds to the complexity of structure.

While describing Achebe's style in "Rhetorical Strategies in the Novels of Chinua Achebe" Kitata Makau says that:

> …the technique of Achebe's style of narration…can be called a dialectic of double refraction in which a first person hero/narrator, Odili Samalu is pitted against a title hero, Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga M.P. (134)

Barret seems to adopt this style of double refraction in the second, fourth and last section of *Blackass*. These sections are told from Igoni's perspective unlike the other sections which are told from Furo Wariboko's point of view. Narration shifts to first person bringing into focus Igoni's perspective. Igoni

directly addresses the reader narrating the introduction of twitter entries. In an effort to balance the structure of the narrative, Barret introduces the character @Igoni who is well versed with technology and the internet. The introductory paragraph in the second section of the novel serves to effectively ensure a smooth transition into the digital space thus satisfying the reader's need for order and proportion. Though not primarily the hero of the story, the introduction of Igoni is significant because he holds the key to the story's meaning. By introducing a character who is a writer, Barret tries to explain Furo's transformation. Igoni is a writer which means he probably knows Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. This explains his lack of surprise and shock at meeting Furo the white man with a Nigerian name and a strong Nigerian accent.

The structure of language used in the digital space is different from the language of the primary narrative. The writer adopts strategies of language in a manner that appears aesthetic as well as different hence allowing the writer to foreground certain issues. The language is characterized by abbreviations, different use of punctuation marks and use of ellipses as illustrated by the following tweets:

03:36 | I think I'm starting to understand this Twitter thing oh …

22:43 | Too much animosity on Twirrer tonight mehn … get a life you haters. #goodbye

20:40 | _|_ (-.-) _|_ to @emem_1987 & @anpasticru

13:48 | O_oRT '@MarkyMona: @pweetychic_tk Thx 4 raising awareness abt this prob.

The word twirrer is a corruption of twitter. Aside from heightening the beauty of the language used, the words have been used to foreground the theme of plasticity of inline identity. In literature corruption of words is done for specific ends. The word is indicative of the pretentious identities people adopt over social media sites. The words abt and prob have been abbreviated.

Capitalization is another strategy of language used. The use of capital letters calls attention to the words capitalized since they are presented in a different sentence case from the rest of the words. Reader's attention is captured by the words in capital as shown by the following tweet:

12:27 | It STINKS inside!!! Twitpic.com/c4knnIP #mortuary

Tekena is describing the state of Ikeja's mortuary. Capitalization serves to draw in audience to participate and understand the experiences the teller is going through and so that the audience can empathize with the narrator.

Barret adopts an appropriate register for the social media platform. His choice of words contributes to the richness and complexity of structure. Hudson (1919) describes register as sets of language items associated with discrete occupational or social groups. Register shows what you are doing and it is defined according to the use to which language is being put. The language used on the twitter platform is different from the one used in the main plot of the story. Words such as "follow, twitter handle, hashtag and googled among others are reflective of the register related to the internet. The diction used helps in contextualizing the narrative within the digital setting.

Unlike *Blackass*, the blogs in *Americanah* are spread out, some appearing within the chapter while others appear towards the end of a chapter. The blogs also vary in length; some made up of only eight lines while others cover an entire page spilling to the next one for example the blog post titled "A Michelle Obama Shout—Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor." The blogs are a significant factor with respect to the structure of the narrative as a whole as they offer a shift in direction and a change of focus.

Obinze, after reading all the archives of "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formely Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" realizes that the language is different and he could not imagine Ifemelu writing them. The language is made up of a "mix of high and low language" with an "irreverent voice with its slanginess" (374). Words and phrases such as "blacks, racism, Zipped-Up Negro, and black barbarian" serve to underscore the main aim of the blog—that is tackle the issue of racism. The language adopted helps situate the narrative in time and place by drawing upon the forms of language which reflect its sociolinguistic context:

So in NYC, professor Hunk was stopped by the police. They thought he had drugs. American

Blacks and American Whites use drugs at the same rate (look this up), but say the word "drugs"

and see what image comes to everyone's mind. Professor Hunk is upset. He says he's an Ivy

League professor and he knows the deal, and he wonders what it would feel like if he were some

poor kid from the inner city.(375)

The use of words such as NYC, American Blacks, situate the narrative within the American social

context. The language is quite different from the blog example that follows:

Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else

for that matter. Lagos has always been undisputedly itself, but you would not know this at the

meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club…It is because Nigeria is not a nation of sandwich-eating people

and (the cook's) last oga did not eat bread in the afternoon…(421)

The use of words such as Nigerpolitan Club and oga situate the story within the Nigerian social context.

Language serves to concretize issues the writer wishes to communicate.

2.7 Narrative perspective

Narrative perspective is equally significant in the structure of a narrative. Gennette devised three kinds of

focalization with respect to the narrator's perception. The first one—zero focalization has the narrator's

perception as omniscient. The narrator is aware of the inner thoughts of the major and minor characters.

Internal focalization is the second narrative perspective. Here the narrator's point of view is limited to the

observations of the main protagonist. Anything beyond his/her standpoint cannot be conveyed to the

reader. The third type is the external focalization. The narrator behaves like a camera lens observing the

actions as an outsider. He/she has no access to character's thoughts.

Americanah adopts a zero focalization narrative perspective. Since the novel addresses issues as its priority and not any individual as its sole subject, it follows the zero focalization narrative point of view. The blog addresses the difficulties and challenges its author undergoes in metamorphosing into an American citizen. When she moves back to Nigeria, her new blog represents her frustrations as she tries to fit in a society that has changed since the last time she was there.

Similarly, the narrative structure of *Blackass* falls under the zero focalization since the narrative is not restricted to the inner thoughts and life events of one single character. The novel covers parallel lives of other characters like Syreeta, Tosin, and even Furo's bosses, Arinze and Obata. There are descriptions related to thoughts and expressions even of minor characters like Headstrong, Passport Man and Syreeta's friends. The tweets bring into focus other characters thoughts like Tekena and @Igoni.

2.8 Aesthetic function

Aesthetics in literature involves an investigation into the nature and perception of beauty in a work of art. The choice of twitter entries and blog posts add to the creation of beauty in the novels under study. External appearance reveals breaks, with an indented bolded typeface in *Blackass* and *Americanah.* The tweets in *Blackass* appear typographically different from the main body of the text. Similarly, Ifemelu's blog posts differ from rest of the novel in that the posts are typographically distinct and more often appear at the end of the respective chapters.

The narrative device affords a shift in narration thus providing obstruction in the continuity of the whole. The story's continuity is interrupted forcing the reader to slow down and attend to the obstruction. The narrative in *Americanah* is told from Ifemelu's and Obinze's perspective. However, the introduction of blog posts alters the narrative levels. Ojiambo (2014) identifies three narrative levels in *Americanah*: the extradiegetic level, intradiegetic level and meta-metadiegetic level. The blog takes the intradiegetic level

where the reader "observes the narration of 'tales' by the intradiegetic narrator both about the narrator (homodiegetic) and about others (heterodiegetic)" (30).

Similarly, reading through the tweets in *Blackass* indicates the shifting narrative points of view. Some tweets illustrate the speakers while others are told from a perspective that is difficult to identify the speaker as illustrated below:

    20:45 | I came here to look for my missing bro. every other thing is dirt off my shoulder

The speaker is identifiable in this tweet as a first person narrator unlike the tweets shown below whose speaker is not readily identifiable:

    11:44 | Retweets are NOT endorsements!

    09:59 | TWITTER FIGHT ALERT!!!

The narrators in the blog and twitter sites try to create a set of community of fellow narrators and speakers. This presents a complex situation pertaining to the structural narrating system. The multiplicity of speakers serves to address issues from different perspectives.

Narration momentarily halted by the twitter and blog entries thus creating suspense. In *Blackass*, Furo's reaction to the discovery that his transformation is not whole is momentarily suspended by the twitter entries. The reader has to wait for the reading of the tweets to pass in order to learn Furo's next course of action thus lengthening and heightening the suspense. Similarly, in *Americanah* an instance of suspense is seen when a blog interrupts the narration about Blaine and Ifemelu's breakup. While the reader is waiting to see whether Ifemelu and Blaine would reconcile, Adichie inserts the blog "What Academics Mean by White Privileged, or Yes It Sucks to Be Poor and White but Try Being Poor and Non-White." The subject of the blog is totally unrelated to the preceding passages. The blog shifts the direction of the narrative thus creating suspense.

The technique has been exploited to vary the tempo of action allowing the writer to bring in reversals and surprises. In *Blackass*, Igoni's transformation is brought out through the internet. The novel captures this transformation through the tweets between Igoni and Tekena. The reader learns about Igoni's gendered transformation through the internet space. The reader is prepared to meet Igoni who has transformed into a woman.

The narrative device relates to the story's structure and it adds to the complexity of structure. This structure embodies the story's overall meaning. The reader therefore is forced to read the social media entries as it provides a clue to the story's overall meaning. The blog posts in *Americanah* give a "natural chronological shift" (Guarracino, 13). The blog entries appear far earlier than the blogs own inception in the plot. The blogs:

> … often introduced by the adverbial "years later", upset the chronology of the storyline by projecting it flash-forward to the moment when Ifemelu's life will be processed by writing. The chronological shift allows for a double take on many of the character's experiences as a black migrant in the US, so that the reader confronts the young Ifemelu's sense of bewilderment and emotional pain together with the older Ifemelu's more distanced elaboration of the same episodes and issues. (Guarracino, 13)

The technique serves to help introduce new plot lines. Igoni's physical transformation is evident when he meets Tekena at the Palms. Tekena comes to Igoni's rescue telling off a curious stranger. This happened after the stranger tried to stroke Igoni's locks prompting Tekena to shout "Leave my girlfriend alone" (164). Igoni later visits Furo's home, and the character is presented to the reader as a woman.

Ifemelu's transition into life different from what it was thirteen years back in America is captured in her new blog "The Small Redemptions of Lagos." In it Ifemelu addresses what life means for the returnees and the pretentious airs they carry around for example Bisi "who had come from a short trip to America" pretended "she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every word she spoke" (65).

2.9 Thematic function

Social media technique foregrounds themes in the two novels selected. The blog brings out the theme of race. The tweets in *Blackass* talk about corruption and plasticity of online identity. There exists a form of continuity in space and time in the events related in the social media space and the entire narrative of *Blackass* and *Americanah.*

2.10 The explicative function

Adichie and Barret invoke the social media site to tell a story. The story unfolding on this site serves to answer some questions arising in the main plot of the narrative. This function helps the reader understand events and hence be able to understand the meaning of the narrative. The tweets between Tekena and Igoni explain some events the reader encounters in the plot of *Blackass,* for instance the ice cream sharing moment between Tekena, Furo's sister and Igoni the writer. The tweets set the stage for Igoni's visit to Furo's home in Egbeda.

Similar to *Blackass,* the blog in *Americanah* explains the different approaches to race in America. The blog helps explain its author's perspective when it comes to the question of race, colour, and beauty both in America and Nigeria. The blog helps the reader understand the histories around the race issue and get a feel of the current attitudes towards race in the American society. An example is the blog post titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A few Explanations of What Things Really mean" (350). This post talks about the evasive strategies Americans adopt when engaged in conversations that address racial issues. The narrator points out that "Americans are most uncomfortable with race." He/she would say race is either "simplistic" or "complex" depending on the conversation.

The post "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking about Blackness" places history at the heart of racism (325). The post records history to show to the reader how history has played a major part in ensuring the perpetuation of race:

…A hundred years ago, the white ethnics hated being hated, but it was sort of tolerable because at least black people were below them, but it was sort of tolerable because at least black people were below them on the ladder. Don't say your grandfather was a serf in Russia when slavery happened because what matters is you are American now and being American means you take the whole shebang, america's assets and america's debts, and Jim Crow is a big-ass debt. Don't say it's just like antisemitism. (326)

The mention of Jim Crow, slavery and anti-Semitism evoke memories of stories of slavery and the treatment of Blacks in white plantations. Ifemelu moves further than listing the do's and don'ts when it comes to the treatment of race subject. In the same post, she goes ahead to invite both opposing races to a possibility of friendship through asking questions and listening.

So after this listing of don'ts, what's the do? I'm not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. If you don't understand, ask questions… (327)

The interactive nature of blogging allows other web users to comment on the issues raised. This serves to shed the light on the race matter from different perspectives. Adichie tries to tackle the race issue from different perspectives so as to maintain objectivity.

2.11 Creating multi-vocality

Authors choose different strategies to communicate issues and polyphony is one of the strategies adopted. According to David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a "novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (86). As opposed to a monological novel where characters are the author's mouthpiece and exist solely to transmit the author's ideology, a polyphonic novel allows different voices to interact and even rebel. The social media entries permit a

diversity of styles and voices, assembled into a structured artistic system thus creating a distinct quality of heteroglossia in the two novels. The concept of heteroglossia was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin while referring to the diversity of voices in Dostoyevsky's novels. In *Discourse of the Novel*, Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as:

> A special type of double-voiced discourse (and it) serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions (324).

For Bakhtin, heteroglossia gives the novel its power in that it supports the coexistence of, and conflict between, different types of speech: the speech of characters, the speech of narrators, and even the speech of the author. The multiple voices allow the reader to attend and fully comprehend issues raised. A diversity of points of view and voices affords the reader an all-round appreciation of issues. No voice is subordinated against the other in a polyphonic novel because each of the voices has its own validity, its own perspective and its own narrative weight. The tweets and the blog posts permit the authors to create an appropriate voice, for instance in case of use of any special language. Barret has used taboo words in the tweets appearing in one of the sections of *Blackass.*

When she was asked on the "International Author's stage" on if she invented the blog for a sharper say on things, Adichie says "yes (especially since) the blog as a device offers immediacy… (and) the language could be different." (n.p). On the question of why she made her main character a blogger, Adichie says,

> I wanted to say many things about race. I wanted this novel to also be a social commentary. I wanted to say them in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction and I just knew that if I had her say them as dialogue it wouldn't work. It wouldn't seem right. I also wanted these things to be said in a voice that was kind of different from her real voice because the self that is in that blog is different from the self that lives every day.

This clearly indicates that the choice of a blog is a conscious effort by the writer to create an appropriate and sharper voice. A voice that appeals directly to the reader because the narrator talks of lived experiences. The narration adopted in the social media entries is different from the narration in the entire story. This creates a sense of immediacy. The reader feels like the character is directly addressing them, inviting them to appreciate the gravity of issues raised.

2.12 Creating audience

Barret and Adichie exploit social media to shape public opinion via the internet using twitter and blogosphere respectively as a metanarrative device. The narrative device serves to create a particular kind of audience-- the internet audience. Quoting McLellan, Page says that "…the most remarkable feature of electronic narrative is its connection with an audience" (223). Tweeting takes place within a community of web users. This element of interactivity brings in an active audience thus allowing for some interesting insights on the process of writing in the presence of immediate and continuous feedback. In *Americanah* Ifemelu starts a blog in an effort to address issues that conflict her as a migrant in the US. Blogs may be written about diverse subjects and for many different purposes, as suggested by Mildorf. "When people tell stories, they first decontextualize their past experiences in order to re-contextualise them in the given storytelling situation" (258). Ifemelu takes to social media to tell stories of personal experiences with a community of users who share similar experiences. Adichie uses the blog as a device to draw audience into the story world and address racism in a distinct way.

Some blog entries have a correlation with what happens at that point in the novel while some do not have any connection to the preceding events, such as the post titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism" (227). This blog post follows a narration about Dike's predicament after being refused sunscreen by his teacher. Readers are left to work through the blog trying to discern what the posts mean. This "self-referential back—and – forth from the novel to blog" (Guarracino, 16) introduces an active audience. The presence of an active audience establishes a dialogic

relationship. Visitors to the blog comment and write their own experiences. Sometimes the blogger directly invites comments encouraging readers to tell their own experiences like the blog "Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes:

> This is for the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space. (307)

Though the blog remains under Ifemelu's control, the interaction between the audience and the blogger influences what gets written in the post. The blogger's awareness of her audience is evident and it shapes the blog post in various ways. Ifemelu is well aware of her audience because "readers like SapphicDerrida…made (her) nervous, eager to be fresh like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use" (5). This illustrates that the blogger crafts a narrative with a target audience in mind. Ifemelu is aware of this and this explains her need to impress and also communicate effectively.

Generating an active audience might explain what sharing of personal experiences means because it functions as a means of promoting solidarity. A narrator in the blog space narrates lived experiences thus inviting readers to empathize with the narrator in the process. Other readers are encouraged to open up and talk about their experiences in the blog space. Sharing of these experiences creates a sense of belonging and a certain bond is established between users. This creates a kind of community—a community of people who have experienced racial prejudice.

2.13 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the deployment of social media in the selected works. In this chapter, I have identified the specific social media elements deployed in the respective texts. The chapter also looks at how the writers exploit social media as a technique. The observation is that social media is exploited as a narrative technique. Apart from being exploited as a means to advance the plot, social media as a device contributes to the complexity of structure, development of multiple voices, creation of a particular audience and it functions as a method of characterisation.

This discussion leads to the next chapter where I evaluate the effectiveness of invoking social media as a narrative site. The chapter also deals with evaluating the effectiveness of social media technique in communicating thematic concerns.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NARRATIVE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THEMES

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the narrative potential of social media. It examines how social media can be invoked as a site to tell a story. I take note that the stories told make meaning through intertextuality. This section also looks at the effectiveness of social media technique in communicating the writer's concerns in *Blackass* and *Americanah.* The chapter also attempts to provide a comparison between Barret and Adichie's use of social media.

Ruth Page (2012) sees the conversational formats in social media as acts of storytelling. She adds that storytelling is interactive and the 'small stories' people tell in social media are interwoven between online and offline contexts. This means that people exploit social network sites for different purposes including sharing stories and building narratives, as in the case of twitter fiction. Page provides a two way classification of stories people tell in social media: reports of professional activity and ongoing stories of personal experience from the narrator's private life. The second category is what features prominently in *Blackass* and *Americanah* as a space both embedded and as a site exploited to tell a story. The range of stories told is wide and diverse, often drawn from the narrator's personal experience.

3.2 Twitter as a narrative site

Twitter is a micro-blogging site, sometimes also described as a social network site. Originally launched in 2005, Twitter has grown to become one of the major social networking sites now considered a mainstream platform for internet use. The popularity of Twitter can be attributed to its ability to entertain users for hours on end. Like other social network sites, Twitter enables its members to create an account and then communicate with other members of the site via short updates known as 'tweets', or through

private messages known as 'Direct Messages'. Depending on the person using twitter, the platform can be used to chat, share information or write a story. Writers like Teju Cole, Rick Moody and David Mitchell have "ambitiously flexed their creative muscles to produce remarkable stories in Twitter-supported languages either through a single tweet or multiple tweet installments" (Laila, 17).

The Twitter entries in *Blackass* tell a story. The posts are neither extensive in length, nor do they focus on significant episodes in the speaker's history. Instead, the entries typically focus on the minutiae of everyday events. The author uses pointers to indicate to the readers the important points he is raising by capitalizing words or using punctuation marks like question marks and exclamation marks.

Tekena takes to twitter to talk about her missing brother and the agony the family goes through as they search for him:

09:10 | Pls help RT. This is my missing bro Furo Wariboko in the pic. He left home Monday morn & no news of him since. pic.twitter.com/0J9xt5WaW

14:59 | Without @efyouaruoh the house is lonely. Mum &dad are looking for him. I'm getting afraid. Maybe something has really happened.

16:35 |I'm starting a hashtag for my missing bro. see the attached picture for details. #Furo needs us! (RT if you have a heart.)

19:59 | Mum & Dad just got back from the police. They've still not heard anything about Furo

16:06 | I'm sad : '(@efyouaruoh won't reply to his mentions & FB messages. Or is he lost 4 real?

14:49 | For those who haven't seen this yet, here's my big brother's missing advert in today's newspaper: twitpic.com/yjs75Np #Furo

21:41 | OMG!!! Mummy wants to go to the mortuary 2moro to look for Furo!!!

There may be little causal connection between one entry and the next but a closer look at the twitter entries reveals their interconnectedness with the tweets revolving around a unifying motif: Furo's disappearance. Knowing that he will not be able to explain his transformation to his family, Furo resolves to never come back. His disappearance is the main reason for the birth of twitter entries in the text. Tekena's first tweet is about her missing brother and the subsequent tweets tell of the family's agonizing pain as they searched for their missing son.

Other stories that can be gathered from the twitter platform include the story about the Admiral's daughter who had gone missing. She was finally found in a Lagos mortuary. We also learn about the ongoing strike and the effects it has on students.

> **11:01** | I'm fed up with this ASUU strike. 2 whole months without school!

The narrator is a student and she has not been able to attend school for two months because of the strike. The writer infers how any kind of unrest leads to time wastage and it affects productivity.

Laila (2016) "says that "achieving a satisfying story arc in 140 characters is challenging; the trick, however, is to leave much of the story out and let the readers fill the blanks" (17). Part of the trick is the use of words, images, sound and video to tell a story as shown by the following tweet:

> **09:45** | This thing is getting real. It's now 4 whole days since my big bro #Furo got lost. See his missing ad in today's (cont) http://tl.gd/ktdfkbt

The hyperlinks provided are meant to guide the reader in following a story. The hyperlinks are primarily intertextual, connecting web-pages and other social media users. In addition, the hyperlinks have an interactive potential. This demonstrates that social media tell stories through intertextuality, especially since the sites are characterized by complex forms of hybridity and intertextuality. The term intertextuality was first coined by Julia Kristeva. The intertextual view of literature, as shown by Roland Barthes supports the concept that the meaning of a text does not reside in the text, but is produced by the

reader in relation not only to the text in question, but also the complex network of texts invoked in the reading process. Stories communicated are not to be understood as isolated pages rather as shared spaces that enable collective contributions from different users in the form of content, comments and edits. Many stories web users produce combine features of orality and writing; make use of several medial forms such as pictures, videos, sound and writing.

A tweet bears reference to a named individual, normally the writer who reports their experiences. The name is crucial information for self- representation. This is important for narrative production and reception. The name, introduced by the handle @ is important for the audience to know who the update is about and hence able to follow a story. More so, Twitter generates a timestamp and fixes the report of events chronologically with a date and time as shown by the following examples from the novel:

@pweetychic_tk: Wednesday, 20 June

@pweetychic_tk: Thursday, 21 June

@pweetychic_tk: Friday, 22 June

The time of narration is crucial as it enables the audience to reconstruct a chronological position for the updated events. A unifying interpretive framework across individual episodes is enabled due to the consistent reference to a named individual together with the marked time and date which imbues a chronological order in the updates. When writers retweet an entry, the retweets are structured around a temporal sequence, as the following examples indicate:

09:59 | RT '@kweenofsheebah: I'm Ethiopian and I'm so offended by @afrikais 1 country'

10:01 |O_o RT '@kweenofsheeba: @afrikais 1 country Ethiopians are a proud people. We're not like the rest of you African booty scratchers. #HornPride'

10:04 | RT '@kweenofsheeba: @VJ_Singhing If @afrikais 1 country wants to mock that way of thinking it should be called AFRICA-IS-A-CONTINENT.'

The marked time and date together with an experiencing agent result in what Page describes as "episodic narrativity… (and is) typical of storytelling in online contexts where recency is prized over retrospection" (440).

In relation to narration and retrospection, there arises the aspect of narrative time. Gerald Genette (1980 highlights the significance of time in the narrative. He observes that there are temporal fluctuations regarding the position of the narrator in the past, or present or participants in the events he/she is narrating. Temporal fluctuation when it comes to narration time and the narrated events is an important aspect in narratology and it is one of the aspects used to determine the narrativehood of stories. Canonical narratives emphasize past events stories. But as we shall see stories told over social media do not necessarily follow the propositions of traditional narratologists. The stories present distinct challenges when it comes to classifying them based on propositions used to determine narrativity in narratives.

Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007) terms stories that appear on social media as 'small stories' and he groups the small story genre in three categories: 'past events', 'breaking news' and 'projections'. The key distinction between these story genres rests on the temporal span interpreted between the time of the reported events and the time of narration. Ruth Page in "Re-examining Narrativity: Small Stories in Status updates" argues that "there are at least three sets of cues that the reader may use when interpreting the temporal span between the narration and the reported events…: the time of narration …, references to time within an update (e.g., later, tomorrow); and the use of verb tenses" (429). The time of narration is indicated by Twitter's time stamp. The tweets in *Blackass* fall under the three categories of small story genre.

Past events stories report events that have already happened prior to the point of narration. Frequently, the past tense verb is preceded by the modifier *just*, as in the following examples:

13:49 | Just got off the phone with my new Twitterpal @_igoni … #crazyexcited

19:41 | Mum & Dad just got back from the police. They've still not heard anything about Furo.

11:49 | I just lost 3 followers. WTF. Why can't I get to 2000???

20:03 | Today's stupid rain couldn't spoil all the fun I had with @_igoni!...

Past events stories emphasize retrospection. However, past time of tweets is not one of distant retrospection as it appears in canonical narratives, but of events in close proximity to the present moment of narration.

Writers may post entries that contain updates that indicate projections of events to take place in the future. The updates are anticipatory in character and report events which will happen later than the point of narration. The narrator "constructs a taleworld of events which have not yet happened" (Page, 429), as in the following example:

21:15 | OMG!!! Mummy wants to go to the mortuary 2moro to look for Furo!!!

22:17 | 2moro is officially the worst day of my life. #goodnight

Writers may refer to precise points in the future by the use of words such as 'tomorrow' and 'then'. Though events told in projections may not be considered as high in narrativity as retrospective events, the writer nonetheless invites speculation as to the outcome of a visit to the mortuary. The reader's mind is activated and drawn into the story world to construct events and possible outcomes. The reader imagines the probable possibilities Furo's parents might encounter. In the process a kind of anxiety and empathy is created on the part of the reader.

The most frequently occurring small story genre is Breaking News. The events reported seem to take place near simultaneously with the act of narration (Page, 2010). Breaking news is characterized by the use of present tense, as shown in the following examples:

13:14 | @_igoni I'm at the Winners Chapel on Akowojo Road in Egbeda.

15:43 | Eating ice cream with @_igoni at The Palms in Lekki!

22:31 | I'm thinking about the long talk @_igoni and I had about #Furo today.

20:03 |… Now heading home in one of those new metro cabs! #enjoyment

The narrator in breaking news stories seem to want to share the reported events straight away as they are still unfolding. The narrator creates an illusion that the reported event is happening at the same time the update is being written. The audiences (who may not necessarily be online at the time the update is posted) experience the narrative retrospectively and hence participate in the illusion that they are co-spectating on the writer's life experiences as the events unfold.

Marie Ryan in *Avatars of Story* says that "the internet is an overflowing well of narratives…from the multimedia news stories of CNN, Google … to the stories we exchange through email, chat rooms and blogs" (xiii). She adds that "the digital environments produce new variations in plot structure as well as in the representation of characters and setting (therefore) narrative is not an end in itself but a means to a goal" (xiv). When Tekena and her parents visited the mortuary in search of Furo, she tweets about how the place looks like and how mortuary attendants stack corpses on rooftops. The narrator talks about the state of the mortuary thus inviting other fellow speakers to join in the conversation resulting in a community of speakers each sharing their experiences and hence generating other stories, as shown in the examples below:

11:15 | This is Not a good morning. Dad is driving us to the #mortuary in Ikeja. We're going to search for #Furo there!

12:21 | I just knew the place would be UGLY twitpic.com/bzT67oM #mortuary

12:27 | It STINKS inside!!! Twitpic.com/c4knnIP #mortuary

12:33 | RT '@Nneka_Or: omg can this be Lagos?? RT @pweetychic_tk: It STINKS inside!!!! twitpic.com/c4knnIP #mortuary

13:03 | THOSE ARE DEAD PEOPLE!!! twitpic.com/bzs24bp #mortuary

13:05 | RT 'enugu2coventry: This is unspeakably shameful. RT @pweetychic_tk THOSE ARE DEAD PEOPLE!!! twitpic.com/bzs24bp #mortuary

13:33 | When I die I want to be creameted! On the same day!

13:48 | O_o RT '@gambianfaust: @pweetychick_tk My granny died & I wanted 2 keep a part of her with me. So after her cremation, I snorted the ashes.'

13:48 | RT '@MarkyMona: @pweetychic_tk Thx 4 raising awareness abt this prob. See the #mortuary they kept my father in! pic.twittewr.com/rUlogDtS'

A single tweet can regenerate several responses thus creating a kind of community where users can share personal stories while seeking support. Users often comment on an unfolding situation, report ongoing events in their lives or plan ahead. Above all, their communication is usually strongly embedded in the interactive context.

Twitter by its nature is interactive. The interaction "is a dialogue between users rather that the navigation or authorship of a particular text. This collaborative interaction bears on the issues of plot development" (Page & Thomas, xi). The stories appearing online are not necessarily plot driven. The interaction between users is sequenced and it appears in an episodic form. Readers comment on a story and share it with other users through re-tweets which further increases readership. The sequences of messages develop over time and this draws attention to the process of storytelling rather than focusing on a discrete narrative product (Page, 2010). Authors can choose to either maintain and extend the original storyline, or use readers' input to add new perspectives and twists to the story. Follow-up tweets may portray a

sequence of interconnected scenes or a twist on the original tweet, which keeps readers anxiously hooked for further developments, as shown in the examples below:

10:08 | TWEEPS!!! See @HornPride for the latest. I'll only retweet the best insults ha ha!

10:10 | #HornPride RT '@kweenofsheebah: @naijapalaver Nigeria was colonized just like the rest of Africa. Ethiopia was NOT.'

10:13 |#HornPide RT '@_igoni: @kweenofsheeba Seems you need reminding that tiny Eritrea kicked your butt. @pweetychic_tk'

10:15 | #HornPride RT '@kweenofsheebah: @_igoni Don't tell me about butt-kicking when your people were dragged to the US to pick cotton & get whipped!'

Igoni tweets Tekena saying "you provided my Sunday entertainment" (93) while offering to buy her ice cream as a reward. This shows how readers follow and appreciate stories unfolding on social media.

Ruth Page argues that "…readers are remarkably adept at creating narratives from nonadjacent story-like material prompted by textual and contextual cues that activate narrative scripts in the reader's consciousness" (437). She adds that "the reader may go on to infer narrative-like connections not explicitly articulated in the updates themselves" (437). From some of the tweets in the novel, a reader can infer stories of colonialism and slavery.

What purposes are fulfilled when stories are told in social media? Aside from being a site where the narrator gives a moment-by-moment account that relates to what the speaker is doing "right now," it can be exploited as a weapon to call for action. Barret demonstrates that the internet is a powerful tool and it can be used to instigate change. The tweet about the state of the mortuary forces the government to take action and shut down the mortuary:

12:33 | RT'@Princeofmojo: RT @infoeNGine: Lagos govt shuts down smelly #mortuary http://dlvr.it/2NLieR @pweetychick_tk'

Barret demonstrates that it is possible to write a narrative through social media. In a metafictional turn, the writer through the character Igoni tracks down Furo with a sole purpose of writing a story about him. He turns to twitter to get information about his main character he intends to write about. He says:

> Furo's story didn't emerge abracadabra-quick. It took me some time to weave the fragments I gathered from Twitter into any sort of narrative. (77)

3.3 Blogosphere as a narrative site

Blogs emerged as a web genre in the late 1990s and since then it has experienced a phenomenal growth. Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2004) put forward a classification resulting in a three-way categorization of blogs: filter, knowledge logs and personal journals. The third category is what features prominently in *Americanah* as such a space, both embedded in but also outside creative writing. Ifemelu's blog post add a sensation of reading non-fiction inside a novel. The blog features as a space where social realities of race can be discussed.

The blog in the novel concern its author's experiences of being a black migrant woman in the US. The genesis of the blog stems from a desire by Ifemelu to share her stories with a larger audience and a longing to speak out. Back in Nigeria Ifemelu was oblivious of her black colour and it is only upon arrival in America that she becomes aware of her blackness. Aunty Uju had earlier cautioned Ifemelu against questioning things since one is in a country which is not their own (119). Angered by the silence, Ifemelu sets up a blog. The blog helps the reader reflect on the issue of racial prejudice. The writer draws on the blog space to tell stories about immigrants and the experiences they go through in an environment where colour is a factor.

The blog in *Americanah* mirrors an autobiographical genre. Here we meet a narrating subject talking about lived experiences through retrospection. The use of a first person female narrator mirrors arguments advanced by Jeniffer Muchiri (2010). She observes that the female autobiographical voice functions as a

tool for women's 'self-exploration and self-definition.' I think the same can be said of Ifemelu. The blogger cum narrator "come to be through experience" (30) and through narration, the subject gets "a chance to be an observer of their own lives from a distance created by the lapse of time" (31).

James Olney in "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiographies and as Literature" argues that the autobiography "may be understood as a recollective narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his life- the present- looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how the history has led to this present state of being" (47). Olney highlight the aspect of retrospection associated with autobiographical writings. I contend that this retrospection is also realizable in the blog especially through the narrative voice in which the narrator tells the story of her experiences and maturation, both physical and psychological. For instance, through the blog, Ifemelu tells of her shocking encounter of racism in America. She tells us she became aware of her blackness in America. Her shocking encounter of the dressing policies of her new country will later be retold in a blog post "where the surprise and feeling of not fitting in of the young expatriate is parenthetically elaborated into a judgmental opinion of American dress codes" (Guarracino, 12), as shown in the following post:

> (Years later, a blog post would read: When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded this courtesy of self-presentation, but has turned that disregard into a virtue. "We are too superior/busy/cool/not-uptight to bother about how we look to other people, and so we can wear pajamas to school and underwear to the mall.") (129).

Ifemelu tells us that she has learnt to accept her skin colour as well as her hair. This indicates a sense of maturity in the young woman.

Each time Ifemelu goes through a major change in her life, a blog post is born just as when she decides to straighten her hair before going for a job interview. Ifemelu painfully decides to straighten her hair following a suggestion from one of her friends.

When she told Ruth about the interview in Baltimore, Ruth said, "My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job."(202)

Hair is something taken seriously in America when it comes to employment. Ruth suggests that she straightens her Afro hair so that she appears professional. The narration is then interrupted by the following entry: "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To" (205). Here, the narrator talks about all other non-American races aspiring to be American white. Adapting to whiteness is the option and anything white should be universally embraced. This post tells stories of the kind of struggles immigrants undergo trying to become "American.". Blacks aspire to have straight hair like white people.

Moved by Ruth's advice, Ifemelu straightens her hair, but she ends up scalding her scalp with chemicals. For Ifemelu, this was a drastic change in her life. She found out that she simply could not appreciate straight hair like a native white American woman. Her hair hanged down and it had lost its verve. The kinky Afro hair is a major identity symbol for the protagonist. Straitening it in an effort to appear American meant that she had lost her cultural identity. Her state of mind is well described by the narrator in the following lines:

> She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss (203).

Ifemelu's hair gets damaged and it starts falling off. She resorts to shaving it, a decision she was not quite impressed with. After years of fighting, Ifemelu finally "falls in love" with her naturally kinky hair. This moment of acceptance is followed by a post on "Why Dark-Skinned Black Women – Both American And

Non-American – Love Barack Obama" (214). The success of the president-to-be is attributed to his having married one of their own thus breaking a pattern that values lighter skin, especially in women.

As illustrated, the blog posts contain a myriad of anecdotes that capture its author's fluctuating experiences of racism interwoven with her everyday life. This serves to generate a shared affectual response from readers who may or may not necessarily share the same experience with the blogger. When Ifemelu wrote about signing up for online dating after her breakup with "the hot white ex" the blog received "comments from people with similar stories (and)…from black women sharing success stories of online dating" (306).

Similarly, Ifemelu's new blog after her move to Nigeria captures her thoughts and reflections of a society different from the one she has lived for close to twenty years. She uses the blog to tell stories of Nigerian returnees and their judgmental opinions of Nigeria.

Muchiri argues that the narrative voice in female autobiography serves to give women agency. The same can be said of the blog. Ifemelu uses her blog to speak out against racial prejudice and the pretentious attitude people have towards the subject of racism, as illustrated in the blog "Job Vacancy in America— National Arbiter in Chief of "Who is Racist"

> In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. Racists are the thin-lipped mean white people in the movies about the civil rights era. Here's the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not… (315)

The blog talks about the current view towards racism. It is viewed as a thing of the past even though it still exists. Although the society is silent about racial prejudice, I take note that social media becomes an integral space where such issues can be addressed without fear of being labelled or attacked.

She also uses the platform to encourage other immigrants to speak and unburden themselves of the pressures of an immigrant's life. A narrator in the blog talks of challenges immigrants face while trying to fit in a society different from the one the subject came from. Issues such as how to fit in or the effort to integrate and therefore become "more American" are discussed in this space. These are the issues Ifemelu struggles with in America. In the blog post titled "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby" the speaker encourages other immigrants to embrace who they are and to stop trying so hard to deny their heritage in an effort to conform:

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—you say "I'm not black" only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder… (220)

Experience is of utmost importance in the autobiographical genre as it validates autobiographical truth. This is the strategy Adichie adopts in *Americanah.* The novelist has her main character author the blog from a point of experience. In addition, she positions Ifemelu at a point where she can observe the things happening and report to the reader. She calls herself a curious observer in her blog, as shown by the title of her blog "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the subject of Blackness in America." Though she later changes the name to "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" she still remains an observer nevertheless. Her position gives the reader an inside account of an immigrant's life experiences. This creates a sense of immediacy thus eliciting empathy from the audience who travel with the narrator as she narrates her lived experiences.

Page in "Blogging on the Body" views personal blogs as an online counterpart of an autobiography. This is because both an autobiography and a personal blog document their writers' lived experiences. But unlike the private world of the autobiography blogging is not a solitary occupation. It takes place within a community of web users. "It is the interactive potential of the blog that distinguishes it above all from its offline counterparts" (223). Stories in blogs are more personalized than official stories but are also less retrospective and less monolithic than autobiography. It is too simplistic to consider blogs as an equal of the autobiographical genre. Instead, the tendency to document one's experience over the blog space merits further consideration as a genre in itself.

The interactive nature of blogging ensures that the author/narrator pays attention to the linguistic choices made. By employing evaluation devices, the narrator ensures the narrative becomes "tellable, vivid and of perceived relevance to their audience" (Page, 228). While carrying out a study on the gendered stories of narrative of illness that proliferate in blogs, Ruth Page concludes that "men and women use evaluation devices in their stories in differing ways." Women seem to employ more evaluation devices than men "in line with a more affective style of storytelling" (228). The author of the blog in the novel is a woman and an analysis of some of her posts reveals her extensive use of evaluation devices:

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—you say "I'm not black" only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder… (220)

Evaluative devices reveal the teller's attitude and interpretation of some of the narrated events. Sometimes the blogger employs evaluative devices to offer explanations and provide reasons for some events, as illustrated in the following example:

> …Don't say "oh Racism is over, slavery was so long ago." <u>We are talking about the problem from the 1960s not 1860s</u>… American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. <u>They are just telling you what is.</u> If you don't understand, ask questions… (327)

The affective style of storytelling serves to draw in audience into the blogger's world and hence experience prejudice and discrimination with the teller. Interaction primarily takes place between users who share common experience. However, sometimes the blogger directly invites comments on her blog encouraging readers to tell their own experiences, for instance in the blog post titled "Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes:

> This is for the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space. (307)

The audience is an important entity since it provides support to the blogger and their responses are intended to influence the blogger and her life experiences, not to respond to a textual segment alone. When Ifemelu had doubts about her hair the post by Jamilah1997 encouraged her to embrace her true self. The post reads "I love sistas who love their straight weaves, but I'm never putting horse hair on my head again" (213). When she later wrote that Jamilah's words made her "remember that there is nothing more beautiful that what God gave (her)" (213), more supportive responses came from audience and the "echoing roar of approval revived her (213). Clearly, the interaction between the blogger and audience influences not only what gets written in the posts but the bloggers experiences in the offline world.

The choice of a first person narrator enables Ifemelu to embody the experience of racism. From the beginning of the story, she is presented as a special character and hence given the autonomy to author the blog. Ifemelu is a woman of strong determination. Not only does she overcome her inner turmoil and physical ordeals but she also gives voice to her anti-racist ideas through her blog *Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) By A Non-American Black.* Ifemelu's portrayal is subversive. She is presented as one that defies dominance. Though she faced some challenges when she first came to America, upon her return home we meet a poised, successful woman in her own right. Unlike Obinze, Ifemelu is able to fashion a successful life in America.

 Whereas Ifemelu secures citizenship in America, Obinze is not able to secure citizenship in England thus leading to his deportation. Adichie places other characters at a position where they are there to support Ifemelu while in America. Aunty Uju picks her from the airport when she landed. She even offers to lend her a friend's National Security card to ease Ifemelu's job search. Ginika, her childhood friend offers to buy her groceries when she faced financial challenges. Ginika is there to help her familiarize herself with her new school. Ifemelu secures a job as a public relations officer at an office in Baltimore with Curt's help. Obinze on the other hand is left to work through the challenges of settling into Britain alone. The best his cousin, Nicholas can do is advise him on how he can get his way around in England. In Obinze's view "Nicholas seemed to feel that he had done his part, delivered words of wisdom, and in the following months, he hardly spoke to Obinze" (239). All Emenike, (Obinze's high school mate) can do is flash all his new acquired privileges to Obinze. He does not offer to help him. Ifemelu is thus marked as a special character in the whole narrative. Her experiences and her voice in telling the African immigrant experience is foregrounded in her special character. The blog exists as a space for telling stories within an online community.

In "The Truth of Fiction," Achebe argues that writers of what he identifies as 'beneficent fiction' use fiction to help readers imaginatively identify with the experiences that they read in the text. He further

notes that this identification is "the opposite of indifference; It is human connectedness at its most intimate" (157). This study identifies the deployment of social media and its invocation as a site to tell a story as a strategy through which readers can identify with the experiences of the protagonists.

3.4 Looping the writer's concerns

One of the themes addressed in *Blackass* is identity. The main character, Furo Wariboko experiences a loss of identity and at the same time gains and struggles to maintain his new acquired identity. Furo wakes up to find he has metamorphosed into a white man. Not knowing how he will face his family and how he will convince them that the 'oyibo' in the house is still their son, he decides to run away. But running away is not the ultimate solution to his identity crisis as he previously thought. He is still plagued by signs of his true identity. His name, his mannerisms, his strong Nigerian accent and his ass which remained black, all markers of his true identity might spoil the overwhelming air of respect and attention he now commands. In addition, the increasingly publicized search by his family including his sister who has been tweeting about his brother's disappearance might destroy his new found privileges. Furo resorts to distance himself from his former life and identity. He struggles to maintain his identity as a white man.

This struggle resonates with the stories of light skinned black people in the US passing as white. Furo finds himself taking dramatic steps in an effort to erase his past, from changing his name to Frank Whyte and even acquiring a new passport. He did all these in an effort to distance himself from Furo Wariboko reported missing by his family. However, his dream of starting a new life as Frank Whyte seems doomed because he has already had a chance encounter with a writer named Igoni. Igoni gets fascinated by the white man with a Nigerian accent stranded in Lagos and without any friends. He tracks him down so that he can write a story about him.

Whereas Furo shuns social media while working on his identity, Igoni embraces the internet and uses it to communicate his new identity. Social media is highly interactive. The communicative interaction between users impacts on macro-social issues such as personal or group identity. The character @igoni accomplishes his identity work while searching for Furo's story on Twitter. He says:

> While searching for Furo's story, I, too, underwent a transformation. I was more relieved than surprised by this happenstance. The seeds had always been there, embedded in the parched earth of my subconscious. I had heard their muted rattling in the remembered moments of my sleeping life; I had seen their shadowy branches overhanging the narrow road that wound into my future. (83)

Igoni undergoes an identity change. She is a woman. When she first met Furo, Igoni was presented as a man but after an encounter with twitter, he changes into a woman. She acquires a new name—Morpheus. Barret also addresses the issue of plasticity of online identity and he uses twitter to develop this theme. Seargent and Tagg (2014 say that identity is "…not a stable, pre-determined property of an individual, but rather a set of resources which people draw upon in presenting and expressing themselves via interaction with others" (5). Thus language is central in the performance of identity in social media as its "performed not through the spoken word but predominantly through the written" (6). Social media technique in the novel effectively develops the theme of plasticity of online identity as it demonstrates how users adopt false identities over online contexts. Since "identities are discursive (and semiotically) constructed and dialogically performed…people have the freedom to choose how they wish to present themselves" (6). This is why the character Igoni distrusts digital personas. He says:

> From early on I distrusted the persona of @pweetychic_tk. I didn't know why at first, as she seemed sincere enough in her tweets about herself, and so I put my skepticism down to my own suspicious nature… (But) I was wrong to think that my skepticism was unfounded, as the more I learnt about Furo's story, the more certain I became that his sister's persona had to be either

contrived or schizophrenic…If her digital persona was not misleading, then her real one had to be full of shit.(80-81)

Igoni knows too well that people adopt inauthentic identities on social media. The internet is often perceived as an environment that enables free identity play for instance through adopting false and/or gender neutral pseudonyms.

The circumstances in which people perform identity online are in many respects different from offline situations. Depending on the identity one wants to portray, different aspects of a person's identity may be foregrounded or sidelined at given times. Therefore, there can be a mismatch between a person's online identity and offline identity. Igoni discovered this when he met Tekena at The Palms for ice cream. He says of Tekena, "Despite all her playfulness on Twitter, she was a Lagos Pikin" (165).

Social media offers anonymity. Drawing on this principle, Barret uses Twitter to criticize the ills in the society like corruption as shown by the following tweet:

> "**20:02** | How can the police at Akowonjo Station tell Dad to pay them to go and find Furo???"

Furo's parents report about their missing son but the police demand a bribe before they can take any action. Corruption is one of the major themes addressed in *Blackass*.

Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart (2010) suggest that "a story is not told or shown in the same way according to the medium in which it is displayed, nor is its content or intensity the same" (i). This means that the same narrative can be channeled through different media but the kind of impact it will have on the audience varies. The story will elicit different responses. Barret addresses the issue of corruption in the primary narrative and he raises the same issue through social media. Through the use of twitter, Barret shows the urgent need to stem out corruption as it has detrimental effects to a person, a group and a society at large.

There are many instances where corruption is witnessed in the novel. Normally, the process of acquiring a new passport costs nine thousand naira and it would take three months to process. But through Syreeta's contact at the immigration offices, Furo's passport takes only three days and it costs double the amount. The narrator, through vivid description takes us through Furo's process of acquiring a new passport from his meeting with the passport man (who no one knows his name) to the questioning and filling of the necessary application forms. We witness Furo issuing money throughout the entire process. The twenty thousand naira Furo had is shared between Syreeta's contact, the passport Deji and the immigration officer. The narrator says,

> The bribe-sharing, the queue-jumping, the fact non-checking and customer-handling were as efficient as any system whose design was alimentary: in through the mouth and straight out the anus. He was no more than a bite of food for a subverted system, which chewed him up for money and, to avoid the cramp of constipation, shat him out fast. (103)

Barret's choice of words indicates his disgust of a dysfunctional system where bribe taking has become the norm. He uses vulgar language as a tool to elicit shock and repulsion among readers and in doing so awaken them to the rottenness in the society. He uses words that refer to parts of the body that can be found unpleasant. Vulgar language connotes general decay and moral laxity in the society. The vulgarity shows the novelist's anger at corruption. His tone conveys disgust.

The narrator also criticizes people whose behavior assures that corruption exists. The narrator says, "It was bad business for Passport Man to fart where he ate, and so, for his own sake, he put real effort into guiding Furo around the hiccups in the bureaucracy (103)." The quotation hints at Barret's criticism of people's behavior which facilitates corruption. Corruption thrives where there is no discipline and strong moral principles.

Another instance of corruption is seen where custom officials demand bribes before they can release receipts that show Furo's father had imported an egg incubator from China. It takes Furo's father five weeks of begging and bribing custom officials to release receipts for the paid-up custom duties. Barret indicates that bureaucracy fuels corruption. One has to pay so that he/she can get services faster.

Barret also shows the moral decay in the society; that with deception and money one can easily get what they want as shown in the conversation between Furo and Yuguda:

'I don't have a degree.'

That's not important,' Yuguda replied…'but you attended university, didn't you?

I did.'… 'I don't have a Nigerian passport.'

That can be arranged,' Yuguda said in a firm voice. (245)

Furo is set to become the head of GELD, a project started by Yuguda. Yuguda says "I have the team to execute the project, but this is Nigeria." He needs Furo because he is white with a Nigerian name and accent. Most importantly, he "knows the tricks" (244) within the system. A man like Furo can ensure the success of the project.

The novel becomes a satire on corrupt practices like bribery and abuse of office. The satiric tone used indicates Barret's outrage at the erosion of values. Corruption runs amongst ordinary people and officials. People view corruption as a means to get rich quickly. Ordinary people are forced to bribe their way so that they can get any service. Similarly, government official demand bribes before they can expend any services.

3.5 Blogging the writer's concerns

Blogging takes place within a community of speakers. The blog's capacity to reach and interact with a hitherto unknown audience is the central contribution towards Adichie addressing the issue of racism. Adichie brings forth the American perspective of race in *Americanah*. The blog serves as a platform

where the writer can speak freely and boldly about race in a society crippled with silences. Blogs offer exposure and anonymity at the same time. This is why Ifemelu is able to speak out loud about the grim realities of race in America. Adichie has her main protagonist author the blog from a point of experience. Ifemelu writes on the dismal situations of racism in America in her blog.

The blog is a technique used by the writer to foreground the theme of race. The term foregrounding has its origin with the Czech theorist Jan Mukarovsky and it refers to the range of stylistic effects that occur in literature. In literary texts, foregrounding is structured (Short and Leech 1981). Short and Leech have argued that "in order to make sure that the point is put across; the novelist tends to say the same thing in a number of different ways and at different levels of structure" (207). They add that "incident and mode of description combine to embody one of the major themes of the novel." The major theme developed by the blog is racism.

The reader encounters a discussion about race from the first chapter when Ifemelu remembers an incident on a plane where she had to explain to a man seated next to her what she meant by a "lifestyle blog." This man then asks "Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even black families don't want them" (4). When Ifemelu later blogged about this man, the post received the highest comments for a month. The positioning of this incident in the very first chapter indicates to the reader that the novel is about race and the blog exists as a space for discussing racism. More so the title of the blog is italicized. Italicization is a strategy used to foreground the theme of race. Adichie makes a graphological choice to indicate to the reader that the blog is a central tool used to tackle racial issues.

The blog effectively develops the theme of race because of its unique nature. Adichie effectively demonstrates that a discussion on race is still relevant. The blog's ability to offer immediacy in communication and the ability to reach a wider audience makes it an effective channel through which race

matters can be discussed. In addition, the blog offers anonymity to its author hence Ifemelu can openly talk about the real issues without masking them. Hence in *Americanah*, Adichie speaks boldly about the American perspective of race without any hesitation.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines racism as "any action, practice, or belief that reflects the racial worldview—the ideology that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called "races"… and that some races are innately superior to others"(n.p). Race therefore exits as a category to be used in classifying the different human groups with Blacks deemed to occupy the lowest rank in the race ladder as illustrated by the post "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism." The post reads:

> …There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!...(184)

Hair, eyes, nose as well as skin colour are markers of race. These markers have been used to determine the place of a particular human group; whether to be included or excluded from races considered superior. Ifemelu's life is altogether "normal" when she lives in Nigeria. She goes to school, she has a family and a boyfriend. Her everyday life is not conditioned by racial prejudice. It is only after moving to the US that, in Frantz Fanon's view—colour becomes a factor in her life. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* says:

> As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others… for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. (89-90)

Black people become aware of their blackness in a white society. It is only after moving to a white society that colour became a factor in Ifemelu's life. She realizes that in America, unlike Nigeria, colour determines the kind os services you receive and the kind of life one leads.

Ifemelu experiences racism in America for instance when a beautician at a beauty spa declines to do her eyebrows because they "don't do curly" (292). She gets served only after her white boyfriend Curt intervenes. Curly is used to mean black and it prompts exclusion as shown by the attendant. Curt is able to arrange and achieve things that would have taken Ifemelu more time and effort, because he is white privileged. His colour affords him inclusion. Exclusion means blacks are denied certain services and privileges. They are locked out of enjoying government services in a country considered a free state. Thus in *Americanah*, Adichie brings forth the soreness of being a black in America, the irony of living in a free state yet being a victim of racism. She speaks about the position of blacks as second citizens even though Barack Obama, a black like them was now the president.

Aunty Uju has to take her braids out when she has to attend job interviews. Wearing braids is considered unprofessional. Ifemelu later on gives in to the same pressure. She straightens her hair to attend a job interview. This goes to show how racism is intertwined with stereotyping. Hair has nothing to do with performance yet the kind of hair one wears determines whether they get employment or not. Another instance stereotyping is portrayed is where Laura centers her talk on stereotypes from Africa and Africans. She draws attention to a picture in a magazine which depicts Africa as a place ravaged by starvation. This gives an impression of a poor starving continent in need of salvation by the white.

One blog post captures Ifemelu's baptism into a society where being a black in America makes all the difference. While babysitting at Kimberly's house, a carpet cleaner gave hostile looks to her thinking that she was the owner of the house. His behavior and the way in which, "he stiffened when he saw her" (166) will later be retold in a blog post. "The swift disappearance of his hostility" (166), after learning that Ifemelu is only a babysitter at that house inspires Ifemelu to write a blog post entitled, "Sometimes in America, Race is Class":

> It didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the
> owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Blacks"

as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites." Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed. (166)

During one of the dinner party gatherings in support of Barack Obama, a poet from Haiti proudly says that she dated a white boyfriend for a year and "race was never an issue for them" (290). Ifemelu strongly detests this pretentious view. Ifemelu knows from experience that race matters. When Ifemelu and Curt told the children Ifemelu babysat about their relationship, the oldest child, Morgan, says that it disgusts her. Morgan is not the only one who finds it hard to understand why a white man would date a black woman. Other people stare when they are walking across the street, holding hands. When they arrive at a restaurant, a waiter asks Curt if he wants a table for one, as if Ifemelu is not there. She experiences racism from white American women every time Curt introduces her as his girlfriend. The reaction exhibited by these women is discriminatory. It shows how white women view black women as undeserving of a white man. Adichie also speaks about this discriminatory attitude in her short story "The Thing Around your Neck." Here, Akunna describes her discomfort as a result of the racist glare she receives from white people in regard to her relationship with her white boyfriend. Akunna says:

> You knew by people's reactions that you two were abnormal—the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice. The old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self –esteem, your self-loathing. Or the black women who tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too obvious hi to him; the white men and women who said, "What a good looking pair" too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open mindedness to themselves. (125)

This experience which is similar to Ifemelu's shows how white women consider black women as the "other." Ifemelu uses this experience to offer her thoughts on one of the ways to end racial discrimination as captured in the following post:

The simplest solution to the problem of race in America? Romantic love. Not friendship. Not the kind of safe, shallow love where the objective is that both people remain comfortable. But real deep romantic love, the kind that twists you and wrings you out and makes you breathe through the nostrils of your beloved. (296)

One of the blog posts in the novel tackles the issue of institutionalized racism (327). Ifemelu experiences this form of racism during the school career fair where she hopes to be recruited for a job. Upon realising that Ifemelu is non-American, the recruiters end up being non-committal because they feared that if they hired her they would have to "descend into the dark tunnel of immigration" (202). Adichie speaks of the troublesome immigration process many immigrants have to deal with; some resorting to extreme measures like fake marriages and fake identities. Bureaucracy in the system ensures blacks are cut off from receiving certain benefits.

Other glaring instances of racial discrimination occur before Ifemelu when Aunty Uju informs her that her son Dike is facing racial discrimination in school and his principal says that "he is aggressive"(171). Dike is bright in school and "he does what other little boys do" (172) but he is branded aggressive because he is the only black student in the class. Later on Dike shares with Ifemelu that the group leader at his school camp refused to give him sunscreen because he is black and according to the leader "didn't need any" (183). This indicates a state of exclusion. The writer highlights the consequences of the treatment of black children through Dike. Dike attempts suicide because he was not able to cope up with the colour discrimination Blacks face in America. Consequences of choosing silence when faced with discrimination can be fatal. The same motif runs in Adichie's other novel. The silence of the world while Biafrans died is one of the major themes in *Half of a Yellow Sun.*

The blog can be seen as a tool for confronting racism. Adichie makes a mockery of whites through reversals. Ifemelu posts on white racist attitudes thus shifting attention from blacks to whites. The blog not only invite the reader to join the conversation about race, but it also opens the same conversation. The blogger invites both blacks and whites to engage in dialogue and to ask questions as seen in the blog "Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness" (325). The positioning of the blogger as a non-American black serves to unravel race as a social construct, not a universal truth. Ifemelu is not burdened by America's racial history in the same manner as African Americans. She is able to critique race objectively, not in a furious manner as an African American would.

The blog also effectively develops the theme of identity. Elias and Lemish in "Spinning the web of identity: The Roles of the Internet in the Lives of Immigrant Adolescents" argue that the internet plays "a variety of roles in the immigrants' lives, in keeping with the diversity and dynamics of the ongoing adjustment to a new society and maintenance of their original cultural identity" (535). The blog contributes to the development of Ifemelu's self-image.

Different factors contribute to the shaping of Ifemelu's identity in the novel. Her relationships with her boyfriends together with her blog all contribute in building her identity. Her relationship with Curt adds to her growing sense of racial prejudice. Even though she feels secure with him, the discriminatory attitudes which suggest feelings of disapprovals on the part of white women made her feel uncomfortable. More so Curt's overprotective attitude whenever in the presence of other whites only adds to her growing discomfort, as illustrated below:

> And it did not help that although she might be a pretty black girl, she was not the kind of black
>
> that they could, with an effort, imagine him with: she was not light-skinned, she was not bi-racial.
>
> At that party, as Curt held on to her hand, kissed her often, introduced her to everyone, her

amusement curdled into exhaustion. The looks had begun to pierce her skin. She was tired even

of Curt's protection, tired of needing protection. (*293*)

Curt's white privilege constantly reminds her of the differences that exist between them. It made her realise "that it is because of race that they look awkward together as he would exhibit her like an ivory tusk trophy" (Kirti, 137). Her relationship with Curt builds her maturity in the sense that she gets to learn about race from the perspective of white privilege.

On the other hand, though Blaine is a black, has experienced racism and knows everything about fighting for black people, the fact that he is African American creates a distance between him and Ifemelu. The distance created is not deliberate but it can be attributed to historical happenings. Thanks to slavery and the middle passage, Africans and African-Americans cannot foster strong bonds. Anger and suspicion prevents the two parties from forging strong relationships. Adichie captures this attitude in *Americanah*:

> Try and make friends with our African-American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective… The African-Americans who come to our meetings are the ones who write poems about Mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian queen. If an African-American calls you a Mandingo or a booty scratcher, he is insulting you from being African. Some will ask you annoying questions about Africa, but others will connect with you. (172-173)

The Trans-Atlantic trade that saw millions of Africans sold into slavery serves to distance Africans and African-Americans who otherwise share a common past and a common suffering when it comes to race. Such attitudes show how Ifemelu cannot talk about race with Blaine in an honest manner. Let's not forget that African-Americans experience what W.E.B. Dubois calls "double consciousness." On one hand they are Africans on the other they are Americans. They lack a sense of belonging. Ifemelu has Nigeria as her homeland. Unlike Blaine, she can trace her ancestry; therefore she belongs. Discussing race in an open

and honest manner becomes difficult especially due to their different backgrounds and different points of view. But her relationship with Blaine serves to build her maturity in the sense that she gets to view race through the eyes of an intellectual. Blaine tries to make Ifemelu an activist, criticizing her for writing about race but not actively fighting it. Eventually, his attitude causes Ifemelu to conclude that being an African-American, Blaine does not really share the same perspective with her when it comes to race.

Ifemelu's relationship with the rich white Curt and the intelligent Yale professor Blaine help her understand the concept of race and colour in America. Ifemelu came to learn that, "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" (290).

The blog therefore serves to build and keep in check Ifemelu's identity, ensuring that she does not get swayed into the falsehood surrounding the race issue in America. It is important to note that it is hard for Ifemelu to criticize and attack racists'' attitudes with her friends, work colleagues and even boyfriends without sounding racist. Even the few chances she gets to talk about race; she does not really explore the subject of race in an honest and in-depth manner. Though the subject of race cropped up in her conversations with Curt, "they talked about it in the slippery way that admitted nothing and engaged nothing and ended with the word "crazy," like a curious nugget to be examined and then put aside" (360). She has the freedom to criticize thevarious ways she feels oppressed in her blog. Whenever she finds herself in a situation that affects her, "Ifemelu makes use of her blog in order to expose the many factors that condition her identity" (Jessica, 14). With the writing of her blog, Ifemelu finally notices how 'race' works in an environment where people fail to acknowledge the existence of racism.

Elias and Lemish further argue that that "…immigrants often feel inferior to local residents, who appear to them as self-confident and successful, (so) the Internet helps them shape their identities, hence becoming more self-confident themselves (540)." This is noticeable in Ifemelu's experience, who felt

insecure when she first came to America. Naïve and unaware of the ways of a foreign country, she is forced to accept an offer of a tennis coach for a sum of a hundred dollars. The job is self-humiliating, something Ifemelu normally would never have accepted, but in America, she has debts to pay, she has no money and she is desperate. Her struggle with her finances made her vulnerable. The encounter with the tennis coach greatly impacts on her self -esteem. She ends up hating herself. The narrator clearly describes her mental state, as illustrated below:

> She walked to the train, feeling heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud, and seated by the window, she began to cry, she felt like a small ball, adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily. Back in her apartment, she washed her hands with water so hot that it scalded her fingers and a small soft welt flowered on her thumb …. She would never again wear those clothes, never even touch them. (154)

This incident plunges her into quilt. She could not even bring herself to tell Obinze, her high school lover. This marks the end of their relationship. Obinze has been a great source of strength for the young woman all this time round. His correspondence in form of letters and phone calls ease Ifemelu's loneliness in a country where she feels a total outsider. It's not that Ifemelu deliberately ends her relationship with Obinze. She tries several times to narrate to him her ordeal:

> At first, she gave herself a month. A month to let her self – loathing seep away, then she would call Obinze. But a month passed and still she kept Obinze sealed in a silence, gagged her own mind so that she would think of him as little as possible … Many times she started to write to him, she crafted e-mails, and then stopped and discarded them she would have to tell him what happened and she could not bear the thought of telling him what happened. She felt shamed; she had failed. (158)

The quotation clearly indicates Ifemelu's predicament. She is someone outspoken who always communicated what was on her mind. But this incident destroys her self-esteem to the point that she lost her voice.

Ifemelu's distancing of herself resonates with Akunna's decision not to write to her family and relatives back home while in America. Kirti says this of Akunna:

> Akunna wishes to write to her family and relatives but her deprivation makes her reluctant to write to them because she cannot share the nasty realities of life back home. Instead every month she would carefully wrap dollars in a brown envelop to send home a large part of her salary. There is a sense of loss of identity in Akunna after arriving in America because she would confine her thoughts to herself by not writing to anybody back home or by sharing her woes with her colleagues at restaurant. She feels lost in the labyrinth of America. (129)

Behaviours of Akunna and Ifemelu are similar in the sense that these women are lone strugglers in the complex dynamic American society and "when they fail to achieve what is expected from them back home, they simply shut themselves away from their loved ones and live in utter disillusionment" (Kirti, 136). The American society edges out a person's identity replacing it with the notions of colour and race as the underlying factors for survival.

After shutting out Obinze from her life, Ifemelu gets into other relationships with other men. First it is with the rich white cousin of Kimberly, the woman Ifemelu babysits for. Even though the relationship is perfect, there is certain restlessness in Ifemelu. She later equates this restlessness to race after her breakup with Curt. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* mentions that the relationship between a white man and a woman of colour is doomed because of the inherent racial inferiority. Kirta views this restlessness as Ifemelu's refusal "to empty her identity any further to a Curt" (104). I view this as an indicator of her need to reclaim her lost identity and self-esteem.

Ifemelu meets Blaine, an African-American professor from Yale. Their relationship is okay except for the constant reminder of her lack of anger when it comes to race matters. There is also the constant reminder of her background by Blaine's sister, Shan. Shan never really accepts Ifemelu as a person but always mentions her race and colour. She says that white men find Ifemelu interesting only because of her "exotic credential, that whole African thing" and if a white guy dates a Black woman "it is only out of fetish and it's nasty" (320). Ifemelu feels lost in the company of Blaine especially when it comes to viewing race issues in the American society. Perhaps this explains the "cement in her soul" (6) which filled her with homesickness and desperation to move back to her homeland.

At some point Ifemelu notices a change in her persona. As she is busy trying to metamorphose into an "American" she slowly loses her self-esteem. Her overwhelming desire to belong to a country which gives and not receives is captured by the narrator, as illustrated below:

> Ifemelu wanted, suddenly and desperately, to be from the country of people who gave and not received, to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy. (170)

Ifemelu experiences this wishful desire while interacting with a few people at Kimberly's, her employer's house. She feels the need to stem out her identity as an African and replace it with an American identity so that she can belong. Such wishful desire is detrimental to a person's self-esteem. One would always view oneself as the lesser one. A loss of self-esteem results in a loss of confidence and voice.

The blog plays a significant role in reclaiming Ifemelu's identity. The blog helps her find her lost voice and reclaim her self-esteem. She grows to be more secure with every blog entry. She uses her blog to adjust to American society and to make a living for herself. At the beginning of the novel we are told that "her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good

speaking fees" (6) as a result of the blog. The narrator stresses the centrality of Ifemelu's blog—successful with a growing readership, even receiving donations. Paula equates the blog to any other authoritative text. She requires her students to read Ifemelu's blog.

Adichie shows us that an immigrant becomes a nameless, faceless entity in America, as in the case of Ifemelu and England, as in the case of Obinze. In the process of trying to edge a life and make ends meet, immigrants resort to using fake identities to secure jobs. Aunty Uju lends Ifemelu a friend's National Security card so that she can use to look for employment. Ifemelu is hesitant to use the card at first because the driver's license and social security card bear the identity of some Ngozi Okonkwo. Aunty Uju convinces her by saying that "all Africans appear similar to white Americans (120). A similar thing happens to Obinze in England but he ends up securing menial jobs like toilet cleaning. The blog gives Ifemelu the power to name herself. It is in this space that she has the freedom to choose how she wants to be identified without any identity being forced down on her.

The internet helps Ifemelu maintain her cultural identity. She faces a loss of identity after relaxing her hair. Her identity lies in the kinky Afro hair and not the straight ones treated with chemicals and relaxers. Wambui encourages her to cut her hair and go natural. She tells her "relaxing hair is like being in prison" (208). When Ifemelu had trouble accepting her new look after she cut her hair, Wambui introduces her to 'happilykinky'—a website for hair like dreadlocks, Afros and twists. The website promotes the use of natural products that do not contain preservatives. She uses her blog to discuss about hair and how to wash and dry it as a way of celebrating its kinkiness.

Adichie deconstructs the myth of African kinky hair and she communicates new ideas on how to view African hair. She uses the blog to discuss natural hair and to question the American notion of beauty and how it affects the black people's self-worth. Black people aspire to look like white. They straighten their hair and adopt fake accents like Aunty Uju who changes her accent every time she addresses a white

person. Later in a blog entry entitled, "Understanding America for the Non- American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To?" Ifemelu blatantly states, "Stupid woman, she thinks she's white." So whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does..." (205).

Ifemelu uses her blog to interact with readers, asking for their experiences and opinions. According to Elias and Lemish the interaction internet affords immigrants contributes to social empowerment. (535). "The internet (creates) a forum for public discourse on issues related to immigrants' painful experiences, (who are) usually excluded from the mainstream…media, thus contributing to the immigrants' empowerment (535). The blog in the novel provides a sense of belonging and solidarity among blacks. The blog does not create hierarchies when it comes to blackness rather; it creates a racial identity—black. Adichie uses the blog forum to criticize the generalizations and assumptions surrounding the black people. They are treated as though they have no individual identity as captured in the following post:

> So in NTY, Professor Hunk was stopped by the police. They thought he had drugs. American Blacks and American Whites use drugs at the same rate (look this up), but say the word "drugs" and see what image comes to everyone's mind. Professor Hunk is upset. He says he's an Ivy League professor and he knows the deal, and he wonders what it would feel like if he were some poor kid from the inner city. (375)

If a crime is committed by a black person all other black people are stopped for fitting the profile. Blacks are deemed to have the same tendencies.

As Chinua Achebe argues in his essay "The Novelist as Teacher" contained in a collection of essays "Hopes and Impediments," the African writer has a role to play. "The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done" (29). We learn very early in the novel about the blogger's role and voice. SapphicDerrida, one of the most frequent posters writes of Ifemelu "You've used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real

conversations about an important subject (5). This statement elaborates on the role of the blogger and by extension the writer.

3.6 Comparison between Barret and Adichie's use of social media technique

While this study has dealt with how Barret and Adichie exploit social media as a narrative technique, there are a few differences notable in the way the two writers use the technique. This section attempts a comparison on the use of social media technique between the two writers.

Whereas blog commentary features in nearly all chapters in *Americanah*, Barret infuses twitter entries in only one section of *Blackass*. This form brings some element of order in the narrative of *Blackass*. In *Americanah*, there are some places where a blog post interrupts narration of particular events. For example the blog post titled "To my fellow Non-American blacks: In America You Are Black, Baby" (220). This post follows a narration about Aunty Uju telling Ifemelu of her decision to leave Bartholomew and move to Willow. The narrator says "Ifemelu liked the town Willow" (221) but before an explanation of her liking is provided, Adichie inserts a blog which is quite lengthy as it spills to the next page. The blog ends and a new chapter is introduced. The reader is left hanging. The blog in *Americanah* interrupts the flow of the narrative especially since blog posts are infused within chapters.

Adichie's use of social media technique to sharpen characterization is quite extensive compared to Barret's use. The blog forms a central presence in Ifemelu's life. The blog is a part of her. Every blog entry as well as comments, edits and even when Ifemelu has to pull down a blog post is narrated. She grows and affirms herself with every blog entry. The blog helps her while metamorphosing into an American citizen. Her confidence in life is built with every entry she makes. In *Blackass,* Igoni's transformation is facilitated by the internet. However, his transformation is not fully explained. We do not know what motivated his transformation. It is also not clear how Igoni's transformation is related to Furo's predicament. It appears as if Igoni is attempting a different story altogether. Similarly, Tekena's

character over social media is not fully developed. Most of her tweets serve to show how people seek attention on social media sites. This presents a limitation on the part of Barret's usage of the social media technique as a means to sharpen characterization.

Similarly, a difference can be noted when it comes to invoking social media as a site to tell a story. Ifemelu's stories expound Jennifer Muchiri's argument that men and women differ when it comes to narrating stories of personal experiences. Muchiri(2010) suggests that while men focus on national issues, women relate experiences that are more personal. Ifemelu talks about her experiences as an immigrant facing racism in the West. She talks about issues that touch on her personal life from her breakup with Curt, her struggle with natural hair to notions of American beauty and how they affect women's self-esteem. On the other hand, the tweets in *Blackass* talk about general issues affecting the society like corruption. The stories are not personalized compared to the blog entries in *Americanah,* rather, the tweets majorly focus on the miniature of everyday life.

Adichie uses the blog to illustrate the role of social media in keeping in check Ifemelu's identity. Ifemelu experiences a loss of identity after relaxing her hair. The kinky hair gives her cultural identity. The internet helps restore this lost identity. Ifemelu's encounter with *hapillykinky,* a website for natural hair helps her accept her natural look and even "fall in love" with it. Her friend Wambui introduces her to this website. It is at this space where Ifemelu learns to appreciate "what God gave her" (213), as she says. When she opens a blog, she uses it to discuss natural hair. She also uses her blog to encourage other immigrants to accept their true identity and to stop trying to conform to American standards of beauty. The same can be said of her new blog after her return to her homeland. Ifemelu realizes that Nigerian returnees carry around them a pretentious air. They keep on criticizing everything Nigerian. Ifemelu's blog serves to keep her in check and to ensure that she does not adopt a judgmental attitude of Nigeria like the other returnees.

Barret uses twitter to expound the issue of identity also but he focuses mostly on the issue of inauthentic identities. Tekena's digital persona is different from her offline persona. Igoni notes this when they meet at The Palms. Barret uses twitter to communicate new identities. Igoni undergoes a transformation. The character is presented as a man at the first section of the novel. When we meet Igoni after the social media entries, she is presented as a woman.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter dealt with examining how social media can be invoked as a site to tell a story. I have examined the kind of stories people tell online. The stories are mainly drawn from the speaker's personal experience and then shared with a community of online audience. The stories shared are antagonistic to the traditional narrative. They are unconventional and not plot driven. However their continued presence indicates the growing popularity of stories told using forms of computer-mediated communication. This calls for keeping an open mind when it comes to narrative in terms of production and its reception. I have also looked at how Barret and Adichie have communicated thematic concerns through the social media technique. The effectiveness of social media in building up themes has also been addressed. Social media offers anonymity. In addition, it offers immediacy, recency and a wider reach. Thus social media effectively develop themes in the two novels under study. The chapter also attempts a comparative study where I have examined the differences between a male and female writer when it comes to exploiting the social media technique.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 Conclusion

The study set out to examine the deployment of social media in Barret and Adichie's selected works. The study of how social media can be exploited as a narrative technique included looking at the specific social media elements deployed and their functions. I also looked at how social media can be invoked as a narrative site. The effectiveness of social media technique in communicating thematic concerns has also been addressed in the study. Social media exists as a space embedded but also outside creative writing.

The two writers deploy different social media elements in their fiction. Whereas Barret uses Twitter in *Blackass* Adichie makes use of the blog device in *Americanah.* Twitter entries appear in one section of *Blackass*. The choice of social media is in line with the narrative turn and it demonstrates Barret and Adichie's experimentation with new forms in communicating their concerns.

Apart from advancing the plot of a story in a unique way because it has been exploited as a metafictional device, social media technique serves an aesthetic function, sharpens characterization, helps create vocal multiplicity and add to structural complexity. The study establishes that a shift in the place of action to the digital space not only adds to the complexity of structure, but it impacts on spatial-temporal positioning of narratives. The introduction of internet elements is narrated by a third person narrator then a change in narrative perspective takes place. Equally, a change in point of view ensures a complexity in the structural narrating system.

The narrator creates a set of community of fellow speakers resulting in multiplicity of voices. Multiplicity of voices affords readers an all-round appreciation of issues addressed. Barret and Adichie adopt an appropriate voice once the narrative shifts to the digital space. Social media contributes in the creation of a polyphonic novel as it creates a distinct quality of heteroglossia.

Barret and Adichie foreground thematic issues in their works by using the social media technique. Social media offers exposure. It offers immediacy and a wider reach. Drawing on these principles, the two writers have exploited the technique to address some of the issues prevalent in society like corruption and racism. One of the themes running parallel in the two novels is identity. The internet facilitates the creation of identity, allows free play of identity and it allows masking of identities. Ifemelu remains anonymous to her readers. Likewise, Igoni adopts a gender neutral name over twitter. Characters and by extension the writer make use of social media to speak out. Ifemelu uses her blog to talk about the grim realities of race in America. Tekena criticizes authorities through her tweets. She is able to speak out about the state of the mortuary in Ikeja. Social media technique therefore effectively develops themes because of its unique nature. An analysis of the narrative potential of social media has been looked at. The study establishes that users take to social media to speak out and/or narrate ongoing stories of personal experience. This is because social media offers anonymity. Ifemelu speaks out about the race issue prevalent in the American society. She shares stories of her experiences as an immigrant in the US in her blog.

Audience is of utmost importance in social media. Their responses are meant to support and encourage the tellers. The presence of an active audience establishes a dialogic relationship. A narrator narrates stories of personal experiences to an online community. The stories shared are meant to generate a shared affectual response from readers thus establishing a social relationship. Thus users are encouraged to narrate their stories because they are assured of immediate feedback. Ifemelu uses her blog to encourage other immigrants to talk about issues that disturb them. The blog offers a catharsis to immigrants purging the pressures of immigrant life. Therefore the blog exists to serve a therapeutic role.

The stories told vary in length depending on the site deployed. Stories make meaning through intertextuality. Social media users use words, images, sound and/or video to tell a story. The hyperlinks contained in an entry are meant to guide readers to follow a particular story. Readers can also infer stories based on the textual and contextual cues which serve to activate narrative scripts in the readers' minds.

Social media fixes reports of events chronologically with a time and date. Therefore one can follow a particular story because events appear chronologically. A unifying interpretive framework is enabled because the reported events bear reference to an experiencing agent. Stories are archived, for instance an external website called "Storify" assembles and sequences the Twitter entries and their corresponding follow-up tweets in a chronological manner. The study highlights the interesting phenomenon of writing in the presence of continuous feedback elucidating the critical role that interaction plays in refashioning narratives. The comments by readers seem to have a co-constructive influence on the narrative development.

Two of the features mentioned as characterizing social media are interactivity and recency. Resulting from these properties are the unique features of sharing stories. The study establishes that audience is important when it comes to telling stories online. Audience offer support and they influence the development of a particular story. Social media stories may not immediately strike us as bearing narrative potential. The stories told are unconventional and not plot driven however, a closer look at the content reveal narrative-like elements hence they can be placed alongside other narrative-like texts. It is important to note that the study does not aim to classify social media stories as prototypical canonical narratives rather, the study demonstrates how new media (social media) shapes contemporary narrative studies.

The ever growing popularity of social media combined with a growing generation of readers with limited attention span calls for keeping an open mind when it comes to narratives. The rise of the short-form genre illustrates a limitation of the theory of narratology. The traditional understanding of what

characterizes canonical narratives may not be fully representative of the contemporary narrative practice. Therefore as Ruth Page purports, it is more accurate to talk about features of narrativity. However, social media stories, like twitter fiction, are not here to replace classic literature. The study aimed at showing how writers are continually flexing their literary muscles by experimenting with new forms.

This research has attempted to establish how social media can be invoked as a site to tell a story as well as manipulated as a narrative technique. The study was limited to the social media technique. I would recommend a study of other narrative techniques employed by Barret and Adichie to fully bring out their artistry.

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