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Research Paper

Mapping the Shadows of Whiteness: Toni Morrison's "Black Matters" and Racial Construction in Adichie's *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Dr. Theadora War

Abstract
Toni Morrison's seminal essay "Black Matters," from Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), reorients American literary criticism by arguing that white American literature relies structurally on the "Africanist presence", which points to a racialised construct used to stabilise and define white identity. This essay extends Morrison's theoretical intervention into a comparative postcolonial framework, examining how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013) and Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) reconfigure that racial proposition. While Morrison exposes whiteness as an identity dependent on Black figures, Adichie performs a deliberate inversion: she creates white characters whose presence heightens rather than overshadows the identities of her Nigerian (Igbo) protagonists. This article argues that Adichie transforms Morrison's critique into a contemporary postcolonial methodology, where whiteness becomes a foil or even a reflective surface that enables African characters to articulate selfhood and historical consciousness. Through close textual analysis and critical engagement with race theory, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism, this paper situates Adichie's fiction as a transnational response to the structures Morrison identifies, demonstrating that the "shadows of whiteness" continue to shape narrative possibilities across continents, but in radically reconfigured ways.

Keywords: *black identity, selfhood, racism, postcolonialism.*

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I. Introduction: Morrison's Challenge to Literary Criticism

Toni Morrison (1931–2019), one of the most influential American novelists and critics, a Nobel laureate, dedicated her career to interrogating how Black life and identity have been shaped and constrained by the racialised structures of the United States. Her critical text *Playing in the Dark* (1992) reoriented American literary studies by arguing that white American literature relies on a constructed "Africanist presence" to define itself. Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, she studied at Howard University and Cornell University before becoming a senior editor at Random House, where she championed Black writers. Morrison's novels, among them *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987), are celebrated for their lyrical prose and powerful engagement with themes of memory, slavery, community, and identity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (born 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria) grew up in Nsukka, where her parents worked at the University of Nigeria, an environment that exposed her early to academic life and to the literary legacy of Chinua Achebe, whose former home her family occupied for a period. She relocated to the United States at the age of nineteen to further her education. She studied communication and political science at Eastern Connecticut State University before pursuing graduate studies in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University and African Studies at Yale University. Her writing is noted for its questions of race and identity from the vantage point of African and diasporic experience. In novels such as *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie intensifies her stance on how Nigerian subjects raise the issue of globalised legacies of colonialism, migration, and racial hierarchy. Despite belonging to different generations and literary traditions, Morrison and Adichie converge in their insistence on foregrounding Black subjectivity against dominant cultural narratives.

Toni Morrison's "Black Matters" remains one of the most important interventions in American literary studies. She argues that Western literary traditions have relied upon a carefully crafted "Africanist presence" that challenges the foundational assumptions of canon formation and racial representation. Morrison insists that white

identity in literature did not evolve in isolation; instead, it is imaginatively and ideologically constructed through the presence and strategic absence of Blackness. Black figures, even when silent or stereotyped, provide the "shadowed ground" upon which white literary subjectivity emerges. By foregrounding this structural dependence, Morrison exposes whiteness as neither universal nor invisible, but as a racialised identity contingent on the 'Other' it creates.

Morrison's theory goes beyond the American context to explore its relevance within contemporary African American literature. Morrison writes within a tradition in which white authors dominate narrative authority. Adichie, conversely, writes from a postcolonial position where African voices reassert narrative centrality. Yet the relation between Blackness and whiteness remains dramatically entangled. This entanglement aligns with Stuart Hall's argument that cultural identity is "not an essence, but a positioning" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226) shaped through shifting relations of power rather than fixed origins. Hall's framework sheds light on Morrison's and Adichie's projects to be read as evolving negotiations of identity across racialised histories.

Adichie's transnational settings, such as Lagos, London, and the United States, thus extend Morrison's critique beyond the American literary imagination into a broader postcolonial and diasporic field. What Morrison names as a historical necessity for white writers becomes, in Adichie's novels, a narrative strategy: whiteness becomes a presence that helps articulate African selfhood rather than constrain it. This inversion, whether deliberate, nuanced, and politically charged, signals a transnational evolution of Morrison's insights.

Morrison's Africanist Presence: Constructing Whiteness Through Blackness

In "Black Matters," Morrison deliberately emphasises the notion that white American literature is premised on an imaginative engagement with Blackness that is both parasitic and productive. In turn, the Africanist presence is fundamental for allowing the white writer to express forbidden desires and anxieties and more importantly, reinforce national myths that further help in defining white moral, cultural, and intellectual superiority. Blackness acts as a canvas for white projection: a crucial mechanism for maintaining the illusion of white autonomy.

Crucially, Morrison identifies Africanist characters as structural devices, not merely thematic elements. The Black figure, often fragmented or absent, becomes the "dark other" through which white characters' innocence and stability are defined. Without the Africanist presence, whiteness loses its narrative contour. Morrison demonstrates that white writers stabilise their own identity through a doubled process: the white self emerges only by imagining its Black counterpart. Frantz Fanon's "racial epidermal schema" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 82) further clarifies how this process relies on the colonial gaze, which reduces the Black figure to a surface of projection. Morrison's Africanist presence thus exposes a foundational act of racialised looking, one that Adichie later turns inside out by shifting the epistemic centre of perception to African characters themselves. This theoretical insight provides an important foundation for analysing Adichie's fiction. Instead of rejecting the relational construction of identity that Morrison outlines, Adichie retools it. She uses whiteness not to construct white identity, but to illuminate the contradictions and desires of Nigerian characters traversing both local and Western worlds.

Adichie's novels function as a reflective surface that sharpens and intensifies the contours of African interiority. The white figures who populate *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* operate as narrative instruments that render visible the global hierarchies of epistemic power. Their presence exposes the structural advantages and blind spots embedded within Western modernity, revealing the ease with which whiteness assumes cultural centrality and evaluative authority. At the same time, these characters destabilise such assumptions by unwittingly illuminating the depth and complexity of the Nigerian protagonists. Through these encounters, Adichie reconfigures what Morrison terms the "Africanist presence," reversing its direction: whiteness becomes the "narrative shadow," not necessarily as a site of identity formation for itself, but a contrasting factor that accentuates African agency. Sara Ahmed's conception of whiteness as an orientation helps illuminate this shift: in Western spaces, whiteness structures what bodies can do and how they move ("A Phenomenology of Whiteness" 151). Ahmed theorises whiteness not merely as a racial identity but as a spatial and phenomenological arrangement that determines what bodies can do, where they can go, and how comfortably they can inhabit the world. In Western spaces, whiteness becomes invisible precisely because it aligns seamlessly with institutional norms and social expectations, allowing white bodies to move with ease while racialised bodies experience friction, stoppage, or hypervisibility. Adichie's fiction exposes this orienting force by centring African bodies that are misaligned with white spaces. The resulting disorientation—experienced through microaggressions, linguistic policing, and cultural misrecognition—reveals whiteness as a structuring absence that governs movement and possibility.

In Adichie's fiction, however, this orientation is destabilised. Nigerian characters pilot whiteness as a perceptible, sometimes obstructive that reveals the boundaries of Western subjectivity. Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as a process of becoming rather than a fixed trait also clarifies Adichie's strategy: her protagonists' identities evolve through encounters with whiteness, not in subordination to it, but in a process that

asserts African selfhood as historically situated and continually produced. In this inversion, Adichie transforms whiteness from a normative ideological centre into a contingent frame that exists primarily to foreground the evolving consciousness of her African characters.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard, the British writer who becomes enmeshed in Igbo culture, exemplifies Adichie's deployment of a white character to illuminate African complexity. Richard is drawn to Nigeria with earnest fascination, but his attempts to narrate Igbo history falter. His perspective is limited and framed by the residual colonial gaze he cannot entirely escape. Yet Richard's limitations are precisely what allow his Igbo lover, Kainene's authority to shine. Her intellectual sharpness becomes more pronounced through Richard's gaze. Through Richard, Adichie enacts Morrison's logic of racial contrast, but with a crucial reversal: the African character becomes central, the white character supplementary.

Furthermore, Richard's failed attempt to write about the Biafran War centres a key issue Morrison raises: the authority to narrate racialised histories. Whereas white American authors appropriated Blackness to construct identity, Richard hesitates, recognising the ethical limits of speaking for others. This self-erasure amplifies Kainene's narrative power and marks Adichie's rejection of colonial literary patterns.

Adichie's depiction of the Biafran War focuses on the politics of witnessing and narrative authority, which are issues that are central to Morrison's argument about who controls cultural memory. Ugwu's transformation from houseboy to soldier and ultimately to the author of *The World Was Silent When We Died* reclaims narrative ownership from the Western humanitarian gaze. His trajectory resonates with Paul Gilroy's understanding of diasporic modernity, where Ugwu's authorship emerges not from isolation but from the violent circulations of colonialism, war, and global humanitarian representation (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* 16-19). Through this movement, he develops a self-awareness that echoes Du Bois's double consciousness (*The Souls of Black Folk* 9), where an acute recognition of how Africans are seen, misrepresented, and spoken for by Western observers. By giving Ugwu the authority to narrate Biafra, Adichie disrupts these structures of looking and writing, offering a counter-discourse grounded in lived African experience. This resonates with Morrison's insistence that Black subjects must become narrators rather than objects of white imagination. Adichie thus demonstrates how literary whiteness historically shaped global perceptions of African conflict, and how reclaiming storytelling is a radical act of epistemic resistance.

Adichie's portrayal of well-meaning white liberals such as Kimberly in *Americanah* reveals how whiteness shields itself with the rhetoric of charity and multicultural goodwill. This reverberates Morrison's critique of white innocence: the ideological belief that one can benefit from racial hierarchies while imagining oneself free of racism. Kimberly's casual surprise at Ifemelu's eloquence or intelligence represents the unconscious condescension that Morrison identifies as the foundation of literary whiteness, which may be seen as a system that both denies and depends upon Black difference.

Adichie's *Americanah* provides a contemporary fictional enactment of Morrison's "Africanist presence," demonstrating how Blackness structures the imaginative boundaries of Western identity. Ifemelu's awareness that she "became Black in America" features Morrison's contention that whiteness requires Blackness as a stabilising contrast. Her realisation echoes Fanon's assertion that Blackness is often imposed externally as a racial designation rather than emerging from one's own cultural identity. In Nigeria, Ifemelu does not inhabit "race" as a primary category; in the United States, Blackness becomes an epidermal inscription, a category she must learn to traverse. Hall's understanding of identity as positional rather than essential becomes crucial here: Ifemelu's racial identity is constructed through her spatial and historical relocation, demonstrating the fluidity and situational nature of subjectivity under racial capitalism. The racialised encounters Ifemelu faces, such as those from the microaggressions she experiences in academic spaces to the fetishisation of her Nigerian identity, perform the very "shadow work" Morrison theorises. The novel reveals how white liberal spaces sustain themselves by invoking narratives of Black difference, even while professing racial innocence. Thus, Adichie dramatises Morrison's argument that Blackness is not peripheral but central to the psychic and cultural formations of Western subjectivity. Through Ifemelu's decision to stop chemically straightening her hair, a move that costs her a job interview, Adichie exposes the violence of whiteness as an aesthetic and behavioural standard. This aligns with Morrison's claim that whiteness maintains power through normalised, unspoken rules that dictate who appears "professional," "civilized," or "credible." Ifemelu's blog, particularly posts like "Understanding America for the Non-American Black," functions as a counter-narrative that destabilises this invisibility by naming whiteness as a racialised formation rather than a neutral baseline. Her satirical observations extend Morrison's critique into the twenty-first century, illustrating how whiteness operates through coded expectations that continue to regulate Black self-presentation and mobility. Adichie repeatedly challenges the expectation that African writing conforms to Western liberal desires either as poverty pornography or as postcolonial trauma testimony. This parallels Morrison's discussion of how white critical traditions shape literary value. In Morrison's framework, whiteness constructs itself as the arbiter of taste while positioning Black experience as either exotic material or moral lesson. Adichie's resistance to this, which is captured in her assertion that she refuses to write about Africa as a "single story", demonstrates how African literature intervenes in the structures of literary whiteness that Morrison exposes. Both writers reclaim discursive authority by redefining what counts as literary knowledge.

This reclamation aligns with Hall's argument that cultural identity emerges through the stories communities tell about themselves. By rejecting the "single story" imposed by Western expectations, Adichie asserts a multifaceted African identity that cannot be reduced to colonial stereotypes or humanitarian narratives. Her fiction thus participates in what Hall calls the "production" of cultural identity—an ongoing process of representation, negotiation, and resistance.

II. Conclusion

Morrison's "Black Matters" exposes the dependency of white American literature on the Africanist presence, revealing whiteness not as an invisible norm but as a racial identity constructed through contrast. Adichie engages this insight by inverting its direction: she creates Nigerian protagonists whose identities become sharper and more fully realised through their interactions with white characters. Adichie's fiction does not centre whiteness; it repositions it as a reflective device that enhances African subjectivity. This relationship forms a transnational dialogue in which Morrison's theory becomes the foundation for Adichie's postcolonial innovations. Ultimately, both writers map the shadows of whiteness not to reinscribe its power, but to illuminate the creative, resilient, and expansive identities that emerge in its wake.

Adichie may be read as Morrison's heir, carrying forward and transforming the critical insights of *Black Matters* into a transnational, twenty-first-century register. While Morrison exposes how whiteness once functioned as the centripetal force around which American literary identity cohered, Adichie repositions whiteness within a global African narrative framework, no longer authoritative, no longer the locus of meaning-making, and no longer the epistemic centre from which other identities derive significance. In *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, whiteness becomes a shadow presence, a peripheral structuring device against which African subjectivity articulates itself with renewed clarity. This creative reversal of Morrison's formulation, where Blackness served the imaginative needs of white writers, asserts instead that African identities can appropriate whiteness as a narrative tool without being subsumed by it. Both writers illuminate the relational construction of racial identity, yet Adichie does so from a stance of reclaimed agency, insisting that African selfhood is not reactive or derivative but autonomous, evolving, and fully capable of redefining the terms of racial discourse.

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