



## Rethinking the Image of Africa in Selected 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Black Narratives

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**Abstract:** *Inspired by Chinua Achebe's criticism of Joseph Conrad's racist ambivalence in Heart of Darkness, this paper focuses on the discourse of denigration as a continuum. It is concerned with how twentieth and twenty-first century black narratives—or more specifically, narratives of/around blackness—have either portrayed an intentionally derogatory image of Africa or become apologetic in defending such an image. While the denigration-versus-resistance polarity has characterized the conception and criticism of literary works across time, the particular experience of being black in a world of conceits has been orchestrated through several forms of conceptualizing black renaissance. We focus on the various stages of black denigration, analyse the shifts (transitions) in representation in the works of Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, Ralph Ellison, Chimamanda and Mychal Denzel, and conclude by assessing the state of “progress” in our contemporary time. Using a comparative and eclectic approach the analysis will lean on concepts from postcolonialism and the critical race theory.*

**Keywords:** Black Renaissance, image of Africa, racial denigration, shifting perspectives.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: COMPROMISED BEGINNINGS

A considerable part of the history of Black peoples, as they dispersed from Africa through several agencies, has been marked by chronic, if not damaging representations. These have been largely denigratory based on false or falsified claims of imperial superiority, and as we will illustrate here, Black writers have over time reacted to this systemic distortion of their personality and identity by offering counter-narratives that also rally around the new media that guarantee more visibility and objectivity. What can be termed the Black struggle for authenticity is observable in imperial wars of dispossession, suppression of Black personality, submission of Blacks to external forces and their ideologies. The various forms of trauma logically resulted in similarly various forms of resistance. To highlight these facts today is not identical to playing the victim or perpetuating its discourse; neither is it tantamount to performing the blame game as is often the case. Rather, the emphasis is part of an ongoing quest to understand the Black predicament more affirmatively, and to entertain proactive reflections that would sustain the conversation for a less othered space, with the hope that at some point, an adequate therapy to the cankerworm would be arrived at. The experiences of slave trade and slavery, colonialism and persistent racism still scar the psyche of Africans, and whether rightly or otherwise, such vilifications still feed diagnostic debates in Africanist discourses.

The word “slavery” tells so many stories, or at least ignites memories of a whole lot of things which the black race has had to deal with in order to project a dignified identity. This is because the reality of blacks all round the world has not changed so much from such memories and stories of past agony. In a representative way, we recall names such as Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) the former slave who bought his freedom and engaged in the battle for the abolition of slavery, Granville Sharp (1735-1813) who through the courts worked hard to free slaves, Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) who dedicated his adulthood to the fight against slavery, William Wilberforce (1759 -1833) the parliamentary spokesperson who persistently tabled a bill for the abolition of slave trade till it was abolished in 1807. While recollection should be functionally motivating, it is also important for us to acknowledge the fact that slave trade and slavery did not end with the official abolition and criminalization of the activity. Dealers in the trade devised more subtle means to continue the “profitable” business, which is part of the reason for the present analysis.

According to Kaye in *Over 200 Hundred Years of Campaigning Against Slavery*, in some cases “Others became indebted to plantation shops that sold goods at inflated prices and then had to work as bonded labourers for the landlord until the debt was paid off. These types of labour exploitation were so severe” and cruel that in subsequent years “they would be categorised by the United Nations as practices similar to slavery” (19). Conversely, despite the pressure that was already driving change in Europe in favor of the abolition of slave trade in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, up to the end of the century, King Leopold of Belgium was still “paying lobbyists to counter the negative publicity” (22) against the persistence of the activity in Congo. But noticing that he would not contain the pressure, “Leopold began to negotiate with the Belgian Government” and “in March 1908, the Government agreed to buy the Congo for some 205 million francs.” Paradoxically, “of this money, 50 million was earmarked to compensate the King for ‘his great sacrifices made for the Congo’ and was to be paid for out of the profits extracted from the Congo” (22). This provided another condition for the promotion and continuation of the inhuman practice. Kaye posits that “the purchase of the Congo had to be paid for and the fact that the Congo was still a hugely profitable colony meant that the ‘Belgian solution’ did not automatically end the slave labour system” (22). To exploit the Congo in order to pay for the cost of her liberation from slavery, ironically, the Belgian Government exerted severe forced labour from the locals, reintroducing another phase of slavery, which extended into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even the “modern day slavery” which the mainstream media highlight today is a vestige of slavery and slave trade, most of which determine the global black condition.<sup>1</sup>

It is to be noted that the colonization of Africa spanned hundreds of years (1800 the late 20th century) after which independence was granted to the nation-states.<sup>1</sup> The infamous Berlin conference of 1884-1885 provided the road map for the partition of Africa and thus availed the colonizers with unrestrained access to the resources on the continent. They seized the most fertile lands from the natives and reduced them to beggars on the periphery of their space. The inhumanity in this design was evident when the colonial masters could not cultivate the seized lands on their own and instead forced the Africans to work on them. After surrendering their lands involuntarily to the aggressors, and being forced to cultivate them, the natives were again made to buy the produce of their own labour from the colonial masters who now owned everything to the extent of owning the lives of the natives. As Dimp puts it, “the farms and cattle were taken away from and yet sold back to Africans at exuberant prices, even if the natives spared any crops to sell in the market, they got way less in exchange” (13). It is important to also note that the “fertile land areas” and “cattle” and “trade” (13) taken from the natives were the most valuable resources in possession of Africans. Life in the traditional senses was all about cultivating the soil and shepherding animals. In fact, when in 1960 Franz Fanon published *The Wretched of the Earth* and Walter Rodney in 1974 published *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, they were only projecting the defamed image of Africans as a result of western colonization of the continent. By losing the basics of life, Africans were the archetypal wretched of the earth. In addition to which they were obliged to pay cutthroat taxes to the cruel oppressors.

Africans were mandated to pay very high taxes during this period. According to Dodds (1998), in his work about “*The Zulus and Matabele Warrior Nations*” he discussed how the European government placed taxes on almost everything they could possibly find including owning dogs. Africans owned practically nothing as almost everything they worked for went back in taxes because they were forced to contribute more money. (Dimp 14)

Africans were reduced to submitting to “exorbitant taxes that extended to [them] being taxed for marrying more than one wife” (14). From a cultural perspective, this was in complete disregard of the culture of the Africans. Africans were grouped together according to the interests of the colonial powers without consideration for their cultural bonds, linguistic ties and ways of life. The immediate consequence of the derogatory treatment of Africans was the furtherance of white supremacist ideology which extended the segregation of blacks to the background in every situation and legitimized, according to Boehen Adu in *General History of Africa VII*, “the notions of ‘white’ and ‘black’ ... as generic labels by the colonialists, who were regarded as superior” (xx).

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that even after the independence of South Sudan in 2011, simmering tensions in the former British Southern Cameroons and Western Sahara, demonstrate how imperial boundaries and their ideologies still make it difficult to conceive of a holistically liberated Black identity.

As already suggested, one essential characteristic of the colonial administration was forced labour. After seizing the most fertile lands from Africans, extensive plantations were established and Africans were forced to cultivate them for their colonial masters. Such dispossession extended into the hinterlands as was the case in 1906 when the German captain Glauning invaded the Nso country with hundreds of foot soldiers mainly because the Nso people “refused to accept German rule and declined from supplying labourers for German plantations” (Gwanfogbe, “Resistance to European Penetration into Africa 125). When the Nso kingdom finally surrendered after two months of futile resistance, they had no choice than to accept the terms of the aggressor which simply required them to surrender all they were fighting to preserve: their dignity. In almost all the regions of the African continent during the colonial era, Africans were being submitted to the most degrading of circumstances in the name of forced labour.

The situation in Anglophone Africa was typified by the case of Kenya where

the British proposed a law which would force all men who had not been paid a salary for three months in the last year to work 60 days on public works (for minimal pay) and an additional 24 days on communal works (unpaid). This plan was only dropped in 1921 following a wave of protests in Britain, but Kenyan men were still obliged to provide 24 days of paid communal service a year (25).

Such inhumane practice was replicated in other colonial cultures on the continent. In francophone Africa, as Kaye argues further, “The French introduced universal conscription into their colonies in West and Equatorial Africa in 1919”. The consequence of this move was that “Those conscripted were rarely assigned any military duties and most spent three years in labour brigades working for private contractors. These conscripts received minimal pay and many died due to bad treatment and working conditions” (25). The sense of the sacredness of life was lost and life to all Africans suffocating in the hands of the colonizers was cruel, short and meaningless. They lived in uncertainty, and by the mercy of the new owners of their soil and resources. “In one project alone, the French conscripted 127,000 Equatorial Africans to work on the construction of a railway between 1921 and 1934. The official death toll during this time was over 14,000, but recent estimates put the figure at over 20,000” (25). At the same time, Africans were undergoing the same fate in the Belgian Congo. Meanwhile, in Mozambique, Portuguese companies were on the necks of traditional chiefs to conscript men and women and children without wages. It is important to note that though the colonial masters did not own Africans as it was the case with slavery and slave trade, the situation was more or less the same; they could still have slaves, without owning them. Such was the duplicity of the colonial period.

A fundamental factor which acted as the determinant for the sustenance of slavery and slave trade and colonialism was racism. Because blacks were considered mentally inferior to whites, it was easy to justify their enslavement and colonization as a noble gesture meant to emancipate them during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because slave trade included three continents in a triangular manner (buyers leaving Europe to buy from Africa to take either to South or North America and ferry their produce back to Europe) the bearing on this discussion consequently extends to America; and based on the forms of denigration already discussed above, we now consider the manner in which narrative transitions have shifted towards a more inclusive sense of representation. Even so, Deborah-Eve Lombard represents the sceptical voices which do not hesitate to point out that “although many people in the United States are sure that ‘as far as race relations go, things have gotten better,’ a closer look at examples of material and popular culture from either end of the 20th century illustrates that “things have stayed very much the same . In other words, the semblance of improvement in identity relations have not overwritten the condescending voices which continue to perpetuate the divisions that preserve inequality in our society” (*Racism’s Tangible Lifeline* 1). It should be noted, however, that eventually, popular opinion, resistance, black renaissance, opposition from political opponents and race studies gave reason for the abolition of slavery and slave trade and for decolonization. After officially ending slavery and its trade, the emancipation of blacks still met with subtle forms of inferiority against the black race and maintained through the kind of pictures projected about the blacks. In *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse argues that within this period

stereotyping *increased* in the wake of black emancipation. Prior to emancipation, slavery itself ensured that blacks were excluded from competition; after emancipation blacks were ‘niggered’ in order to ‘ghettoize’ them, to safeguard their being excluded from competition by cultural and discursive, or if necessary physical means (235).

Negative pictures or images of Africa/blackness have therefore persevered a purist mentality for the whites and political correctness is only a way of smoothening the edges of the rough discourse. Such derogatory representations still enable political and diplomatic opinions together with the policies with which they are associated, generally to go to the disadvantage of the blacks. It is from this background that we can better assess how the ramified representation of the image of Africa (blacks) in the selected texts from the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Conrad, Achebe, Ellison) and the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Chimamanda and Denzel) demonstrate a shift in the imaging of the embattled/denigrated African.

### 2. SHIFTING NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN CONRAD, ACHEBE, ELISON, CHIMAMANDA AND DENZEL

As seen above, black denigration characterized three successive phases of denigration dynamics from slave trade and slavery to colonialism and racism across various historical contexts. These phases are presented in an evolutionary aesthetics in the works of the authors cited above. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* depicts the period of the exploration of Africa, slave trade and slavery, a period in which the image of Africa and consequently that of blacks as captured through the eyes of the colonizer Kutz portrays rudimentary humans who are depicted as primitive and must be tamed and exploited. Even when they are oppressed in the taming, they are still denied a voice of their own and so can only grunt and gesticulate.

In the opening pages the Thames and the Congo are described as trade routes in the development of Europe. The authorial voice notes that: “The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth”. The dignity accorded this waterway is inseparable from the benefits it renders to the white race and explains why Marlow and his companions look at the “venerable stream” with “abiding memories”, “seeing in its lower reaches”, the “great spirit of the past” (4). This contrasts the description of the Congo whose primeval vicinity suggests “somewhere far away in another existence perhaps” (29). Achebe in “An Image of Africa: Race in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” argues that unlike the Thames in the analysis of Conrad, “The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension” (2). The explorer’s primal gaze here fails to shed cultural conceits and thus implies that “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” (39). Such beginnings that are shrouded in mystery are misrepresented as “wild” in the colonizing gaze. Marlow observes the “sluggish” nature of the air around the river with “no joy in the brilliance of sunshine” while “the long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of over-shadowed distances (39).

Because the Congo is bleak (to the “civilized” eye), those who inhabit its surroundings (blacks, Africans) are portrayed in the most derogatory of ways such that as Marlow later confesses, “They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough ...” (41). The tension between the “horrid faces” of the natives and their “kinship “with global humanity mirrors similar emotions in Conrad following his visit to the Congo prior to his writing *Heart of Darkness*. This explains his ambivalence, and also how the novel’s textualization of racial difference also tends to exploit the linguistic essentialism of Eurocentric codes which obviously play against Europe’s periphery.

Irked by what he saw as racist representation of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* the significance of Achebe’s reaction as perhaps the first formal attack on the embedded racism in Conrad’s novel—to the point of describing the author as a “bloody racist” (4)—is significant. It draws attention to the intricacies of attempting to occupy a moral high ground while at the same time playing into the conceit of the othering agent: in his reaction Achebe becomes a victim of the fallacy suggested by Alexander Pope since the 17<sup>th</sup> century in which the critic tends to misinterpret textual data as evidence of authorial inclination. Nevertheless, Achebe’s ethnographic reevaluation of cultural relativity in the

trilogy of his early novels establishes the socio-cultural background of the people whom by extension Conrad and/or his main characters view as sub-humans. In the second of these, *Arrow of God* for example, Achebe suggests that an Igbo man is a man of culture just like Europeans and that since these cultures belong to different civilizations, the misunderstanding of one by the results from unfounded cultural conceits. The misunderstanding is diluted into the arrogance of colonial manhood which degenerates into the disrespect of an African power broker, the chief priest. His rough-handling is anathema in the African worldview and when Winterbottom ignores his previous relationship with Ezeulu, we realise not only the convenience of the friendship whenever necessary, for the alien consciousness, but also how it can be manipulated against the all-embracing victim of colonialism who has been written in the colonial imagination as primitive and barbaric. In his diagnosis of this phenomenon, Achebe is simultaneously rewriting difference as depicted in Conrad's novel and valorising the African perspective in terms of victimhood.

Thus, the continuity in image representation from Conrad to Achebe revolves around lived and not mediated experience. Although Conrad went to the Congo in 1899, this trip was too brief and contingent for someone who had been favoured with British nationality to be completely weaned of the colonizing assumption of power and superiority at the mercy of the blacks (Africans). Ezeulu's moves in the conflict between the Umuara and Okperi peoples pits him in trouble as they provoke an arrest order from Winterbottom. Normally, from an African world-view, an elder, talk less of the chief priest of a well acknowledged deity as Ulu is revered and even if they are found guilty of a crime, there is a way of correcting them different from the way ordinary people are punished. This imposition of colonial law over nature alternates when Winterbottom acts in his capacity as magistrate – with emphasis on the possibility of the natives “learn[ing] good manners” is an example of how Achebe critiques Conrad on the basis of valuating the colonial Other on the basis of cultural ignorance. Like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Winterbottom has the benefit of authorized ignorance which he uses in violation of rival cultures.

To the white colonial, however, such affirmation of native culture is a sign of disrespect for the authority which he personifies and prompts him to commit further disrespect of the African world-view as he “signed a warrant of arrest in his capacity as magistrate for the apprehension of the priest and gave instructions for two policemen to go to Umuaro first thing in the morning and bring the fellow in” (149). In the western world-view represented by Winterbottom, every person is treated same regardless of age nor position in authority as it is claimed that everyone is equal before the law and thus the respect given to elders in African traditional setting is not evident in the western world. In addition to sending policemen to go and arrest Ezeulu, Winterbottom instructs Tony Clarke as follows: “you are to lock him up in the guardroom. I do not wish to see him until after my return from Enugu. By that time, he should have learnt good manners. I won't have my natives thinking they can treat the administration with contempt” (149).

It is important to note that the evolution of the African condition from *Heart of Darkness* to *Arrow of God* is not only spatial; it is also mental, even psychological, and mirrors a shift in the perception of Africans. While in *Heart of Darkness* Africans are considered a little less than humans, are seen as cannibals, lacking the faculty of rational communication, in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu projects the subtlety of African wisdom, and we even notice that he is esteemed enough to stand up to the white man. He is even a friend to Winterbottom, even if this was contingent on native subservience. As such, despite the continuous denigration of native culture, the natives in *Arrow of God* are more dignified than those in *Heart of Darkness*. From the perspective of Ezeulu, he is right in the African way not to accept the disrespect from Winterbottom. On the other hand, from the perspective of Winterbottom, it is disrespectful on the part of the chief priest, a fetish priest to be precise, to go against the measures of the colonial government. In fact, when Akuebue gets the message of Ezeulu being summoned to appear before the white man in Okperi, he suggests that some elders should accompany the old man considering that it is unthinkable for the chief priest of Ulu to be maltreated by an outsider. If there is anything to be done, the elders who should accompany him would come in and save the priesthood of Ulu from embarrassment. This is evidence of the cultural shock which is evident in the colonial project albeit tilting in favor of the culture that has power for despite the shock and resistance, Ezeulu does not have any choice than to submit himself before Winterbottom. It is important in this transcending trajectory to note that the natives in *Heart of Darkness* are more primitive than does in *Arrow of God* and as such the relevance of the discussion of transition in both denigration and resistance (renaissance).

In the end, Ezeulu leaves for Okperi with his son, Obika. When they arrive, it is the Court Messenger who goes to inform Tony Clarke about their arrival. Then Clarke orders: “lock him up in the guardroom till morning” (156). This instruction offends the Court Messenger who fears that something terrible may happen to anyone who unnecessarily mistreats Ezeulu. As such he pretends as if he has not heard his master well: “massa say make I putam for gaddaloom?” he asks, and Clarke becomes furious: “that’s what I said... are you deaf?” (156). The Court Messenger is surprised that the chief priest of Ulu who is both human and spirit will be locked up in the guardroom indicating his own consciousness at the taboo mistreatment of the African authority despite being an enabler. Worst still, he is the one to do the job. Knowing the consequences such an action could cause, he still shows some degree of dissatisfaction: “no be say I deaf sah but...” he tries to caution the white against the decision but is helpless “get out” Clarke shouts at him and he no longer has a voice. If only he could explain to the white man the consequences that may follow from mishandling the chief priest of Ulu. Even though Eze is finally locked up and nothing happens, the thinking and effecting of his arrest is anathema to native culture and is thus tantamount to black denigration. In England Eze is likely to be the equivalence of the King and as such the treatment of Eze by an Englishman as such symbolizes a deliberate attempt to denigrate culture; it is not the result of ignorance because British colonisers were already aware of the culture since the events recorded in *Things Fall Apart*. At the same time, we must concede that Conrad’s Marlow would have been surprised at the actions of Ezeulu and co and Kurt would have viewed such as abominable and punishable perhaps by some form of ethnic cleansing; but for Winterbottom to react with just an arrest indicates the degree of improvement in racial relationships. Through his ethnographic insights, Achebe therefore engages in an apologetic endeavour to cleanse the image of Africa. Juxtaposing Conrad’s image of Africa and Achebe’s one perceives enabling aspects of cultural evolution which even amounts to the gradual humanization of the Africans from the dehumanization in *Heart of Darkness*.

Following the transition in the trajectory of Black representation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* contributes to the debate by highlighting the experiences of the African American during the Jim Crow era. It is important to assert that this work considers the mishaps of black Americans by extension as the mishaps of Africans who though living in different lands have an African ancestry and the denigration of blacks in continental Africa as seen in the texts above can arguably be presented as haven transcended to the West in Ellison’s text. Their image then is the symbolic image of a particular race of African descent and therefore the image of Africa and that is why they are “Invisible” in America in the first place. The predominant sub theme of black denigration in the text is the psychological torture of Black Americans in Jim Crow America. Being black in America seems to be a problem of its own, as one automatically has to deal with traumas, name callings which naturally come to those who are black in colour. The narrator of the story is an invisible character because he is a spook—literally unseen—a black man living in the racist atmosphere of America in the 1920s and 1930s, unrecognized because of his skin colour. Consequently, he must shout or cry or fight to be seen to exist since the black American is only a construct in the psyche of the racist Self. The feeling provoked by imposed invisibility is that of resentment and trauma, and the invisible narrator insists that one feels “that way most of the times... you ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world” (2).

In the invisible world, the Negro is called different names which most if not all of the times are derogatory pet names. The narrator recounts one encounter with a man in the dark in which the man calls him “an insulting name” (4) and refuses to apologize even with severe pressure from him to do so. And of course, this man bumps into him because as a phantom, he is not visible and has to wail and shout different sounds to be heard and to be seen to exist. Because everyone despises him, the narrator searches for a place to live alone beyond his tormentors, a place which has been forgotten “during the nineteenth century”. The construct of invisibility for the African American thrives because racism is institutional or legally constructed as argued by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in “Critical Race Theory: Past, Present, And Future” (477). They don’t have a voice since the media (in this case white media outlets) is an arm of the establishment and thus protects its image and even when protest is organized it is countered with brute force. The image is one of helplessness and indeed the struggle for visibility culminates in a more derogatory treatment and image of blacks in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Shifting then to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the age of globalization, migration, multiculturalism and the dynamics of the digital age, we see progress in terms of policy and overall black condition albeit with some duplicity and new phases of denigration. Taking a 21<sup>st</sup> century text like *Americanah*, the complicity of the establishment with the mass media leads to the presentation of sophisticated images for the diaspora, a typical tactic in all culture wars. These images constitute the diplomatic pull factors that goad migrants who in most cases are victims of push factors like bad governance, unemployment and wars. Reading *Americanah*, it is clear that life in the diaspora does not meet the expectations of the migrants especially because they did little or no fact-checking. By the time they are leaving their home countries, the life they seek is that which is presented on TV shows which unfortunately are edited to always reflect almost only the good image of America for instance. In Ifemelu's (the major character) case, "it was the commercials that captivated her. She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions in shampoos and cars and packaged foods, and in her mind they became the real America, the America she would only see when she moved to school in the autumn" (135). She however meets with the real America where racism, discrimination, "worse working conditions" and various categories of exploitation are rife. From Ifemelu's expectations which are not met, it is clear that the appearance of the diaspora opposes the reality on the ground.

To describe Ifemelu's condition as an aspect of migrant tragedy is also to endorse the simple mindedness of her representative consciousness as one that fails to see beyond the gloss. While she is consequently forced into Ifemelu prostitution, Obinze (who migrated to England) becomes a cleaner of toilets and other mess. Adichie presents therefore a willfully migratory image of those Achille Mbembe refers to as "afropolitans" who crisscross the world in search of greener pastures even as improved versions of the African we find in Conrad, Achebe and Elison. Taking the American society for example, the visibility of the African American is no longer in question even though controversial black celebrities (as Adichie presents them) in the persons of Obama, Oprah, Beyonce and others are forced to become "a type of blacks" who oppress themselves for the interest of the establishment. Taking the example of Michelle Obama, Ifemelu ponders on the consequences of the First Lady going native, more or less:

Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls. (There is no knowing what her texture will be. It is not unusual for a black woman to have three different textures on her head.) She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (342/43)

Her reflection demonstrates the split personalities which black women have to negotiate for the convenience of political correctness. By downplaying the original identities, they are willingly being absorbed into the osmotic culture where standards are affirmed without much consideration for individual idiosyncrasies. As such even though in the text, the blacks have found a place typified by Obama's ascension to the American presidency, the image of the African American is still contested. That is the reason why the homeless Ifemelu first finds her voice on the internet – which Denzel and the other Black Live Matter crusaders are latter to view as the messiah—through her various blogs and when even this is not enough she returns to her homeland in the same way as Obinze. Adichie thus presents an unstable image of Africans as they shuffle between homeland and the metropolis and despite the hardship, the returnee trajectory vindicates Africa when it comes to economic empowerment through the capital they bring.

Mychal Denzel's *Invisible Man Has Got the Whole Watching* changes the scope from just fictional representation to a more practical memoir in which he argues that the image of the "invisible" African American has not been totally vindicated given that his prominence in the spotlight can most likely be occasioned by a spectacle like the killing of Travon Martin by white supremacist Zimmerman. This killing follows a cultural pattern and forms the crux of conflict in the memoir with the alarming trivial reason for which a white Supremacist kills a young black boy, whose demise rallies universal attention. As recorded on the 911 call between Zimmerman and the police, the boundaries of criminality are subsumed into the institutional archetype of invisibility:

This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about...He looks black...A dark hoodie, like a grey hoodie, and either jeans or sweatpants and white tennis shoes...He's just staring...looking at all the houses...He's got his hand in his waistband. And he's a black male...Something's wrong with him. Yup, he's coming to check me out, he's got something in his hands, I don't know what his deal is...These assholes, they always get away. (Introduction)

The short excerpt tells of a society in which black young men are stereotyped and cannot move about freely and carry out their respective activities because at any point they can be suspected and reported to the police and at the least or be killed as seen in the events culminating from this encounter. Zimmerman's report demonstrates the racial profiling of blacks in America and brings back the debate on invisibility only that this time evidence can be recorded and disseminated in real time on social media unlike in the past when even analogue gadgets were not available to blacks. Just like in *Americanah*, online activism appears to be the safest and most available means for militating towards vindicating the image of blacks and of Africa. Through online activism and crowd sourcing which have been identified as characteristic of digimodernism, other groups are rallied into both physical and virtual forms of protest. The narrator corroborates this by admitting how "Nationally syndicated black radio shows started making the Jena Six case a part of their regular coverage, and the public outcry pushed 'mainstream' media outlets like CNN to take notice. Al Sharpton got involved" (chapter 4). Even with the subjective voice in this "report", since there is no credible evidence that the mainstream media and Civil Rights leaders had to be forced onboard the protest wagon, still we find a significant indication of how the internet is indeed a game-changer in the sensitization and mobilization for the ultimate visibility of the black and black image. The narrator's consolation that "it was as if the blackness messiah had come down to lay hands on me personally" (Chapter one) is a tribute to the internet as the new agent of breaking down boundaries beyond the institutional gate-keeping that hampers activism through traditional media.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This paper has asserted through the background provided and textual analysis that the experience of Blacks as represented in various spaces and epochs of their history is commensurate to the fictional and semi-fictional content provided in the selected novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, provided the discourse of a derogatory image of Africa based colonial intensions for exploitation of both African slaves and African resources; a representation which goes beyond economic nuances to have negative cultural undertones. As counter, Achebe provided an African perspective through his ethnographic narration in *Arrow of God*, and through which Conrad's misunderstandings and misrepresentations of African cultures and its people in *Heart of Darkness*, can be countered; the realism in the narration of African cultural reality by an African through an African lens steeped in the African worldview begins the process of cultural rehabilitation. Further, the paper demonstrated that transitions from Africa to America in Ellison's *Invisible Man* followed the events of the transatlantic triangle that characterizes discourses around the image of blacks such that the experiences of ex-slaves and their descendants become another phase for the examination of black denigration. Transcending to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the paper equally relied on Adichie's *Americanah* and the dynamics of migration and multiculturalism therewith to argue that progress has been made in race relations despite a thriving line of denigration which manifests through migrant tragedies. Denzel's *Invisible Man Has Got the Whole World Watching* finally corroborates these mishaps by arguing that the black man still remains denigrated, in this case "invisible", and just as in *Americanah*, the internet can be exploited positively to correct and enhance a much-respected black image in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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