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The Construction of a Black Female Migrant Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
Americanah (2013)

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Dedication

First and foremost, I thank Allah for granting me the strength and patience to seek knowledge
and to finish this humble work.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother **Nacef Kahina**, my first teacher who taught me
everything she knew and gave me everything she had.

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Abstract

Despite the growing number of works that represent the black female migrant characters in the literary scene, many narratives often fail to capture the complexity and uniqueness of their identities and experiences. Therefore, this study examines the construction of a black female migrant identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). This novel offers an insightful vision on how black migrant women, who come into contact with the mainstream white American society and confront racism and alienation, perceive and negotiate their identities, as represented through the main character Ifemelu and other female characters. This dissertation sheds light on how Adichie portrays the complex and nuanced nature of black female migrant identities. Furthermore, it highlights the ways in which race, gender, culture and migration intersect to shape migrant women's identities. Drawing upon intersectional feminist theories and black feminism, this research aims to critically assess the representation of black female migrants in *Americanah*, questioning whether it reflects the complexity of their experiences, and examining Adichie's portrayal of black migrant female identities in the US. The study analyzes how the novel challenges simplistic imaginations of race, beauty, blackness and their intersection. The thesis shows that the blend of cultural identities seems natural and positive for Ifemelu, yet it places her in a state of being neither completely American nor entirely Nigerian. Instead, she becomes Americanah. This amalgamation deepens our understanding of black female migrant identities as a fluid and dynamic constructs shaped by racial and gender disparities.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, migration, *Americanah*, racial identity, feminism, blackness, gender, intersectionality.

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المُلخَص

Résumé.....

Introduction

The construction of a female identity is a problematic issue in contemporary literature since women's reality is marked by continuous struggle against various kinds of oppressions such as patriarchy, sexism, and racism. Therefore, the pressing need to address female issues led to the emergence of feminist movements that advocate for women rights and freedom. However, the initial waves of feminism focused mainly on the issues of white middle class women and failed to capture the concerns and the needs of women of color. Thence, many black feminists and activists deem it necessary to have an inclusive approach that expresses the experiences and the aspirations of other women including women of color, lower class women, poor women, migrant women and all other categories. Black migrant women in particular have faced multiple, layered forms of oppression simultaneously. Thus, they are subjected to prejudicial treatments stemming from the intersection of their race and gender besides their migration status. This intersection creates their unique experiences and shapes their complex identities.

Traversing borders can be both liberating and challenging, it forces black women to confront how their blackness and womanhood are perceived in new settings. They navigate a challenging journey that necessitates a questioning of fundamental pillars and crucial aspects of their existence such as their sense of belonging, notion of home and their selfhood. While confronting the pressures of discrimination, injustice and marginalization and stereotypes, they shed or strengthen ties with their homeland, and sometimes they develop a sense of resentment and hate towards their own origins, which increases the complexity of their experiences and identities. The understanding and interpretation of black identity and blackness reflects a broader spectrum of perceptions that shift between unfavorable views, which associate blackness to

ugliness and inferiority, and favorable views that link black identity to the diversity and the richness that stem from an African heritage flush with history and culture.

The black female migrant identity is a complex construct because it incorporates a variety of aspects that are essential to understanding its full dimensions including the intersection of race and gender, cultural interactions as well as social and cultural biases etc. Moreover, it encompasses the notion of transformation and change, which means that it embodies the ideas of alteration, growth and evolution. The construction of a black female migrant identity is a dynamic process where change is an integral characteristic. Thus, this identity cannot be adequately described or understood without acknowledging its potential shift from one state, form, or perspective to another.

Black female migrant identities are profoundly explored in migration narratives and in many black feminist literary works that portray the challenges and the painful reality of black women in alien surroundings. Many writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta, Yaa Gyasi, Maya Angelou etc. sought to give voice to black women and to illuminate the ignored chapters of their stories, struggles and their resistance to oppression. Through their literatures, these authors challenge reductive perceptions of black female migrants and rebut other narratives that misrepresent their identities and perpetuate stereotypes about them. The representation of black female migrant identities in fiction stresses the diversity of their stories; some works depict them as victims and submissive characters, other novels portrays them as resistant women who revolt against the oppressions they endure.

Since black female migrant identity has been long studied through limited, one-dimensional lens, ignoring all factors, aspects and intersections that shape this identity, this dissertation explores the journey of identity negotiation among black migrant women. It

examines the construction of a black female migrant identity in the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013) in order to uncover how black female migrants perceive and navigate their identities and whether the novel reflects the complexity of their experiences. The novel is selected since it is a well-acclaimed novel, and it provides a comprehensive, nuanced framework for examining the identities of black women migrants from the perspective of a black African migrant female writer through various characters' stories. The novel is not just about struggle; it is also about resilience, empowerment, and the quest for an autonomous identity. It is a rich text to explore how black migrant women navigate adverse conditions to assert their agency and identity in their own terms. The selection of this particular theme is driven by personal interest and a deep passion for both intersectional black feminism and migration literature. Adichie is a Nigerian black feminist writer who enriches the conversation on black women issues. In her novel *Americanah*, she provides a deep authentic portrayal of black experience in a foreign territory. Through the female characters, she offers insights into the complexities of navigating new cultural and social landscape and grapple with the challenges of racism and sexism. In addition, to her focus on crucial aspects and issues such as race in America and the significance of hair for black migrant women.

The research relies on black feminist thoughts of many black feminists, scholars, and activists including bell hooks, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Stuart Hall and other influential figures whose ideas are appropriate to explore and deeply understand the matter of black female identity. These influential figures call for more complex representations and examination analyses of black female migrant experiences, they urge for the development of a comprehensive approach and a multidimensional theory to examine black female migrant identity as an intersectional construct. According to intersectional black feminists' views, understanding the lived experiences

of black women cannot simply be distilled into the categories of race or gender alone, instead, it requires the adoption of an intersectional lens to fully shed light on it.

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters. The first one is theoretical, it consists of two main sections. The first section deals with the complexity of black female migrant identity, it highlights the main ideas and concepts related to black female identity in the context of migration such as blackness, Africanness and identity crisis. It focuses on theoretical studies that discuss the intersecting or triple oppression faced by black women and acknowledge the difference between women's experiences and identities. The second section covers the representation of black female migrant identity in fiction and shows how black migrant women are depicted in other literary works.

The second chapter is an analytical chapter, it offers a broad overview of the thematic concerns of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* in its first section. The second section is concerned with the issue of race in America from the perspective of a black female migrant as it is discussed in the novel. The last section deals with the challenges that face the protagonist, Ifemelu, and other black female characters abroad as a result of the intersection of their race and gender, and how these struggles affect their identities and life stories. The third chapter is also an analytical chapter that shows the reconciliation process between the two conflicting sides of Ifemelu's identity and how she comes to terms with her racial identity and her blackness. It also discusses how Ifemelu embraces a complex identity that is a blend of Nigerian and American cultural identities coexisting together in what Adichie calls the Americanah model. Its second section discusses the significance and symbolism of hair in the novel using bell hooks ideas about black women's hair.

Chapter I: The Complexity of the Black Female Migrant Identity

This chapter is a theoretical chapter that deals with the complexity of black female migrant identity, the first section tackles important intersectional theories by black feminist scholars including bell hooks, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith etc. and other black activists and feminists whose thoughts are relevant and appropriate to understand black migrant women's identity. Since they acknowledge the intersectional nature of this identity and the failure of white feminism to cover their issues. The following section tackles the representation of black female migrant identity in fiction and explores how this category of women is portrayed in various literary works.

I.1. The Struggles of Embracing the Black Female Migrant Identity

Throughout history, women have suffered from multiple forms of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and sexism that have marginalized and silenced them. The fight for women's equality has undergone a very complex process, starting with early feminist waves, which focused on obtaining basic rights such as suffrage, political participation, equal opportunities as well as economic independence, to more modern streams that were centered specifically on the suffering of women of colour including black women. As the first waves of feminism mainly focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women, scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Angela Davis felt the need to address the struggles of black females. This is evident in what Angela Davis has said in one of her lectures where she criticized mainstream feminism calling it "Bourgeois Feminism". Davis suggests that:

The mistake made by mainstream feminism and its continued reliance on categorical representation of women as soon as one assumes that women can be categorically represented it means that there is some clandestine racialization happening there . . . any

feminism that privileges those who already have privilege is bound to be irrelevant to poor women, working class women, women of color...women who are at the very bottom not who only have to break the ceiling to get where they want to go.(Davis 00:48:47-00:50:31)

Davis along with numerous black feminist activists and scholars have challenged mainstream feminism, which ignores the experiences of women who are doubly marginalized by oppressive systems. In her book *Ain't I Woman*, hooks openly expresses her dissatisfaction concerning the failure of mainstream feminism to address the challenges endured by black women. She states that: “We were disappointed and disillusioned when we discovered that white women in the movement had little knowledge of our concern for the problems of lower class and poor women or the particular problems of non-white women from all classes” (hooks 188).

In fact, the mainstream white feminism that hooks refers to fails to capture the intersecting oppression faced by black women as Barbara Smith refers to it as “simultaneity of oppression” in her book *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. She argues that: “The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought” (34). What is meant by the concept of “simultaneity of oppression” is the multidimensional experience, whereby black women face multiple forms of oppression at the same time. These oppressive factors such as racism and sexism cannot be examined in isolation from one another. In this regard Katie Cannon observes that: “throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and

oppressed” (qtd. in Collins 26). In other words, Cannon stresses the complex reality of black women who confront a layered system of oppression and domination, which places them on position of struggle and resistance. Thus, acknowledging and recognizing the duality of black women’s oppression ensures a deeper and more accurate understanding of their experiences and so their identities. The question raised here is why do black women experience such oppression? The answer could be that, “This triple oppression arises from the conviction that society is arranged following a hierarchy in which white middle-class man occupies the most privileged position...Conversely, those people whose race, gender and class categories diverge from the norm are usually Othered, deemed inferior and powerless” (Nuria Juan Martinez 4).

In other words, there are social classifications that discriminate or privilege some groups over others based on certain aspects of identity. Since black women hold complex intersectional identities, where race and gender intersect, they are subjected to different forms of persecution. Hence, the aim of the analysis above is to establish a comprehensive theoretical context that considers the intersecting oppressions and complex experiences of black women before engaging in the main scope of this research, which is exploring the construction of black female migrant identities. Drawing upon the foregoing thought, one might argue that black female migrants too endure multiple forms of oppression and face significant challenges because of the intersection of their race, gender, class and migration status. So considering these interconnected aspects of their identities ensures accurate and inclusive understanding of their complex experiences and identities.

Most black migrant females make their way through a challenging process of identity construction, they undergo a journey that is full of obstacles, contradictions and questions, marked by the feeling of loss, in-betweenness, and alienation. A critic notes that, “Perhaps one of

the most serious concerns of the African American community is the sense of alienation” (Bouallegue, “Spirituality” 48). They find themselves navigating different worlds, different cultures, thus different identities. First and foremost, they find themselves defined by their race. Thus, they navigate the new world as the Other. In this respect, Zora Neale Hurston in her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”, states: “I feel most colored, when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance at Barnard. “Beside the waters of the Hudson” I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon”. The words of Hurston reveal black females’ sense of shame that stems from the black skin. This self-consciousness in the presence of whites is related to a disengagement from all traits of Africa, including the black skin. Bouallegue argues that, “Before the sixties- the era of the Civil Rights Movement and cultural plurality, Africa was depicted as the land of cannibals and savage animals; it was the home of disgrace and ignorance. This discourse led to the demonization of Africa and the creation of a rift between African Americans and Africa” (“Spirituality” 49).

Moreover, as a black woman who has navigated the challenges of immigration, Adichie offers a unique perspective on identity, in one of her interviews, she argues:

I find identity to be such a fluid thing and I don’t mean that I become different people in different places, no I mean there are many Things at the same time but depending on where I am one thing is highlighted more, because I have two homes I live in Nigeria and US, in the US it’s my being black . . . in Nigeria would be more about my ethnicity and gender . . . identity is something one negotiates but it’s also external, something inside and outside as well. (Adichie 00:00:54-00:02:32)

Adichie highlights a significant aspect of identity. She sheds light on the fluid identity and in so doing; she opposes the fixed identity. This fluid identity is a result of the experience of migration

because “the remaking of home depends on the character’s constant remaking of herself” (Bouallegue *Home and Exile 2*). By stating that “identity is something one negotiates”, Adichie views the experience of migration as “a revisionary process that enables the character to revise and reassess the connection with the US, the adopted country, and the original land”. This experience enables characters “to re-create home and re-define an identity in relation to different, sometimes, antithetical sites: the mainstream culture and the ethnic heritage” (Bouallegue, *Home and Exile 2*). Thus, Adichie underscores the influential role that place plays in shaping their sense of self and defining who they are. Moreover, she confirms the fact that there are certain interpretations and meanings attached to skin color in certain parts of the world, significantly the US that is considered as racist land. Most importantly, Adichie asserts the intersectional nature of black women migrant identity, highlighting how these women negotiate different and complex aspects of their identities.

Considering the ideas of Hurston and Adichie, one might assert that black identity is not merely personal pattern but rather a social construct positioned by the white background. This means that the mainstream white society contributes in shaping black identity but also, it associates blackness with certain stereotypes. Thus, there is a particular treatment and oppression imposed on them, which must be highlighted because it is an important aspect of their experiences and identities.

Additionally, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* by Carole Boyce Davies is crucial work to understand the complexities of black female migrant identity. As she mentions, “the experience of Black women lends itself to the notion of fluidity, multiple identities, repetition that must be multiply articulated” (48). Davies argues that black women’s experiences are shaped by a unique intersection of male dominance, race, gender dynamics, and class prejudices,

economic exploitation, and through migration, this intersection becomes even more dynamic and changing (60). As black women move across borders, their sense of self is challenged by new social and cultural realities. Thus, some parts of their identities are stressed, other parts are masked, besides the negative attitude they may adopt toward themselves and their original identities. In this respect, Malcolm X addresses the reason behind the crisis of belonging that African Americans endure, he notes that “And since we all originated in Africa, you can’t make us hate Africa without making us hate ourselves. And they [whites] did this very skillfully” (9). What Malcolm X is aiming to convey in this passage is that the bigotry and prejudice perpetuated by white oppressors contribute to a disdain for African ancestral roots and black identity among blacks. Moreover, he asserts that the dissemination of bad images and negative perceptions of Africa is a form of manipulation that exacerbates the identity crisis and self-hating suffered by people of African descent, resulting a deep psychological harm. He explains the outcome of African Americans’ disengagement from Africa:

They ended up with 22 million Black people here in America who hated everything about us that was African . . . We hated our hair. We hated our nose, the shape of our nose, and the shape of our lips, the color of our skin. Yes we did. And it was you who taught us to hate ourselves simply by shrewdly maneuvering us into hating the land of our forefathers and the people on that continent. (9)

The quote above poignantly, reflects on a deep-seated identity crisis among black individuals in America. It articulates the pain of those who have been forced to reject their physical attributes, such as hair texture, nose shape, lip form, especially skin color, and become sources of unjustified shame and self-rejection. Additionally, Malcolm X suggests that this self-hatred was

not inherent but taught and imposed on blacks to cut ties with their African origins, leading black people to hold negative attitudes against their own race.

Indeed, this aligns with Cook's idea that if a person's appearance is more European and their African heritage is not visually apparent, they might feel more comfortable or even proud to discuss their African roots. She notes, "It is quite all right to have African blood if it does not show. The more Caucasian the person looks, the more readily he will boast to a black foreigner of his Negro blood" (191). In fact, Cook here explores one of the myriad ways in which some African Americans refuse their "Africanness". This stigma often arises from societal biases that wrongly associate darker skin and African features with negative stereotypes, leading to a sense of shame among those who visibly possess these traits.

Both Malcolm X and Cook discuss a basic idea and an integral part of black identity, which is the identity crisis that most black Americans suffer from as a result of several reasons. Firstly, the racial discrimination against them because of their skin color, which led to their rejection and disdain for their African origins, secondly, stereotypes about Africa and linking it to some bad concepts and images. Overall, this crisis of identity; feeling of shame toward blackness and animosity toward Africa is a stage that almost every black person who lives in a racist society dominated by whites like America must go through.

Whereas, Davies highlights different idea of black identity she suggests that generally, to be 'Black' is to openly embrace an African heritage that is rich in history and culture, she views this identity as something to be celebrated for its strength and beauty. Over time, this identity becomes disconnected from negative labels like being sick or inferior, and instead, it is linked to empowerment (6). Comprehensively, DeLinda Marzette in her study, "Coming to Voice: Navigating the Interstices in Plays by Winsome Pinnock" argues that the experience of black

identity in the context of migration can be complex. She claims that the literature of black diaspora is inherently polyphonic and vibrant, in one hand, it promotes a black aesthetic that is rich and diverse by eliminating the stereotypical views surrounding blackness that portray blacks as a homogenous one-dimensional group. In the other hand, it represents the deep sense of alienation, marginalisation and fragmentation that remains present (32).

Additionally, Davies explores the concept of journeying, both literally and figuratively, for Black female characters, particularly migrants. She observes that the novel *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983) by Paule Marshall effectively captures this subject, as the protagonist Avey “Avatara” embarks on multiple journeys to define herself. These multiple journeys embody critical aspects of her being, as woman, Black individual, and migrant (119). The constant movement, both physical travel and navigating different identities, is crucial for female migrants to understand themselves as a whole. Similarly, Emmanuel Ngwira in his Dissertation, *Writing Marginality: History, Authorship and Gender in the Fiction of Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, notes that the changes that African women immigrants experience in their identities are often the result of societal pressure and expectations. He believes that in the pursuit of the American dream, such perceptions or stereotypes related to African identity like ‘blackness’ “becomes an undesirable and unhomly trait” (164). Thus, black migrant women during the ongoing journey of identity construction are forced to abandon and refuse numerous facets of their identities, or perhaps their very sense of self, and their feeling of belonging.

Another theoretical perspective related to understanding the complexity of black diasporic identities is the theory of cultural identity, introduced by Jamaican-born British scholar Stuart Hall, who thinks that “Most black experience is a diasporic experience” (273). Although Hall theoretical framework does not explicitly address women’s identities, but it is instrumental in

dissecting the intricate, hybrid nature of identities among black female migrants. His insights into migrant and diasporic identity construction offer valuable perspectives that remain relevant when exploring and understanding the complexities embedded within the identities of these women.

According to Hall, “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). In other words, migrant identity is constantly shifting; as long as migrants interact with new societies, they construct and reconstruct their sense of self and this process does not happen in isolation; it takes place through constant interaction with new environments, experiences and cultures resulting in identities that celebrate change, diversity and complexity.

In his influential 1996 essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall presents two different definitions of cultural identity; “The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other” (223). Within this view, identity is a unified construct shared by people or groups with common history, background and heritage. This enables individuals to delve into their origins, hence, according to this view, black migrants have to acknowledge their African origins to discover their authentic cultural identity. In addition to the first view, which is based mainly on the similarities shared within a group or a community, Hall presents a second view that acknowledges the disparities and the key distinctions that construct the core of individuals’ unique identities. He notes that: “This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’. We cannot speak...about ‘one experience, one identity’ without acknowledging its other side of ruptures and discontinuities which constitute its uniqueness” (225). Thus, this view could be more fitting framework to understand the black female migrant identity as complex, unique and fluid

construct, Hall here, confirms the complexity and the duality of identity which appears in the combination of both the common, shared aspects of identity besides the unique experiences that create individuals' distinctiveness. He adds: "it is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' ... Cultural identities undergo constant transformation, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). In other words, based on Hall's second definition of cultural identity; identity is not merely fixed, unchanged concept but rather a dynamic one. He thinks that cultural identity is continually constructed, reconstructed, and influenced by various factors such as historical events like colonization or the slavery trade era that is part of black identity. Cultural interactions as well as the power dynamics which include the systematic categorization that oppresses or privileges individuals based on certain attributes also influence their sense of selves. Hall argues that this definition is very useful in understanding the traumatic colonial experience and recognizing certain stereotypes about black identities that lead to narrow or unfair representation of black experience (225).

To conclude, the construction of black women migrant identity is an ongoing journey marked by struggles, challenges and triple oppression as a result of the overlapping of race, gender and migratory experience. Hence, the complexity of black female migrants' identity is manifested in the intersecting oppressions they experience, the deep-rooted sense of alienation which all contribute to the fluidity of this identity.

I.2. Representations of Black Female Migrant Identities in Fiction

The topic of migrant identity has recently gained consideration among both writers and feminist authors. Black migrant women face challenges because of their race, gender as well as their migration experiences. Their stories are often marginalized in mainstream discourse.

Therefore, many authors including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zadie Smith and Toni Morrison

have highlighted and given voice to the experiences of black female migrants in their literature. Thereby, these writers aim to challenge and reshape dominant narratives about migrant women's identity as bell hooks stressing the necessity to give voice to the identities of women of colour she declares, "now it is time to write about who really the colored women are and hope to become" (qtd. in Torabi 123). Addressing the different factors that shape the experience of Nigerian female migrants, Opeyemi Ajibola in her study "Representation of Female Migrants in Selected Nigerian Migrant Narratives" notes that:

Nigerian migrant fiction presents the heterogeneity that attends migrant practices. It accounts for the diverse push-and-pull factors, neocolonisation indices and the postcolonial disillusionment that compel youths to flee their fatherland. It depicts some unpleasant experiences that female migrants face as a result of their gender, class and race (135).

Buchi Emecheta in her notable novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974) has addressed the theme of black migrant female identity; the novel is a powerful portrayal of the challenges faced by a Nigerian woman living in London. It delves into issues of race, gender, and class, as the protagonist struggles to fit in a community that often marginalizes her. Emecheta's narrative illuminates the strength demonstrated by women when confronted with issues of racism, domestic abuse, and the struggle for self-fulfillment and independence. For example, when Adah the protagonist invites her husband Francis to read her first novel's manuscript he responds: "You keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black. The white man can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast feed her baby" (Emecheta 156). This quote reflects the double oppression that black

women endure and the painful reality of racism that black migrants, especially women have to endure both at home and outside, these prejudices follow them everywhere.

Cynthia Ward in her article, “What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of Otherhood” mentions that: “her [Emecheta’s] novels represent the experience of the African woman struggling to assert herself against historically determined insignificance. A self-constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of oppression...a self that must find its true voice in order to speak not only for itself but for all others similarly oppressed” (83). Thus, Emecheta’s literary works portray the struggles of African migrant women to overcome the oppressions they experience, and their endeavors to represent and assert their own voice like Adah who transforms from being perceived as unimportant to becoming a woman who establishes her identity and finds her authentic voice. Moreover, Emecheta through her novels focuses on the idea of collective responsibility placed on the shoulders of black women to advocate for their rights and to speak for other women facing similar challenges.

In fact, various literary works address the issue of constructing a black female migrant identity and the challenges faced by black women to find themselves and overcome racism and alienation they confront. In his article “Rebellious and Strong Black Women in Paradise”, Zadmehr Torabi compares the representation of black female characters in *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved* against those that feature in *Paradise* by Toni Morrison, he notes:

In the two novels especially in the first one, men were active and women appeared passive, men looked at women and women were being looked at, thus the black women unconsciously and gradually turned into objects. Such a case is not true for Paradise

women who accomplish their aim in being no longer victimized or unrecognized . .

.While the black women in *Beloved* believe some day their social regeneration will occur, black women in *Paradise* take actions and create that regeneration and this helps in solving their problems of race contact and cooperation (124-125).

In other words, Morrison skillfully depicts black migrant women and their diverse experiences in a realistic and authentic way, whether as marginalized victimized characters, or as strong, rebellious women who resist oppressive forces. She seeks to eliminate the distorted image that unfairly portrays black women realities in one-dimensional simplistic mold and ignoring their richness, complexity and uniqueness.

Another work that portrays the intersection of race, gender, class and migration in the construction of black migrant identities is *On Black Sisters' Street* (2011) written by the Nigerian author Chika Unigwe. The novel tells the story of four African women who migrate to Europe 'Belgium' in search for a better life but fall into a human trafficking scheme. They experience violence, racism, and poverty, which results in the death of one of those women called 'Sisi' because she could not pay back her debts. (Deborah Umeh 172). At the end, they overcome the hardships of poverty and achieve financial stability. However, they pay the cost of migration, as they end up with navigating a life filled with trauma, holding a fractured identity and losing touch with their authentic selves.

Moreover, the historical fiction novel *Homegoing* (2016) by Ghanaian-American author Yaa Gyasi explores the story of two half-sisters who lived in the 18th century and their families for many generations after. One sister is sold into slavery and the other is not. The novel shows how slavery affects their lives and their descendants, and also how they try to hold onto their cultural identity in the US. Ava Landry in her article, "Black Is Black Is Black?: African

Immigrant Acculturation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" affirms that the novel "Homegoing" highlights how African immigrants come to understand the racial social order and their position within it. First, they may feel the need to reject the label of "Blackness" and cling to their previous identities. Second, they acknowledge that Blackness is an identity projected onto them whether they consent to it or not" (137). Thus, the writer in her novel describes an incident that captures well this issue she mentions: "on a black cultural event for the school, the teacher asked Marjorie if she would participate: "All you have to do is tell your story," Mrs. Pinkston said. "Talk about what being African American means to you." "But I'm not African American" (Gyasi 273).

Additionally, Gyasi through her novel *Homegoing* sheds light on the internal conflict and cultural identity struggles faced by most African Americans. She uses an African term "Akata" to refer to Black Americans. Gyasi states:

She wanted to tell Mrs. Pinkston that at home, they had a different word for African Americans. Akata. That Akata people were different from Ghanaians, too long gone from the mother continent to continue calling it the mother continent. She wanted to tell Mrs. Pinkston that she could feel herself being pulled away too, almost Akata, too long gone from Ghana to be Ghanaian. (273)

Thus, Akata implies a difference between Africans and African Americans due to the historical separation and different cultural evolution that African Americans experienced after being removed from Africa due to slavery. The protagonist wants to share with her teacher her feelings of being culturally adrift. She identifies herself as "Akata" which signifies that she feels too detached from her Ghanaian roots to fully claim her Ghanaian identity, similar to how she perceives African Americans as being detached from Africa. This sense of not belonging

completely to either culture illustrates a struggle for identity among immigrants and diaspora communities, where the ties to the homeland are felt to weaken over time and distance.

By examining these literary works, one might uncover that in one hand, the characters' experiences share common struggles, as all the characters in one way or another encounter intersecting oppressions including racism, sexism, class, and marginalization etc. In the other hand, their stories celebrate the uniqueness and diversity of each woman's journey. They navigate the complexities of identity formation amidst trauma and struggle, yet some manage to unearth their authentic selves despite the adversities they face like Adah in *Second Class Citizen*, others struggle and feel lost between two worlds, facing inner conflicts like Marjorie in *Homegoing*. Thus, this dichotomy emphasizes the richness and complexity of black female migrants' identities.

Overall, each woman through her distinct challenges and experiences forges her own path and contributes to a broader understanding of the resilience, identity negotiation and the sense of belonging among black women. Thus, black women's varied stories is a reflection on the intersections of race, gender, and migration, and the personal approaches to empowerment and identity formation that define the black female migrant experience.

Chapter II: Confronting the Intersecting Challenges of Race, Gender and Migration in *Americanah*

This chapter is mainly analytical, it deals with the intersecting oppressions and challenges the main character, Ifemelu, encounters in her journey of identity construction, it is divided into three main sections, the initial one deals with the thematic concerns of *Americanah*. The second section explores the issue of race in America from an outsider's perspective. The third section tackles the challenges Ifemelu experiences which stem from the intersection of her race, gender and her migration's experience.

II.1. Rewriting a Different Story of Africa in *Americanah*

Migration has risen to the forefront of contemporary discourse, particularly within the realm of black feminist literature, as it profoundly shapes the identities and life stories of black women. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stands out as a seminal figure whose contributions and literary works have significantly enriched this conversation. She is regarded as a pivotal voice in contemporary discourse on black women, she is known for her influential TED Talks “We Should All Be Feminists” and “The Danger of a Single Story”. In 2022, she received The Highest Honour of Harvard University, “W.E.B Du Bois Medal” ([channelstv.com](https://www.channelstv.com)). Her famous novel *Americanah* (2013) has been widely acclaimed and has been selected as one of The New York Times Book Review's “Ten Best Books of 2013”, and has won The Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Fiction, 2013 ([Chimamanda.com](https://www.chimamanda.com)) and many other awards.

Adichie's *Americanah* is centered on the journey of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian Igbo woman, from Nigeria to America and back to Nigeria along with her love story with Obinze. “The novel belongs to the diasporic literature genre and it traces the spiritual, emotional and mental growth of its eponymous heroine” (Krishnamurthy 54). Adichie masterfully offers a

fictional representation of the reality of black migrant women as she transcends the mere depiction of economic struggles, delving into the psychological aspects of these women's lives. She offers deep examination of their personal worldviews, their attitudes, perceptions and rich experiences within the United States. Her novel reveals the complexity of the female black migrant character's identity by emphasizing the interplay between race, gender, class and migration experience.

Significantly, *Americanah* illuminates a distinct genre of migrant narratives, exploring the journeys of well-educated, ambitious African women. These are not characters that conform to the stereotypical images of the starving and war-fleeing African migrants, but rather individuals who are driven by a pursuit of opportunities; they are looking for the American dream. Adichie describes them in her novel saying "all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness...none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty" (Adichie 269-270)

Furthermore, Adichie paints a broad picture of migration through her characters' eyes, both males and females who emigrate to the U.S. for a variety of reasons. An example of a character whose story does not conform to the typical and simplistic narrative of the black female migrant is Ifemelu's Aunt Uju, who devolves from a cozy life as the general's mistress to fleeing to America in search of safety after his death "in a military plane crash"(84).

Patrycja Koziel notes that "Americanah is structured around several intersectional issues such as retrospectives to childhood and youth life of Ifemelu and Obinze, being mobile, love tribulations and are related to the reconstruction and negotiation of identity during whole migration processes"(99). Thus, it delves into complex issues intersecting race, identity, and love.

Through the journeys of Ifemelu and other characters across borders, it addresses the ongoing transformation that characters experience due to migration and cultural transitions.

In addition to tackling the theme of identity negotiation among migrants, the novel has political undertones as well. Nuria Juan Martínez in her study “Triple Oppression and Transnational Identity: the Immigrant Black Woman in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” states that “*Americanah* is a politicised novel that issues an appeal to its audience to reformulate their conception of black women and diminish the impact that cultural differences and dominant ideologies exert on African minorities to prevent some types of potential discrimination” (3). Thus, *Americanah* is a work with strong political message that pushes its readers to rethink and reshape their views on black migrant women identities and experiences. It seeks to shatter some stereotypes linked to Africa, blackness, beauty and many other aspects of identity. Indeed, Adichie herself confirms the political nature of her fiction; she states in her interview with Damian Woetzel that: “As a writer...I think I write social realism I’m a human being, I live in the world, I’m sort of very politically aware and I have political positions, and surely my fiction reflects that” (Adichie 00:18:00-00:18:08)

In reviewing the novel, Sarala Krishnamurthy commends Adichie for her truthful representation of Nigeria in all its “vulgarity and nakedness”, and how she exposes “the ugly underbelly” of Nigerian politics (55). Moreover, she notes that: “What gives *Americanah* its strength is its brutal honesty, its vitriolic attack on Nigerian politics and incorruptible and unequivocal delineation of the Nigeria society as it exists today. hopefully, Adichie will succeed in educating the Nigerian people and pricking their conscience”(55) Therefore, *Americanah* does more than just tell a story; it can be regarded as an educational tool that aims to teach readers, rise a sense of personal and collective responsibility among the Nigerians. Moreover, Adichie seeks

to confront some simplistic imaginations that have long shaped the narratives around black female migrant's lives which overlook the complexity and the nuance of their identities. Hence, Adichie does so through depicting the distinct differences between the characters, for example, this manifests in how the hair braiders fail to comprehend Ifemelu's decision to turning back into Nigeria and deeming it irrational, until she tells them she will marry her man and gives a comprehensible reason to moving back according to them (19). Thus, even though they are migrants too and taste the brutal truth of migration and alienation but they differ in how they perceive the world and in their attitudes.

It is clear from the above criticism that the novel deals with different issues pertinent to the experience of migration such as identity crisis, displacement and love. It rather explores the notion of home and belonging in a foreign land and the personal, societal perceptions about beauty, blackness and navigating issues of cultural assimilation among migrants. In addition to, its core focus on the issue of race in America.

II.2. Becoming Black in America

Adichie's *Americanah* kindles a serious conversation on the issue of race in America; she successfully convinces and compels us to reconsider the varied dimensions of racial discourse. The author herself states in an interview that her novel *Americanah* gives people language to speak about race. Indeed, this is what she accomplished through Ifemelu blog "*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*" which is an effective platform to present real experiences and social comments that make readers explore the complex aspects of race in America. Moreover, Adichie describes "Race as America's original sin", she adds: "one of the founding pillars of America is racism particularly anti-black racism" (channel4.com). Arguably, Adichie's statement is emphatic and

direct, expressing how deep-rooted and old the problems of race and racism are in the American society.

In the first few pages, Adichie presents a viewpoint of a white man about race, who sat next to Ifemelu on the train and seems to her a “social warrior and might make a good guest blogger” (6). He even told her: “Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it’s all about class now, the haves and the have-nots” (6). Accordingly, his words suggest that the issue of race is downplayed in America by some Americans especially white individuals. Moreover, the quote shows the disrespect of the experiences and challenges faced by black individuals and the denial of the ongoing racism they endure which affects their lives. Certainly, class is an important factor, but it does not prevent racial discrimination against blacks in America, because even if they possess a high economic class standing, they may confront obstacles that stem from racial prejudice.

Moreover, through a post on Ifemelu blog, Adichie tells Black people from other countries what to expect in America, and what they will find in this place where people and leaders preach liberty, high ideals and openness. The post is titled:

To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby

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...you say “I’m not black” only because you know black is at the bottom of America’s race ladder. (216)

Hence, Adichie sheds light on the dark side of America and on the inevitable reality that awaits migrants of color, and how they will become black in America regardless of their

backgrounds or other aspects of their identities. Adichie shows that black identity in America it is not only about a racial classification but rather it is an identity that carries many bad meanings. She explains that being black requires you not to deny this identity, you must show your dissatisfaction because of some racist jokes, which you certainly do not understand its meaning, such as calling you a “watermelon” (because it grows in very hot areas) or “tar baby” (216) and “you have to stay away from a crime scene that a black man has committed or you might be stopped because you fit the profile” (216). The word profile in this quote is significant; it suggests that there is a misconception that blacks are criminals. It also shows that because of their race, blacks are undergo constant surveillance. The quote captures the daily struggles that blacks experience because of their race. Thus, Adichie’s message serves as a reminder of the danger of the issue of race in America and as an acknowledgement to the complexity of black’s experiences. Within the same quote, Adichie shows how black women are too subjected to stereotyping and labeling. Adichie adds: “In describing black women always use the word “STRONG” because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY” (216).

Pardiñas Baldomir in his dissertation: “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*: (Re) opening Conversation about Race and Beauty” notes that: “Adichie’ *Americanah* is opening a possibility for her readers to engage in a cross-cultural conversation, and to finally have that honest talk about America’s racial reality. It refers to many significant events from African American history and to the reality of black women in particular; it sheds a new light on history books and theoretical texts dealing with race” (51).

In other words, *Americanah* becomes a perfect text to explore the issue of race and racism in America through the lens of non-American black since a white American may have biases toward his country. Or he/she would reject the fact that racism is still there and still effects black people's lives, just like the white Jewish student 'Ifemelu classmate' who says in a lecture about civil rights that: "the blacks have not suffered like the Jews" (201). Another scene that shows the importance of race in the novel is when Ifemelu is at dinner party and responds to the Haitian woman who says that race was never an issue with her white boyfriend, Ifemelu tells her: "The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. But it's a lie...when you are black in America and you fall in love with white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone...but the minute you step outside, race matters."(283)

Indeed, Ifemelu's response reflects the reality she experiences when she was dating her Ex-white boyfriend, Curt, and one of the reasons that fails their relationship is the racial differences between them since Ifemelu is not accepted and welcomed by his family and friends and treated as an outsider by them which makes her feel alien and lonely.

As initially mentioned, Adichie's *Americanah* offers realistic and candid views about race from the perspective of a black female migrant i.e. non-American black woman who faces the fact that she becomes black. Thus, she utters: "I came from 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" (283). She adds about racial identity in America: "In America, you don't get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you" (327). Actually, both quotes convey the idea that for Ifemelu, and by extension for most black migrants, racial identity is a new identity imposed on her. It means that she assumes a new identity as if that facet or aspect of her identity becomes more apparent and influences her life. It is a racial identity which means that she already possesses such attributes,

but due to certain circumstances (the mainstream white American society) she finds herself identified by her race. Indeed, this idea that black identity is not merely personal pattern but rather a social construct positioned by the white mainstream is previously asserted in the first chapter. Accordingly, Ifemelu's identification as black positions her as the "Other" or as an outsider which involves her loss of privilege or being treated in totally different way than the dominant group. According to Jean François Staszak:

The Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination. Only dominant groups (such as Westerners in the time of colonization) are in a position to impose their categories in the matter. By stigmatizing them as Others. (1)

Thus, applying Staszak's definition on the case of Ifemelu, we can say that the white mainstream American society is the dominant group who stigmatizes Ifemelu along with black Americans or non-Americans as the "Other" because of their skin color, leading to their devaluing and susceptible them to discrimination. Moreover, there are many instances that highlight the concept of Other in *Americanah*, an example is a hostile attitude happens to Uju by a patient, she tells Ifemelu: "one patient, a useless layabout with tattoos all over his body, told me to go back to where I came from. All because I knew he was lying about being in pain and I refused to give him more pain medicine" (214). Thus, these discriminatory instances clarify how both Ifemelu and Uju perceives as the Other or outsiders because of being black and migrants. Therefore, black female migrants are classified as the Other based on their race, migration status besides their gender. Hence, it is not just a matter of classification, yet it leads to the intersecting oppressions that complicate their lives more.

The United States is characterized as a “melting pot,” a metaphor that depicts the blending of various cultural and ethnic identities into a single, unified society. However, Adichie in *Americanah* challenges this concept and she reveals that tribalism is prominent within American society she notes:

In America tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds- class, ideology, religion and race...Finally, Race. There is a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American black which 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 are black, better get back!). (182)

Adichie here points to a reality that is different from the melting pot concept and other ideals that are often attributed to the US such as cultural integration and tolerance, unity, and the openness. She suggests the idea of America's tribalism, a force that divides the country along four key lines: class, ideology, religion, and race, by focusing on racial tribalism, Adichie again succeeds in addressing the issue of race that is a challenging affair and situation hard to resolve because it is fundamental factor ingrained in the society.

Besides the myriad discussions about race, Adichie open up in the novel, through Ifemelu blog, she explains what certain labels and words about race that are used in the American society really mean. For example, she notes that “urban” means black, poor and possibly dangerous and potentially exciting. further, Americans use the expression “racially charged” because they are uncomfortable saying “racist” and it's simplistic to say “race” because “racism” is too complex.(339-340)

Additionally, Adichie presents many real-life events; foremost among them is her talk about Obama and his presidency, which symbolize hope for equal life in America for Ifemelu and other black characters. Adichie explains the varying views on Obama's presidency between white and black Americans. She highlights the excitement and enthusiasm that sweeps through black Americans as Obama runs for presidency and wins the election. Adichie states:

On the morning of the election day, Ifemelu and Blaine 'her black American boyfriend' went to the high school, Blaine wanted to be the first to vote, [Ifemelu] willed them all to vote for Obama, she felt like a bereavement, that she could not vote...[Ifemelu and Blaine crowd with their African American friends, nervously watch the election news on TV] Michael said "I wish my mama was alive to see this day no matter what happens"...when they hear "Obama is projected to be the next president for the united states of America they start crying and hugging each other and the room became an alter of disbelieving joy...Her phone beeped with a text from Dike: I can't believe it. My president is black like me; she read the text a few times her eyes filling with tears. (349)

The quote captures the intense emotions of hope, pride, and a sense of communal victory among Ifemelu, Blaine and all blacks in America. It highlights its profound impact on African Americans who see themselves reflected in the election of a black president. It signifies a breaking of racial barriers and a substantial step towards equality and recognition in a country with a deep history of racial segregation. Obama's victory embodies the possibility of change and progress, it reflects the idea that anyone, regardless of his racial background, can achieve the highest office and it is deeply tied to the validation and visibility it grants to the black community.

However, in their article, “‘Reconfiguring Others’: Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi assert that: “Considering Obama’s speech about oneness, unity, love, togetherness and the spirit of communal consciousness ought to define inter-racial relationship in America as transculturalism seeks. However, many happenings in the novel indicate the contrary” (45). Indeed, Adichie aims to reveal a reality that is often overlooked and avoided, for instance, a hateful message received by Ifemelu in the chat room of her blog after her post about Obama and probably the sender is a white man, he writes: “How can a monkey be president? Somebody do us a favour and put a bullet in this guy. Send him back to the African jungle. A black man will never be in the white house, dude, it’s called the white house for a reason” (342). The quote depicts racist, prejudiced, and hateful rhetoric that reflects a deep-seated and pervasive strain of racism that has persisted in American society. It significantly addresses the struggle that the protagonist has to endure because of her race and the painful words that she hears because of being black. Racist messages and statements like these can trigger feelings of sadness, isolation, fear and even trauma for Ifemelu or for any black American who receives such words.

Since, *Americanah* is a novel that rises questions more than answers them, Adichie suggests an unattainable solution to overcome the problem of race, she asserts that:

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. And because that real deep romantic love is so rare, and because American society is set up to make it even rarer

between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved. (289)

Although, Adichie thinks that deep love can be a solution for racial problems in America, she also indicates that kind of love is rare. Further, the issue of race is incredibly complicated, requiring multiple factors to be overcome. It is about how Americans perceive and understand one another, their mindsets, their beliefs, and social structures. It needs considerable efforts that include education, dialogues that foster understanding, and empathy among Americans.

Overall, Adichie enriches the contemporary discourse about the issue of race her critical views ensures deep understanding on the issue of race and the meaning and the reality of being black in America, and the outcomes associated with this racial classification and identity. Additionally, she focuses on the consequences that stem from being black in America, moreover, her narrative serves as a nuance portrayal of the intersecting oppressions that black migrant women encounter as a result of the confluence of their race gender and migration.

II.3. Ifemelu's Struggles as a Black, a Female and a Migrant

The experiences and the identities of black migrant women are often mishandled mainly because of their complexity. They are studied in a superficial manner and portrayed by writers in an incomplete and non-comprehensive way. Hence, Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" states that: "the failure to embrace the complexities of [black women lives]...is due to the way of thinking about discrimination, so that struggles are categorized as singular issues occurring along a single categorical axis, and due to the single axis analysis that distorts these multidimensionality of Black women's experience" (139-167). Thus, Crenshaw criticises the mainstream discourse that studies the experience of black women from one single angle ignoring the other angles. It means analyzing it as a race

issue only or as a gender issue only rather than as an intersectional experience composed of multiple aspects that interplay in a complex way. Hence, Adichie in her novel *Americanah* addresses the issue of the marginalisation and the neglect that black women undergo by the mainstream American society. Through a conversation between black characters, Ifemelu friends, Adichie states:

Isn't it funny how they say 'blacks want Obama' and 'women want Hillary,' but what about black women?" Paula said. "When they say 'women,' they automatically mean 'white women,' of course," Grace said. "What I don't understand is how anybody can say that Obama is benefiting because he's a black man," Paula said. "It's complicated, but he is, and also to the extent that Clinton is benefiting because she's a white woman," Nathan said, leaning forward and blinking even more quickly. "If Clinton were a black woman, her star would not shine so brightly. (344)

Adichie aims to convey the idea of the oversimplification of black women experiences and views in political discourse. This conversation highlights the generalizations made by American society, which overlook the perspectives and opinions of black women by making broad statements like "blacks want Obama" or "women want Hillary" without any reference to black women's positions. Hence, this quote directly shows the ways in which race and gender intersect and so, they affect black women's worldviews and lives. Furthermore, Adichie through this quote clarifies how individuals' identities influence their choices and opportunities in life whether grant them privilege or cause them an oppression, that is to say Obama benefits from being a man (gender) and Hillary Clinton benefits from being white (race). However, if we take the hypothesis proposed in the quote of Hillary Clinton being a black woman, so she would lose privilege, and would face marginalization or challenges due to the combination of racial and

gender biases. So, in order to ensure an accurate examination of black women issues and a deep understanding of their identities, it is crucial to take into account the ways in which race, gender intersect to create their complex experiences. Moreover, since the case study involves black migrant women, it is important to acknowledge that migration, as another layer, contributes in shaping their identities.

Therefore, *Americanah* is an appropriate choice for understanding the journey of constructing and reconstructing black female migrant identity, as Adichie successfully prints a broad picture about how black women perceive and negotiate their identities through the main character, Ifemelu and other female characters. As migrants, black women face lots of obstacles and struggles that contribute in constructing their identities, which stand to as major factors in shaping their unique experiences and stories.

Additionally, Adichie addresses the practice of oversimplification that blacks undergo by some white individuals who view all black people as a monolith, ignoring their unique nationalities, backgrounds, genders, and even physical differences. This manifests clearly in the novel when aunt Uju gives Ifemelu a fake social security card and driver's license of another woman named "Ngozi Okonkwo" (119) who does not resemble Ifemelu at all, but rather appears to be ten years older than her. Aunty Uju, then, tells her that nobody would notice. She states: "All of us look alike to white people, Amara's cousin came last year and she has been working with Amara's ID...Nobody noticed, just make sure you always remember your new name. I have a friend who forgot and one of her co-workers called her and called her and she was blank. Then they became suspicious and reported her to immigration" (119). The quote shows that Uju has internalised the idea that to the white mainstream society she, and by extension all other blacks, is

unimportant, unnoticeable, and even invisible. The quote reveals that this character and others are treated as less than human in the US, they are all the same.

In the first chapter of the novel, Adichie describes Ifemelu's longing for her home country after spending almost fifteen years in America. Even though, "her blog was doing well" (8), she achieves success there, besides her stable relationship with her boyfriend Blaine, she is unsatisfied with her life in America, "she felt the cement in her soul" (8). In addition to the racism, economic problems and other challenges that she faces in the US, she also suffers from homesickness, nostalgia and longing for Nigeria, a problem that has no solution rather than return home. Adichie states:

It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. She scoured Nigerian websites...and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home...She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss...Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. (8)

Through this passage, Adichie conveys the complex reality of identity negotiation and the crisis of belonging that most migrants experience regardless of their gender or race. She highlights the inner emotional struggle of those who live abroad and the uncertainty over their lives and decisions. The uncertainty is depicted in many scenes through Ifemelu who despite

having strong feeling of longing to her country of origin that have driven her to think about moving back home but “she wanted to give herself time to be sure. But as the weeks passed, she knew that she would never to be sure” (9) and ultimately, her desire to feel at home and to settle down wins out over her uncertainty.

Undoubtedly, the migrants' journeys are not as straightforward as they would imagine it to be, they are rather full of obstacles and surprises. Many migrants think the host country is that magical place where dreams come true, but soon after they arrive they face an unexpected reality, Ugwanyi Dele Maxwell in his article “Migration, disillusionment and diasporic experiences in Segun Afolabis *Goodbye Lucille and a Life Elsewhere*” states that: “the migrants believe that the center signifies realms of possibility, fantasy, wish fulfillment where identities and fortunes must be transformed. The migrants did not know the center was also a place of banishment, unlawful practice, oppression, social disgrace and frustration” (251). Hence, Maxwell presents a phenomenon that almost every migrant experiences once she/he puts her/his foot in the host land which is the migration disillusionment, it is a feeling of disappointment which arises when migrants face the reality of the new country and they realize that it is no longer the idealized destination they were looking for. Indeed, this is what happens to Ifemelu as soon as she arrives in America. She feels alien and lonely, wearing her thickest sweater because she believes that America is an overseas cold place, but she is surprised to find out that it is summer in America. Adichie describes this moment: “The sweltering heat alarmed her, as did Aunty Uju’ s old Toyota hatchback, with a patch of rust on its side and peeling fabric on the seats. She stared at buildings and cars and signboards, all of them matte, disappointingly matte; in the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shine gloss” (102).

Thus, Adichie portrays the first moments and days of her protagonist in America where she starts a new life and where she confronts complex challenges force her to negotiate and transform her identity. For instance, Ifemelu encounters psychological stress regarding the insecurity and instability in America, and far from the warm embrace of home and family, she finds herself in an unfamiliar country. The safety and the security once provided by her parents are gone; they are replaced by feelings of fear and vulnerability. These are new feelings that she never sensed before. Adichie describes that as follows:

At first, the evening news puzzled her, a litany of fires and shootings, she watched day after day, images of men being hauled off in handcuffs, distraught families in front of charred, smoldering houses, the wreckage of cars crashed in police chases, blurred videos of armed robberies in shops, her puzzlement ripened to worry. She panicked when there was a sound by the window, when Dike went too far down the street on his bicycle. She stopped taking out the trash after dark, because a man with a gun might be lurking outside. (113)

Yet, this unexpected pressure that Ifemelu lives, encourages new facets of her identity to emerge, with each challenge she overcomes she discovers herself more, and with every step she takes adds a layer to her complex journey of shaping this intersectional identity, sometimes, she adopts new aspects in her identity, and in other times, she resists certain changes keeping her original identity. This is as well revealed in how Ifemelu is forced to speak American accent. In her first year in America, she struggles with the accent “she began to practice American accent”

(132). After an administrator in the university in America called “Cristina Tomas” comments on Ifemelu’s “foreign accent”. Adichie describes this embarrassing situation:

She realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling “I speak English,” she said. “I bet you do,” Cristina Tomas said. “I just don’t know how well.” Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas’s before she took the forms. She shrank like a dried leaf. She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did.(131-132)

This upsetting incident can be considered a discrimination against a migrant black woman, it is one of the challenges Ifemelu faces regarding her accent leading her to reshape important aspect of her original identity to conform to American norms and standards. For example she adds many words in her dictionary like the word “thin” instead of “slim” which is good description for Americans unlike the Nigerians (121), and she deletes many other words such as “half-caste” (121) or “the word fat” that “she said it slowly...and thought about all the other things she had learned not to say aloud in America” (8).

Another instance that shows the intersecting racial oppression that the protagonist encounters in America is when she delivers a speech in a “diversity talk ” (296), but the audience whom most of them are white does not like her honest opinion and how she speaks about the issue of race and racism in America. At the end of her presentation, “attendees’ faces were frozen, the leaden clapping deflated her...at evening she received an email: YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY ” (296-297). This offensive and hurtful email is a clear example of

discrimination and microaggression the protagonist experiences in America. Thus, this incident deeply troubles and annoys Ifemelu. Initially, she had been enthusiastic about these discussions and conferences, but the email she receives alters her state of mind. As a result, she modifies her speeches, opting to say what she believes the American audience expects to hear, even if it means compromising her own beliefs and principles. Hence, such instance shows the intersection of race and migration status that denotes the complexity and the difficulty of black migrant lives abroad especially in the US.

Sharejeel Ahmed et al. in their article “Demystifying The Turmoil of Cultural Identity and Racial Politics: A Diasporic Study of Adichie’s *Americanah*” note that: “In *Americanah* we can easily see that Adichie has highlighted many African traditions and norms which are in conflict with the American culture and caused a kind of split in the mind of Ifemelu. The quest for identity in *Americanah* is continuous i.e. Ifemelu is struggling with her African identity as well as constructing American identity” (1417). Indeed, Adichie’s work holds on many instances where Ifemelu is in confusion and contradiction with the American customs and norms that absorb her daily which are different from African Nigerian culture. For example, when she meets her friend Ginika she is surprised by her thinness, Ifemelu thought that her friend has become like “dried stockfish” (120) unlike her old looking in Nigeria. Then she figures out that these are the Americans’ beauty standards that differ from the Nigerian norms regarding femininity. Thus, Ifemelu starts loss weight to fit in American society.

Furthermore, communication poses another identity’s conflict with Ifemelu, she notices that Americans choose polite, and sometimes dishonest, attitude compared to directness and straightforwardness of Nigerians, like Kimberly who uses the word beautiful in every sentence

she says but she does not mean it, Ifemelu wonders too how Americans use the expression “I’m not sure” instead of “I don’t know” or how they are always “excited” about everything (132)

Overall, these confusions and many others, demonstrate the complexity of navigating and balancing two different cultures and identities that Ifemelu and many black migrant women undergo whether in terms of beauty standards, Communication styles or even in the perceptions about race and class.

It is undeniably true that most black female migrant’s experiences are fraught with hardships, risks and sometimes sacrifices and waivers. For Ifemelu, her path is not adorned with blossoms, but rather riddled with risks since her arrival to America. The narrator says that Ifemelu “woke up every day worrying about money” (132). She applies for many jobs and attends many interviews but with no response, she is rejected due to her skin color or her illegal status, most of the employers choose white women instead. The difficulty of getting a job makes her do things she has never thought she would do. She uses a fake ID card, she straightened her hair because braids are “unprofessional” in America (118), and she even erases part of her university studies in Nigeria from her CV because American employers do not appoint educated African woman. Adichie narrates how Ifemelu’s miserable financial conditions and threat to be homeless leads her to accept a “relaxing job” as a masseuse. However, she finds herself subjected to sexual harassment by a tennis coach. This traumatizing experience causes her depression and feeling of guilt. Adichie portrays Ifemelu saying:

She feels heavy, seated by the window adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily... She sat on her bed and looked at her life, in this tiny room with the moldy carpet, the hundred-dollar bill on the table, her body rising with loathing... She imagined packing her things, somehow buying

a ticket, and going back to Lagos. She curled on her bed and cried, wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened. (152)

Aunt Uju too is not spared from such challenges and microaggressions, for example, in her work patients refuse her as their doctor because she is black, Uju tells Ifemelu: “How she walked into an examining room and a patient asked “Is the doctor coming?” and when she said she was the doctor the patient’s face changed to fired clay. “Do you know, that afternoon she called to transfer her file to another doctor’s office! Can you imagine? ” (180). Moreover, her husband forcefully takes her money to pay off his car debts, and even though he is black, an immigrant, and uneducated, he always shows her that she is inferior to him. She faces a complex challenge of racism, social pressure and patriarchy, Uju once talks about him with Ifemelu and tells her:

Both of us work. Both of us come home at the same time and do you know what Bartholomew does? He just sits in the living room, turns on the TV and asks me what we are eating for dinner. He wants me to give him my salary. Imagine! He said that it is how marriages are since he is the head of the family, that I should not send money home to Brother without his permission, that we should make his car payments from my salary...Is it my fault that he cannot get the loan? Did anybody force him to come here? Did he not know we would be the only black people here? Did he not come here because he felt it would benefit him? Everything is money, money, money. He keeps make my work decisions for me. (213-214)

Furthermore, Adichie sheds light on different black female migrant characters who are the customers and the employees of the braiding salon. She offers a glimpse into their life stories and hardships. She shows their struggle to make ends meet and pay rent, and how life in America can

lead to unexpected choices. For example, Adichie describes Aisha, a woman from Senegal: “a small, ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin who had two Igbo boyfriends, and who was insistent that Ifemelu should meet them and urge them to marry her. It would have made for a good blog post: A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy” (20). Thus, Aisha represents many black migrant women facing a double challenge. On one hand, as a woman, she dreams of a romantic relationship and marriage; on the other hand, as a migrant, she is determined to do whatever it takes to obtain residency documents and American citizenship.

In essence, such incidents and situations in the novel show the many challenges and forces that play a crucial role in the construction of these black female migrants’ identities, as they navigate through life obstacles, they confront some limitations and potentials. Hence, they may adopt new attitudes, new aspects including language, accent, clothing or even their ideas and perceptions about everything.

In addition to the struggles and challenges that Adichie recounts throughout her novel, she sheds light on an important issue regarding the relationship between Afro-Americans and African migrants in America. Although one might anticipate that this relationship is built on solidarity, support and brotherhood among them, Adichie shows the opposite. She portrays a realistic, negative side of some African Americans who treat African migrants in arrogance and prejudice. Adichie expresses this issue through the character of Shan, Blaine’s arrogant elder sister, who always intends to insult, and underestimate Ifemelu because she is African. She once commented on her blog saying: “You know why Ifemelu can write that blog, by the way? Shan said. Because she’s African. She’s writing from the outside. She doesn’t really feel all the stuff she’s writing about. It’s all quaint and curious to her. 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 labeled angry and shunned” (326)

Shan here is “as white American, portrays the supremacy of African Americans over African immigrants’ fellows” (Merabti and Benzoukh 528). She perceives Ifemelu as an outsider, though they share the same black identity and blackness, and both suffer from racial and gender discrimination, but she insists on reminding her that she is African and never comprehend American issues. Additionally, Blaine, Ifemelu’s boyfriend, who seems to be open, high minded, and passionate about Obama and black people’s history, he shows his real intentions toward the blog after a serious discussion with Ifemelu, he says: “That blog is a game that you don’t really take seriously, it’s like choosing an interesting elective evening class to complete your credits” (334). Through these episodes and many others mentioned in *Americanah*, Adichie successfully offers an insight into an underrepresented side of the relationship between African Americans and African migrants. A relationship that should be characterized by empathy and tolerance among them. She reveals the different layers of racial discrimination that her characters endure as black migrants not only from the white mainstream society but also from their fellow African Americans who might be thought of as a source of support.

In accordance with Malcolm X and Cook’s idea of black identity crisis presented in the first chapter, such actions by African Americans can be interpreted as a rejection of their African origins (Africanness) and blackness which manifests in how they treat Ifemelu and think about her, thus, their refusal for Ifemelu is nothing but an outlet for refusing their African origins. As Malcolm X states: “they ended up with 22 black million here in America who hated everything about Africa” (9). This rejection stems from a difficult story of struggle experienced by all black

individuals in America, all of them in one way or another suffer from racism, stereotypical labeling and bigotry.

To conclude, Adichie recounts the life story of her protagonist to exemplify the challenging journeys of black women in the diaspora, where they navigate external pressures like racial discrimination, exploitation and other pressures that lead them to alter critical aspects of their identities in order to be accepted in the new society. As well as the internal pressures they live due to alienation and longing for their homelands. Hence, they pass all these challenges in order to forge their places within different spaces that may not accommodate their intersecting identities and complex realities, and to reconcile between the contrasting cultural and societal environments.

Chapter III: Navigating Dual Identities: Identity Reconciliation in Adichie's *Americanah*

Corresponding to the analysis in the previous chapter, the current one highlights the novel's engagement and response to the struggles and conflicts that face the main character, Ifemelu, as she navigates a challenging journey of identity construction, and how she finally reconciles with her fractured selves and construct an identity that is complex in its first section. Moreover, it tackles the main factors that contribute in managing her contradictory sides of her identity. The second section deals with the author portrayal of hair and its significance throughout the quest for her identity.

III.1. Ifemelu's Quest for Identity in Divergent worlds

Commonly, the complexities of migrants' experiences are exhibited notably in their varied reactions toward aspects of their homeland culture and the new aspects of the host land culture with which they come into contact. These reactions differ depending on their personal beliefs, the reasons behind their migration as well as their attachment to their original cultural identity. Thus, some of them assimilate to the new world and adopt new attitudes, behaviors and language. Others resist assimilation into the new culture and persevere their original identity as much as possible. There are other migrants who neither totally assimilate nor totally resist the new surrounding culture which is the case of Ifemelu, she ends up embracing a complex identity that encompasses aspects of both cultures. After many hardships, ups and downs she learns how to balance her identity within two different contexts, her old initial cultural identity in Nigeria and the mainstream American culture and life style. Ifemelu can be a model for those who “ are faced with the dilemma of attempting to reclaim what is left of their original cultural identity, and aligning with the imposed Anglo-American standard which has been politicised and publicised to

make it dominant” (Eleanor Anneh Dasi 142). Hence, between adaptation and resistance, Ifemelu and other female characters together create the story of constructing the intersectional black female migrant identity.

Adichie portrays the negotiation journey Ifemelu experiences which results in the construction of her unique identity. She navigates through tough challenges, struggles and confusions, which contribute to her reconciliation between her paradoxical identities, and adopting an Americanah’s archetype. Syamala Ghantasala claims that “For several migrants, the term “American” specifies the most favoured guardianship that many immigrants crave to earn, while Americanah stands for a recognition built on earlier encounter of living in America” (123). Adichie chooses this title to refer to Nigerian migrants who return to Nigeria with American affectations, pretending that they no longer understanding their mother tongues, refusing Nigerian food and making constant reference to their life in America (Adichie, “Americanah” Author Explains “Learning” to Be Black in the U.S.). Thus, Americanah is a Nigerian word that describes a certain identity, traits or behaviors a migrant may acquire during his/her stay in America, just like Ifemelu who is influenced by the American standards and shape an identity that contains both aspects, Nigerian and American ones. For example, she embraces the culture of blogging and when she returns home she opens a new blog “*The Small Redemptions of Lagos*” (401) to discuss Nigerian issues, which can be considered a bold step for a Nigerian woman, since it seems that in the novel Nigerians do not use such platforms for such purposes and even they take her posts personally, “Oh my God, Coz, people take this stuff really personal, Dike said about the comments” (406).

For instance, her friend Ranyinudo attacks her when she posts about the wealth Nigerian women get by dating married men, and she thinks that Ifemelu meant her (405). In addition to

many other posts that are not well received by Nigerians even though she tackles real topics that happen every day.

When Ifemelu first goes back home she discovers that Nigeria has changed, but it remains the place where she belongs. At the same time, she feels that she too is no longer the same old Nigerian that she used to be before travelling to the US, “she felt, anything could happen...she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar, had it [Lagos] always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence” (368). Adichie describes Nigeria by the strange familiar which means that for Ifemelu Nigeria now is different, but it resonates with her or she has that sense of *déjà vu* toward Nigeria, it is a sense of belonging and being at home. The transformation in Ifemelu’s identity is normal as a migrant who has lived abroad for a long time, therefore, her perceptions and understanding of the world change as well as her attitudes. Even her friend Ranyinudo notices her transformation, she tells her: “You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real Americanah. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!”(368) The idea of transformation in Ifemelu’s identity recalls Stuart Hall’s proposition discussed in the theoretical chapter that identity is subject to renewal, change, and transformation and it is not a fixed concept. He argues that “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235).

Another instance of American influence on Ifemelu’s identity appears in her motivation to start working. She first meets Aunty Onenu, the owner of the magazine, in her house, and although she finds this unprofessional, she does not complain because she remembers that she is now in Nigeria. Ifemelu begins to speak about her ideas regarding the magazine which makes

Onenu compliments on her: You are a real American! Ready to get to work, a no-nonsense person! Very good” (375). Furthermore, Ifemelu disagrees with her Nigerian friends on many things, for example, when they propose a house for her to settle down she does not like it and they were surprised by her saying that is ugly, “And what an ugly house, Ifemelu said...they said: Ugly kwa? What are you talking about? The house is beautiful!” (376). This shows the distance that is created between Ifemelu and Nigerian friends in Nigeria, by showing this gap, Adichie emphasises the struggle of Americanah to fully belong in neither Nigerian nor the US despite having a strong attachment to the homeland. Through Ifemelu, Adichie promotes the idea that for some migrants, home “is not synonymous to fixity and stability” (Bouallegue, “The Modern Nomad” 103). Home is not a mark on a map.

Actually, the previous instances are just few signs which indicate that Ifemelu adopts some American aspects in her way of thinking, her attitudes and aptitudes. However, this does not mean that she becomes American and fully assimilates to the American mainstream society, like her friend Ginika who is assimilated in the US mainstream society and has a life there. Adichie shows how the same circumstances do not often lead to the same result, as Ginika who despite the microaggressions and discrimination she encounters, she is fully assimilated into the American mainstream culture as if she is not an immigrant. Adichie States through the voice of Ifemelu: “Unlike Aunt Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidity of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin, and now she went bowling, and knew what Toby Maguire was about, and found double-dipping gross” (123). By analysing the character of Ginika and Aunt Uju, one might argue that both of them navigate through many challenges in America, and both become assimilated into American Culture and identity. However, each one of them responds to circumstances differently, hence, they build two distinct identities. On the one

hand, Ginika undertakes a healing journey, despite her suffering from racism and bullying she possesses sense of resilience and humble which manifests in her support of Ifemelu, she even recounts her experiences with humor to help Ifemelu moves on and overcomes her struggles. On the other hand, Aunt Uju's assimilation is colored by fear and overthinking which multiply her sense of isolation, she possesses a violent and cruel attitude toward Ifemelu and her son Dike. For her adopting such defensive behaviour is kind of strategy to deal with her challenges and to maintain a sense of self-respect. Ifemelu tells her in one their discussions:

These people, they make you become aggressive just to hold your dignity...[Uju responds to Ifemelu] I just want to be comfortable. I just want to be able to pay for my child's college. I don't need to work longer hours just to accumulate money. It's not as if I am planning to buy a boat like Americans...I don't even know why I came to this place. Why do I have to take this rubbish? I blame Buhari and Babangida and Abacha because they destroyed Nigeria.

(214)

Overall, this analysis highlights the complexity of black women experiences abroad, and their ways of navigating the hardships they face, as well as, how these pressures force them to change and sometimes to act against their true selves.

In her article "Triple Oppression and Transnational Identity: the Immigrant Black Woman in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" Nuria Juan Martínez States that: "Ifemelu experiences multiple oppressions that shape her complex cultural identity. Even though at first she tries to assimilate to the new culture due to social pressure, eventually she empowers herself by adopting various forms of resistance in order to claim her place in society and contest myths and stereotypes related to immigrant black women"(3). Thus, initially, the pressures of American

society uproot Ifemelu from her authentic self and impose a new identity on her which is black identity, so she adopts some standards and certain new practices that do not belong to her, in order to fit in American mainstream. However, later on, she ceases to adhere to the roles and expectations that the American society compels. For example, Adichie narrates how her protagonist stops faking American accent, after she receives compliment about her accent, Adichie says: “Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent...on the same day she meets Blaine...her decision was prompted by a telemarketer’s call...when he told her you sound totally American” (171). Adichie describes this turning point in Ifemelu’s journey of identity reconciliation as follows:

Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words “You sound American” into a garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; pallid-faced Cristina Tomas...she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. And so she resolved to stop faking the American accent. (173)

Furthermore, Adichie clarifies the extent of black migrant women’s suffering who are exposed to various levels of discrimination, even regarding their physical appearance. Ifemelu too suffers in her attempt to conform to American beauty standards and to create a picture to be respected and privileged. Ifemelu starts relaxing her hair to mirror the aesthetic of the new culture and to conform to the new norms. By adopting such new hairstyle, Ifemelu abandons important aspect of her Nigerian identity. Adichie describes Ifemelu’s feelings after finishing relaxing her hair saying:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. 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. (199)

Thus, after a challenging journey with her hair during which she loses a good job as public relations manager in a company, she finally comes to terms with her blackness and decides to go natural, embracing an afro kinky hair. Hence, she chooses her Nigerian identity and her comfort over American social affirmation and acceptance.

Ifemelu's journey of her identity reconciliation and construction does not end in her accent or hair, but also the language plays a crucial role in shaping Ifemelu complex, hybrid and bicultural identity. Throughout the novel, Adichie uses many Igbo expressions through Ifemelu. When Aisha asks Ifemelu if she speaks Igbo, Ifemelu responds: "of course I speak Igbo, Ifemelu said defensive, wondering if Aisha was again suggesting that America had changed her"(40). Thus, Ifemelu's use of Igbo is a sign of celebrating her homeland cultural identity that she still maintains and in some extent resisting the host cultural identity imposed on her. Additionally, her use of both Languages, Igbo and English, is a marker for her complex hybrid identity that she constructs. While other characters like aunt Uju assimilate into the American culture to the degree that she refuses to speak Igbo especially with her son Dike. She tells Ifemelu: "Please don't speak Igbo to him, two languages will confuse him. What are you talking about, Aunt? We spoke two languages growing up. Ifemelu said. This is America. It's different." (108). Another scene happens at the grocery store Aunt Uju said:

Dike, put it back,” with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. Pooh-reet-back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. She was overeager with the cashier. “Sorry, sorry,” she said as she fumbled to get her debit card from her wallet. Because the cashier was watching, Auntie Uju let Dike keep the cereal, but in the car she grabbed his left ear and twisted it, yanked it. (107)

Uju new attitude toward her homeland identity may be explained as a result of the racism and marginalization to which she is exposed in America, which creates a feeling of shame and disgrace in her regarding everything related to Nigeria and her original identity. Moreover, her total assimilation to American culture can be interpreted as a means of survival, since she flees to America in bad conditions.

Accordingly, these tuning moments are essential in reconciling the conflicting sides of Ifemelu’s identity. Thus, her decision to preserve certain crucial aspects of her original identity, and to resist societal pressures, stems from a challenging journey, resilience and strong self-awareness besides certain relationships that pushes her to hold on her uniqueness and individuality.

In fact, Adichie shows the story of black female migrants from all angles, she presents the dynamics those females experience and all the factors that contribute to constructing their complex identities, in one of her interviews about her work *Americanah*, Adichie argues that: “It is the relationships that make Ifemelu grow so I think they are very important for her to fully becoming herself” (00:03:41-00:03:48). Thus, besides the crucial instances discussed above that

contribute to the construction of Ifemelu's identity, it is worth to highlight the pivotal role that relationships play in her journey towards reconciling her conflicting identities.

Adichie highlights the critical role that relationships play in assisting Ifemelu to become her authentic self and to cope with various challenges. An example is her Nigerian friend Ginika who is happy to see Ifemelu in America, she "recounted anecdotes about her own early experiences in America, as though they were all filled with subtle wisdom that Ifemelu would need" (121). She guides Ifemelu and gives her all American secrets she knows. Moreover, Ginika provides Ifemelu with financial support and thanks to her that Ifemelu finds a job as a babysitter for Ginika's friend Kimberly's children. During Ifemelu's period of depression, because of the tennis coach, she finds Ginika's support, empathy and understanding. She gently guides Ifemelu to see a psychotherapist, they are very close and they maintain contact even after Ifemelu back home. Therefore, Ginika's support and involvement in Ifemelu's journey plays important role in her identity negotiation. Hence, it serves as external validation from a close friend, which Ifemelu needs to reinforce her self-concept.

Another example of relationship that signifies the spirit of sisterhood and friendship among black female migrants is Ifemelu's friendship with Wambui the Kenyan girl, her colleague in class, after few weeks from their meeting they become very close friends. "Wambui was the president of the African Students Association, she tells Ifemelu: you don't know about ASA? you must come to the next meeting on Thursday" (136). Later, Wambui encourages Ifemelu to embrace her natural hair (when her hair starts falling because of chemicals) and she advises her to "go online HappilykinkyNappy.com, it's this natural hair community, you'll find inspiration" (205). Indeed, Wambui advice helps Ifemelu to accept her appearance and her afro hair. Hence, Wambui and Ifemelu relationship is another example that shows the importance of

friendship and sisterhood in the protagonist quest for her identity, thus, it is because of this relationship Ifemelu starts considering the idea of embracing natural hair which means embracing her African roots and identity.

Moreover, Adichie shows how the meeting of ASA serves as a balm to Ifemelu's sense of foreignness, the meeting imbues her with a newfound affinity, diminishing her pervading sense of alienation. Adichie describes the meeting as follows:

The meetings were held in the basement of Wharton Hall...Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, one Congolese, and one Guinean sat around eating, talking, fueling spirits, and their different accents formed meshes of solacing sounds. They mimicked what Americans told them: You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It's so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa. And they themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again. Here, Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself. (136-137)

Thus, the quote shows one instance among many instances and situations that bring Ifemelu together with other African immigrants, especially after her joining in the Association, which contributes in preserving her Africanness, balancing her identity, and overcoming the cultural clash and identity crises that she experienced. Members of the organization often provide advice

and guidance to each other and share their experiences. In one of the meetings, Mwombeki, one of the immigrant students who spends a long time in America tells them:

Try to 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... You will also find that you might make friends more easily with others internationals, Koreans, Indians, Brazilians, whatever, than Americans both black and white. Many of the internationals understand the trauma of trying to get an American Visa and that is good place to start a friendship. (138)

Thus, Adichie suggests that Ifemelu connection to supportive community that includes other migrants who share similar cultures and origins is a symbol for pan-Africanism, unity and solidarity among migrants and African Americans. It can as well provide safe space for her to explore, reconcile her identity and to keep attached to her African roots.

Not only these relationships which are imbued with the spirit of sisterhood, friendship and pan-Africanism that help Ifemelu in her journey of identity construction, but also romantic relationships that she lives with three different men Obinze, Curt, and Blaine. Adichie describes her novel as an unapologetically love story, even though the scenes featuring Ifemelu and Obinze together are few, yet Adichie shows how important romantic relationships is for migrant women in the host country in constructing their identities. Obinze, Ifemelu's classmate in high school in Nigeria, is a real estate investor in Nigeria, he is "her first love, her first lover, and the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself" (8). With him Ifemelu feels "self-affection, He made her like herself with him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was

her right size” (60). Obinze and Ifemelu’s relationship signifies deep understanding and shared past and background, and he represents strong connection to Ifemelu’s roots and her Nigerian culture.

Another relationship that plays a major role in constructing Ifemelu’s black identity, is her relation with Curt, Ifemelu’s first boyfriend in America, he is Kimberly’s brother, a wealthy white American, who is open-minded and shows great interest in Ifemelu’s life and background and even her hair. Ifemelu enters Curt’s circle of acquaintances and friends. He gives Ifemelu the chance to enter the life of white Americanism, with him, Ifemelu lives the life of ease and privilege “That was what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease. She had slipped out of her old skin” (196). Thus, the inter-racial relationship of Ifemelu and Curt illuminates crucial aspect of her identity, which is her race. It makes her blackness more apparent and makes her realize the meaning of being an outsider and being perceived as the Other.

Ifemelu describes one of the dinner parties where she feels out of place: “ornate hotel dining room, full of nicely dressed people, silver- haired couples with their grandchildren, and middle aged women with brooches pinned on their lapels. The only black person was a stiffly dressed waiter” (149). Although Curt is a good man and Ifemelu enjoys her life with him, but she cannot bear the surprising stares of his friends when they see them together. One could argue that the failure of their relationship is a reflection of the complexities of cross-cultural relationships and the depth of race issue in America. Additionally, the influence of societal perceptions and external pressures about race that ultimately lead Ifemelu to seek fulfillment and identity on her own terms and ending their relationship.

After breaking up with Curt, Ifemelu dates Blaine, an African-American professor, he is disciplined, methodical and consistent in his approach to life and political activism. Even though

Ifemelu and Blaine they share a passion for racial issues and Obama's presidency, but this alone does not stand as strong reason for the success of their relationship. Their shared passions bring them together, but their personal differences, ideologies and values hinder the success of the relationship. However, this relationship stills very important for Ifemelu during the process of shaping her identity because both Ifemelu and Blaine suffer from racial oppression and understand what it means to be a black who lives in America.

In essence, Adichie brilliantly discusses American and Nigerian societal issues and racial issues through Ifemelu's romantic engagements. Further, Adichie's goal is not only enriching the dramatic plot but also conveying a deep understanding of the black female migrant identity. For Ifemelu, harmonizing and building her complex identity is a result of experiences and challenges besides her engagement within different racial, social and cultural contexts that allow her to discover herself more.

In conclusion, Ifemelu's journey of identity construction is not that straightforward process, but rather it is a challenging journey that determined by many factors, which can be divided into two kinds of factors; internal factors that include the turning points and the intentional reflections which help Ifemelu to uphold her complex identity. In addition to the external factors that involves the various cultural interactions and the relationships, she navigates under the banners of love, friendship, and sisterhood. Altogether, contribute in the construction of her complex black migrant identity and result in her becoming Americanah.

III.2. Hair as a Symbol of Identity and Race

The literary scene is abundant in symbols and motifs that gained the attention of writers and scholars, in *Americanah*, hair is a powerful tool that Adichie uses to signify various meanings

and interpretations. When reading the novel, “hair” is mentioned in almost all pages, which indicates its significance not only as an aesthetic literary concern but also as a lens for exploring the complexities of race, identity, assimilation and resistance. Adichie portrays the hair of her protagonist as an essential part of her identity from her childhood to womanhood. Adichie narrates how important hair is for Ifemelu:

Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother’s hair. It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory. “Is it your real hair?” strangers would ask, and then reach out to touch it reverently... Through the years of childhood, Ifemelu would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils, will it to become like her mother’s (41)

To emphasise the importance of hair as a symbol of black female identity, Adichie uses the powerful and emotional scene of Ifemelu’s mother cutting and burning her hair for the decision to change her religion. Adichie describes Ifemelu in this scene as follows: “From the verandah, Ifemelu began to cry because she sensed that something had happened, and the woman standing by the fire, splashing in more kerosene as it dimmed... the woman who was bald and blank, was not her mother” (40)

In this scene and others, hair features as the essence of black females’ migrant identities particularly Africans, but also as an obstacle in their lives. When Ifemelu arrives to America, she is shocked by how American society perceives her hair, and how it holds several meanings, For

example the first thing she learns in America is “if you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional” (118). Therefore, braids prevent women from having a job. Upon reviewing the standards of professionalism, one discovers that in the United States natural hairstyle for African Americans is banned even though the “Crown Act of 2022” which stands for “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act of 2022, it was a bill in the United States Congress intended to prohibit discrimination based on an individual’s hair texture or hairstyle by classifying such discrimination illegal under federal law ” (CONGRESS.GOV.com). Yet the act is introduced and passed in some states, but still such standards represent clear evidence of the racism rooted in America, because putting certain norms against certain category because of their natural appearance as God made it is a kind of oppression and injustice against black women.

Similarly, Bell Hooks in her essay “Straightening Our Hair 1989” argues that: “The reality is straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that we are not acceptable as we are unless we alter our appearance or hair texture, that we are not beautiful”(5). That is to say, black women in western societies like America live in pressures that drive them to do some practices in order to be visible, accepted and fit in the mainstream society.

Ifemelu’s lack of awareness and her urgent desire to get a job makes her a victim of American beauty standards, so she begins the journey of straightening and relaxing her hair and using chemicals that the writer describes as “creamy crack” (208). Unfortunately, her hair falls out, which forced her to cut it, and she loses her job, but her biggest loss is the distortion of her identity and the loss of her African authenticity. In the end, she reconciles her fractured identity as “she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair” (209), and she

accepts her natural hair which can be interpreted as a symbol of her celebration and pride of her black African identity as she tells Aisha “I like my hair the way God made it”(14) and as a form of resistance against prevailing racist standards. This is reminiscent of hooks who invites black women to confront prejudiced criteria by all their means, she states that: “It is more important that black women resist racism and sexism in every way; that every aspect of our self-representation be a fierce resistance, a radical celebration of our care and respect for ourselves”(5)

Chepkorir indicates “when African women stick to their natural self, they demonstrate a strong sense of self-worth rather than when they imitate anything they see coming from the West in the name of fashion”. Thus, Adichie shows how Ifemelu embraces her natural hair as a form of self-fulfillment and acceptance as well as a sign of healing because her hair in America becomes one of her biggest insecurities and challenges, for example when she discovers that Curt cheats on her, the first thing she sees in the woman is her hair and she tells him that “All your girlfriends had long following hair” (206). This might be considered an irrelevant statement to that moment but laden with her trauma and her struggles regarding her hair.

In an interview, Adichie states that “black women hair is political” (channel4News.com), her statement highlights the idea that black women’s hair goes beyond personal or aesthetic style, yet it carries other connotations related to social, cultural and political dimensions, which means, the way black women choose to style their hair puts them under classification, biases and stereotypes. In *Americanah*, through a powerful and humorous post in Ifemelu’s blog, Adichie discusses social perceptions, stereotypes and another kind of racism related to black women hair, the post is titled: “A Michelle Obama Shut-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor” Adichie States:

Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily,

kinky, or curly) in the ugly “before” picture, and in the pretty “after” picture, somebody’s taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight? Some black women, AB and NAB, would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it’s not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it’s just not damn normal...I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it’s not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don’t want relaxers in my hair (By the way, can we ban Afro wigs at Halloween? Afro is not costume, for God’s sake.) Imagine if Michelle Obama...decided to go natural...She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote. (289-290)

Thus, Adichie points out through the post, the harsh reality of racism against black women in America, she explains how the American media reinforces the intensity of racism against black women by spreading ideas and stereotypes related to the natural black women hair. These media associate natural hair with ugliness, unprofessionalism, unsophistication and other bad connotations. Furthermore, Adichie sheds light on the improper use of Afro hair in the Halloween by Americans which represents an affront to its symbolic significance, its cultural worth, and its vital role in expressing African identity.

Adichie highlights the way Americans view natural hair, which is a look of astonishment, as for them a black woman who embraces her natural hair is an artist or a supporter of environmental organizations, and it is not reasonable for her to be an ordinary person who sees

her health as more important than social acceptance and to be classified as beautiful. Moreover, the writer used Michelle Obama as a well-known figure and high-profile person, in order to prove the idea that hair is a political construct. The example of Michelle Obama suggests that even the first lady in the US cannot embrace her natural hair. This example is made more powerful by Ifemelu's statement that Obama would lose his position if his wife embraces her natural hair. Finally, through her literature, Adichie calls for the advancement of black women's rights and an understanding of the extent of their suffering in a country that claims freedom and democracy like America.

In essence, hair is a central theme in *Americanah* thereby Adichie portrays the experiences of Ifemelu and other black female migrants who suffer from various forms of racism because of some parts of their appearance and identity such as their hair texture or skin color etc. Moreover, Adichie uses Ifemelu's journey with her hair between straightening it and embracing her African natural hair as a parallel to her identity construction between assimilation and resistance.

Conclusion

The suffering of black women throughout history has been deeply rooted in the systems of oppression, discrimination and inequality. Hence, black feminism emerged as a response to the marginalization and invisibility of black women within mainstream white feminist movements. Thus, black feminists and activists try by all means to advocate for black women's rights and to resist these systems. Emerging from this history of struggle and resistance, another significant feminist theory has risen to the forefront, which is intersectional feminism. Both black feminist and intersectional feminist theories not only shed light on the unique experiences and challenges faced by women of different backgrounds and identities like black female migrants, but they also provide crucial frameworks for understanding how multiple forms of oppression intersect and reinforce each other.

Accordingly, the experiences of black migrant women are shaped by the clash of various forms of oppression that contribute to the construction of their complex identities as black, women and as migrants since they have to cope with two different identities within two different contexts. Many black female writers address the issue of shaping a black female migrant identity through their literatures and shed light on the neglected struggles that these women encounter. Among these is the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who prints a broad picture of the experiences of black women abroad and highlights the tough journeys they go through for the pursuit of a better life. Her novel *Americanah* serves as a vivid portrayal of black women who deal with contradictory worlds thereby, they search for a new sense of home and assert their identities in places where they once felt invisible.

This thesis showed the complexity of black female migrant identity as an intersectional pattern shaped by the interplay of multiple aspects of identity including race, gender, migration

and class. It also revealed that certain black migrant identities are formed as a result of the combination of homeland cultural identity aspects and the host land cultural norms and standards. It investigated how writers portrays the experiences of black migrant women in fiction. This study examined the construction of a black female migrant identity in Adichie's *Americanah*. It highlighted the challenges and conflicts the protagonist goes through in her journey of identity construction and reconstruction. It dealt with the ways in which race, gender and migration intersect to shape the protagonist and other black female characters' identities. The thesis showed how black female migrant characters differently perceive and negotiate their identities that represent the uniqueness of their identities and the richness of their experiences.

This research divided into three main chapters. The first theoretical chapter showed the emergence of black feminism and intersectional feminism as separated movements from the mainstream white feminism that fails to address black women's issues and intersecting oppressions. Its second section reviewed literary works that portrays black women experiences in the context of migration. The second chapter dealt with the analysis of *Americanah*, its first section showed the thematic concerns of the novel and the main topics it tackled including searching of sense of belonging, love and cultural assimilation etc. The second section investigated the issue of race in America, how the protagonist becomes black and the consequences of this new identity imposed on her. The last section of the chapter explored the challenges and the turmoils the main character endured in her path of survival and build her authentic selfhood amidst the new world.

The last chapter tackled the reconciliation between two contradictory sides of Ifemelu's identity and the main forces and factors that help her managing her opposing identities, it showed how the blend and confluence of all her identities seems to be positive for the protagonist and

makes her hold a complex identity with multiple belongings, hence, she becomes *Americanah*. The following section examined the role and the significance of hair in Ifemelu sense of self, it showed that black women's hair represents various meaning surrounding their identities and their resistance in the face of racism and marginalisation.

In conclusion, it is evident that black migrant women face unique and often overlooked challenges as they navigate life in a new country. From systemic racism and discrimination to cultural barriers and economic struggles, these women encounter significant obstacles that require greater attention and support. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, this research and powerful works like *Americanah* can ensure a deep understanding of their identities and can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for them. Thus, it is essential to amplify the voices of these women and advocate for policies that promote their well-being and empowerment.

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المخلص

على الرغم من العدد المتزايد من الأعمال التي تستعرض الشخصيات السوداء المهاجرة في المشهد الأدبي، فإن العديد من الروايات غالبًا ما تفشل في تصوير مدى تعقيد وتفرد هوياتهن وتجاربهن. لذلك تبحث هذه الدراسة في بناء هوية المهاجرة السوداء في رواية أمريكانا لشيماماندا نجوزي أديتشي. تقدم هذه الرواية رؤية ثاقبة حول إدراك النساء المهاجرات السود، اللاتي يتواصلن مع المجتمع الأمريكي الأبيض السائد ويواجهن العنصرية والاعترا ب، وكيفية تعاملهن مع هوياتهن، حيث يتم تمثيلها من خلال الشخصية الرئيسية إيفيميلو والشخصيات النسائية الأخرى. تسلط هذه الأطروحة الضوء على كيفية تصوير أديتشي للطبيعة المعقدة والدقيقة لهوية المهاجرات السود. علاوة على ذلك، فإنه يسلط الضوء على الطرق التي يتقاطع بها العرق والجنس والثقافة والهجرة لتشكيل هوية المرأة المهاجرة. وبالاعتماد على نظريات النسوية التقاطعية، والنسوية السوداء، يهدف هذا البحث إلى إجراء تقييم نقدي لتمثيل المهاجرات السود في أمريكانا، والتساؤل عما إذا كان سردها يعكس مدى تعقيد تجاربهن، كما يهدف إلى دراسة تصوير أديتشي للهويات النسائية المهاجرة السوداء في الولايات المتحدة. وكيف تتحدى الرواية التخييلات التبسيطية للعرق والجمال والسواد وتقاطعها. تظهر الأطروحة أن مزيج الهويات الثقافية يبدو طبيعيًا وإيجابيًا بالنسبة لإيفيميلو، لكنه يضعها في حالة ليست أمريكية بالكامل ولا نيجيرية بالكامل. بدلا من ذلك، تصبح أمريكانا. يعمل هذا الاندماج والتحول على مستوى هوية البطلة على تعميق فهمنا لهوية المهاجرات السود باعتبارها بنية مرنة وديناميكية تشكلها الفوارق العرقية والجنسانية.

Résumé

Malgré le nombre croissant d'œuvres représentant les migrantes noires sur la scène littéraire, de nombreux récits ne parviennent souvent pas à saisir la complexité et le caractère unique de leurs identités et de leurs expériences. Cette étude examine donc la construction d'une identité féminine noire migrante dans *Americanah* (2013) de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Ce roman offre une vision perspicace de la façon dont les femmes migrantes noires, qui entrent en contact avec la société américaine blanche dominante et affrontent le racisme et l'aliénation, perçoivent et négocient leur identité, telle que représentée à travers le personnage principal Ifemelu et d'autres personnages féminins. Cette thèse met en lumière la manière dont Adichie décrit la nature complexe et nuancée de l'identité des migrantes noires. En outre, il met en évidence la manière dont la race, le genre, la culture et la migration se croisent pour façonner l'identité des femmes migrantes. S'appuyant sur les théories féministes intersectionnelles du féminisme noir, cette recherche vise à évaluer de manière critique la représentation des migrantes noires en Amérique, en se demandant si elle reflète la complexité de leurs expériences et en examinant la représentation d'Adichie des identités féminines migrantes noires aux États-Unis. L'étude analyse comment le roman remet en question les imaginations simplistes de la race, de la beauté, de la noirceur et de leurs intersections. La thèse montre que le mélange des identités culturelles semble naturel et positif pour Ifemelu, mais il la place dans un état ni complètement américain ni entièrement nigérian. Au lieu de cela, elle devient *Americanah*. Cette fusion approfondit notre compréhension de l'identité des migrantes noires en tant que construction fluide et dynamique façonnée par les disparités raciales et de genre.