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Gendered Migration Experiences in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)

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BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Chairwoman: Ms. MOUMENE Soumia (MA/A)	**University of 8 May 1945-Guelma**
Supervisor: Dr. BOUALLEGUE Leyla (MC/B)	**University of 8 May 1945-Guelma**
Examiner: Dr. BOUALLEGUE Nadjiba (MC/A)	**University of 8 May 1945-Guelma**

Submitted by:

ATTAF Darine

BENHAYAOUM Amani

Supervised by: Dr. BOUALLEGUE Leyla

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Dedication

From Sprinkler splashes to fireplace ashes,

I gave my blood, sweat, and tears for this.

To all the women who made this possible.

To our cats, and all cats in general.

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This work would not have been possible without the power of friendship. We are deeply grateful for the day that brought us together as companions, sparking the birth of this precious creation.

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities of gendered migration, focusing on the experiences of migrant women and their negotiation of identity within new cultural contexts in *The Other Americans* by Laila Lalami and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It explores how the two novels challenge the notion of migration as a gender-neutral process. In this study, we argue that both texts suggest that gendered constructs significantly shape every stage of the migratory experience. The study employs a feminist intersectional lens focusing on the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality and their role in shaping migrant women's experiences. The study finds that migrant women face unique challenges related to cultural expectations, familial obligations, racial and gender discrimination, and workplace exploitation. Special attention is given to themes of cultural adaptation, intergenerational conflict, racial discrimination, gender oppression, and the reclamation of identity. The analysis also reveals the resilience and agency of migrant women, demonstrating how they strategically navigate these challenges through resistance, self-assertion, and the formation of new hybrid identities. The central aim is to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of gendered migration, challenging simplistic narratives and highlighting the contradictions inherent in migrant women's experiences.

Keywords

Gendered Migration, Intersectional Feminism, Postcolonial Theory, Resistance and agency, Cultural expectations, Patriarchal Norms, Race and gender.

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Introduction

Migration, a global phenomenon with profound social, economic, and political implications, has long been subject of scholarly research. However, traditional migration studies often overlook the nuanced ways in which gender shapes the migratory experience, often focusing on the economic, social and political drivers through a male-centric lens. In this study, we argue that migration is not a gender-neutral process; gendered constructs influence every stage, from the initial decision to migrate to the lived realities of integration and belonging in the host country. This dissertation seeks to delve deep into the complexities of gendered migration, examining how contemporary literary works illuminate these intricate dynamics, particularly the experiences of migrant women navigating diverse cultural landscapes.

This study primarily tackles the following research questions: How do contemporary literary narratives deconstruct and reimagine gender roles and identities within the context of migration? How do the protagonists' gender identities shape their migration experiences, and in turn, how does migration influence their gender roles? What role do gender, race, and socio-economic status play in the characters adaptation to new societies? These central questions are multifaceted, encompassing both the constraints imposed by traditional gender norms and the agency and resilience displayed by migrant women in reshaping their lives. This dissertation argues that Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* offer a powerful lens through which to understand the complexities of gendered migration, challenging simplistic narratives and highlighting the complexity of migratory experiences.

This study emphasizes the importance of understanding migration as a deeply gendered process, challenging traditional, male-centric perspectives that have historically dominated migration studies. Migration is not merely a matter of economic or political

factors, it is a personal and social experience shaped by cultural expectations, familial obligations, and individual aspirations. This study contributes to the existing body of literature that deals with gendered migration by addressing the gap that traditional migration studies often overlook, in terms of the multiple ways gender shapes the migratory experience. It will fill the gap by examining how contemporary literary works illuminate the dynamics of gendered migration, particularly the experiences of migrant women.

The choice of the novels discussed in this work is deliberate and strategic. These novels offer compelling narratives of migration from diverse cultural contexts exploring the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural adaptation of migrant women. Lalami's *The Other Americans* provides a portrayal of a Moroccan immigrant family in the United States, focusing on the intergenerational tensions and cultural clashes that arise as they navigate their dual identities. The novel's emphasis on race, class, gender offers a rich exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by immigrant women. Adichie's *Americanah* tells the story of a young Nigerian woman's migration to the United States, her experiences with race and identity, and her eventual return to Nigeria. Through Ifemelu's journey, Adichie critiques mainstream American society and explores the complexities of cultural adaptation and self-discovery.

These novels are particularly relevant because they represent a shift in contemporary literature toward more in depth and complex portrayals of migration. They move beyond simplistic narratives of assimilation and cultural conflict, offering a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by migrants and the ways in which they navigate their identities and relationships. Additionally, both novels emphasize the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that gender, race, class, and other social categories are interconnected and shape individual experiences.

The lived experiences of migrants—shaped by displacement, loss, forced adaptation, and identity negotiation—provide valuable material for literary exploration. While migration narratives have received significant literary attention, the distinct experiences of female and male migrants remain insufficiently studied, often because these experiences are analyzed through a gender-neutral lens that overlooks gender-specific differences. This literature review examines how literary works highlight the gendered dimensions of migration, focusing on the contrasting experiences of male and female migrants. It explores how these texts intersect gender with other social categories, such as class, race, and sexuality, to reveal the multifaceted and complex realities of gendered migration.

Among the novels that explore the experiences of women and highlight the inequalities they face is Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011). The novel portrays the exploitation of Japanese women who immigrated to the United States. Rimdani and Syafe'i's analysis of Otsuka's work demonstrates how societal norms and power dynamics shape women's migration experiences in the novel. The authors focus on the mechanisms of exploitation—how women are controlled and profitably used by men. They highlight the narrative's collective, plural voice, which underscores the stark power imbalance in which men hold absolute authority both at home and in public. In the domestic sphere, women are subjected to threats and coercion should they defy male authority (77). Otsuka meticulously details the unfair treatment these women endure; her novel provides a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation about the representation of migrant women's identities. Her nuanced perspective sheds light on the subtle and overt ways in which societal structures and power imbalances intensify women's suffering.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2001) provides a comprehensive lens for exploring the intersection of migration, class, and gender. The novel delves into the complexities of

migration, particularly the experiences of women and men within the dynamics of class and gender relations. Arafat's Marxist analysis of the novel, *Brick Lane: A Marxist Exploration of Class, Gender, and the Potential for Social Transformation*, offers a valuable framework for understanding the interconnected factors shaping the lives of the characters. Arafat's analysis focuses on the experience of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant woman, using her journey to illuminate the pervasive exploitation of women and alienation within a capitalist system. His study shows how Ali's novel contributes to broader scholarly discussions about the vulnerability of migrant women to various forms of marginalization and subjugation.

The novel highlights Nazneen's experience as a garment worker, presenting a stark portrayal of the challenges faced by many migrant women in low-wage labor. In his paper, Arafat focuses on Nazneen's alienation, reflecting on themes of powerlessness within both the domestic and public spheres. Her dual struggle—marked by limited access to resources and cultural and social barriers—lies at the heart of her difficulties navigating London's complex socio-economic landscape (Arafat 74).

While this work primarily focuses on Nazneen's experience, the novel also offers valuable insights into the experiences of men within the context of migration. The interplay of patriarchal structures within both the Bangladeshi community and the broader British society significantly shapes the lived experiences and relationships of the male and female characters. Arafat's Marxist interpretation of *Brick Lane* demonstrates the novel's effectiveness in portraying the nuanced and complex realities of migration. It emphasizes not only the structural inequalities affecting migrants but also the potential for both individual and collective resistance to these power dynamics. The strength of this paper lies in its ability to provide a theoretical framework that can be applied to other literary works and scholarly research on immigrant women and gender dynamics.

A noteworthy example is Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), a novel that traces the journey of cultural adaptation, highlighting the complexities of identity, family dynamics, and the pressures of assimilation. Ćurić, in her paper titled "(De)marginalisation in Julia Alvarez's How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents: Images of Garcia Girls' Ethnic and Gender Oppression", offers a valuable framework for analyzing the novel's depiction of ethnic and gender oppression within the context of migration and the bicultural experience.

Ćurić's analysis draws on postcolonial and Latina feminist theory to focus on the Garcia sisters' experiences of marginalization in both Dominican and American societies. The paper examines how societal practices and familial dynamics shape their identities and life experiences. It highlights the various forms of discrimination faced by Carla, Sandi, Yolanda, and Fifi García, which are deeply rooted in their gender and ethnic identities (Ćurić 373). This analysis aligns with broader scholarly discussions on the intersectional experiences of migrant women, who confront systemic barriers at different levels and are excluded from the opportunities available in the United States.

It is important to note that Ćurić argues the sisters, rather than losing their connection to the Dominican Republic, develop a bicultural consciousness through which they navigate their marginalized experiences (384). While her analysis primarily focuses on the female characters, the novel also portrays the migration experiences of men—Carlos in the Dominican Republic and John in the United States. In her thesis *Home and Exile in Minority American Women's Writing*, Bouallegue examines Carlos's migration experience, asserting, "Carlos has always wanted to be the patriarch of the house, he has adhered to this role for many years, yet the change of the situation makes him realize that he has simply become an 'old man sitting in their [his daughters'] houses'" (91). Alvarez's novel helps to illuminate the broader social and cultural challenges faced by women due to the intersection of ethnicity

and gender. Through its exploration of biculturalism, identity formation, and the strategies the sisters employ to overcome marginalization and oppression, the novel makes a significant contribution to the body of work on gendered migration narratives

This dissertation will adopt a feminist intersectional approach to analyze the selected literary works. This approach recognizes that gender is not an isolated category, but it is intertwined with other social identities, such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. By examining how these identities intersect, this study will offer a deep understanding of the challenges faced by and the opportunities offered to migrant women. To highlight the intersectionality of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, we build on transnational feminism and intersectionality alongside concepts such as 'liminality,' 'objectification theory', 'postcolonial theory', and 'social capital theory'.

This work is divided into three chapters, The first chapter entitled "Theorizing Gendered Migration: History, Theory, and Intersectionality", lays the theoretical groundwork by examining the historical evolution of gendered migration studies highlighting the importance of feminist perspectives in understanding the complexities of migration. This chapter challenges traditional, male-centric approaches and emphasizes the need to consider the distinct experiences of women, shaped by cultural expectations, familial obligations, and individual aspirations. This chapter also introduces the concept of intersectionality, highlighting how gender intersects with other social categories, such as race, class, and ethnicity, to shape individual experiences of migration.

The second chapter, titled *"Gendered Identity and Displacement in The Other Americans,"* offers a theoretical exploration of Laila Lalami's novel with a focus on intersectionality and cultural identity. It examines how the characters Maryam and Nora, as Moroccan immigrants in the United States, engage with issues such as intergenerational

conflict, cultural displacement, and the negotiation of belonging. The chapter draws on key theoretical frameworks, including Homi Bhabha's concept of 'liminality' and Objectification Theory, to analyze how gender, race, and cultural expectations shape the experiences of migrant women in diasporic settings.

The third chapter, *"Gender and Migration,"* turns to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* to examine the intersectional challenges faced by Black women migrants from the Global South. It considers how migration, race, and gender operate within a racialized American context, focusing on identity negotiation and cultural assimilation. The analysis is informed by W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness and the theory of the 'objectified other,' providing insight into how structural forces influence the perception and experience of migrant women within dominant social narratives.

This dissertation seeks to contribute to a more detailed understanding of gendered migration, challenging simplistic narratives and highlighting the complexities of migrant women's experiences. By analyzing contemporary literary works through a feminist intersectional lens, this study offers insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant women and the ways in which they reshape their lives and identities in new cultural contexts.

Chapter 1: Theorizing Gendered Migration: History, Theory, and Intersectionality

This chapter lays the foundational framework for the study by tracing the historical and theoretical evolution of gendered migration scholarship. It explores how traditional migration studies have often overlooked the specific experiences of women, prompting a shift toward feminist and intersectional approaches. Drawing on frameworks such as Mahler and Pessar's "Gendered Geographies of Power," Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, and Chandra Mohanty's transnational feminism, the chapter situates the study within broader academic debates. This theoretical grounding allows for a nuanced understanding of how gender, race, class, and cultural expectations converge to shape migration experiences, particularly for women from postcolonial contexts.

1.1. Gender and Migration: Then and Now

Gender refers to the social and cultural constructs that define what is considered feminine or masculine within a given society. Though these constructs are often viewed as natural, they are shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts. In their seminal work *Gender and Migration* Anastasia Christo and Eleonore Kofman emphasize that Gender interacts with other social divisions—such as age, class, ethnicity, nationality, race, disability, and sexual orientation—forming a key category of social differentiation (1). Completing this view, Sarah J. Mahler & Patricia R. Pessar's work of "Gendered Geographies of Power" provides a solid framework to examine how gender operates across different "geographic scales," and intersects with other social powers. They assert that, "[Gender] is a human invention that organizes our behavior and thought, not as a set of static structures or roles but as an ongoing process that is experienced through an array of social institutions from the family to the state" (442). In this way, gender plays a central role in structuring many aspects of life, including migration dynamics.

Migration is a global phenomenon involving the movement of people across geographical boundaries, with significant implications for societies worldwide. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) International Migration Report 2020, approximately 281 million individuals are international migrants. Early migration research primarily focused on political and economic drivers, often from a male-centric perspective, with limited attention to gender. As a result, the distinct experiences of women were often overlooked or reduced to their roles as dependents of male migrants. Christou and Kofman explain that it was not until the 1980s that feminist scholarship began to highlight the gender-specific dimensions of migration, redirecting attention to the broader, more nuanced understanding of this critical phenomenon (1).

Although migration is often seen as an individual choice, numerous underlying factors make it far more complex. Gender plays a significant role in migration, influencing everything from the decision-making process to the actual migratory experience. Sociologist Silvia Pedraza illustrates this impact in her work, "Women and Migration: The Social Consequences of Gender," highlighting how gender shapes migration in profound ways:

> [T]he household is the social unit that makes decisions as to whether migration will take place, who in the family will migrate, what resources will be allocated to the migration, what remittances or household members can be expected to return, and whether the migration will be temporary or permanent. All of these decisions are guided by normatively prescribed kinship and gender roles as well as by the hierarchy of power within the household. (308)

Furthermore, Pierrette hondagneu-sotelo in her book *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* observes that, "given the diverse historical and social contexts in which migration occurs, women in the same culture and in similar circumstances encounter

different types of patriarchal obstacles and hence improvise different responses to migration" (188). Hence, migration is not a uniform experience; gender acts as an active agent in shaping individuals' migratory opportunities and constraints differently.

Earlier studies on migration emphasized its economically motivated nature, with migration initially carried out by men and women portrayed as passive spouses who would join later. However, more recent immigration research incorporating gender perspectives reveals that, although family reunification is one reason for women's migration, it is not the only one. Many women migrate for other reasons, such as supporting their families economically or escaping patriarchal constraints to gain agency and establish a more egalitarian family structure. Such patterns can be observed among various female migrant groups, for example, Cuban (Pedraza 313), Irish (Morokvasic 898), and Dominican (Pedraza 309; Hondagneu-Sotelo 101).

Christou and Kofman suggest that, compared to men, women's migration is more strongly driven by a desire to escape socially discriminatory institutions and pervasive social control (5). This difference is also evident in attitudes towards return to the country of origin. According to Pedraza, there is a distinction between men's keenness to return home and women's typical delay or avoidance of their return process, as doing so would require them to sacrifice their employment and the freedoms they have recently attained (310). While examining the gendered experiences of Mexican immigrant men and women in the United States, Hondagneu-Sotelo observes that, unlike female immigrants—who were not held to high standards as labor migrants—their male counterparts' sense of masculinity and maturity depended on living up to the ideal of a successful migrant (144). She also adds that the role assigned to Mexican men by patriarchy not only permits their departure but also requires them to serve as the primary financial providers for their families (188). Thus, the migratory

experiences of men and women are fueled by different motives, which are significantly shaped by patriarchal structures, traditional gender roles, and societal expectations. Besides shaping the motives and circumstances under which men and women migrate, gendered structures also extend to shape the practical migratory experiences, including labor participation, migration policies, remittance practices, etc.

Upon arrival in the host countries, migrant men and women often enter distinct labor sectors. Data indicate that migrants, particularly women, tend to cluster in specific sectors, resulting in "gendered migrant division of labour" (Christou and Kofman 33). Pedraza demonstrates that while both genders tend to be concentrated in particular fields, immigrant women face a considerably narrower range of opportunities. These women are often employed in domestic work, the garment industry, family-run businesses, or, more recently, skilled service professions like nursing (315). Crucially, many also engage in unpaid labor, functioning both as homeworkers and household workers (Morokvasic 886). However, migrant women's substantial economic contributions remain often ignored, poorly documented in official data, and excluded from definitions of economic activity (Morokvasic 887).

Furthermore, the domestic jobs sector is often unprotected by labor laws, leaving female workers particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. For instance, in Europe, household work remains undervalued, poorly paid, and minimally recognized by immigration policies (Christou and Kofman 36). Following the 1974 halt on labor immigration, Western European countries imposed strict restrictions on the employment of migrant spouses, mainly women who were not members of European Economic Community, often requiring long waiting periods or complete bans with limited legal work opportunities, many women turned to informal jobs in sectors like domestic service and garment work, where they faced

exploitation and lacked labor protections. These migrant women were the most vulnerable of immigrants, defined by law as “dependents.” Their residency was tied to their husband’s legal status, making them at risk of deportation in case the marriage ended or their husband’s status changed. This forced many women into a harsh choice between enduring domestic violence to maintain their legal stay or leaving unsafe conditions at the risk of deportation (Morokvasic 891). Thus, labor migration policies for a long time were deeply embedded in gendered assumptions, reinforcing the existing inequalities by trapping women in low-wage, precarious labor with limited rights.

More broadly, global migration policies have consistently reflected and perpetuated gendered structures and stereotypes, shaping opportunities and vulnerabilities experienced by both migrant women and men. In Portugal, until 1989, passports were male-reserved, and their dependents (spouses) had to travel on the men’s documents. Even after this policy changed, women still needed their husbands’ permission to travel abroad (Hondagneu-Sotelo 40). Another example of this gendered policy is U.S. immigration legislation, which has disproportionately benefited male Salvadoran refugees, leaving women physically tied to their home countries due to limited opportunities and mobility (Mahler and Pessar 449). Additionally, asylum and refugee policies are also shaped by gendered assumptions. These laws often prioritize public forms of persecution, which are more commonly associated with men, while overlooking the private, intimate forms of violence women frequently face within families and communities (Hondagneu-Sotelo 40). Throughout history, numerous state policies have shaped the gendered nature of migration, and the examples mentioned earlier represent only a small portion of this broader pattern.

While migration and wage labor often intensify women’s exploitation within patriarchal structures, these experiences can paradoxically create opportunities for

empowerment, offering pathways to independence, self-respect, and self-autonomy. Studies of Irish immigrant women show that they generally benefited more than men, pursuing education more eagerly and assimilating more quickly in America. Similarly, Jamaican women in London gained independence by breaking free from traditional roles despite the challenges of migration. Dominican women in the U.S. experienced transformed household dynamics and heightened self-esteem through first-time employment (Pedraza 321–322). Hondagneu-Sotelo further illustrates that migration affects Mexican immigrant families differently by gender. Women often become more self-reliant through active participation in public life and access to social and economic resources, whereas men tend to lose their traditional dominant role and increasingly share household responsibilities (146). Although these women's conditions get significantly better but they still face challenges, Morokvasic writes:

> The 'now and here' approach that characterizes several studies implies also that migration is a move from a more oppressive to a less oppressive environment, from traditional to modern, and that the access to waged work contributes to access to a less oppressed status. So, migration is a liberating process and results in a modicum of sexual equality, causing the rural cognitive modes about woman's place to no longer be operative, and it is a rejection, conscious or unconscious of traditional female roles. (892)

The quote challenges the idea of considering host societies as fully positive while harshly criticising migrant women's country of origin. This idea is in line with Leyla Bouallegue's idea that "many migrant literary narratives" abound with what she refers to as "reductionist and demonising representations of 'Third World' countries" (43).

To sum up, migration is a complex phenomenon that is influenced not merely by gender but also by a variety of overlapping factors like race, class, and nationality. While this section cannot fully address these multifaceted dynamics due to its limited scope, it highlights how such intersections create divergences in migratory experiences across different genders. This complexity necessitates a feminist approach to migration studies. By centering gender in our analysis, we unpack the intricate folds, refute the mainstream narratives, and develop more nuanced understandings of the female migration experiences.

1.2. Intersecting Forces: Feminist Insights into Women's Migration

Dominant feminist discourses often overlook the intersectional nature of oppression faced by women of color. By centering the experiences of privileged white women and neglecting the role of race, these frameworks marginalize women of color and inadequately represent the complexity of their lived realities. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, criticizes mainstream (white) feminism. She writes:

> The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women. The authoritative universal voice-usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity—is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics. When feminist theory attempts to describe women's experiences through analyzing patriarchy, sexuality, or separate spheres ideology, it often overlooks the role of race. (154)

Migrant women constantly navigate the intricate webs of race, gender, and class. These interconnected forces shape their lives, influencing their social interactions and economic opportunities in multifaceted ways. Fong captures this idea in the following quote: "Migrant women frequently navigate a complex landscape where societal beauty ideals, often rooted in racial and class biases, shape their perceived worth and opportunities in both local and global contexts" (102).

In academia, the discussion on gendered migration focuses on local and global feminist perspectives, highlighting the tension between a universal approach to gender justice and its inability to address specific local contexts (Mohanty 27). Globalization tends to amplify this challenge; it introduces, on one hand, opportunities for transnational solidarity, while on the other hand, risks imposing homogenizing narratives that overlook the complexities of individual circumstances. In literature, this manifests as different portrayals of women's agency and identity, reflecting the dual effect that globalization created. This paradox requires a well-nuanced approach that understands the global patterns and local realities at once.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty is one of the foundational figures in transnational feminism. Her work "Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity" serves as a critique of western feminist thought for how it often disregards the particularities of non-Western contexts, hence, universalizing the experiences of women from different nations. She also condemned and challenged the treatment of the western feminism to third world women as a homogenous, single, uniform group. Mohanty illustrates:

> In these texts women are defined as victims of male violence (Fran Hosken); as universal dependents (Beverly Lindsay and Maria Cutrufelli); victims of the colonial process (Maria Cutrufelli); victims of the Arab familial system (Juliette Minces);

> victims of the Islamic code (Patricia Jeffery); and, finally, victims of the economic development process (Beverley Lindsay and the [liberal] win school). This mode of defining women primarily in terms of their object status (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems) is what characterizes this particular form of the use of 'women' as a category of analysis. (23)

This framework is integral in examining the narratives of migrant women, as she argues for understanding how global capitalist structures work with local cultural dynamics to create unique forms of both oppression and resistance for women in different contexts.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's conceptualization of intersectionality offers further enrichment to this discourse. She introduced intersectionality to unveil that a singular lens is simply incapable of dissecting the discrimination created by overlapping identities –race, gender, and class– (1242). Her work recognizes how non-white women face multiple layers of oppression, how they navigate both challenges of patriarchal norms in their countries of origin and the gendered biases in host nations, changing how we think about discrimination and privilege. Crenshaw describes what she had in mind when she introduced the term 'intersectionality':

> That was the activist engagement that brought me to this work. And my own use of the term "intersectionality" was just a metaphor. I'm amazed at how it gets over- and underused; sometimes I can't even recognize it in the literature anymore. I was simply looking at the way all these systems of oppression overlap. But more importantly, how in the process of that structural convergence rhetorical politics and identity polities— based on the idea that systems of subordination do not overlap— would abandon issues and causes and people who actually were affected by overlapping systems of subordination. I've always been interested in Intersectionality as Critical

> Inquiry in both the structural convergence and the political marginality. That's how I came into it. (Guidroz and Berger qtd. in Collins, *Intersectionality* 26–27)

Thus, intersectionality is a framework that provides flexibility in analysing the multiple and seemingly separate systems of oppression, like racism, and sexism, more than race or gender studies.

On another note, Abu Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* is a direct critique of the framing of Muslim women as victims needing liberation. Her emphasis throughout the whole book is on the necessity of context-specific analyses, which aligns with Mohanty's call for localized feminism. She refers in her book to Marnia Lazreg, a prominent Algerian sociologist who examined the intersections of colonialism, gender, and power. Lazreg heavily criticized the gendered dimensions of colonialism in *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* where she denounced the portrayals of Algerian women as passive victims. Her main argument is that colonial and postcolonial narratives reduce Algerian women to symbols of cultural backwardness, completely disregarding their agency and resistance (Lazreg 78).

This critique of reductive representations of women intersects with broader discussions on how patriarchal and racial power structures shape women's experiences. bell hooks, for example, argues that "there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and…the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people" (2). Parashar further explores this idea, noting that, "indubitably, patriarchy tricks women into valuing beauty . . . as essential criteria of feminine identity" (6221). Together, these perspectives highlight how patriarchal and racial systems—whether in postcolonial contexts or within Western societies—use

patriarchal tricks, such as beauty standards, as a tool of control, shaping women's sense of worth and identity.

'Beauty standards' are socially constructed ideals (Mohamed et al. 6). They define what is deemed attractive in a given culture. Historically, sociocultural influences, along with ideologies such as stereotypes, have significantly shaped perceptions of beauty, from ancient Greek times to contemporary societies (Rodrigues 78). As fluid meters of desirability and social acceptance, beauty standards evolve over time, interacting with other power dynamics. Critically, Eurocentrism underpins many of these dynamics. Patricia Hill Collins defines "Eurocentrism" as "an ideology that presents the ideas and experiences of Whites as normal, normative, and ideal," also identifying it as a form of "white racism or white supremacy" (*Black Feminist Thought* 299). Consequently, Eurocentric beauty standards can be understood as a system that operates within a racialized binary: they systematically elevate white features as normative while devaluing non-European appearances, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies and white dominance.

White beauty standards are deeply embedded in colorism, which operates as a mechanism of exclusion and privilege. Collins explains:

> Colorism in the U.S. context . . . is deeply embedded in a distinctly American form of racism grounded in Black/White oppositional differences. Other groups "of color" must negotiate the meanings attached to their "color." All must position themselves within a continually renegotiated color hierarchy where, because they define the top and the bottom, the meanings attached to Whiteness and Blackness change much less than we think. (*Black Feminist Thought* 90)

Burke articulates, ‘‘Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin’’ (qtd. in Burton et al. 440). Mady et al. note that although colorism affects all genders, its impact is “considerably greater” on women due to societal fixation on female appearance (69), reinforcing Dixon and Telles’ characterization of colorism and beauty standards as “deeply gendered ideologies” upholding white privilege and patriarchy (412). Therefore, beauty standards are not just about aesthetics but serve as a mechanism for maintaining bot racial and gender hierarchies, further entrenching structural inequalities.

It is crucial to understand how prevailing beauty standards shape non-white women’s everyday life experiences. According to Collins, institutions dominated by white authority exhibit a clear preference for lighter-skinned black individuals, often marginalizing those with darker skin or those who do not conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals (*Black Feminist Thought* 91). This bias toward whiteness is deeply embedded in workplace respectability policies that enforce conformity to Western beauty ideals, often through grooming regulations, hiring preferences, and professional appearance standards that disproportionately disadvantage individuals who do not fit these narrow aesthetic expectations.

Within respectability politics, non-white women with tightly textured hair face disproportionate scrutiny of their aesthetic choices—a racialized form of gendered control that positions Eurocentric hair norms as the standard of professionalism and social acceptability. This scrutiny operates as both a material barrier (to employment, education, etc.) and a symbolic violence enforcing assimilation. Black women often navigate societal pressures when choosing their hairstyles, as their decisions can carry social and economic consequences (Thompson 855). In professional spaces, Black natural hair is often associated with being “unprofessional, unkempt or messy” (Carter 36). This bias impacts employment

opportunities, as many black women feel the need to straighten their hair to avoid discrimination in hiring. As a result, they experience unique pressures to alter their appearance and suppress aspects of their identity to conform to mainstream beauty standards and gain social acceptance or professional stability.

Chapter 2: Gendered Identity and Displacement in *The Other Americans*

This chapter explores the representation of gendered migration and identity negotiation in Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. Using a feminist intersectional lens, the chapter investigates how female characters navigate displacement, familial expectations, and cultural hybridity. It discusses the intergenerational tensions between immigrant mothers and daughters and the role of silence and music as forms of resistance and self-expression. The analysis is informed by theoretical concepts such as Homi Bhabha's 'liminality,' 'Objectification Theory, ' and 'Social Capital Theory', all of which help elucidate the complexities of immigrant women's identity formation within a racialized and gendered social order.

2.1. Gendered Migration Journeys:

In *The Other Americans*, Lalami paints the portraits of female migrants in such a nuanced way that it offers a rich examination of how gender fundamentally shapes the process of displacement, adaptation, and identity formation. Through characters like Nora and her mother Maryam, the complex dynamic between gender, migration, and cultural expectations reveals how women navigate additional challenges that differ substantially from those of their male counterparts. This chapter analyzes how gender shapes the migration experience, focusing on the strategic silences of Maryam, the impact of displacement on her identity, and the intergenerational conflict that emerges from differing expectations of womanhood between her and her daughter Nora.

Maryam's character is a compelling representation of the distinctive challenges women face during migration. Unlike her husband Driss, whose narrative revolves around financial fulfillment, economic opportunity, and professional identity, her experiences are within the domestic sphere and charged with invisible emotional labor. Maryam's silent

struggles, which will be explored in later sections of this chapter, most clearly reveal the emotional labor. This 'concept' was first coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her 1983 book, *The Managed Heart*, where she described how service workers (like flight attendants) have to display certain feelings (e.g., friendliness, calmness) regardless of how they actually feel inside. This form of labor applies to the situation of housewives which involves regulating one's emotions to maintain family harmony, often at great personal cost.

On silence, Nadjiba Bouallegue argues that silence can be a deliberate and strategic form of resistance rather than a sign of passivity (*Home and Exile* 129). This perspective is particularly relevant to Maryam's silence throughout the novel, where her quietness can be interpreted as an intentional choice. In contexts where marginalized individuals opt for silence, it often reflects a conscious decision to withhold their voices selectively, signaling agency rather than submission.

For instance, Maryam is given only three chapters in contrast to Nora's nineteen Chapters —a narrative imbalance that itself reflects the silence Maryam endures throughout the novel. This silence, which is not imposed but chosen, serves as a coping strategy for the deep sense of displacement she experiences. Upon her arrival in America with Driss, Maryam experiences a form of double displacement: geographic, due to her migration from Morocco to the United States, and emotional, stemming from profound isolation. She briefly articulates this loneliness, recalling, "I can still recall how long and lonely those six months were, being confined to my room all day, almost like a prison cell…" (80). Maryam's isolation is exacerbated by her limited English proficiency, she tells the reader that she learned English from her favorite show on television, which taught her words she does not really need in everyday conversations:

> I would watch Sally or Donahue, which in those days were in the middle of the afternoon, when the shop was quiet. My brother has told me that watching television would help me improve my English, and I will say I learned a lot of words, like *paternity test* and *artificial insemination* and *AIDS epidemic*, but my trouble was pronunciation, how easy it was to say "tree" when I meant "three" or "udder" when I meant "other". (31)

This profound sense of displacement gives rise to intense feelings of homesickness in Maryam. As a complete stranger walks past her, Maryam reflects, "Then a woman pushed her cart past us, and in her wake I caught the scent of rose water. Instantly, I was back in Casablanca with my sisters, putting our hair in rollers and trying on different colors of lipstick" (31). This sensory memory highlights how deep her feelings of homesickness are, as even a brief encounter with a familiar scent can evoke vivid and emotional memories. The rose water not only signifies a longing for home but also the separation from her past life and identity. This insight into Maryam's character deepens the reader's understanding of her emotional state and the inner turmoil caused by her displacement.

Maryam's displacement is intensified with the infidelity of her husband who is planning a second marriage. As the events unfold, the jewelry shop he ordered the engagement ring from calls the landline of the Joshua Tree cabin where Nora decided to stay. When Nora discovers the truth, she feels conflicted about telling her mother, while Maryam has already known and has tried to hint at it to her:

> I had tried talking Nora out of living in the cabin in Joshua Tree where Driss brought the other woman, but my daughter was deaf to all of the hints I dropped. My poor, gullible daughter. What would she have said if I had told her that her father had betrayed the trust I had placed in him?... to her, he could only be a hero, he could

> never be a man of flesh and blood, full of the same weaknesses and capable of the same mistakes as other men. (269)

The contrast between the father as a "hero" and as a "man of flesh and blood" emphasizes the theme of idealization versus reality. It also reflects the tension between honesty and the desire to protect Nora from being hurt. Ultimately, this quote encapsulates the bittersweet nature of family dynamics and the complex interplay of trust, silence and vulnerability. Mernissi examines the effects infidelity has on men and women in her work, *Beyond The Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, arguing that, for Moroccan mentality, polygamy is a way of humbling women, "Debase a woman by bringing in [the house] another one" (48). Her analysis suggests that polygamy is not solely a personal or familial matter but also a societal mechanism that reflects broader attitudes toward gender and power by framing it as a traditional practice that transcends individual relationships. Infidelity in this case becomes an act laden with power implications; it signifies a man's dominance, reducing women to objects that can be controlled or replaced.

In the early years of their migration, Maryam worked alongside Driss in the shop for more than eighteen hours a day. However, during her pregnancy with Nora, she was diagnosed with preeclampsia, a condition that confined her to her room for six consecutive months. For Maryam, pregnancy and childbirth—experiences uniquely tied to womanhood— are forms of emotional labor, which intensified her isolation and emotional burden.

After enduring long hours of labor—duties taken for granted as her responsibility—and six months of confinement due to illness, Maryam had hoped that life would return to normal after Nora's birth. Unfortunately, that hope was unmet. She reflects, "Eventually, I gave up working at the shop. I'm not saying I regret staying at home, how could I, my

daughters are the light of my life, it's just that I thought after all these sacrifices, at least my family would be close, but it surprised me to discover that my daughters lived in their own worlds" (80). This quote highlights the professional sacrifice Maryam made in stepping away from work to prioritize domestic life. More deeply, it captures the emotional disappointment she faces—the painful disconnect between her expectations of familial closeness and the reality of emotional distance.

Maryam's sacrifice was made with the hope that it would foster a close-knit family. Her words, "at least my family would be close," suggest that family cohesion was the minimum she expected in return for her efforts. This statement powerfully encapsulates the often overlooked emotional labor of immigrant mothers—women who navigate the complexities of cultural transition while striving to preserve familial unity. Maryam endeavors to safeguard the family from the threat of 'cultural assimilation' and the loss of their ethnic identity. Bouallegue argues, "the task of maintaining the family is very complicated; mothers are faced with their daughters' rebellion. As a result the mother-daughter relationship turns to be ambivalent and aggressive" (*Chinese American Women* 70). Yet, despite their sacrifices, mothers are sometimes met with the painful reality that their children have assimilated into a culture that values individual autonomy over collective family bonds.

Maryam's open disappointment in Nora's decision to prioritize her career over traditional family aspirations reflects a broader theme of generational disjunction. This disconnect often emerges when daughters of immigrants, like Nora, pursue paths that diverge from the values and expectations held by their mothers. The resulting tension highlights a clash between cultural heritage and modern, individualistic ambitions. For immigrant mothers like Maryam—who have made profound personal sacrifices to create opportunities for their children—this divergence can be particularly painful. Nora herself reflects on this tension,

describing her own journey of leaving medical school to become a musical composer by admitting she is seen as “the f*** up” of the family (92), underscoring the weight of unfulfilled expectations and cultural conflict.

The intergenerational conflict between Maryam and Nora arises from their differing expectations of womanhood, particularly concerning marriage, education and career. Nora’s career choices were never approved by her mother. Although Nora was accepted into medical school, she gave it up to pursue her passion for composing music. Throughout the novel, Maryam repeatedly insists that Nora reconsiders her decision, but Nora always rejects her mother’s advice, leading to several confrontations between them. Their relationship embodies the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing individualism, shining a light on the challenges of balancing legacy and ambition in a rapidly changing world.

This intergenerational conflict between Maryam and Nora not only highlights the tension between cultural heritage and individualism but also stresses the evolving nature of identity and belonging for immigrant families. As Nora navigates her own path, diverging from her mother’s expectations, she essentially redefines what “home” means to her, both culturally and personally. This negotiation of identity and belonging is a common experience for many immigrants and their children.

In exploring the multifaceted experiences of immigrants, it is essential to understand how the concept of home evolves and influences identity. Sara Ahmed articulates this complexity, stating, “Home becomes the impossibility and necessity of the subject’s future (one never gets there, but is always getting there), rather than the past that binds the subject to a given place” (Ahmed 78). According to her, home is both an unattainable ideal and a driving force in the subject’s journey through life. She suggests that home is not merely a

static concept, instead, it represents a dynamic aspiration- The longing for belonging, stability, and identity that shapes one's future.

As the daughter of Moroccan immigrants, Nora's struggle differs significantly from her mother's. The reader learns about cultural expectations for women mainly through Driss's point of view. Unlike the stereotypical traditional Moroccan Muslim father, Driss has rejected religion and embraced atheism. In contrast, Maryam becomes more devoted to Islamic values like modesty and faith. This ideological divide is especially clear during scenes focused on religious events. For example, Driss recounts a visit to the mosque on Eid, where a child tells Nora, "Cover your legs, sister," to which she sharply responds, "Who do you think you are, kid?" Driss proudly recalls this exchange, adding, "Do you think that maybe your faith has other things to worry about than my daughter's legs?" (59). This moment illustrates Driss's commitment to allowing his daughters the freedom to shape their own identities, unbound by traditional religious expectations.

Nora's perceptions of herself significantly influences her identity formation. This is illustrated through a pivotal scene near the end of the novel, where she invites Jeremy to the cabin in Joshua Tree. The narrative unfolds through both of their points of view in consecutive chapters, revealing contrasts in their experiences of the same incident. As Nora and Jeremy begin to get physical, she unexpectedly spots someone watching them through the window- who is later revealed to be Jeremy's friend, Fierro. When confronted about his presence, Fierro expresses curiosity about Jeremy's late-night activities, making an offensive comment, "I didn't know you like hajji p**** so much" (255). This triggers an argument between Jeremy and Fierro, escalating into a physical fight that ultimately results in Jeremy abandoning Nora in the cabin to join his friend. In this moment, Nora's self perception is challenged; the intrusion of outside judgement and Jeremy's reaction force her to confront the disparity between her aspirations for intimacy and the harsh realities of her circumstances.

Nora's point of view is notably introspective. She reveals to the reader, "Whenever I tried to interpret the expression in Fierro's eyes, I couldn't decide whether it was disgust or desire, but both made me feel like I was nothing more than a body, or even a commodity"(263). This sentiment directly aligns with objectification theory, which posits that women are often viewed as objects to be evaluated based on their appearance and sexual desirability (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). In this moment, Lalami portrays Nora, a second-generation immigrant Arab Muslim woman, as a character reflecting how Oriental women are often viewed as exotic objects by white men like Fierro. This perspective reduces women to simplistic stereotypes that serve the fantasies of white men, stripping them of individuality and depth. Edward Said critiques this dynamic in his seminal work *Orientalism*:

> Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing. (Said, 207)

In this quote, Said critiques the sexist and exoticizing view of 'Oriental women' in Western literature and travel writing. He points out how these representations often reduce women to objects of male fantasy, emphasizing stereotypical traits like heightened sensuality and submissiveness. This perspective reflects the intersection of Orientalist attitudes with gender biases, further reinforcing the notion of the Oriental "other" in Western imagination. Fierro's comments reduce Nora to her sexuality, implying that there is little else of value in her, and suggesting this may be the reason for Jeremy's growing distance in their friendship. In contrast, Nora is portrayed as a well-rounded character—an educated composer, a sharp conversationalist, and a courageous individual. When she confronts Jeremy about Fierro's remarks, she asserts her autonomy, stating, "I feel so violated." She rejects his attempts to

console her, making it clear that she neither needs nor asks for his protection (264). This scene between Nora and Jeremy marks a powerful subversion of the white knight narrative, as Nora reclaims her agency in the face of intersecting forces of sexism and racial objectification.

Ultimately, this section highlights how gender shapes the migration experience for women. Through the characters of Maryam and Nora, Lalami explores themes of silence, sacrifice, and the struggle to maintain family cohesion across cultural boundaries. The intergenerational conflict between mother and daughter underscores the complexities of identity formation for immigrant women as they navigate conflicting expectations of womanhood across generations and cultures.

2.2. Negotiating Identity: Female Migration and Intersectionality in Lalami's *The Other Americans*

The novel presents a multifaceted exploration of migration through characters who navigate the complex terrain of American society while carrying the weight of their ethnic background. This section examines how Lalami's work foregrounds the complexity of female migration that is provoked by the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. This complexity is vividly depicted through the character of Nora Guerraoui. Her navigation of her Moroccan-American identity and her pursuit of music as a means of cultural expression and resistance are skillfully used by Lalami to illustrate the diverse challenges faced by female migrants in reconciling multiple identities. Additionally, this portrayal demonstrates how creative expression can serve as a potent tool for asserting autonomy and resisting societal constraints.

Nora's character embodies the complex intersections of race, class, and gender that shape immigrant experiences in America. Nora occupies what Bhabha refers to as a liminal

space between cultures, classes and identities. To that matter, his metaphor of the stairwell as a liminal space offers a profound insight into the nature of cultural identity and interaction:

> The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. (5)

In this quote, Bhabha presents 'liminality' not merely as a static in-between state, but as a dynamic process of "symbolic interaction" that actively constructs and reconstructs cultural differences. The stairwell, with its constant "hither and thither" movement, becomes a powerful representation of the fluidity and temporality inherent in identity formation. The stairwell, as a connective tissue between supposedly distinct categories such as "upper and lower, black and white", becomes a space where these categories are simultaneously bridged and defined. By preventing identities from "settling into primordial polarities", Bhabha's liminal space opens up possibilities for hybrid cultural forms and identities that transcend simple binary oppositions. This concept provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of cultural interaction in an increasingly globalized world, where traditional boundaries are constantly being blurred and redefined.

Nora's racial identity positions her as the "other" in predominantly white spaces. This concept, from a sociological perspective, describes the process by which dominant groups construct and maintain social distance from marginalized groups, often based on ethnic differences. This othering involves the projection of negative characteristics onto the marginalized group, reinforcing stereotypes and justifying discriminatory practices. In the context of racial discrimination, the creation of "the other" serves to establish and perpetuate

power imbalances, allowing the dominant group to define itself in opposition to those it deems different or inferior (Schwalbe et al. 422-423). A concept that is excellently illustrated when Nora returns to Mojave following her father's passing, she experiences a renewed awareness of her otherness. Lalami reveals sentiments of alienation in the scene of the court hearing against her father's killer, Nora conveys to the reader her thoughts about how she and her mother, two women of color were the only people present on behalf of the deceased:

> Because why would anyone care about a dead man if the only people present at the hearing were his wife and his daughter. And how could anyone believe that someone like Baker was capable of premeditated killing when all his friends and family, the little girl and the pretty brunette included, were there for him? (163)

Nora sat in disbelief and guilt after the court's decision when they let the man who killed her father leave on bail at $10,000. Lalami reflects on the broader sociopolitical context through Nora's inner monologue:

> But if the roles had been reversed on the night of April 28th, and Mohammed Driss Guerraoui had killed a man he'd been fighting with for many years, would he have been charged with a count of hit-and-run? Would the D.A have so readily agreed to bail … the savagery of a man named Mohammed was rarely questioned, but his humanity always had to be proven. (165)

The hypothetical scenario presented reveals how racial stereotypes can influence perceptions of guilt and innocence. This aligns with the idea that race is a social construct that shapes legal and social outcomes, even in the absence of explicit prejudice (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Lalami's quote reflects the reality that in the eyes of the justice system, "the savagery of a man named Mohammed was rarely questioned, but his humanity always had to be proven" (165).

Class is another dimension to Nora's experience of migration. The Guerraoui family's economic status as small business owners places them in an ambiguous class position: financially stable enough to provide Nora and Salma with educational opportunities, including pursuit of her musical ambitions, yet still marked by the precarious nature of the immigrant livelihoods in America. The family's restaurant being vandalized after the September 11 attacks illustrates how quickly anti-immigrant sentiment can threaten the economic foundation that immigrants work so hard to establish. This incident causes the protagonist's mother to frequently rush back to asking to return to Morocco: " 'We should go back' my mother was saying. 'Go where?' 'Home, Casa' 'We can't go back, Maryam' " (37). This exchange shows how class security for immigrants is often tenuous and contingent upon broader socio political currents beyond their control. According to theorist René Girard, such an event vividly illustrates the concept of scapegoating and its impact on immigrant communities –a phenomenon defined as blaming an individual or group for problems not of their making (Oxford English Dictionary, "Scapegoat"). As he explains in *Violence and the Sacred*, societies often seek a scapegoat to displace internal tensions and restore a sense of order (10). During times of crisis, marginalized groups are often unjustly blamed and targeted as outlets for societal anxiety and anger. In this case, the Guerraoui family's restaurant, a symbol of their hard work and integration into American society, becomes a target of aggression fueled by anti-immigrant sentiment. This act demonstrates how quickly xenophobia can translate into tangible threats to the economic security and well-being of immigrant communities, disrupting their efforts to establish themselves and contribute to society.

Cultural values further complicate Nora's experience of migration. She has to steer expectations from both her Moroccan heritage and American society. Her mother, Maryam, represents traditional gender roles associated with their Moroccan background, while Nora's

pursuit of a non-traditional career path in music signifies her resistance to these constraints. When Maryam criticizes Nora's decision to pursue music instead of medical school she was told "you have your head in the clouds" (73) as an accusation. For immigrant women, career choices are not merely personal decisions but are weighted with cultural expectations and practical considerations related to reputation. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of intersectionality theory, which examines how multiple social identities intersect to shape individual experiences and choices (Crenshaw 140). For immigrant women, the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and immigrant status creates unique challenges and constraints in career decision-making. Cultural expectations play a significant role in shaping career choices for immigrant women. According to Berry's acculturation theory, immigrants must navigate between their heritage culture and the host culture, often leading to a negotiation of values and expectations (6-7).

Adding to the matrix of intersectionality, gender roles make this negotiation of cultural values particularly challenging for women, as traditional gender roles from their home countries may conflict with career opportunities in the new environment (Yakushko and Chronister 294). Furthermore, concerns about reputation within their ethnic communities can significantly influence career decisions. Social capital theory suggests that maintaining a positive reputation within one's community can provide valuable resources and support (Portes 3-4). Within Nora's Moroccan immigrant family, she is expected to prioritize marriage, motherhood, and a financially stable career like her mother Maryam, who embodies these values. For immigrant women like Nora, choosing a career that aligns with community expectations could have helped her preserve social status and ensure continued support from her ethnic networks; but choosing jazz music, a genre associated with nightlife and improvisation, places her far away from that.

The intersection of race, class, cultural values and gender creates a complex matrix of privilege and oppression in Nora's life. While her education and relative economic stability provide certain advantages, her experiences as a woman of color in America further subject her to various forms of discrimination and marginalization. Crenshaw emphasizes that the experiences of individuals with intersecting identities are shaped by complex overlapping systems of oppression. She explains that these systems do not simply add together but interact in ways that multiply the effects of discrimination, creating unique vulnerabilities for marginalized groups. As Crenshaw states, "Because the experience of intersectionality is not just additive but multiplicative, understanding the ways in which identities intersect allows us to see how social structures such as racism, sexism, and classism overlap to produce specific forms of marginalization" (1244). Her work focuses on the notion that social identities are interconnected, and their intersections can exacerbate inequalities beyond mere additive effects. As previously mentioned, Nora encountered discrimination that is simultaneously rooted in racial stereotypes and gender biases, resulting in lived experiences that cannot be adequately understood through an analysis of race or gender in isolation. Crenshaw's framework emphasizes the importance of examining how multiple systems of sociopolitical power operate in tandem to produce distinct and compound forms of marginalization.

2.3. Composing Identity: Music as Resistance and Self-Definition in *The Other Americans*

Nora's pursuit of music represents a powerful assertion of agency in the face of constraints imposed by her immigrant background and gender expectations. Her compositions function as cultural hybridization, fusing elements of Moroccan musical traditions with Western elements to create something distinctly her own. This artistic synthesis mirrors her own identity as neither fully American nor fully Moroccan, the reader learns by the end of the novel that Nora's piece was incomplete which symbolizes the

ongoing process of identity formation for women migrants -a unique amalgamation of both cultural traditions.

Music provides Nora with means of expression that transcends linguistic and cultural barriers allowing her to communicate experiences that might otherwise remain inarticulable. In Nora's case, it enables her as a marginalized individual to define herself on her own terms rather than being defined by dominant cultural perspectives. Her commitment to music also represents resistance to gendered expectations within both American and Moroccan contexts. In pursuing a creative career rather than a more conventional profession, she challenges her mother's traditional views about appropriate female aspirations. Simultaneously, by incorporating Moroccan musical elements into her compositions, she resists American pressure to assimilate completely and abandon her cultural heritage. She reflects on the rejection of her musical piece saying:

> In the jazz bands or chamber orchestras I'd performed with over the years, I was often the only woman, the odd one out. And I liked to write in different traditions, jazz and classical, which meant that my place in the music world was not quite settled. Perhaps it would never be. (136).

Nora's role as a jazz composer in *The Other Americans* not only carves out a space for her within a male-dominated field as an Arab Muslim woman of color but also embodies a site of 'hybridity' where identity is negotiated through cultural interplay rather than fixed origins. Her music, rooted in Jazz's improvisational fluidity and infused with fragments of Moroccan rhythms and melodies, becomes a metaphor for her evolving selfhood. Jazz, a genre historically tied to African American resistance and reinvention, mirrors Nora's navigation of marginalization. Its emphasis on spontaneity and adaptation allows her to transcend rigid

cultural binaries, refusing confinement to either a static "Moroccan self" or full assimilation into dominant American norms.

By blending disparate musical traditions, she creates a sound that exists between identities, echoing Bhandari's assertion that the 'third space' "does not necessarily depend on holding on the third's origin but fosters dynamic, evolving positions" (173). This sonic 'hybridity' parallels Nora's refusal to be reduced to singular labels–Arab, woman, immigrant– and instead asserts her agency in synthesizing new modes of belonging. Her performances, then, are not merely artistic acts but political ones, challenging patriarchal and colonial expectations through a medium that itself resists categorization. In this way, Nora's music becomes both a refuge and a rebellion, a 'third space' where her multifaceted identity is continually composed and reimagined.

The theme of Nora's musical composition further demonstrates how her art functions as an expression to counter dominant discourses and assert the legitimacy of marginalized perspectives. This is manifested in a feedback of one reviewer who describes her music as "too cerebral, Too out there, too something". (136) The reviewer's recognition suggests that Nora's artistic rendering of migration resonates with a specific audience that is not mainstream, because it emerges from lived experience rather than abstract imagination. Nora's turn to artistic expression beyond language symbolizes her search for a sense of self that cannot be articulated through words alone. She talks back to the labels given to her by white men as mentioned earlier in this section, by her lover's friend, and to the committee of all the music festivals she was refused to attend as a composer. It all comes down to her musical piece symbolizing the ongoing process of constructing her identity in a space where race, class, and gender intersect, proven by her piece being incomplete by the end of the novel.

In summary, Nora Guerraoui's intersectional experiences in *The Other Americans* reveal the complex realities of migration, where race, class, and gender intersect to shape both identity and opportunity. Nora's pursuit of music serves as a form of resistance against societal expectations and cultural constraints, symbolizing the ongoing journey of self-discovery and the challenges of navigating multiple worlds.

Chapter 3: Gender, Race and Migration in *Americanah*:

This chapter examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the lens of gendered migration, focusing on how the protagonist's experience is shaped by intersecting structures of race, gender, and class. Set against transnational backdrops in Nigeria and the United States, the chapter considers how colonial legacies, Western beauty standards, and institutional racism affect female migrant identity. Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness' and postcolonial feminist critiques, the chapter provides a theoretical context to explore how female migrants resist objectification and marginalization while asserting agency and reclaiming identity in host societies.

3.1. Gender and Migration

This complex representation of postcolonial identity and migration in *Americanah* also resonates with broader concerns raised by scholars and writers about the internal struggles faced by African nations in the aftermath of colonial rule. Adichie's portrayal of Nigeria—marked by corruption, instability, and failed leadership—reflects a deeper disillusionment shared by many post-independence intellectuals. As Yokossi and Koussouhon observe, the inability of many African nations—including Nigeria—to effectively govern themselves after independence has become a central theme in the works of Nigerian writers, who express their disappointment through literature (81).

In *The Woman, the Native, and the Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha highlights how Third World feminists critique the colonial legacy in postcolonial African societies. They argue that colonialism imposed patriarchal capitalist systems which marginalized women and disrupted traditional gender relations characterized by mutual dependence and balance (108). Trinh further illustrates how, in this context, African women are now often seen as intruders in male-dominated spaces (particularly certain jobs), confined to domestic roles through appeals

to reinterpreted traditions, and actively discouraged from challenging these socially constructed restrictions (116).

Additionally, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, a prominent Nigerian sociologist and feminist scholar, in her seminal work *The Invention of Women,* critically examines how the social category "woman" was constructed in Yoruba society under colonial rule. She asserts that gender is a byproduct of what she terms the "bio-logic" of Western culture—a cultural logic that privileges biological determinism and visual markers in the organization of society (122). She further explains that:

> The very process by which females were categorized and reduced to "women" made them ineligible for leadership roles. The basis for this exclusion was their biology, a process that was a new development in Yoruba society. The emergence of women as an identifiable category, defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations, resulted, in part, from the imposition of a patriarchal colonial state. (124)

The gendered hierarchies imposed by colonial systems, which established and legitimized male dominance over women, continue to shape African societies today, leaving postcolonial women disproportionately burdened by this legacy. As Bertolt argues:

> The new gender system introduced by colonization, consecrating the superiority of men over women was accepted by men in Africa who took advantage of new social hierarchies despite racial oppression . . . These dynamics of inequalities continue today and are characterized by the domination of patriarchy, the inequality between men and women. (14)

This systemic privileging of men, institutionalized under colonial rule, evolved into enduring patriarchal structures that still marginalize women in many aspects of life.

As a postcolonial feminist writer, Adichie consistently critiques systemic gender injustices throughout her fiction and nonfiction works, focusing on the Nigerian and other societies. Some of her works like *Purple Hibiscus*, examines how patriarchy is reinforced through cultural, religious, and familial structures in Nigeria. Similarly, in her wildly famous TED talk, "We Should All Be Feminists," which was later expanded into a long essay, Adichie broadens her scope to address gender inequality in both Nigeria and the globe, demonstrating how societal norms restrict women's potential by imposing limiting gender roles from childhood.

In postcolonial patriarchal societies like Nigeria, where powerful men typically dominate access to economic resources, women often face systemic restrictions. Many Nigerian women navigate such contexts through having relationships with powerful men as a strategy for economic survival and upward social mobility. In *Americanah,* this dynamic is precisely illustrated through the character of Aunty Uju—a medical doctor and Ifemelu's close family member—who becomes the mistress of a high-ranking military official known as "The General." The General deliberately keeps Uju financially dependent on him by controlling resources rather than giving her direct access to money. She reveals the following to Ifemelu, "'Oga never gives me big money. He pays all the bills and he wants me to ask for everything I need'" (76). Uju's constant attention to her appearance and catering to the General's desires demonstrates the significant emotional and physical labor required to sustain such relationships wherein male provision serves as a mechanism to subtly constrain female autonomy.

Ifemelu's growing disillusionment with this dynamic shows her inner rejection of the social structures and patriarchal expectations placed on women in Nigerian society, as the narrator observes:

> For the first time, Ifemelu felt older than Aunty Uju, wiser and stronger than Aunty Uju, and she wished that she could wrest Aunty Uju away, shake her into a clear-eyed self, who would not lay her hopes on The General, slaving and shaving for him, always eager to fade his flaws. It was not as it should be. (83)

Adichie exposes how patriarchal religious and cultural institutions in Nigeria often enforce unequal moral standards that specifically target and restrict female expression and autonomy. This is exemplified in a church event where a man known as "Chief Omenka"—a celebrated "419" fraudster (a reference to Section 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code dealing with financial fraud)—is honored for his big donations from money that is gained from illicit conduct to the church. Conversely, Sister Ibinabo, a powerful and influential Church figure, publicly shames a girl named Christie, declaring that "'Any girl that wears tight trousers wants to commit the sin of temptation'"(50). This illustrates how moral control is imposed over women's bodies by framing personal clothing choices as sinful. Ifemelu perceives this sanctimonious behavior as "poisonous spite [Sister Ibinabo] claimed was religious guidance"' (51). This criticism of gendered moral policing aligns with Adichie's observation in her TED talk "We Should All Be Feminists," "We teach girls shame. Close your legs. Cover yourself. We make them feel as though by being born female, they are already guilty of something" [00:18:08–00:18:20].

Ifemelu's rejection of her oppressive and hypocritical environment is symbolized in her decision to exit the Church event, a pivotal moment in her awakening. This internal shift is captured through Adichie's imagery: "suddenly the last thing Ifemelu wanted was to be in that small room full of shadows" (51), underscoring Ifemelu's desire to escape these suffocating social structures. This moment serves as a turning point. The narrator notes, "Ifemelu was looking forward to being away from home, to the independence of owning her

own time" (89). Her desire to attend university far from home emphasizes Ifemelu's yearning for autonomy and freedom. When university strikes disrupt her plans, she takes the opportunity to migrate, challenging the systemic constraints that life imposes on her. This decision to leave Nigeria for the United States marks her break from the limiting structures and the start of her journey of self-discovery.

3.2.Racial Awakening and Assimilation Struggles

In her influential TED talk "Allegories on Race and Racism," Dr. Camara Jones, a renowned physician-anthropologist and anti-racism activist, declares: "Race is clearly a social classification, not a biological descriptor. The social interpretation of how we look in a race-conscious society" [00:02:35–00:02:45]. Her definition shows how racial categories are arbitrary, a reflection of societal constructs rather than natural biological divisions among human populations.

Racialized societies like the U.S. impose identity categories based primarily on physical characteristics, disregarding the complex ethnic, cultural, and national identities individuals carry with them. Ifemelu articulates the transformative experience of becoming black in America when she states, "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black, and I only became black when I came to America" (290). African immigrants such as Ifemelu face a strong shift from their pre-migration modes of self-identification to a new socially imposed racial identity that carries historical and social implications completely disconnected from their personal, national, and ethnic background.

The protagonist, Ifemelu, can be considered a semi-autobiographical figure for Adichie, as the author's own experiences of racial awakening, shared in interviews discussing *Americana*, are in parallel with those of the character (SVT 2013; Librairie Mollat 2015). This is particularly apparent when Adichie recounts, "In Nigeria, I didn't think of myself as black,

and then I went to the U.S. and I became black . . . in Nigeria, I identified as Igbo . . . [and] as Christian . . . then in the U.S., suddenly black . . . [which] often meant things that were not very positive" [Librairie Mollat 00:03:30–00:04:04].

For Ifemelu, becoming Black in America does not replace her national or ethnic identity but rather adds a complex, imposed layer to it—one that comes with the historical weight of racial oppression. Landry observes, "African immigrants have become what I call an 'ethnicized Other,' a distinct ethnic group within the already racialized and marginalized black community and the larger population as a whole" (1–2). This imposed racial categorization becomes a burden as Ifemelu navigates a society where race determines social position in ways she never previously experienced in Nigeria. Adichie illustrates how Ifemelu must learn to wear this new identity, one that comes with predetermined assumptions, expectations, and limitations in the American social contexts.

As Ifemelu later writes about the experience of being an African immigrant in America, she writes about her first interracial encounter in the U.S and how it was the starting point of her racial awakening in a blog named: **To My Fellow Non-American Blacks, in America, You Are Black, baby.** She writes:

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—you say "I'm not black" only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder. And you want none of that. (220)

Ifemelu comes to realize that American society operates within a binary, essentialist logic that opposes whiteness to Blackness, not as a neutral difference, but as a hierarchical relationship in which Blackness is marked as inferior. This logic ignores a wide spectrum of ethnic and cultural diversity into a single racialized category: "Black".

For Ifemelu, becoming Black in America meant navigating the stereotypes and negative connotations imposed on her racial identity. Collins explains, "U.S. Blacks are assigned all of the negative characteristics opposite and inferior to those reserved for Whites" (*Black Feminist* 89). While working for Kimberly, an upper-middle-class white woman living in a grand stone house with white pillars, Ifemelu answers the door for a white carpet cleaner, who showed hostility because he assumed that she was the homeowner, a status his racialized worldview could not reconcile with her Blackness. But the moment he realized that Ifemelu occupied the position of the help rather than being the lady of the house, his hostility dissolved into cheerfulness. The man's comfort was restored only when the Black person in front of him returned to a position of service to white wealth rather than possessing it herself. The text notes:

> He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility. . . . he thought she was a homeowner, and she was not what he expected to see . . . the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be. . . . She would never forget him, and she would begin the blog post "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class" with the story of his dramatic change, and end with: *It didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned, I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a*

> *whole are often lumped with 'Poor Whites.' Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed* [original emphasis]. (166)

This interaction reveals that Blackness in America is constructed not merely as a racial category, but as a subordinate social position—uncovering yet another dimension of the imposed racial identity that Ifemelu must navigate.

In white-dominated societies, the burden of daily microaggressions imposes assimilation on racially or culturally marginalized individuals as a survival necessity, denying them the choice to embrace their authentic identities. In the beginning, Ifemelu demonstrates a critical stance toward assimilation, unaware of the embedded hierarchies and systemic inequalities that structure American racial and cultural dynamics. Her first summer in the U.S. marks a moment of disillusionment as she observes a significant change in Aunty Uju's identity performance, particularly in the new way of pronouncing her name as "you-joo" instead of "oo-joo." Ifemelu was alarmed by Uju's new "apologetic and self-abasing" persona, which accompanies her American accent, a disguise that she puts in front of the watchful eyes of Americans (104–108). Similarly, Ifemelu is struck by the Americanness of her old Nigerian friend Ginika, who had migrated to the U.S. earlier. Formerly embodying the ideal Nigerian body type, Ginika now reminds Ifemelu of "dried stockfish" after undergoing a great weight loss, a transformation that reflects Ginika's adaptation to American beauty norms that idealize thinness, in contrast to the fuller body ideals celebrated in Nigeria (122–124).

However, this critical stance towards assimilation begins to change upon entering college, where Ifemelu becomes increasingly aware that her foreign accent marks her as an outsider. During college registration day, Cristina Tomas, a white administrator, deliberately speaks to Ifemelu with an exaggerated slowness, assuming that her foreign accent indicates a lack of English proficiency. The narrator describes this incident:

> Cristina Tomas said, “I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" and she realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, 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. . . . She shrank like a dried leaf. . . . And in the following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent. (133–134)

As an immigrant in the United States who speaks English with a Nigerian dialect, Ifemelu encounters racially biased assumptions regarding her intellectual competence. Skutnabb-Kangas observes, “people whose mother tongue is not a ‘standard’ variety of the language they use are often stigmatized” (qtd. in Dovchin 2). In response, she adopts an American accent as a form of self-protective strategy. This linguistic adaptation aligns with what Patricia Hill Collins describes as “the mask of behavioral conformity,” which marginalized individuals develop by “becoming familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (*Black Feminist* 97). Eventually, Ifemelu mastered an Americanized English that “made race pollsters on the telephone assume that [she] [was] white and educated” (177). This act of linguistic appropriation marks a significant step in her assimilation into a newly constructed American identity. As Iain Chambers notes, “[l]anguage is not primarily a means of communication; it is, above all, a means of cultural construction in which our very selves and sense are constituted” (22). Her linguistic shift, therefore, is less a simple choice than a strategic response to systemic bias, vividly illustrating how the pressure to conform linguistically forces immigrants like Ifemelu to negotiate their identity within frameworks designed to exclude their authentic selves.

However, the maintenance of this inauthentic linguistic performance imposed a considerable psychological burden on Ifemelu, a direct consequence of its consciously constructed nature. The narrator describes, “the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds” (173). Echoing the experience of Uju, Ifemelu learns how to conceal her natural speech patterns, therefore her Nigerian identity, beneath a linguistic “white mask” when she adopts an Americanized English. The narrator observes, “[Ifemelu] had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers” (175). This identity bifurcation aligns with W.E.B. Du Bois’s foundational concept of ‘double consciousness,’ which theorizes the internal fragmentation experienced by Black individuals navigating an authentic self, alongside a performative self-adapted for white society. This concept was introduced in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk*, where Du Bois defines it as “a peculiar sensation . . . this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others . . . One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro . . . two unreconciled strivings” (16–17). Despite having been formulated over a century ago, the concept remains critically relevant, encapsulating the enduring struggles of Black individuals within persistent structures of racial inequality.

Ifemelu’s decision to abandon her American accent signifies a pivotal moment of decolonization and the reclamation of her authentic self. This decision was prompted by a phone conversation with a telemarketer who, mistaking her for an American due to her accent, offers a compliment that triggers a sense of shame. Confronting this internal conflict, Ifemelu raises a critical question, “[w]hy is it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?” (175). This reflects her growing awareness of the implicit power structures embedded in linguistic assimilation, which valorise whiteness. In rejecting the American

accent, Ifemelu reclaims her Nigerian English as a form of resistance and self-affirmation. The narrator captures her sense of liberation in this act, “she felt a rush of pleasure . . . [t]his was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake” (175). Her accent, therefore, is not merely a linguistic choice, but a powerful marker of identity, cultural heritage, and authentic mode of self-expression.

Americanah carefully captures Ifemelu’s complex transformation from identifying primarily as a Nigerian immigrant to understanding and navigating life as a Black in the U.S. Her journey reflects the struggles faced by African immigrants in American society, which penalizes their authentic differences by imposing new identities on them while erasing their original ones. Consequently, these individuals struggle to achieve a balance between their authentic identities, which limit their social mobility, and the new identities they adopt to integrate into society, often requiring a lot of psychological and physiological effort.

3.3. Intersectional Becoming: The Impact of Gender and Race on the Female Immigrant Identity

Beyond racial oppression, both Ifemelu’s precarious immigration and financial status intersect to intensify her marginalization, intensifying her exposure to gendered vulnerabilities and workplace exploitation. Scholarship reveals systemic deficiencies in immigration frameworks, particularly regarding their failure to protect vulnerable immigrants from intersecting forms of discrimination and abuse. Menjívar and Salcido argue, “History reveals that racism and sexism are entrenched in immigration laws of the receiving countries” (900). Furthermore, in a study that attempts to systematically analyse migrant experiences of gender-based violence (GBV), it was found that that migrants with unstable residency status are less likely to report incidents of gender-based violence, since they face substantial economic,

social, and institutional barriers, in addition to the fear of deportation, detention, or social exclusion (Tan and Kuschminder 1–2). Those incidents typically originate from unequal power relationships between the involved parties, and those who experience such incidents often suffer enduring negative effects that continue to impact their lives (Tan and Kuschminder 8–9).

While all immigrants are vulnerable to abuse, certain groups within this already marginalized population may encounter higher risks. Female migrants in particular are exposed not only to structural challenges but also to other vulnerabilities related to their gender. A study using data from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) found that immigrant girls were nearly twice as likely as their non-immigrant peers to report repeated incidents of sexual assault (Decker et al. 503). Similarly, Mindlin et al. emphasize that immigrant women may be particularly vulnerable to sexual assault (3). Hence, migrant women are subject to intersecting forms of oppression that make them particularly an easy target for exploitation and harm. Their gender and immigration status do not operate in isolation but instead reinforce one another, amplifying their exposure to abuse and reducing their access to justice.

Immigrants face structurally unrealistic barriers, created and upheld by complicit legal systems that render immigrants vulnerable to abuse. Ifemelu's encounter with sexual exploitation exemplifies how these barriers render migrant women disproportionately vulnerable to gender-specific abuse. Ifemelu's undocumented employment status, born from restrictive visa policies, forced her to work illegally—by using another woman's ID—to pay her rent and tuition (106), leaving her unprotected by law, and undesired by employers of legitimate jobs. As a result, many job interviews Ifemelu attends turn unsuccessful; the only one that yields an immediate offer is a disturbing proposition from a tennis coach who frames

sexual contact as a form of relaxation therapy. The narrator describes the dialogue between Ifemelu and the tennis coach during the job interview:

> Look, you're not a kid,' he said. 'I work so hard I can't sleep. I can't relax. I don't do drugs so I figured I need help to relax. You can give me a massage, help me relax, you know. I had somebody doing it before, . . . Helped her with a lot of her college debt.' He had said this to many other women, she could tell, from the measured pace with which the words came out. . . . she regretted that she had come. (144)

The tennis coach's offer operates within a well-established pattern of sexual coercion, wherein financial leverage substitutes for consent. His casual reference to a previous beneficiary reveals an institutionalized practice of targeting indebted migrant women, weaponizing their socioeconomic vulnerability for sexual exploitation.

Although initially hesitant, Ifemelu's escalating financial distress compelled her to accept the tennis coach's offer. She finds herself inside his home, a space marked by a clear imbalance of power that makes her particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The text notes, "She should leave now. The power balance was tilted in his favor . . . ;she felt defeated . . . she was [there] with a stranger who already knew she would stay. . . . She did not want to be [there], . . . He had not forced her. She had come here on her own" (153–154). This quote further illustrates the nature of such dynamics, in which predators are acutely aware of how to select their victims. Ifemelu's presence was driven more by the necessity to survive than by personal desire—yet, she found herself unable to leave.

Despite the absence of overt physical force, Ifemelu's presence and compliance are shaped by coercive socioeconomic conditions, rendering her consent to be morally questionable. Ifemelu in this situation can not be considered as an autonomous subject capable of genuine consent. She is an undocumented immigrant woman, excluded from legal

protection and economic stability, and thus positioned in extreme structural vulnerability. In such context where individual agency is constrained, the encounter aligns more accurately with sexual assault than with consensual sex work. Pemberton and Loeb illustrate, "Sexual assault, or sexual behavior that occurs without consent being obtained or freely given . . . These [sexual] behaviors include, but are not limited to, those involving physical force; they also include coercion, manipulation, threats, and situations in which the victim is not able to provide consent" (2). The aftermath of this exploitation induces trauma in Ifemelu, culminating in depression, a psychological consequence stemming from experiences of sexual violation.

Ifemelu's migratory experience is shaped not only by the interplay between her precarious legal status and systemic gendered power imbalances, but also by the intersection of race and gender, which subjects her to structural oppressions distinct from those confronting Black men. Being a Black woman navigating a white-dominated society exposes Ifemelu to 'double marginalization,' through a simultaneous racial and gendered exclusion, which is particularly evident in the prevailing standards of beauty that elevate whiteness and devalue Blackness. Collins explains:

> Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair. Race, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness. (*Black Feminist* 89)

Cheryl Thompson, a Canadian scholar specializing in Black cultural and media studies, further contextualizes this dynamic within our globalized contemporary world when she

writes, "[It] is fair to say that in the United States, and in many countries that are influenced by the United States (largely through mediated forms), the current standard of beauty is a White, young, slim, tall, and upper-class woman" (845–46). Hegemonic, globally dominant Eurocentric beauty standards function as a racialized apparatus of social control. This system, which systematically positions Black women as the devalued "Other," relegates their features and bodies to the periphery of acceptability, and thus beauty standards emerge as a critical site where the combined forces of race and gender distinctly shape Ifemelu's migrant identity and negatively impact her experience.

Beyond the White/Black aesthetics, the good/bad hair binary emerges as a harmful construct that systematically devalues natural Black hair textures and styles, affecting Black women's self-perception. Ingrid Banks writes in her book *Hair Matters. Beauty, Power and Black Women's Consciousness*, "The 'good hair' and 'bad hair' distinction is probably the most indelible construction of hair that occupies the psyche of African Americans" (28). This biased construct compels Black women to navigate not only external societal pressures but also internalized notions of hair aesthetic worth that reinforce the broader Eurocentric beauty standards, marginalizing their authentic self-expression.

Ifemelu faces systemic barriers that reinforce Eurocentric beauty norms, particularly in professional settings where her socioeconomic success becomes conditional to altering her hair texture. The connection between race, gender, White beauty norms, and economic opportunity becomes observable in the novel when Ifemelu's career counselor advises, "'My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. . . . We want you to get that job'" (202). After spending enough time living in the U.S., Ifemelu internalizes the oppressive notion that "professional means straight is the best but if it's going to be curly it has to be the white kind . . . but never kinky" (204). This professional/unprofessional binary demonstrates how

American society compels Black women to alter their natural appearance as a prerequisite for socioeconomic advancement, gradually changing their self-perception and diminishing their authenticity.

Burdened by prolonged unemployment and structural constraints, Ifemelu grows increasingly willing to conform in order to access legal employment. This pursuit of economic stability exposes her to further struggles. Upon recognizing pervasive workplace stigma against natural Black hair, Ifemelu resorts to straightening her hair to appear more 'professional' and enhance employability. This act confirms the argument in the previous section: assimilation is not a choice but rather an imposed strategy necessitated by survival.

By occupying the role of the 'objectified other,' Black women encounter distinct challenges shaped by the intersection of race and gender in racialized societies, significantly impacting their psychological and physical health. In her way to straighten her hair and get "the white-girl swing" (203), Ifemelu experienced a deep sense of alienation. Montle explains, "Hair representation is a conspicuous identity of Blackness . . . it holds 'emotive qualities' which are associated with the lived experiences of Black women" (118–119). The narrator reflects on how Ifemelu's hair is transformed by the straightening process, "hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin" (203). The contrast between 'hanging down rather than standing up' suggests a loss of authority. Also, the physical imagery of hair 'hanging down' can be read as a symbolic surrender to white beauty standards. Ifemelu's hair once signified her Nigerian and African identity, and has now been compromised for cultural conformity under social and professional pressure. Ifemelu's hair transformation "de-Africanise[s]" her (Henry 289).

Upon leaving the salon, Ifemelu's alienation intensified, as she was completely disconnected from her new self. The narrator describes, "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" (203). Ifemelu's inability to identify with her transformed self—'[s]he did not recognize herself'—accompanied by the grief over the loss of her natural hair that felt like 'something organic dying which should not have died,' reflects the unique alienation Black women endure under hegemonic white beauty norms. Thompson further emphasizes this oppressive dynamic, noting that "all women, irrespective of race, have been socialized to adhere to a beauty standard that has caused psychological damage . . . ;however, Black women are unique in that we are asked not just to strive to attain mainstream standards of beauty, but to have such standards completely override our natural being" (844). Consequently, Eurocentric beauty ideals enforce not merely adaptation but a radical erasure of Black women's inherent identity by demanding the suppression of their natural state. Following this psychological distress due to her hair transformation, Ifemelu endures severe physical consequences, including scalp damage and hair loss caused by the chemical relaxers (203–208).

Even though Ifemelu's decision to straighten her hair was pragmatic, prompted by professional expectations, it did not insulate her from the deep psychological and physiological distress that accompanies the process. This distress mirrors the broader struggles Black women face when conforming to Eurocentric beauty standards, often internalizing self-rejection. As Ashe observes, "the straightening of hair is a means through which Black women seek to align with White society's ideals of beauty, however unconsciously" (qtd. in Montle 120). Thus, even ostensibly practical, career-driven choices remain embedded within systemic racialized beauty norms that extend far beyond individual agency.

Ifemelu eventually internalizes Eurocentric beauty standards, a struggle that becomes increasingly apparent after she follows her friend Wambui's advice to "cut [her] hair and go natural" (208). Confronting her reflection, she perceives a distorted image of herself. The narrator observes, "She was all big eyes and big head. At best, she looked like a boy; at worst, like an insect. . . . In the bathroom mirror, her hair had startled her, dull and shrunken from sleep, like a mop of wool sitting on her head" (208–209). The short, kinky texture of Ifemelu's natural hair is unmatched by her internalized notions of beauty. As a result, she starts to associate its appearance with masculinity, a perception reinforced by dominant beauty norms that equate femininity with straight, long hair. Ingrid Banks suggests, "[t]he desire to have long hair relates to perceptions of what is considered feminine, and those traits are associated with white women" (91). Ifemelu describes her hair as a "mop of wool," further emphasizing the persistence of racialized stereotypes that devalue Black hair, a legacy rooted in colonial ideologies. Ellis-Hervey et al. note that during slavery, "White men had hair on their heads, while Africans had "wool" on theirs. As a result of this mentality, slaves were required to wear rags on their heads to hide their "undone" hair or iron their hair to appear more acceptable by White standards and to avoid offending White people (871). This historical dehumanization resurfaces in Ifemelu's self-perception; after cutting her hair, she agonizes, "[w]hat had she done? She looked unfinished, as though the hair itself, short and stubby, was asking for attention, for something to be done to it, for *more* [original emphasis]. . . . she went to the drugstore, Curt's baseball hat pulled over her head" (208). Her discomfort reveals how the internalized gaze of whiteness renders her natural state unfamiliar and undesirable, compelling her to conceal it. Banks affirms that "black women are no longer held in submission by chains, nor by segregation, yet images of beauty in U.S. society are stacked against them" (46).

Furthermore, the profound impact of internalized white beauty standards extends beyond shattering Ifemelu's self-confidence, actively poisoning her interpersonal relationships. This becomes particularly evident when she discovers emails between her ex-boyfriend Curt and another woman—emails that include photographs of "[a] woman who liked her hair and thought Curt would like it too" (210). Confronting Curt becomes a breaking point for Ifemelu, as feelings of inferiority and unattractiveness rise to the surface. She accuses him, "'All your girlfriends had long flowing hair'" (210). At this moment, Ifemelu mentally recalls all Curt's past partners, all of whom possessed conventionally beautiful hair, including this new girl who had long and straight hair. Overwhelmed by this comparison, Ifemelu closes the laptop, feeling "small and ugly" (211). Ingrid Banks explains:

> What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women's hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society . . . Even if hair is only one of many markers of femininity, or lack thereof, it is definitely one of the most powerful. (2–93)

In this quote, Banks underscores how hair functions as a racialized and gendered signifier, one that positions Black women outside dominant paradigms of attractiveness.

In a society that rewards conformity while punishing authenticity, Black women face intense societal policing of their natural hair choices. After Ifemelu decided to wear "her hair a very short, overly combed and overly oiled Afro" (211), she encountered intrusive assumptions about her sexual orientation—"Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?" (211)— as well as questions about whether her hairstyle carries political significance, "'Does it mean anything? Like, something political?'" (211). Notably, this policing is not limited to white observers. When Ifemelu is out with Curt, a Black man passes

by and mutters, "'[y]ou ever wonder why he likes you looking all jungle like that?'" (212), a comment that exposes the internalization of anti-Black beauty ideals within the Black community itself. Aunt Uju had also given her a similar remark when she said, "[Curt] really likes you . . . even with your hair like . . . jute" (216). Collins highlights, "African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty—standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another" (*Black Feminist* 89–90). This multilayered scrutiny from white society, Black men, and even other Black women demonstrates how natural hair functions as a contested site for negotiating respectability, femininity, and political opinions.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's journey toward self-acceptance highlights the significant role of media representations in shaping Black women's perception. A defining moment occurs when Ifemelu embraces her natural hair, marking a significant shift in her relationship with her identity. The narrator describes this transformation, "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" (213). Central to this transformation is the online community *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*. This digital platform offers a supportive environment where Ifemelu engages with other Black women who share personal testimonies, hair-care tips, and strategies for navigating a society that often marginalizes them (212–213). Within this virtual world, Ifemelu no longer feels deviant but rather affirmed and normalized. This online community can be viewed as a "safe space", a concept Patricia Hill Collins defines as a site "where Black women speak freely" (*Black Feminist* 100). Collins demonstrates the power of these safe spaces when she writes:

> These spaces are not only safe—they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other. In these spaces Black women "observe the feminine images of the

> ‘larger’ culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community.” (*Black Feminist* 101)

Such communities can challenge dominant beauty norms and empower Black women to reclaim their identities.

Although empowering platforms like *HappilyKinkyNappy.com* can provide beauty affirmation for Black women, their influence remains constrained within a broader media landscape that sharply privileges Eurocentric beauty standards. As Thompson observes, “While White women have lots of issues about their hair, they also have lots of affirmation for their hair. Black people don’t have the overall cultural affirmation that counters the negative obsession” (840). This Imbalance becomes increasingly apparent in a revealing encounter where Ifemelu challenges Curt’s assumption that mainstream magazines are racially skewed (294–295). As Ifemelu points out the systematic erasure of dark-skinned Black women, she states, “So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines . . . Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me. . . . Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* even exists?” (295). Byrd and Tharps attribute this a phenomenon of marginalization to the hegemony of white aesthetics, “Since the beauty standards in [America] are set according to a White aesthetic—from Miss America to the Barbie doll—Black women are left with precious few places to find an image of beauty that showcases unstraightened tresses and natural styles” (qtd. in Thompson 841). Ifemelu’s awareness of the media’s power in shaping perceptions is further illustrated when she responds, “[w]hat if every magazine you opened and every film you watched had beautiful women with hair like jute? You would be admiring my hair now” (216), to Uju after she described her hair as ‘jute’.

To conclude, Ifemelu's migration from Nigeria to the United States traces a journey that illuminates the intersectional marginalization confronting Black women immigrants from the Global South. Ifemelu initially seeks assimilation by concealing her authentic self, hoping for protection and belonging, as she navigates identities and stereotypes imposed through a racialized and gendered American lens. However, her strategy of seeking assimilation ultimately fails, exacerbating her feelings of alienation. Consequently, she begins a process of self-reclamation, learning to navigate American society while affirming her unique identity and differences. Through Ifemelu's narrative, Adichie challenges the dominant racial and gendered scripts that seek to silence migrant Black women; instead, she affirms that in a society eager to define them, power lies in resisting imposed narratives and daring to *speak*, *live*, and *flourish* in one's unfiltered truth.

Conclusion

This work explored the complexities of gendered migration through the analysis of contemporary literary texts. It argued that migration is not a gender-neutral process, and that gendered constructs significantly influence every stage of the migratory experience. This study adopted a feminist intersectional approach to examine how gender intersects with other social identities such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality to shape the experiences of migrant women. It challenged traditional, male-centric perspectives on migration by centering the experiences of women and highlighting the heterogeneity of their experiences.

The first chapter, "Theorizing Gendered Migration: History, Theory, and Intersectionality," established the study's theoretical foundation. It examined the historical evolution of gendered migration studies, emphasizing the importance of feminist perspectives. The chapter revealed that early migration research often overlooked the distinct experiences of women, reducing them to dependents of male migrants. It emphasized the need to consider the particularity of women's experiences, shaped by cultural expectations, familial obligations, and individual aspirations. The chapter further introduced and explained the concept of intersectionality, highlighting how gender interplays with other social categories to shape individual experiences. It argued that migration is not merely a matter of economic or political factors, but a personal and social experience shaped by cultural expectations, familial obligations, and individual aspirations.

The second chapter, "Gendered Identity and Displacement in *The Other Americans*", analyzed *The Other Americans* by Laila Lalami through the lens of intersectionality and cultural identity. It explored the complex journey that Nora and Maryam undergo in their quest for a migrant identity as Moroccan immigrants in the United States while negotiating intergenerational tensions, cultural clashes, and the multilayered nature of belonging. The

chapter focused on the themes of silence, sacrifice, and the struggle to maintain family cohesion across cultural boundaries. The study showed the fact that Maryam's silence is considered a form of resistance against cultural expectations, while Nora's pursuit of music symbolizes her assertion of agency in the face of societal constraints. In this chapter, we argued that the intergenerational conflict between mother and daughter was used by Lalami to shed light on the complexities of identity formation for immigrant women as they explore conflicting expectations of womanhood across generations and cultures.

The third chapter, "Gender and Migration", examined Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* to illuminate the particularity of the marginalization confronting Black migrant women. It explores the protagonist's struggle against the stereotypes that she is subjected to as a result of living in a racialized and gendered society The chapter argued that Ifemelu's attempts at assimilation by concealing her true self were driven by the desire for acceptance and integration. However, this strategy failed and exacerbated her alienation, leading her on a journey of self-reclamation, learning to bargain between American identity and the peculiarity of her core identity. In this chapter, it was shown that Ifemelu's experiences in America forced her to confront the complexities of race, gender, and class, resulting in a deeper understanding of herself and the challenges tailored for her as a Black woman in America.

Overall, this dissertation demonstrated the value of analyzing contemporary literature to understand gendered migration. Through *The Other Americans* and *Americanah,* the study revealed the diverse challenges and strategies of migrant women as they negotiate their identities and reshape their lives. The findings contribute a more comprehensive understanding of gendered migration, challenging simplistic narratives and highlighting the contradictions inherent in migrant women's experiences.

Future research could explore a broader range of cultural backgrounds and examine literature's role in fostering empathy toward migrant communities.

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Résumé

Cette étude explore les complexités de la migration genrée, en se concentrant sur les expériences des femmes migrantes et leur négociation d'identité dans de nouveaux contextes culturels The Other Americans de Laila Lalami et Americanah de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Remettre en question la notion de migration comme un processus neutre en termes de genre, en faisant valoir que les constructions genrées façonnent de manière significative chaque étape de l'expérience migratoire. L'étude utilise une perspective intersectionnelle féministe en se concentrant sur les intersections de genre, de race, de classe, d'ethnicité et de sexualité et leur rôle dans la formation des expériences des femmes migrantes. L'étude constate que les femmes migrantes sont confrontées à des défis uniques liés aux attentes culturelles, aux obligations familiales, à la discrimination raciale et sexuelle et à l'exploitation sur le lieu de travail. Une attention particulière est accordée aux thèmes de l'adaptation culturelle, des conflits intergénérationnels, de la discrimination raciale, de l'oppression de genre et de la revendication identitaire. L'analyse révèle également la résilience et l'agentivité des femmes migrantes, démontrant comment elles naviguent stratégiquement à travers ces défis par la résistance, l'affirmation de soi et la formation de nouvelles identités hybrides. L'objectif central est de contribuer à une compréhension plus complète de la migration genrée, en remettant en question les récits simplistes et en soulignant les contradictions inhérentes aux expériences des femmes migrantes.

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة تعقيدات الهجرة بين الجنسين، مع التركيز على تجارب النساء المهاجرات وتفاوضهن على الهوية ضمن سياقات ثقافية جديدة الأمريكيون الآخرون بقلم ليلى لالامي وأمريكانا بقلم شيماماندا نجوزي أديتشي. تحدي فكرة الهجرة كعملية محايدة جنسانيًا، بحجة أن البنيات الجندرية تشكل بشكل كبير كل مرحلة من مراحل تجربة الهجرة. وتستخدم الدراسة عدسة تقاطعية نسوية تركز على التقاطعات بين الجنس والعرق والطبقة والانتماء العرقي والجنسانية ودورها في تشكيل تجارب النساء المهاجرات. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن النساء المهاجرات يواجهن تحديات فريدة تتعلق بالتوقعات الثقافية، والالتزامات الأسرية، والتمييز العنصري والجنساني، والاستغلال في مكان العمل. يتم إيلاء اهتمام خاص لموضوعات التكيف الثقافي، والصراع بين الأجيال، والتمييز العنصري، والقمع بين الجنسين، واستعادة الهوية. ويكشف التحليل أيضًا عن مرونة النساء المهاجرات وقدرتهن على التصرف، موضحًا كيف يتعاملن استراتيجيًا مع هذه التحديات من خلال المقاومة وتأكيد الذات وتشكيل هويات هجينة جديدة. والهدف الرئيسي هو المساهمة في فهم أكثر شمولا للهجرة بين الجنسين، وتحدي الروايات التبسيطية وتسليط الضوء على التناقضات الكامنة في تجارب النساء المهاجرات.