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BECOMING BLACK: IFEMELU'S JOURNEY FROM NIGERIAN TO AFRICAN AMERICAN IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVEL AMERICANAH

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Abstract

Migration has always been a part of human history. With modern transportation and communication, thousands of individuals across the world, especially from the Third World, left their homes to find economic stability. Migration theory has historically focused on the factors that lead to international migration, often neglecting to consider the unique migration experiences based on gender. Insufficient theoretical foundations make it challenging to elucidate phenomena such as the factors influencing women's migration. Only recently has it become a major concern on a global scale, with literary theories of migration emphasizing women's migration and the multicultural diaspora, where women reshaped their identities.

"Americanah" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie depicts the profound evolution of Ifemelu, a Nigerian lady who relocates to the United States. This paper explores the intricate processes of identity creation and transformation that Ifemelu experiences as she navigates from the bustling streets of Lagos to the sharply opposing hallowed halls of Princeton University. Ifemelu grapples with the harsh reality of racism and societal norms in America, leading her to ponder intricate dilemmas regarding her sense of belonging, self-image, and the concept of "home". This paper seeks to provide a more nuanced view of the diverse experiences of immigrants and how these

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experiences shape their identity. It also illustrates how gender significantly influences a seemingly gender-neutral process of movement, leading to diverse outcomes for both men and women.

Keywords: Migration, identity, racism, gender, feminism, culture, hair, language, post colonialism, African literature, Intersectionality.

Introduction

Migration has been a prevalent issue throughout human history. Currently, it is a highly relevant socio-political topic. “According to government data obtained by The Times, the number of Africans apprehended at the southern border jumped to 58,562 in the fiscal year 2023 from 13,406 in 2011” (The New York Times, 5 January 2024). Migration is more than just a social fact: it has also permeated literature, as a literary area of study. According to the International Organisation for Migrants (IOM) Regional Data Hub, women and girls constitute 50.4% of migrants in the East and Horn of Africa, outnumbering males and boys, which is a distinctive migratory pattern in this area. This indicates that female migration is not a minor phenomenon. In spite of this, the voices of female migrants in literature have emerged quite recently. Therefore, it becomes particularly fascinating to investigate how a fictional account approaches the topics of migration and the feminine identity. This research paper will examine the concept of identity building using the migratory experience as the primary lens. It will particularly investigate the elements that impact the identity of Black women. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Americanah* serves as the primary source of inspiration for this research. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an accomplished writer of Nigerian descent, raised in Nigeria. Influenced by Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" in her teens, she began writing. Her debut novel, "Purple Hibiscus" (2003), won the Commonwealth Prize, and made it to the shortlist for the Orange Prize. Her second novel, "Half of a Yellow Sun" (2006), garnered international recognition,

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winning the Orange Prize and shortlisting for the Booker Prize. Critically acclaimed novel "Americanah" (2013) followed. She also published short story collections like "The Thing Around the Neck" (2009), nonfiction books such as "We Should All Be Feminists,"(2014) "Dear Ljeawe" (2017) and children's literature. Other subsequent works include "Notes on Grief" (2021) and "Mama's Sleeping Scarf" (2023), including the TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story."

Adichie believes that story-telling is a powerful tool for raising awareness of gender inequality and racism and helping to promote change. Her novels and essays often explore the lives of women who are struggling against patriarchal norms. Adichie criticizes western feminism for being ethnocentric and neglecting to address the harsh realities of women of colour. She believes that feminism must include the experiences of all women, irrespective of their, class, colour, or origin. Adichie's approach to feminism is intricate and multifaceted, influenced by her personal background as a Nigerian woman and her exploration of western feminist ideas. She questions the constraints of western feminism, highlighting its tendency to overlook the perspectives and struggles of women of colour. She explores the lives of African Igbo women in postcolonial Nigeria as well as a migrant in other countries. Adichie aims to empower women in a male-dominated society in her works, her female characters are fighters who evolve their identity as 'individuals'.

The story of Americanah revolves around two young lovers, Ifemelu and Obinze, leaving for the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, not because of the typical narrative of escaping from natural disasters, wars, or poverty, but because of their desire to experience something new and of their own choice. The book chronicles Ifemelu's progression from a little girl to a young lady as she navigates through American culture. Furthermore, the narrative depicts her unexpected homecoming to her own country after a thirteen year stay in America. Adichie very effectively portrays the condition of immigrants through her characters'

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experiences. Immigrants have high hopes for equal opportunities regardless of race, class, or gender before moving to America, but upon arrival they discover a system that only favours white and wealthy individuals, leading to disappointments. Americanah offers a realistic and horrifying view of contemporary America. Upon Ifemelu's arrival in New York City, she was surprised to find that, "all her life she had thought of overseas as a cold place of wool coats and snow and because America was "overseas" ...she bought the thickest sweater she could find in Tejuosho market for her trip" (Adichie, 103). While traveling to her aunt's house, she was astonished by the poorly maintained neighbourhoods. In her dream America, all things were shiny, beautiful, and supervised appropriately, but when she noticed men urinating outside, she was shocked. "See the boy! ... I didn't know people do things like this in America," Adichie (104). The moment she lands in the United States, one by one, she witnesses the real face of her land of dreams. Her aunt's small, shoddy house, plagued by cockroaches, shocked her. She has beds arranged on the floor. While she had slept on the floor earlier, but she didn't anticipate having to do so in America, a country she imagined magnificent. The poorly illuminated street below was filled with closely parked cars instead of green trees, in stark contrast to the delightful pavement presented in The Cosby Show. All her misconceptions of the United States as a land of pristine cleanliness and remarkable infrastructure, disappear. Her idealized perception of the American landscape fades away, revealing the congested, cramped apartments and vibrant bars and clubs where she first encountered America's authentic essence. This signifies the beginning of a series of unexpected events and disappointments. However, still, like many other migrants, she was hopeful about the opportunities the host country would offer, brimming with expectation and excitement to explore America.

Unmasking Racism and Sexism

Racism and sexism are interconnected forms of discrimination that perpetuate unequal opportunities and reinforce stereotypes. Racism involves prejudice, discrimination, and bias

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based on an individual's race or ethnicity, while sexism targets individuals based on their sex or gender, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Laurence Thomas offers a critique. "I should note that sexism and racism are commonly taken to be quite similar. This is because both racist and sexist attitudes rest upon the view that, respectively, there are innate differences between whites and blacks, on the one hand, and men and women, on the other, which in each case make it natural for the latter to be subordinate to the former. For instance, blacks and women have been stereotyped as being both intellectually and emotionally inferior to whites and men, respectively." (242) When sexism intersects with racism, it creates "gendered racism," exacerbating wage disparities and other inequalities.

Talking about racial issues is frequently awkward and often filled with tension and debate. Several theories have been proposed to tackle these sensitive issues in the American consciousness. Over time, different strategies have been developed, one prevalent approach is colorblindness, which advocates for treating everyone equally regardless of their race, culture, or ethnicity. However, it is essential to recognize that this ideology is consisted of limitations and drawbackssuch as denying differences, ignoring racism, and invalidating perspectives. It renders people of color invisible, perpetuates a taboo around discussing race, and hinders effective racial issues. Colorblind ideology can inadvertently perpetuate racism and sexism by ignoring differences and silencing important conversations.

When Ifemelu goes shopping in Philadelphia with Ginika, she first comes to experience the American ideology of racial colour-blindness. The shop's cashier inquired, "Was it the one with long hair? Was it the one with dark hair?" in an attempt to determine who had assisted her. Ifemelu expressed her disappointment at this colour-blindness, saying, "I was expecting her to ask, 'Was it the one with two eyes or the one with two legs?'" Why didn't she just ask, 'Was it the black girl or the white girl?'" Ginika's response to this question confronts the prevalent concept of colour-blindness in the American psyche, "Because this is America. You're supposed

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to pretend that you don't notice certain things" (Adichie, 127). As T. Williams says, "There is a problem with the colorblind approach. "Break it down into simple terms: colorblind -people of color-we don't see you (at least not that bad "colored" part). As a person of colour, I like who I am, and I don't want any aspect of that to be unseen or invisible. The need for colour-blindness implies there is something shameful about the way God made me and the culture I was born into that we shouldn't talk about. Thus, colour-blindness has helped make race into a taboo topic that polite people cannot openly discuss. And if you can't talk about it, you can't understand it, much less the racial problems that plague our society."

Ifemelu, like many other college students, is looking for a part time job to meet her expenses. She begins a search for employment using someone else's security card but fails to secure a job despite her strong academic records. It's crucial to remember that using someone else's social security card is against the law however, the indifference of the host nation 'America' that lacks the ability to see beyond race, which indirectly enables many illegal and undocumented migrants like Ifemelu to reside and work in the United States. An incident from the novel clearly mirrors their mindset, when Aunt Uju tries to convince Ifemelu to use someone else's ID card she says, "All of us look alike to white people" (Adichie, 120). When Ifemelu expressed scepticism, Aunt Uju responded, "I'm not kidding. Amara's cousin came last year, and she doesn't have her papers yet, so she has been working with Amara's ID... Her cousin is very fair and slim. They do not look alike at all. Nobody noticed" (Adichie, 121).

Although Ifemelu failed miserably to secure a satisfactory job, she turned to self-prostitution. Her struggle to secure a job, despite her credentials, serves as a clear and loud example of the persistent racial prejudice prevalent in the country's workplaces. Eventually, in her battle against the world, she fails miserably and felt defeated, so she decided to contact a prominent advertisement she came across in the newspaper. The loss of agency and fundamental rights is apparent, was evident through the advertisement, White men's guts to publish the ad with its clear

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reference to sexual labour. This says a lot about the privilege that white males in the West Country enjoy. He acts without thinking of the consequences that might follow. Throughout the conversation with Ifemelu, it seemed like this was nothing new for him. The utter absence of concern about any legal or judicial complaints is apparent.

When she reached the coach's residence, she felt like it was the beginning of her slow spiral into an identity crisis. She wanted to leave, but she stood up, struggling with her own choices. Her own words had abandoned her when she said, "I can't have sex." The white man was unconcerned about any of her feelings because "He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted." (Adichie,154) During Ifemelu's interaction with the tennis coach, she experienced a sense of alienation from her own body. This incident has left her feeling totally lost and lifeless. "She was bloodless, detached, floating "(Adichie, 155). It makes her feel like she no longer owns her own body, her freedom, her sex, or her voice as a human being, "she felt herself sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself back" (Adichie, 155). This scenario illustrates how sexism and racism work hand in hand to subjugate black women. Although Ifemelu willingly lost her sexuality, she had gone alone and accepted the job, she was not forced by the white man, but it is necessary to acknowledge that this mistreatment is not all her faults. It's clear that the white man indirectly forced her into prostitution. To meet her financial needs, she turned to escorting as her only source of income.

She was too embarrassed to share the incident with anyone. This resulted in her disconnection from her current environment, which in turn led to her separation from her partner, Obinze. Losing control over her situation and body causes her to lose love and happiness in life. When she listened to his voice message, "that voice that seemed suddenly so far away, part of another time and place" (Adichie, 155), she isolated herself in a room for many days, cut off from the outside world. "She woke up torpid each morning, slowed by sadness, frightened by the endless stretch of day that lay ahead. Everything had thickened. She was swallowed, lost in a viscous

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haze, shrouded in a soup of nothingness. Between her and what she should feel, there was a gap" (Adichie,156). The memories of abuse and psychological trauma, eventually resulted in depression and devastated her completely.

Sexual exploitation has been going on for a long time, and it has affected immigrants more than anybody else. Their legal position as non-residents diminishes their fundamental human rights, leaving them with no choice but to remain silent in the face of sexual exploitation as lifeless objects. White people who commit crimes, they are very well aware of the fact that the majority of the immigrants will never file charges against them because of their sense of insecurity of losing their jobs, their visas, or getting entangled in a costly legal formality that they cannot afford. Additionally, it sheds insight on the ways in which westerners have seen African women as exotic and aliens with an overactive sexual desire who are willing to trade sexual favours for help. "Merriam-Webster defines the word exotic by means of four descriptions: introduced from another country, not native to the place where found; strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different or unusual; of a relating to striptease, involving or featuring exotic dancers; foreign, alien. With each definition evoking a sense of otherness or, at a push, abnormality, what this vivid impression alludes to is a social outsider." (qtd.in Kaul) This word certainly does not describe a person of colour in a positive light. It seems quite dehumanizing to compliment a woman with a word typically associated with fruit, places, and animals. "No matter how positive the intentions behind the use of micro-aggressive term are, they do not outweigh the negative emotions experienced by those impacted" (Kaul)

In the novel, Adichie intentionally juxtaposes Ifemelu 's experiences with her Nigerian boyfriend, Obinze, who relocates to London in the hope of achieving a more favourable future. Like Ifemelu, he too uses another person's ID card, although he does not have to go through as many difficulties as Ifemelu does while struggling to get work. Kimberle Crenshaw. In her speech during The New York Women's Foundation's "Celebrating Women," said, "It's

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(Intersectionality) basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about racial inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts." As in the case of Ifemelu and Obinze colour and sex interchange the discrimination they face at the hands of the white.

When it comes to the experience of being an immigrant, the most significant concerns consist of racial and ethnic prejudice. "Race is such a strange construct, because you have to learn what it means to be black in America." Adichie (2013) Constrained standards of beauty marginalize and discriminate against people of colour, especially black women, within contemporary social institutions. In her relationship with Curt, even though Curt loves and cares deeply for Ifemelu as his girlfriend, for society, it is a phase of obsession with an exotic beauty, an inter-racial romance, as "CURT HAD NEVER been with a black woman" (Adichie,195). In her meeting with Curt's mother, she realizes that for her mother, she means nothing. "She would tolerate anybody he liked, but she felt no obligation for affection." When Morgan learned about their relationship, she was shocked and unhappy. She exclaimed, "That's disguising" (Adichie 195). Everyone at Curt's family's cocktail party scrutinizes Curt's association with her, who isn't even considered to have light skin, with the question, "Why her?" (Adichie,293) America, as portrayed in various narratives, upholds beauty standards that are Eurocentric. Individuals who do not conform to these standards are often; labelled as different or exotic. Ifemelu has come to terms with the racial hierarchy and its acceptance, which allows her joke about her own colour. In their discussions over marriage, she joked about how his family and friends would be terrified if they were married: "His relatives stared in horror and asked one another, in whispers, why the help was wearing the bride's dress" (Adichie, 199). "A woman of colour is reduced to her racial origins, appearing as nothing but the colour of her skin" (Kaul).

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Curt plays an important role in strengthening her social and economic position, obtaining a green card which ensures her status as an American citizen. Curt was always with her; whenever she confronted racial exclusion and prejudice, he raised his voice against it. Through his interactions with Ifemelu, he became aware of the disparities in their social system. When Ifemelu visited a spa for eyebrow treatments, she faces discrimination. The spa employee stated, "We don't do curly hair" (Adichie, 292). Ifemelu wants to return but Curt stood up for her, ensuring she had her eyebrows professionally done. Curt could not understand what the problem was with her eyebrows. Ifemelu's reply shed light on the racial prejudice that black women encounter at every turn of their daily lives. "Maybe they've never done a black woman's eyebrows, and so they think it's different because our hair is different after all, but I guess now she knows the eyebrows are not that different." Curt's background as a white, privileged man has kept him ignorant of unpleasant or racist behaviour. He acknowledges Ifemelu's struggles but cannot truly understand the challenges that a black female immigrant confronts in a white-dominated culture. According to Fryberg (qtd. in Williams), "In a colour-blind society, white people, who are unlikely to experience disadvantages due to race, can effectively ignore racism in American life, justify the current social order' and feel more comfortable with all their relatively privileged standing in society." In a surprising turn of events, Ifemelu decides to break up with Curt after realizing that he will never comprehend her experiences as a black female immigrant. "Colour-blindness creates a society that denies their negative racial experiences, rejects their cultural heritage, and invalidates their unique perspectives." Adichie very successfully portrays this when Curt's mother says, "Some people were still looking for reasons to complain even though America was now colour-blind" (Adichie, 293).

As the story progresses, we find Ifemelu in a transformed self, during her brilliant response to a racist question at a Manhattan dinner party. "The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not, but it's a lie. I came from a country where

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race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black, and I only became black when I came to America. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you are alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it." (Adichie 290)

Ifemelu responds to black immigrants who have successfully assimilated into American culture and have come to appreciate their place in society. They consistently remind each other that they have made significant progress and have come a long way. "Look how far we have come; just forty years ago, it would have been illegal for us to even be a couple blah blah blah, because you know what we're thinking when they say that? We're thinking why the fuck should it ever have been illegal anyway? But we don't say any of stuff. We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable" (Adichie,291). Ifemelu's speeches and blogs are based on her experiences in America. Once, she went to a fine dining restaurant with Curt, and the host asked Curt, "Table for one?" (Adichie, 294), unsure if Ifemelu would be a guest. They envision a black girl like Ifemelu working as a waitress or cleaner in their restaurant, but never as a guest. Once again, during her stay in Montreal, the hotel owner refused to acknowledge her, focusing solely on Curt. She wished she could tell Curt how dishonoured she felt, but she didn't because she didn't want him to say that she was overreacting. Americanah takes place primarily in a salon, where Ifemelu gets her hair braided after she decides to return to Nigeria. For Ifemelu, her hair symbolizes her quest for confidence and identity as a Nigerian and black American. In Nigeria, Ifemelu has always braided her hair, but in America, it's necessary to use chemicals to relax her hair to avoid appearing unprofessional. When Ifemelu has to go in for an interview, her friend Ruth suggests, "My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff, but it matters." She went to a salon to relax her hair because she desperately needed a job. During the process, she sustained

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numerous burns, but the hairdresser didn't seem to mind, commenting, "Just a little burn, but look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got a white girl swing!" (Adichie, 203). As if white girls' hair is the benchmark of beauty, anything other than that can't be considered beautiful, which means Ifemelu's natural locks were not pretty, but now when they are straightened then they're beautiful. However, Ifemelu straightened her hair under societal pressures and assumptions about professional prompt, but this act made her feel as though she was betraying her true self and erasing her Nigerian identity, conforming to those Eurocentric beauty standards that think black is bad, kinky is ugly. "Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. your hair rules you, (Adichie, 208). When she decided to cut down her relaxed hair, experienced a constant internal struggle. "I look so ugly I'm scared of myself" (Adichie, 208). for days she was in her room, afraid to face the eyes of people questioning and judging her, but when she decided to go to the office, she experiences different perspectives of people related to black women's hair.

One co-worker asked her, "Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?" (Adichie, 211). Another asked her, "Does it mean anything? Like' something political" (Adichie, 211). That day, she began to understand the complexities of hair politics in America. Later, in her blog post, 'A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor,' Ifemelu explores the potential impact of Michelle Obama's kinky hair on the election outcome. "Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spiral curls. She would totally rock, but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote" (Adichie, 297).

Through one of her blog posts, 'To My Fellow Non-American Black: In America, You Are Black, Baby', it's clear that the equal opportunities, freedom, and pleasant life she had dreamed of in Nigeria had become a distant memory. In America she has encountered various forms of racial, gender, and class discrimination, and she is well-versed in the various threats that black individuals face on a daily basis in white society. "Dear non-American Black, when you make

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the choice to come to America, you became 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... You say I'm not black only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder... You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say "You are not alone; I am here too" (Adichie, 220). Adichie very honestly and thoroughly depicts all the discrimination faced by black people in the host country. One fine morning, Ifemelu decided to return to Nigeria. There is no legitimate justification for Ifemelu's decision to return to Nigeria other than her desire for a sense of belonging and her quest for a true, impartial identity. "...there was no cause; it was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her" (Adichie,7). Her blog is thriving, with thousands of followers, she has a fellowship at Princeton and is in a relationship with Blaine. Everything is absolutely flawless. "Yet there was a cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and border lessness. It brought with it amorphous longing, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she would living, that over months melded into a piercing homesickness...Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she should sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (Adichie, 6).Safran (1991, p. 84) remarks that "for diaspora people, their homeland is their ideal home where they or their descendants should eventually return."

Conclusion

"Americanah" explores the notion of racial prejudice and discrimination that people from non-American backgrounds especially black encounter and each person's experience of discrimination is unique. Immigrants experience a significant sense of alienation and estrangement due to the inferior treatment they receive from the original settlers. This struggle has a profound impact on their lives, often leading them to find comfort in their homeland and

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embrace the values of African culture. At the beginning of the novel, Ifemelu doesn't feel any strong connection with her homeland. She has an insatiable longing for a better life, she seizes the chance to pursue a scholarship that will transport her from Nigeria to America, in search of a brighter future. However, her journey takes her to a different reality—one filled with discrimination and racial obstacles. She experiences alienation in America as a black woman, which exacerbates her sense of not belonging. Which resulted in embracing her African heritage, letting go of her American accent and chemical hair treatments in favour of traditional hair braiding. Through these choices, Ifemelu confidently establishes her identity and articulates her discontent with America, ultimately unveiling her profound connection to Nigeria. *Americanah* tells the story of Ifemelu's migration to America, her admiration and adaptation of American culture, and her eventual rejection and return to Nigeria, despite her success.

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