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**An Immigrant Black Woman in America: An Intersectional
Analysis of Adichie's *Americanah***

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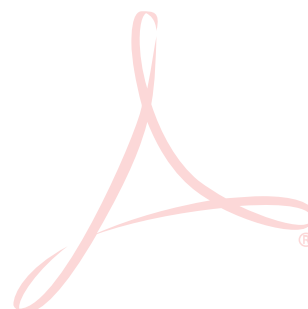


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Abstract

Americanah is a novel written by the renowned author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It was first published in 2013 and it deals with Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who voluntarily emigrates to the United States in order to look for a better prospect of life. There she encounters different forms of racial, gender and class oppression. This is the reason why the present BA thesis is devoted to discuss Ifemelu's experiences in America from an intersectional perspective.

In the first section I will present a theoretical framework in which I am going to deal with African American history, since the relation between them has existed for centuries and has evolved across time until our days, shaping the identity of African Americans. I will also cover the consideration of the book as an Afropolitan novel, because some critics think that *Americanah* perfectly depicts the spirit of Afropolitanism. Lastly, I will analyze how the concept of race as a social construct has evolved and how it interacts with notions such as gender and class (intersectionality).

In what regards the second section, it is devoted to the close reading and analysis of the intersections presented in the novel. In order to do this, I will focus on the protagonist of the story. Ifemelu is oppressed by multiple factors that perpetuate male chauvinism, racism and classism. She is limited, in this way, by roles that serve the interest of others and determine black women's life. This context will enable us to explore how black beauty is used to oppress black women, particularly, by using hair and skin color; how intersectionality functions in interracial relationships between a black woman and a wealthy white man and, last but not least, how black women's work experiences are limited, for these women are often subjected to discriminatory practices that perpetuate the privileges of the dominant class.

The aforementioned analysis will help us see how, in Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu confronts the reality of immigration and the triple oppression to which black migrant women are subjected in the United States. This oppression affects all instances of her life and demonstrates that discrimination is multidimensional or, to use a more specific terminology, intersectional.

Introduction

Americanah (2013) is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fourth book. It was during my third year in my degree in English Linguistics and Literature that I came into contact with Postcolonial Literature and with Adichie, in particular. When I first read the book, I discovered that black women were subjected to different types of oppression. For this reason, in this paper I chose to examine the nature of the discrimination that the protagonist suffers in the United States as a black working-class woman, in other words, because of the intersections of race, gender and class.

The novel deals with Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who leaves her country in order to look for better opportunities in the United States. Thus, I will first discuss the harsh realities that immigrants encounter in America, as well as American attitudes as regards black beauty, interracial relationships, class, education and so on. However, Adichie also focuses on Nigeria, her own country. Therefore, she creates a protagonist whose identity is shaped both by her life in Nigeria and by her new life in the host country, a white supremacist society in which racism, patriarchy and classism have a great impact on non-white immigrants. As a consequence, readers discover what it means to be an immigrant in the United States. This is usually silenced, and through Ifemelu's eyes, we are able to see and experience issues that still matter today.

In order to carry out the analysis based on the theory of intersectionality, this study has been divided into two main sections. The first one acts as a theoretical framework, introducing the most relevant aspects and notions for the subsequent close reading. Chapter 1.1. presents the historical and socio-political links between Africa and America. Knowing about the past and being aware of historical developments and changes allows us to better understand the present and, consequently, contemporary novels like *Americanah*. From the brief overview of African American history, we can draw the conclusion that it is marked by both difficult times

and more optimistic periods; nevertheless, we cannot forget that African Americans' fight for equality still continues nowadays, because racism, sexism and classism persist. In addition, it is important to note that, at the beginning of the 21st century and in sharp contrast with the experience of slavery and forced displacement of earlier times, Africans migrated by choice, because they wanted to look for a better future than what their country of origin could offer them. This is the case of many characters in the novel (like Ifemelu), who leave Nigeria because corruption has turned their country into a failed state. Arguably, these characters tend to exhibit a diasporic consciousness: while Nigerian immigrants "become partially assimilated to their new environments," they "remain socially and culturally committed to their homelands" (Falola and Heaton 253). This diasporic yearning constitutes the reason of the protagonist's return to her country of origin; in so doing, she becomes, to all effects, an authentic "Americanah."

Chapter 1.2. deals with the reception of the novel. Since its publication, the novel has been critically acclaimed and has won, among other prizes, the *National Book Critics Circle Award* (2014). Nevertheless, it has also received harsh criticism from those who consider it an Afropolitan novel. Although Adichie does not identify herself as Afropolitan, her depiction of upper-middle-class protagonists who represent the privileged portion of the new African diaspora, among other characteristics, has led to the consideration of *Americanah* as one of the works that best epitomizes the spirit of Afropolitanism. Whatever the case may be, what is undeniable is that the novel reflects the intersection of race with notions such as gender and class, concepts that will be discussed in the following chapter (1.3.).

During the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, race and racism became a reality in the United States. Being a social construct used to justify inequality, the definition of race changed over time. To echo William E. B. Du Bois, African Americans are at the bottom of a pyramid, and, what is more important, "the color-line not only racially divides society, but even more, black souls and black selves" (Rabaka 77). Thus, in contemporary America, a demographic

classification based on race still exists; as David Hollinger states, “the term race continues to have great currency, even among people who deny that races exist as anthropological entities and who know that genetic variation from one race to another is scarcely greater than genetic variation within the races” (*Postethnic* 34). Nevertheless, studying the problem of discrimination from a single point of view cannot provide a complete perspective. As Kimberlé Crenshaw defends with her intersectional approach, the claims of exclusion can be multidirectional. Therefore, intersectionality is a necessary notion to understand the complexity of black women’s lives in America.

After providing the theoretical framework, in section 2 we are going to carry out the analysis of intersectionality in *Americanah*. It has been claimed that many popular images of black women are constructed and “do not reflect black women’s lived experience; instead, they limit African American women to prescribed roles that serve the interests of others” (Harris-Perry 9). Those images derive not only from their skin color, but also from factors such as their gender and class, which serve to build stereotypes about black women and also to oppress them. In this part we will explore such intersections to understand Ifemelu’s experiences in America. On account of this, we shall focus on black beauty, Ifemelu’s interracial relationships and Ifemelu’s work experience in the United States. Chapter 2.1. deals with how the idealization of a Eurocentric beauty standard affects black women, focusing on hair and skin color, symbols of black beauty.¹ Chapter 2.2. will examine how the intersection of race, gender and class functions in a romantic relationship between a black migrant woman and an affluent white man. Lastly, the chapter devoted to Ifemelu’s work experience (2.3.) will explore how racial discrimination, gender conceptions and class barriers have been —and are still— used to limit job opportunities for black women in the USA.

¹ The mixing of patriarchy and racism results, then, in that it is really difficult for black women to construct a positive image of themselves because “historically and into modern times, African American beauty has been disparaged” (Patton 25-26).

1. Context and Critical Approach

1.1. Historical and Sociopolitical Links between Africa and America

There is not a right answer to when African American history begins; however, it is undeniable that the relationship between the African continent and America has existed for centuries. This relationship and, consequently, African American history have changed over time in order to adapt to more evolved societies. For instance, almost until the 20th century, the history of America was the history of white people, or rather, the history of white men, so women and black people, along with other racialized communities such as Native Americans or Asian immigrants, seemed to have no history: they were completely forgotten. And if those groups were completely forgotten, black women underwent a double “erasure”: they did not exist. I would argue that knowing about the past and being aware of the changes that have affected history allows us to better understand the present. It is also important to note that the evolution of history and the evolution of artistic manifestations usually occur in parallel, and this is the reason why, with the end of Civil War, and, in particular, with the beginning of the 20th century, when the first glimmers of freedom could be appreciated, black people became active agents of history.

The western hemisphere was a place in which, for centuries, African Americans encountered slavery, poverty, racial discrimination, etc. As Nell Irvin states, “their color stands for poverty and poverty’s stigma” (4) and it is the color of their skin that served as an excuse for white men to consider them inferior human beings. As a consequence, during the 17th, 18th and part of the 19th centuries, black people were captured and transported to the New World in order to be bought and sold as objects. The Atlantic Slave Trade became a lucrative business in which approximately 10 million Africans were forcibly transported to America, a fact that

resulted in the emergence of an African diaspora (a concept that will be discussed in the following chapter). The physically and psychologically traumatic experience of slavery, along with the separation from their African homelands, was decisive in the creation not only of African American history, but also of African American identity.² Consequently, African Americans became a diasporic people who were and are set in a transnational frame, a concept that Paul Gilroy conveys through the image of a ship in his influential *The Black Atlantic*:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. ... Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records and choirs. (4)

Those Africans who were transported to America lived in a context very different from the one in which their fellow citizens lived in Africa. With the passage of time, the assimilation to a new culture and the adoption of different languages, religions, etc. created a break with their homes. However, African Americans were not completely American either, in fact they were impoverished and enslaved until the Civil War. But this Civil War, which ended in emancipation, did not entail complete freedom for black Americans, and by no means real equality.

² “Being “African” American is part of a New World identity. Naming people only by the continent of their origin and ignoring their ethnic identity is a consequence of distance in time and space” (Irvin 5).

From the Great Migration³ onwards, freedom began to become real, in particular with the participation of black Americans in political processes. Black migrants who escaped from the South sought better jobs in their new localities, which meant not only the improvement of the African Americans' quality of life, but also that black men had the possibility of voting⁴. Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance⁵ brought with it the recognition of African American culture⁶ and that African Americans could access education more easily. Harlem schools were open on what was supposed to be a non-segregation basis, yet the black population still suffered from racism, and discussions arose about the type of education that would be most beneficial to African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance was also the period in which a generation of black scholars emerged (Carter G. Woodson, Charles S. Johnson, etc.). Nonetheless, the change was slow and progressive, and society continued to be oppressive, forcing black people to face more difficulties than white people. Segregation lasted for centuries, but with the foundation of associations such as the Universal Negro Improvement Association, in the 20th century, African Americans saw how their efforts began to pay off and, although of a second class, they were considered Americans. This inferiority began to be questioned during the period of the Second World War; in fact, in the years that followed, "African Americans also appeared more prominently in American culture, at home and abroad" (Irvin 257).

African Americans realized that freedom was not free, and in the mid-20th century they joined together to protest against the discrimination to which they were subjected. Throughout the United States, black public services were inferior and, in the South, segregation was still enforced by law. The Montgomery bus boycott, led by Martin Luther King Jr., triggered a series

³ More than half a million black people moved out from the South to the North and Midwest during the First World War.

⁴ In fact, in 1928, the first African American congressman from the North, Oscar De Priest, was elected.

⁵ The Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance (from the 1910s to the mid-1930s) was a movement of political, social and cultural promotion among people of African descent who lived in the metropolises. It began in the New York neighborhood of Harlem and from there it spread around the world.

⁶ For instance, Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" gained enormous popularity in the 1920s and became the "Negro National Anthem".

of actions of civil disobedience (student movements in the early 1960s, the 1963 Birmingham protests, etc.), collectively known as the Civil Rights Movement. As a result of this, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting racial discrimination, along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, led to a context in which black Americans became, to some extent, legally protected. In this manner, black identity was reinforced and the interest in the African roots increased (up to this point, black Americans had tried to avoid the issue of their origin). It was also during this period, in 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, a turning point in African American history. This fact confirmed Black Americans' belief that "the United States was fundamentally antiblack and that they would have to depend upon themselves to overcome racial oppression" (Irvin 345). As a result of this, one of the main objectives was to create a counternarrative of African American history and culture, although we cannot forget that it is very difficult to characterize African Americans as a whole, since, as we shall see next, there are now new arrivals that complicate the picture.⁷

From the brief overview of the history of the African Americans, we can draw the conclusion that it is marked by both adverse times and more optimistic periods; not forgetting that their fight for equality still continues nowadays. This is a surprising fact taking into account that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the voluntary immigrants from Africa already outnumbered those who had been transported in the Atlantic slave trade. And these voluntary immigrants, who were born in Africa, have a closer relation with their country of origin, which completely changes the perspective of what we understand by African Americans. At the beginning of this century, African immigrants, specifically Nigerians, were one of the best educated immigrants in the country.⁸ Africans migrated by choice, because they wanted to look

⁷ Artists have a key role in this labor, since they "have felt freer than scholarly historians to present the emotional dimension of history" (Irvin xvi).

⁸ Kira Olsen-Medina and Jeanne Batalova, experts of The Migration Policy Institute, present a table with the twenty countries of origin for college-educated immigrants (India, China, Philippines, etc. can be found, among others) and establish that "immigrant college graduates are younger and more likely to be of prime working age (25 to 54) than their native-born counterparts".

for a better future than what their country of origin could offer them. This is the case of the main protagonist, Ifemelu, and of many other characters of *Americanah*. It becomes necessary, then, to shift our attention to this new type of black American, the African immigrant, and, more specifically, Nigerians.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and its population is very diverse, consisting of over 200 different ethno-linguistic groups. Additionally, it is one of the largest oil producers in the world, which, in words of Toyin Falola and Mathew Heaton, "will ensure that the country continues to play a role in global affairs" (270). Moreover, this connection with the rest of the world is also guaranteed thanks to the emigrant population.

Prior to "the mid-nineteenth century most intercontinental migration of Nigerians was involuntary and permanent" (Falola and Heaton 249); however, migration did not end with the disappearance of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Since their independence from Britain on 1 October 1960, Nigerians have continued to emigrate in search of employment and education opportunities. Actually, Falola and Heaton contend that "Nigerians who have relocated to Europe and the United States since the early twentieth century have established what can be called transnational communities, in which migrants become partially assimilated to their new environments but remain socially and culturally committed to their homelands" (253).

One of the main reasons why Nigerians want to seek a better future outside the borders of their homeland is that, although it is a consolidated country from the political and geographical point of view, its main problem, corruption, has led it to become a failed state. In words of Emmanuel Oladipo Ojo, Nigeria is:

a country of inexplicable trajectories, despite enormous national wealth, intractable corruption had sentenced an overwhelming percentage of Nigerians to grinding poverty; health institutions are near total collapse resulting in which maternal deaths, preventable

ailments and morbidity; social services such as potable water, power supply, good roads and a functional and dynamic educational system are either altogether non-existent or hopelessly inadequate and erratic thereby turning Nigerians into infrahumans. (67)

Corruption was —and still is— such that “each of the country’s 109 Senators earns about \$1.7 million per month . . . , approximately five times the \$400,000 annual salary of President Obama of the United States of America” (Ojo 90). In spite of this, wealth is not the reality of the majority of the Nigerian population, which entails the desperation of many citizens to access the socio-economic opportunities that are available elsewhere. For this reason, many Nigerians traveled to the United States in search of a better life. When, in 2009, Obama became the first black president of the country, he became an idol both for the consolidated African American community and for the new immigrants from Africa. Obama’s own “blackness” along with his beliefs in “a more perfect union,” (“Transcript: Barack Obama’s Speech on Race”) encouraged conversations on race and politics. He brought hope not only to the African American community, but to all the immigrants in the United States. But this hope completely disappeared with the presidency of Donald Trump. Trump’s speeches transmitted hate and division. His attacks were directed to the religious, ethnic and racial minorities; his followers believed in the supremacy of the white people and, therefore, there were a lot of violent altercations. As a consequence, movements such as Black Lives Matter⁹ re-emerged to fight against the country’s institutional violence, in general, as well as the specific racist policies of Trump’s administration. Not surprisingly, proposals for a political framework more adapted to the African Century¹⁰ increased in the years of his presidency¹¹, and even though “a few Nigerians

⁹ BLM was founded in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi in response to the absolution of Travon Martin’s murderer and now it has become a movement “to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (“Herstory”).

¹⁰ Term coined by Thabo Mbeki at his 1999 inauguration as president of South Africa. The African Century means seeing this century as the period in which stability, peace, development, etc. in Africa will be achieved; in short, as the century in which the African renaissance is going to take place.

¹¹ In fact, some experts such as Judd Devermont —director of the African Program at the CSIS— describe the US policy towards Africa as unfocused, anachronistic and mired in old thinking for too long, and encourage the United

settled permanently in the ... United States during the first half of the twentieth century, ... prevailing sentiments of race prejudice in [America] made permanent relocation unattractive to many Nigerians” (Falola and Heaton 253). Who knows? Maybe the future will hold brighter days for Nigerians, either in Nigeria or in the United States.

1.2. *Americanah*: An Afropolitan Novel?

According to Shona Jackson, “colonialism is a practice and logic that organizes the modern world through the uneven distribution of resources and subordination of black and brown bodies” (56). The consequences of colonialism go from the violation of human rights to economic instability and environmental degradation. Therefore, postcolonial studies are concerned with the impact that colonialism had, in particular, on the colonized people. One of the objectives of postcolonialism is the deconstruction of the vision of the colonizers, giving the colonized people the opportunity to rewrite their own story and rebuild their identities. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* perfectly depicts the image of Africa and Africans according to colonialism. In fact, this novella led to numerous discussions,¹² and it is this image of Africa the one that authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie try to deconstruct in their works, by providing a new vision of the continent and its people.

As a consequence of the politics of colonialism, there was a dispersion of Africans in several directions, which gave rise to the African diaspora. Shana Redmond describes it as a “political project of affiliation and camaraderie that unites members through historical condition as well as deliberate choice” (64). Thus, the African diaspora contributes to the

States “to connect with the next generation of African leaders and advance its objectives in the region and the wider world” (1).

¹² The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe stated that “Conrad, whose novella presented Africans as “rudimentary souls” and “savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet”, was “thoroughgoing racist”” (qtd. in Tunca and Ledent 1) whereas Phillips, born to African Caribbean parents and brought up in England, “viewed Conrad’s narrative as an indictment of the European colonial enterprise in Africa” (Tunca and Ledent 1).

construction of the African identity.¹³ As previously advanced, it could be forced or voluntary, leading to the distinction between the old diaspora and the new diaspora. The members of the old African diaspora (those displaced by the transatlantic slave trade) are called, in *Americanah*, African Americans, whereas the members of the new African diaspora, or those who arrived after the 1965 Immigration Act, are called non-American blacks. Nonetheless, this distinction is not clear-cut in the novel. Although Ifemelu, the protagonist, historically belongs to the new diaspora, she is ideologically committed to a racialized identity as much as to the old African diaspora (McCoy 290). In fact, after living for 13 years in the United States, Ifemelu decides to return to Nigeria, her country of origin.¹⁴ Thus, as Shane McCoy suggests, “we might envision that the “new” African diaspora reimagines racialized solidarity and a renewed commitment to a racialized identity while, at the same time, crafting new narratives that often hinge upon becoming economically, politically, and socially empowered” (290). It is this depiction of upper-middle-class protagonists who reflect the economic privilege of a portion of the African diaspora which has led some critics to categorize *Americanah* as an Afropolitan work.

“Afropolitanism” is a term coined by Taiye Selasi in 2005. In her essay “Bye, Bye Babar” she called for the “recognition of a new generation of African global subjects, who were navigating through a cross-cultural transnation” (Eaton 6). In other words, the word Afropolitan refers to a generation of young Africans who are on the move. This mobility is not only physical, but also digital, which is a key aspect of Afropolitanism as a diasporic movement. However, it is important to note that the concept of Afropolitanism has sparked some debates in recent years. On the one hand, those in favor consider that it is a useful tool for diasporic Africans, in

¹³ One of the ideological, political and literary movements that contributed to the characterization of African identity through the reconsideration and exaltation of African culture was negritude. It emerged during the first half of the 20th century when Caribbean and French-speaking African writers joined to protest against the policy of assimilation in the French colonies. Its leading figures were Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor, who apart from teacher, poet and first president of Senegal, became an avid promoter of African culture.

¹⁴ As a result of this, she becomes an authentic “Americanah”: she is neither American nor Nigerian, but a hybrid subject.

particular for middle-class people, since it allows them to have a feeling of belonging to their country of origin, which usually becomes “Africa of the mind,” to echo Salman Rushdie. Additionally, the term has much more potential to offer to the field, because in it are hidden multiple layers of creativity, artistry, etc. On the other hand, those who are against this concept defend that it highlights a commercialized perspective of Africa and their major reproaches have to do with “its elitism/class bias, its a-politicalness and its commodification” (Gehrmann 62). As a consequence, and taking into account that Afropolitanism needs wrestling with black internationalism and economic power, “urban black spaces worldwide are increasingly transforming into economic sites of urban renewal, rejuvenation, and, ultimately, black removal” (Eaton 8). This is why the followers of this movement are seen as trying to “reject prevailing associations with political turmoil, disease, and lack that filled the minds of those watching from outside the continent” (6). Although this utopian representation of the continent can construct a better image of Africa, ignoring the reality of the people who live in poverty is, to some extent, immoral. The solution to this debate, according to some critics such as Kalenda Eaton, would be the “fusing [of] the Afropolitan movement with [the] return to the activism of global black solidarity” (13), because, after all, Africa does not mean the same for everybody.¹⁵

As mentioned above, Afropolitanism was coined by Selasi in 2005; however, it was not until 2010s when the term was at the heart of the debate with the publication of several works. *Americanah* was first published in 2013 and this coincidence in time has led many scholars to study the novel under the Afropolitan perspective. Amatoritsero Ede, in his article “The politics of Afropolitanism” established that:

¹⁵ As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie claims in her famous Ted Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” seeing something from a unique perspective “robs people of dignity” (13:40). For instance, accepting only the African story that comes from the tradition of the West means to ignore many other stories of the continent that are not related to darkness, negativity, poverty and catastrophes. Besides, “it [also] makes the recognition of [Africans] equal humanity difficult” (13:45). That is why, “when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise” (18:10).

the Afropolitan feels a sense of belonging to the metropolitan society only in being seen, in an artistic sense, as ‘cultured’ and as an ideal citizen. This is why it is mostly cultural-brokers —writers, visual artists, musicians, dancers, and so on, one might say *cultured people* who occupy a venerated social stage because of their *valued* and acquired symbolic capital,— who identify as Afropolitan. Opposed to them are members of larger black migrant populations and diasporas, who feel alienated and lack agency within metropolitan political and social establishments from the USA to the EU or South Africa. (92)

The definition above is important, considering that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie does not identify herself as Afropolitan, but only as African (Tunca and Ledent 3). Yet, however surprising as it may be, *Americanah* is considered one of the novels that best epitomizes the spirit of Afropolitanism. The first Afropolitan feature that can be found in *Americanah* is the critique of the Nigerian society. Although unemployment issues, institutionalized corruption, etc. are depicted in the novel, the center of attention is shifted away from the continent and the Euro-American-centered patterns are privileged (4). Additionally, the upper-middle-class protagonists of the novel do not deal with these problems in the same way as a low-class person would do it. In other words, both Ifemelu and Obinze desire to go to the United States since this country constitutes one of the places of the middle-class Nigerian imaginary, and, at least, they have the opportunity to travel, an opportunity that the majority of Nigerian citizens do not have. However, it is also important to note that Adichie reproduces, too, the limitations and difficulties that individuals, especially black women, have to face in the United States. As Katherine Hallemeier reveals, “*Americanah* does not so much speak to the US of the present reality of African lives as it speaks of the US in order to better articulate a desirable Nigerian future” (235).

Another important concept is that related to mobility; in particular, to digital mobility.¹⁶ The novel begins with Ifemelu's visit to a hair salon in Princeton, and, in a series of flashbacks, she narrates part of her life, including her move to America. It is in America where she discovers that she is black; in Nigeria she was identified by her religion and tribe, but in America she was identified by her skin color, which had and has negative connotations. In order to share her racial experiences, she created a blog "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black". The blog became a space in which she could express her opinions without restrictions; in fact, she exhibited a strong political and social commitment (Pahl 77).¹⁷ Working on the blog is what allowed Ifemelu to enjoy economic security. So, Ifemelu meets the conditions to represent an Afropolitan woman: cosmopolitan, from middle-class and educated. Finally, beauty is the last point that determines the perfect Afropolitan character of Ifemelu. As Gloria Ori and Anthony Njoku affirm, "Ifemelu starts her journey to self-recovery by rejecting perm hair and deciding to go back to wearing her natural hair" (162). This is important because it keeps the link between Ifemelu and Nigeria, her home. Thus, even though she has changed, and Nigeria too, Ifemelu becomes an African living in the United States and not an African transformed into an American (Ori and Njoku 162).

1.3. Unraveling Race: Intersectionality

There is not a universally accepted definition of race; however, there is an agreement in that race is a human invention or, in other words, a social construct. In particular, it is a pseudo-biological concept that has been invented by Europeans and has been used "to justify and

¹⁶ Digital mobility refers to the different worlds that can be found on the Internet. Nowadays, mobility is not only physical because Internet offers a wide range of possibilities to communicate with people who are in the other side of the globe.

¹⁷ This political and social commitment is, as advanced in the previous chapter, more associated with the Old African diaspora than with the New African diaspora.

rationalize the unequal treatment of groups of people by others” (Machery and Faucher 1208). Even though the term race descends from the understanding of race as a scientific truth and is a product of the 18th century Enlightenment, Geraldine Heng determines that “there is compelling evidence of “racial thinking, racial law, racial formation, and racialized behaviors and phenomena in medieval Europe before the emergence of a recognizable vocabulary of race”” (qtd. in Keaton 165). As a result of this, race is what a society makes it to be.

During the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, race and racism became a reality in the United States,¹⁸ a reality that persists even today. Race was used to support the inferiority of Africans. Notwithstanding the fact that color is not race, the former “serves often as [the latter’s] surrogate” (Keaton 165). Thus, there is a close relation between body and race.¹⁹ Scientific racism was everything except scientific, but the idea that black bodies²⁰ were inferior was useful to keep a political and economic system that benefited and protected white people. As a consequence, race became deeply instilled in the United States.

The result of the establishment of race as such an important factor in the American continent has led numerous critics to study the significance of being black in a white supremacist community.²¹ In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” so as “to capture and convey African Americans’ feelings of dissonance and dividedness between their distant African ancestral homeland and their present American environment” (Rabaka 75). Race was used to organize society in a hierarchy. In one of his most famous passages, Du Bois affirms:

¹⁸ “During the first century of Africans’ importation into North America, the idea of human races as scientific truth had not yet been invented. As poor, unfree, largely non-Christian, ... Africans were subject to the sort of humiliating treatment that later earned the name of racism” (Irvin 58).

¹⁹ The term body, as Jayna Brown settles, “is used to draw attention to the visceral nature of racism as well as the physical forms of African Americans’ resilience and resistance” (29).

²⁰ Blackness was a racialized marker, associated with a set of characteristics, both physical and mental.

²¹ According to Hollinger, “the identities people assume are acquired largely through affiliation, however prescribed or chosen” (*Postethnic* 7) and in the acquisition of those identities, the concepts of race and racism are very powerful.

after the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (ch. 1)

Du Bois was interested in making societies aware of the damage that racism caused on “the souls of black folk”.²² To echo Du Bois, African Americans are at the bottom of a pyramid, and, what is more important, “the color-line not only racially divides society, but even more, black souls and black selves” (Rabaka 77). Even though the idea of race as something biological is now discredited, in America a demographic classification based on race persists.

In 1995, David Hollinger published *Postethnic America*, where he described the ethno-racial pentagon²³ conformed by “five presumably involuntary communities of descent” in the US (8): Americans, Euro-Americans, Indigenous, Asian-Americans and African Americans. The conception of the American society based on this pentagon has as a consequence that African Americans do not form their group by choice; they are black, and it is this blackness (descent, ancestry) that determines their position in society —although the ethno-racial pentagon has a stronger cultural content than the black-white color dichotomy. According to

²² “The very color-line that racially divides the white world from the black world simultaneously creates a tortured “two-ness” in blacks’ souls (and psyches). In fact, the racial ruptures of the color-line ultimately drive blacks to constantly question whether they are Africans or Americans” (Rabaka 76).

²³ In Hollinger’s words, “the ethno-racial pentagon ... is a remarkable historical artifact, distinctive to the contemporary United States. The five specified blocs are not equally populated or empowered, but the five-part structure itself is supposed to embrace us all” (*Postethnic* 24).

Hollinger, “the term race continues to have great currency, even among people who deny that races exist as anthropological entities and who know that genetic variation from one race to another is scarcely greater than genetic variation within the races” (34).²⁴ Indeed, in spite of the efforts of the black community to obtain equality, racism is still functioning, dividing societies by discriminating those who have a different skin color.

That being so, antiracial politics emerged with the goal of putting an end to racism and black discrimination. However, studying a problem from a single point of view cannot provide a complete perspective, insight, or even an accurate solution. The reason for this is that race interacts with other concepts, especially with gender and class. In fact, as Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, a single-issue analysis presents conceptual limitations that her proposal, intersectionality, challenges (“Demarginalizing” 149). In other words, the claims of exclusion can be multidirectional. Therefore, intersectionality has to be understood as “a revision of theories of discrimination and subordination in law, race, labor, and gender studies and naming of black women’s embodied knowledge, historical positioning, and exploited labor” (Thompson 102).

Crenshaw first wrote on intersectionality in her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), in which, by reviewing three judicial cases of black female plaintiffs, the author reached the following conclusion: “unable to grasp the importance of Black women’s intersectional experiences, not only courts, but feminist and civil rights thinkers as well have treated Black women in ways that deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks” (150).

²⁴ As Hollinger puts it, “racism is real, but races are not” (*Postethnic* 39).

Intersectionality was soon propelled “beyond legal theory, antidiscrimination discourse, and case study into the fields of feminist theory, antiracist strategies, and public policy” (Thompson 103). Additionally, Crenshaw enlarged the idea of intersectionality towards a more multifaceted concept in her 1991 essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” in which she does not only present the interactions “of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color” (1296), but she also considers that “intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity [gays, lesbians, other people of color, etc.] and the ongoing necessity of group politics” (1296). On account of the aforementioned, intersectionality has become a keyword for scholars who try to understand how identities function in the United States, and it is this approach the one that I will be using in my analysis of Adichie’s *Americanah*.

2. Intersectionality in *Americanah*

In recent decades, black women have gained more visibility, which has allowed them to protest —and try to deconstruct— the stereotypes to which they have been historically subjected. As Melissa Harris-Perry states:

African American women face unique expectations as citizens of the United States. The particular histories of slavery, Jim Crow, urban segregation, racism, and patriarchy that are woven into the fabric of American politics have created a specific citizenship imperative for African American women—a role and image to which they are expected to conform. ... The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hard-working breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty and rejection. (21)

In this way, there is a constructed image of black women based not only on their skin color, but also on factors such as their gender and class. Thus, Harris-Perry distinguishes two myths created around the figure of black women: Mammy and Jezebel. The first one represents a helpful and asexual woman who is prepared to do everything that is needed as a domestic worker, whereas the second one is related to the hypersexualized image of non-white women. These myths “do not reflect black women’s lived experience; instead, they limit African American women to prescribed roles that serve the interests of others” (9).

In the aforementioned constructed images of black women, race interacts with other concepts such as gender and class.²⁵ In fact, as mentioned in the previous chapter, trying to see discrimination as a unidirectional claim of exclusion denies the complexity of black women's experiences. In this part of the study, intersections are going to be explored to better understand the events to which Ifemelu, the main character of *Americanah*, in particular, and black women in general are subjected. In order to do this, we shall focus on three aspects: firstly, black beauty; secondly, Ifemelu's interracial relationship; and, lastly, Ifemelu's work experience in the United States.

2.1. Black Beauty

All women, by virtue of being women, experience, throughout their lives, a certain pressure to conform to the standards of beauty established as the canon. There is a dictatorship of beauty; that is to say, women are expected to be (or become) beautiful. In fact, patriarchal and racist environments do not allow black women to construct a positive and subjective image of themselves. The burden of beauty is combined with the idealization of a certain model or canon, which, is equivalent to the Eurocentric standard: tall and slim women, with blue eyes, and blond and long hair. It is undeniable that the Eurocentric norm was and still is that of a "perfect" white woman. Therefore, for centuries, black women have not even had the chance of being considered beautiful. In the novel, Ifemelu is aware of the consequences of trying to adjust to the aforementioned Western canon. Nevertheless, she is also, to some extent, conditioned by the pressure exerted by society; a pressure that is sometimes invisible, since one of the main problems of patriarchal societies is that there are indirect actions that perpetuate

²⁵ "Isn't it funny how they say 'black want Obama' and 'women want Hillary,' but what about black women?" (Adichie 441).

male chauvinism. On account of this, beauty is defined and marketed to serve the interests of the heteronormative patriarchy.

Ifemelu is, according to Dina Yerima, a conflicted individual, since she tries to harmonize her traditional culture and the colonizers' one: "in doing this, an imbalance occurs and there is no longer a single original culture but a hybrid one that is a blend of the two" (640). Therefore, the protagonist is a "hybrid" individual and her identity is the result of the colonizer-colonized relationship. This cultural exchange, however, implies inequality, since the colonizer's culture is associated with domination whereas the colonized one is linked to subordination. In this way, the colonized subjects suffer oppression and, in the case of Ifemelu it is constructed upon two fronts: on the one hand, on the basis of race and, on the other hand, on the basis of gender. These phenomena intermingle and the resulting effects can be observed in the assessment of black beauty.

Popular magazines, the media or the Internet... all of them are full of images that insert stereotypes into our mind on a daily basis. Even though the representation of beauty varies among history and cultures, adjusting to a canon is necessary to be considered somebody in society, since beauty has long been used to reinforce hierarchies and denigrate women. In this way, people and, in particular, women are, first of all, their looks: what is beautiful is good. The problem comes when that appearance is totally different from the one established as the standard;²⁶ even more, it is not just that it is different, but also that it is almost impossible to resemble a little the expectations and, in order to achieve them, it is needed to belong to the high class.²⁷ As a consequence, "differences in body image, skin color, and hair haunt the

²⁶ The Euro-American standard has such an influence on black communities that in the novel *Obinze* compliments Ifemelu telling her: "You look like a black American" (Adichie 80). American culture, society and ideals are more appreciated than the Nigerian (African) ones.

²⁷ "For example, the high cost of various beauty regimens such as cosmetics, tanning salons, perms, hair straighteners ... eludes, excludes, and marginalizes poor women who cannot afford the high cost of fulfilling hegemonically defined beauty standards" (Patton 35-36).

existence and psychology of Black women, especially since one common U.S. societal stereotype is the belief that Black women fail to measure up to the normative standard” (Patton 24).²⁸

Color is not race, as stated in chapter 1.3.; nonetheless, there are certain physical characteristics that allow the process of “racialization” by establishing a close relation between body and race. The black-white dichotomy has been useful not only to characterize black people as inferior, but also to consider white as the epitome of beauty and privilege. Thus, the division that exists between black women and white women increase, since the more one term is associated with negative connotations, the more the other acquire positive characteristics. That being so, the Eurocentric or Euro-American standard has a devastating impact on black women. From their hair to their lips or nose, without forgetting their skin color: there is nothing similar to the white canon. Consequently, black women are subjected to processes (bleaching creams, relaxers, etc.) that even damage their health just to assimilate a little to the ideal, because, overall, black beauty has not been historically appreciated.

Nonetheless, it is not just a question of beauty, but of oppression.²⁹ Beauty, in this way, is subjected “to the social conditions of racism, sexism and classism” (Patton 30). In *Americanah* it can be seen how the Eurocentric standard still exists in the 21st century, with persistent traumatic effects on black women. In the following subchapters, I will explore the intersection of race and gender, using as the starting point hair and skin color, symbols associated throughout the entire novel with the ideal of black beauty.

²⁸ In spite of the fact that in this work I will focus on black versus white beauty, it is important to bear in mind that, as Tracey O. Patton reminds us, “beauty issues and subjection to dominant standards are not the sole domain of Black and White women” (25).

²⁹ In fact, activists such as Angela Davis express the humiliation of “redu[cing] a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion” (37).

2.1.1. Hair

As previously advanced, “historically and into modern times, African American beauty has been disparaged” (Patton 25-26). Nevertheless, hair soon became a symbol of African identity, and, as any symbol, it acquired different connotations across time. Thus, “in the early fifteenth century,” in the context of the African continent, “hairstyle for the Wolof, Mende, Mandingo, and Yoruba signaled age, ethnic identity, marital status, rank within the community, religion, war and wealth” (27). At this point in history, hair was more than a cosmetic concern and, as soon as enslavers realized about this fact, they shaved the heads of the slaves, wiping out the slaves’ cultural identity to make it easier to control them (Randle 117). “Throughout the centuries of slavery scarves became a practicable alternative to covering kinky, unstyled hair or hair that suffered from patchy baldness, breakage, or disease” (Patton 28), and as slaves did not have combs or products to take care of their hair, they developed new ones and used foodstuff such as butter and coffee. It is important to highlight that, in the context of American plantations, skin color and hair³⁰ were decisive factors for choosing who worked in the fields or who worked directly with the white population. Therefore, imitating whiteness—in other words, straight hair and light skin— was associated with privilege: better access to food and clothes, among other features, and the promise of being free. Later on, in the late 19th century, the practice of hair straightening was considered by intellectuals such as Du Bois an attempt to emulate whites and, consequently, a way of internalized racism.³¹ However, the practice became so widespread in society that many women simply considered it a matter of fashion. Throughout the 20th century, with inventions like the hair softener by Madam C. J. Walker, the debate around hair straightening continued to be a controversial issue, since Walker, who was

³⁰ Within black hair, there were hierarchies. “It is the prominence or absence of the kink factor—from nappy to curly to wavy to straight— that determines good and bad hair valuations” (Randle 115).

³¹ Considering Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, the colonized subject mimics the colonizer “by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values” (Ashcroft et al 124). As a result, the colonized individual is a blurred copy of the colonizer.

one of the most influential black women of that time, spearheaded “the idea that straight hair mean[t] higher social and economic opportunities” (Randle 117).³² Yet the “Black is Beautiful” movement, emerging in the 1960s and flourishing in the 1970s, brought with it hairstyles other than straight; for instance, “afros, braids, dreadlocks, and knots” (Patton 30), all of which, with their creativity, carried signs of rebellion and self-confidence. On account of this, hairstyles became a tool that African Americans used in order to confront the standards. Nonetheless, those decades of optimism and self-esteem were followed by a period in which assimilation was necessary to achieve success in America. Eurocentric ideals of beauty became, again, the norm, hair being “one major way Black females [we]re devaluated” (Randle 116). This idea lasts until our days, although “African Americans have begun to use a resistive strategy of acceptance. In this counter-hegemonic turn, beauty differences within the Black community are considered good, because one is being creative in their own individual beauty standard, rather than looking for outside acceptance” (Patton 41).

In the 21st century, black women are still struggling with the matter of embracing their natural hair or adjusting to the Eurocentric canon, as reflected in *Americanah*. The novel begins with its protagonist, Ifemelu, traveling to Trenton, in New Jersey, to get her hair braided at an African salon, in a process that takes for 4 to 6 hours. The hairdresser suggests Ifemelu should “relax” her hair and use a specific color for her braids,³³ yet Ifemelu rejects the proposal by stating that “[she] likes [her] hair the way God made it” (Adichie 15). It seems, then, that Ifemelu chooses natural over artificial; that she rejects the Eurocentric standard. However, until

³² “It’s one thing when whites demanded blacks to change the way they were created, but when one of their own suggested hair straightening, well that’s a different story. Madam C. J. Walkers 1905 hair softener ... is regarded as the first hair product developed and manufactured by, and sold to, Black people. Walker revolutionized the way Black women thought about their hair” (Randle 118). Still, this interpretation can be contrasted with the continued intellectual problematization of “conking” one’s hair, as described by Malcolm X in his famous autobiography.

³³ That is, to mimic white women’s hair because the more they adjust to the Eurocentric standard, the more likely they are to be successful in America.

reaching this point, her life was conditioned by the Western standards of beauty. Thus, from the very outset of the novel, black women's hair becomes an important symbol.

In Nigeria Ifemelu braided her hair; nevertheless, in America she learnt that she must straighten it. When Aunt Uju passed her medical exams, Ifemelu learnt that, in America, natural black hair was a synonym of unprofessionalism. That may be the reason why one of the first concerns of Aunt Uju was relaxing her hair, since she wanted to be considered a good, professional American doctor: "Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional" (Adichie 146). At this point, Aunt Uju was worried about succeeding in the host country: "you are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (146). In this way, she was trying to fulfil the white patriarchal notions that the American society had imposed upon her. As previously mentioned, black women suffer a double oppression: because of her gender and because of her race. Men do not need to adjust to such an idealized stereotype in order to succeed and white women, at least, have the possibility of resembling a little the canon just because of their race. Ifemelu considered that Aunt Uju had "left behind something of herself" (146), without knowing that later on she was going to be in the same situation due to the social pressure, because "the range of beauty and hairstyles embraced by African American women can have an effect on employment opportunities. Failure to work toward the Euro American beauty ideal can result in such consequences as the loss of a job" (Patton 37).

When Ifemelu was going to have a job interview, Aunt Uju and Ruth suggested her to straighten her hair —"My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job" (Adichie, 250). Ifemelu bought a relaxer but it did not work, so she decided to go to a professional. Even though when her hair was straightened it was a little burned, the hairdresser praised her because "[she] have got the white-girl swing!" (251). Ifemelu did not recognize herself and felt that "something organic

[died] which should not have died” (251), yet this was the correct thing because it was part of the American beauty standard. In order to fit in the American society, one of the most important symbols of African beauty was destroyed and Ifemelu accepted it.

A few days later, her hair started to fall out terribly because of the chemicals of the relaxers, and, as one of her friends, Wambui, told her, the solution was to “cut [her] hair and go natural” (257). Once Ifemelu got her hair cut, she felt “so ugly [she was] scared of [herself]” (258) and it was not until Wambui recommended her the webpage HappilyKinkyNappy.com that she began to feel better about herself. This episode happened at the same time that Ifemelu discovered an infidelity on the part of her partner at that moment, Curt. In particular, one of the things that caused her most pain was seeing that the woman with whom Curt was flirting (sexting) had a long, blond and beautiful hair. Ifemelu felt so inferior and insecure that she was not able to go outside (even to work) until three days had gone by. Since that moment, in which Ifemelu began to fall in love with herself again —and especially with her natural hair—, she faced the reactions and criticism that her natural hair caused:³⁴ from “Does it mean anything? Like, something political?” (262), to “Are you a lesbian?” (262) or “You think your hair was part of the problem?” (262). The reactions to natural hair were charged with negative connotations,³⁵ since, as Randle notes, “African women have wrestled with the concept of “good vs bad hair” (114): good would mean straight hair and bad would imply natural hair.

As a consequence, Ifemelu was forced to choose natural over artificial, but once she got used to it, she used her hair as symbol of freedom, identity, strength and confidence. Thus, black women’s “natural” hairstyles are not just fashion, as some people consider it, since damaging real hair for the sake of achieving the beauty standard entails damaging one’s physical and

³⁴ This confirms the fact that there is a “dictatorship” of beauty. Ifemelu fell in love with her body again because, previously, she suffered the consequences of imitating the Eurocentric standard. Maybe, if her hair had not fallen out, she would have continued straightening her hair and conforming to the white patriarchal standard of beauty.

³⁵ People preferred damaged hair to healthy and natural hair in order to maintain the Eurocentric canon.

psychological health and integrity. In this way, African American women are asked not only to adjust to the white standards of beauty, “but to have such standards completely override their natural being” (Randle 119), in a process in which hair intertwines with skin color and other factors to indicate social class, sexual orientation, political views, etc.

2.1.2. Skin Color

“Skin color and hair are so intertwined that it is hard to separate the two when examining the forces that shape Black people’s lives” (Randle 117), as both relate to the perception of beauty. Margaret Hunter differentiates between racism and colorism, but recognizes that both are completely interconnected processes necessary to establish a skin color stratification that “systematically privilege[s] lightness” (175). This privilege of the lighter skinned over the darker skinned turns into different relations of power in which “whiteness is believed to represent civility, intelligence, and beauty, and in contrast, Blackness/Brownness is seen as representing primitiveness, ignorance, and ugliness” (187). As previously stated, light skin color and straight hair were determinant factors since the period of slavery. They were signs of power and privilege that lasted until our days. Thus, “light skin bestows privileges in education ... an advantage in income attainment ... [and also] in the marriage market” (187-189). Nevertheless, skin color not only determines social and economic privilege, but is also part and parcel of the standard of beauty that people aspire to, thus having severe consequences in African Americans’ self-esteem.

In the promotion of light skin color and straight hair; that is to say, of the Eurocentric standard of beauty, the media constitute a key factor:

In the media, many of the African American women who are glorified for their beauty tend to be lighter-skinned women who have long, wavy hair. ... The media may promote

or single out a more Eurocentric-looking model because Euro American standards of beauty are paramount and mediated standards of beauty promote adherence to whiteness (Patton 39).

This limited representation, if any, of non-white women in the media is narrated in *Americanah*. Ifemelu complains about the “absurd[ity of] how women’s magazines force images of small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world” (Adichie 219). But not only that, because she also emphasizes the biases to which magazines are subjected: “so three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can’t get clues for makeup from these magazines” (365).³⁶ As if this were not enough, according to Brenda Randle, “the products that are advertised regularly included before and after pictures that encourage Black women to lighten their pigment and straighten their hair, if not for themselves, but for their community” (118).³⁷ In America, black women learn to feel inferior because of their skin color and hair, this is why self-love and the acceptance of black beauty become powerful weapons against racism.

As a consequence, Africans, in particular women, use skin-bleaching products to remove the natural pigmentation of their skin, which has catastrophic effects on their health.³⁸ The desirable standard of beauty for black women is embodied by Ginika³⁹ and Kosi. In Nigeria, both are praised for their beauty, which derives from their light-skin. Kosi, in particular, is the

³⁶ Makeup is part of the game of beauty. The system is subtle with this subject: although the fact of not making yourself up is not totally censored, there are a whole series of subliminal messages that turn makeup into a “chosen obligation.”

³⁷ Traditionally, most successful blacks in America were light-skinned. Nowadays, however, there are models, such as Nyakim Gatwech, and actresses, like Lupita Nyong’o, that challenge the prevalence of the white standard of beauty. In fact, Nyong’o, who won the Oscar-winning in 2013 was, one year later, named by *People* magazine the most beautiful person, becoming the first black woman in receiving this distinction.

³⁸ “Uneven complexion, dark patches, thinning of the skin, and, in severe cases, cancer” (Yerima 646-647).

³⁹ When Ginika meets Ifemelu in the United States, she recognizes the privileges of being light-skinned. In fact, she asserts: “there’s some shit you’ll get from white people in this country that I won’t get” (Ngozi Adichie 151).

best representation of how light skinned women are more likely to marry high-status men. In contrast to them are women such as Aunty Uju and Aunty Onenu, who use bleaching creams to appear more sophisticated and climb up the social ladder. There is a racial hierarchy and black women aspire to whiteness in order to have, at least, some of the white privileges. Despite the fact that women are more oppressed by the beauty canons, there is at least one male character in the novel, Bartholomew, Aunty Uju's Nigerian boyfriend in the United States, who employs lightening creams to erase his blackness —and, symbolically, his roots— in order to have the possibility of making it in America. Ifemelu's reaction to this procedure is one of rejection. Even though she is subjected to the pressure of being as white as possible, she is at ease with her skin color, demonstrating with her natural hair and skin that black beauty really exists.

2.2. Are We Equal? Ifemelu and Her “Hot White Boyfriend”

In the previous chapter we discussed how beauty interacts with concepts such as gender and race. In this we will focus on Ifemelu's interracial relationship with Curt to explain how the intersection of race, gender and class functions in this sphere. It is important to note that, even though intersectionality does not occur in Ifemelu's other romantic relationships, her life was conditioned by them. In other words, her lifetime was highly influenced by men.

In Nigeria, Ifemelu had a relationship with Obinze during their adolescence. It would be broken at a certain point in the story and would be resumed over time, when the protagonist returns to Nigeria. In the meantime, in America, Ifemelu has a crush on two men: on Blaine,

whom she meets on a train⁴⁰ and on Abe, her white classmate.⁴¹ Later on, Ifemelu meets a white man, Curt, while babysitting at Kimberly's house. Arguably, Curt becomes Ifemelu's first official boyfriend in the United States, and even though at the beginning their relationship seems to be idyllic, it evolves into a sea of problems.

The first time Curt asked Ifemelu out, she felt "how glorious it was, to be so wanted, and by this man with the rakish metal band around his wrist and the cleft-chinned handsomeness of models in department store catalogues" (Adichie 237). It was glorious, for a black woman like Ifemelu, to be wanted by a rich and handsome white man, because this kind of relationship was not the expected one.⁴² After their first date, in which Curt spent almost all the time talking about himself "with boyish enthusiasm" (237), Curt felt the need to tell his family about her love affair with Ifemelu, as if she was a prize or, as his mother put it, another of his adventures. The first reaction to this interracial relationship came from Kimberly, who felt happy about the announcement. Nonetheless, her husband Don showed surprise, as if Ifemelu did not deserve such a boyfriend as Curt: after all, she was black. As previously suggested, Curt's mother thought that her son was "[an] adventurer who would bring back exotic species—he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl" (244). In Curt's family circle, she is the one that best epitomizes her disapproval.⁴³ Conversely, Ifemelu did not tell her parents about Curt, maybe because of his race, but she did tell Aunty Uju. For Aunty Uju, Curt was a synonym of the

⁴⁰ After Curt, Ifemelu began a relationship with Blaine. Even though they were both black, their background and experiences were completely different and, at the end, Ifemelu accepted and submitted to her partner's habits, forgetting her needs. Nonetheless, she was able to decide her own future by breaking up with him because "her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out" (Adichie 9).

⁴¹ Abe was a white man who "did not see [Ifemelu] as female" (Adichie 236) because of her blackness. She could be his friend, but not his partner; in fact, "she was invisible to [him]" (236). Following the ideas of Erin Pryor, "having Black friends is acceptable, but romantic interracial relationships are not" (107).

⁴² As David Hollinger states, "black out-marriage ... remains rare in comparison to the statistics for out-marriage among Hispanic Americans, American Indians, and the various groups of Asian Americans. [Additionally] ... black men marry non-black women much more frequently than black women marry non-black men" ("The Concept of Post-Racial" 177). Even though Hollinger claims that "when someone in your own family is in one of these traditionally stigmatized relationships the stigma loses some of its power" (178), in *Americanah*, through the figure of Curt's mother, we can see that the stigma is still present.

⁴³ In an act of color-blindism "she would tolerate anybody he liked, but she felt no obligation for affection" (244).

American Dream, he entailed everything that she desired, everything that a black woman in the United States aspired to.

This wide range of reactions to a cross-racial relationship depicts the prejudicial racist thoughts that persist in the American society. According to Erin Pryor, in interracial relationships whites manifest a color-blind ideology while blacks show a color-blind logic; the former promotes “a race-neutral discourse ... that benefits and privileges the white majority” (100), whereas the latter suggests that “to successfully participate in society Blacks must adopt mainstream racialized beliefs and practices” (101). This dichotomy can be appreciated in the family circle, in Curt and Ifemelu, and, by extension, in the American society.

All in all, Curt can be described a wealthy and handsome white man who loved Ifemelu, albeit not in a healthy way. His attraction to Ifemelu was shaped by the promise and exotic appeal of her racialized body. He saw Ifemelu’s body as a place of colonization and did not only hypersexualize her, but also considered her as the prototype of black women, since “he had never been with a black woman” (Adichie 240). His image of black women was based on the constructed stereotypes previously mentioned (Mammie, Jezebel, etc.). Nevertheless, Ifemelu accepted the sexual practices that Curt proposed. In my opinion, feeling so strongly desired by a white man led her to accept those practices, even though she did not understand them, because for her it was enough “to lie bare skin to bare skin” (241).⁴⁴ Therefore, her submission works on Pryor’s color-blind logic.

Curt gave Ifemelu the “gift of contentment, of ease” (Adichie 246) and she “began to like him because he liked her” (237). In doing so, she became the passive member in the

⁴⁴ It is important to note that sexuality, in particular black sexuality, has always been considered a taboo topic. As a consequence, there has been a silence that has gradually started to be broken in recent years. Some black authors, like Adichie herself, “engage issues around sexuality. ... This engagement is not just focused on the violence, oppression, and trauma; rather, these scholars examine and highlight eroticism, sexual desire, pleasure, and practice, including nonnormative sexual subjects and community formations” (Bailey and Stallings 196). Even though sexuality and sexual orientation are other factors that can be considered in intersectionality, for the purposes of this paper we are going to focus on race, gender and class, which constitute the original intersectional approach.

relationship, both in the sexual sphere (which eventually led her to cheat on Curt) and in the economic field. In this way, as their affair progressed, Ifemelu found herself leading a life in which, thanks to Curt, she was beneficiary of the privileges reserved to the wealthy white class. In fact, Ifemelu got her visa and green card thanks to Curt, who “could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (250). Ifemelu was, at this point, living the life most immigrants dreamt of. At the same time, however, she continued to feel like an outsider in that world because of her race. The protagonist was, to some extent, Curt’s possession.⁴⁵ She was at the bottom of the social ladder, while Curt was at the top: “it was not merely because Curt was white, it was the kind of white he was, the untamed golden hair and handsome face, the athlete’s body, the sunny charm and the smell, around him, of money” (Adichie 362). All in all, it seems that their relationship, were it not for the money involved in it, would have lasted less.

It is worth noting that, in this interracial relationship, Ifemelu spent a lot of time explaining things to her partner.⁴⁶ On many occasions, she felt that she was a misunderstood woman. For instance, when Curt’s mother showed her rejection towards their relationship, Curt laughed and said that it was because “[her] mother [did not] like beautiful women” (Adichie 245). He tried to hide the question of race and, at the same time, he objectified women. Ifemelu, this time, did not say anything. Nevertheless, there were many cultural misunderstandings that placed the protagonist in an inferior sphere. Curt tried to condemn the prejudices against black women that compel them to do things that damage their health, such as relaxing their hair: “It’s so fucking wrong that you have to do this” (252). Despite that, there were other acts or episodes that Curt, because of his race, gender and class background, was not able to understand. For

⁴⁵ In fact, she had internalized this to such an extent that “she felt proud—to be with him, and of him” (Adichie 272).

⁴⁶ “The thing about crosscultural relationships is that you expend so much time explaining. My ex-boyfriends and I spent a lot of time explaining” (Adichie 563).

example, when a taxi driver told Ifemelu that she did not look African because her blouse was too tight, Curt did not understand why she was infuriated by that comment. In fact, he “laughed and laughed” (256), and began to tell the story to his friends: “she actually went to the bathroom to look at her blouse!” (256). Likewise, once they had gone into a restaurant “with linen-covered tables” (363), the host had looked at them and had asked Curt “Table for one?” (363-364). Curt told Ifemelu that the host did not mean it like that, but Ifemelu asked herself: “How else could the host have meant it?” (364). Thus, it is not just that this kind of romance was not well considered in the United States —“In their expression was the question “Why her?” It amused Ifemelu. She had seen that look before, ... the look of people confronting a great tribal loss” (362)—, but it is also that, inside the relationship, there were many misunderstandings because of their different race, gender and class.⁴⁷

There are two other episodes that are worth mentioning. The first one has to do with the moment in which Curt asked Ifemelu to leave her job as babysitter in order to spend more time with him, in what constitutes a blatantly patriarchal attitude: if she accepted his suggestion, she would become financially dependent on him. The other episode has to do with the reaction that Curt had when Ifemelu told him that she had had sex with another white man: ““You gave him what he wanted,” Curt said ... In a sudden giddy of recklessness, she corrected Curt. “I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental”” (357). Ifemelu hurt Curt’s pride to such an extent by telling him that she had slept with a white man, thus indirectly confirming that he had no more power over her, that he called her “bitch” (357). This was the end of a relationship characterized by Ifemelu’s subordination and Curt’s oblique —but relentless— power.

⁴⁷ “White partners tend to downplay the significance of race in their experiences and associate racialized matters with non-racial factors. Consequently, they are often unaware of ... negative public reactions to their interracial status. Black partners tend to be aware that their interracial status may garner adverse reactions, and therefore, they strategically handle possible intolerances to assure ease of participation in society” (Pryor 119).

In conclusion, to some extent, Ifemelu's life is conditioned by her relationships with men. In particular, her relationship with Curt includes numerous aspects that black women have to face when dealing with race, gender and class. These factors matter, and the way in which they intermingle determines her life as black working-class woman.

2.3. The Reality behind the American Dream

Racial discrimination, gender conceptions and social class were and are still used to limit black women's work and life. Thus, the struggle to deal with race also becomes a struggle to deal with gender and class inequality. As Jean Belkhir and Bernice Barnett cogently argue, we cannot forget that "class is one of the three central organizing principles in people's lives and that we are living in the context of a global capitalist world-economy. [In fact] the U.S. is characterized by a history of racism, sexism and classism that enhances social, cultural and institutional forms of differentiation, inequality, and resource distribution" (159). The oppression to which black women are subjected because of this can be appreciated in the novel, in particular in the detailed description of Ifemelu's experience as an immigrant in the United States.

Once in the United States, Aunt Uju gave Ifemelu a friend's social security card so that she could find a legitimate job.⁴⁸ She started applying for the jobs she saw on the newspapers, but she was always denied an opportunity because of racial prejudices. Thus, when she was desperate to get a job in order to pay her rent and the university fees, she consented to offer her body to a tennis coach. This became Ifemelu's first work experience in the United States. I

⁴⁸ Ifemelu worried about the fact that the person on that security card did not look like her at all. Nevertheless, Aunt Uju told her that for Americans, there was no difference among blacks. In this way, her identity as Ifemelu was erased. That is to say, what mattered was that she was a black poor woman in the United States and, therefore, the worst jobs were reserved for her.

would like to refer to this episode as one of abuse, because the white man took advantage of his power—economic, racial and sexual power—and ascendancy over a young black woman who was jobless. As a consequence of this incident, Ifemelu slid into a deep depression: “she felt like a small ball, adrift and alone” (Adichie 190). Despite the fact that she tried to tell Auntie Uju what had happened, her aunt was so influenced by the American society that she was not able to help her niece and, in the end, Ifemelu felt completely overwhelmed by such a hard situation.⁴⁹ The intersection between patriarchy, racism and capitalism is perfectly depicted here. Under these combined systems, women are exploited for the benefit of the affluent white class, represented, in this case, by a wealthy white tennis coach.

Ifemelu’s next job was offered by Kimberly, a rich white American, who hired the immigrant woman as a babysitter. Kimberly “paid cash under the table” (Adichie 179), contributing to the perpetuation of racist, classist and patriarchal ideologies that gave the dominant culture its power to oppress those they consider “the Other.” As shown by Belkhir and Barnett, in domestic work “the greater liberty of the capitalist class and higher status women ... is achieved at the expense of the lower working-class women, who, forced to work, assume the tasks beneath, distasteful to, or considered as “dirty job” by these privileged women” (167). Domestic work is structured around the place that women traditionally have in their families; that is to say, domestic jobs are often reserved to women. To introduce another intersectional ingredient, we should add the fact that, in America, race is sometimes class. Blacks are supposed to occupy the lowest rank in society, which becomes evident in the episode of the carpet cleaner. When the carpet cleaner found Ifemelu, a black woman, in such an amazing house as Kimberly’s, his reaction was one of rejection —“a burly, red-faced man stood there ... He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility” (Adichie 204)—. How had Ifemelu managed to be in that position? She should be

⁴⁹ It is important to note that episodes like this have been traditionally silenced.

poor, because she was a black woman and, if not, he, as a working-class white man, should at least be in a superior level. In this way, the carpet cleaner assumed that all blacks had to belong to the lower class. He did not consider the possibility of comparing whites with blacks; the comparison is always established between poor whites and blacks. It is also important to note that maybe, if Ifemelu had been a man, the carpet cleaner's reaction would have been different: at least he would be serving a rich black man, which was better than serving a rich black woman in his distorted and twisted worldview.

From this point onwards, and thanks to Curt's help, Ifemelu began to succeed in America. Nevertheless, there is another event worth mentioning. When Ifemelu's blog about race began to get popular, she was invited to give speeches and conferences. In her first diversity talk all the attendants were white and, after her speech, she received an e-mail in which was written "YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY" (Adichie 377). This last sentence perfectly summarizes the triple oppression to which black women are subjected. It was not just that a black blogger was giving a talk on race, but also that she was a woman, so Ifemelu "should be grateful" (377), she should pretend that her race, gender and class were not obstacles for her. As the protagonist puts it, "in America," paradoxically, "racism exists but racists are all gone" (390), an intuition that can be extrapolated to other social factors such as gender and class. In this way, even though some facts are undeniable, the privileged class denies them and does not want to look for the solution to those problems, especially when that could entail losing their benefits. This may be the reason why discriminatory practices as the ones depicted in Adichie's *Americanah* continue to exist, probably in more subtle ways, with the ultimate objective of perpetuating the privileges—and the supremacy—of the dominant class which, for the most part, continues to be formed by rich white men.

3. Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* deals with issues that have been traditionally silenced (racism, black sexuality, the harsh reality of immigration, etc.). In this dissertation we have focused on the main protagonist, Ifemelu, in order to explore the triple oppression that black migrant women have to confront in white supremacist societies. The results obtained prove that trying to see discrimination as a unidirectional claim of exclusion denies the complexity of black women's experiences; in fact, Ifemelu's identity is shaped by the intersection of race, gender and class.

The findings suggest that, in the intersection of race and gender, beauty is used to serve the interests of patriarchy; in particular, of white, Western patriarchy, since the current canon of beauty is a Eurocentric one. Thus, white supremacist societies try to prevent black women from constructing a positive image of themselves. Additionally, Ifemelu's life is conditioned by men. It is worth mentioning her interracial relationship with Curt, a wealthy white man, because, through it, we can appreciate misunderstandings, both within the relationship and outside of it, which shape, condition and oppress Ifemelu. Lastly, intersectionality is also obvious in the consideration of the jobs that Ifemelu has when she arrives in the United States. The question that arouses, then, is that if Ifemelu were a white man, would he suffer the same discrimination as her female counterpart? For me the answer is evident. Thus, *Americanah* becomes a key text in understanding why intersectionality is such a necessary approach in the 21st century.

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