

BORDER CROSSING:  
BLACK WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY AND THE LIMITATIONS TO EMANCIPATION IN  
CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

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Border Crossing: Black Women's Subjectivity and the Limitations to Emancipation in  
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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) has received commendable attention especially for creating autonomous, visionary female characters who sharply subvert the hegemonic structures that relegate them to submissive Others. Ifemelu, for instance, is depicted as a dynamic, empowered, Black woman, who defies heteropatriarchal structures of power thus exemplifying *Americanah* as a model for Black female agency within feminist scholarships. Postcolonial critics on the other hand, have focused on how *Americanah* transcends national boundaries and identities by traversing three different continents, Africa, America, and Europe, and creating a transnational and transcultural text that significantly introduces new paradigms to postcolonial studies. For instance, examining transnationalism, transculturalism, and Otherness presented in the novel, Akingbe, Niyi; Adeniyi, Emmanuel argue that, "The configuration of Other in *Americanah* is in two forms: the geographical ostracism of blacks or the poor from white Americans, and the resentment of Other by another Other. A funny scenario of Otherised Other is presented, indicating a victim victimizing another victim" (50). This argument significantly illustrates the complexities of Otherness in *Americanah*, and at the same time, introduces the multilayered oppressions of the colonized Other as a racially marginalized individual in the diaspora. Whether focused on feminism, postcolonialism, or racism, critics have unanimously applauded *Americanah* for its new dimensional focus on Black women agency.

I agree with these interpretations but also propose that, to understand how Black women perform their identity, calls for the understanding of how they occupy space as Black African women both in Africa and in the diaspora; an integral aspect that most criticism on *Americanah* tends to overlook. Border crossing does not only significantly complicate the liberation of the

Black female subject, but also constructs new strategies of agency. Ifemelu's adaptation to diasporic cultural and social dynamics comes with the redefinition of her agency as a Black woman and her ability to develop a voice that forcefully asserts her as a speaking subject regardless of context. Her performance of race and gender significantly subverts the hegemonic constructions of power structures that normalize the oppression and suppression of Black women in a heteropatriarchal system. I acknowledge this strong womanhood that the novel establishes; however, I also recognize drawbacks in its success as an emancipatory text for Black women both in Africa and in the diaspora. *Americanah* presents instances where "Ifemelu's voice and experiences are dismissed and trivialized in various regimes of power" (Felix Mutunga Ndaka 104). For instance, in Nigeria, Ifemelu is constantly reminded to behave like a woman, to learn not "to say everything" (Adichie 65), and revere men. In America, Ifemelu is repeatedly reminded of gender, Blackness and foreignness. Additionally, Ifemelu pulls down her *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* (Adichie 4) blog, moves back to Nigeria, and reunites with her ex-boyfriend, Obinze (now married with a daughter). In the light of such concerns, I argue that *Americanah's* seemingly teleological structure re-establishes the systematic structures of oppression that continue to pervade Black women in Africa and in the diaspora. No structural change occurs towards the collective emancipation of Black women. By failing to recognize that Black women are still significantly stifled and delimited by heteropatriarchal and racial oppressions, the novel's happily-ever-after ending presents a moment of complacency and complicity that erases the liberating Black female subversion established in the course of the novel. This paper will examine how women of African descent construct their subjectivity in Africa and the diaspora,

and how the noncommittal closure of the novel compromises their pursuit for active emancipation.

Reading *Americanah* mainly through the scholarship of Michelle Wright, this essay seeks to demonstrate the various ways in which *Americanah* presents new dimensions to the definition of Black women subjectivity in Africa and the diaspora. In addition, I will explore how the novel's ending does not recognize the persistent oppression pervading Black womanhood hence compromising the quest for emancipation. Reading *Americanah* through this lens creates new epistemological truths regarding the identity of Black women in contemporary society and illuminate the underlying frameworks that complicate their emancipation. *Americanah* provides an opportunity for Black women to imagine a subjectivity that challenges white heteronormative hegemony, not designed by a history of slavery and racism, nor defined by Black patriarchal structures. The construction of this new womanhood is, however, premised on border crossing thus presenting gender performance that is significantly influenced by Western traditions. Adichie interweaves her identity as a colonized elite, a Black woman in diaspora, and her knowledge of both postcolonial and western models of writing to present fiction that plays on the conventional frameworks of African literature but also largely draws from Western forms. As this paper will demonstrate, understanding of the Black female subjectivity in *Americanah* begins with the understanding of how Black identity is lived both in Africa and in the diaspora and its implication on the liberation of Black women.

I will proceed by analyzing the gender performance and societal expectations in Africa. I will argue in this section that in the African context, racial oppression is arguably non-existent; instead, the society is primarily heteropatriarchal and women are oppressed on the premises of gender. I will examine how Ifemelu, and other women like Obinze's mother, are frowned upon

for their outspokenness in a society that labels women as “virtually silent observers who simply fulfilled their destiny without questioning it or the structures that sanctioned the roles they were made to assume” (Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 5). The next section will present a close analysis of diasporic identity and its implication on the intersectional subjectivity of Black women previously unaware of their racial marking. I will argue in this section that *Americanah* constructs autonomous women who imagine a new kind of subjectivity thus rewriting “a radically different text for a female empowerment” (Hortense Spillers 80). However, the outside forces of oppression and the existence of the African woman as doubly Othered because of her foreignness presents major drawbacks in the emancipation of Black women. Ultimately, I will argue that *Americanah* posits a commendable journey for Black women’s liberation and achieves a new dimension to the subjectivity of Black women in America; however, the novel’s trajectory does not recognize the persistent oppression pervading black womanhood in Africa and the diaspora and writes African women as compliant with restrictive hegemonic patriarchy. Although Black women put great effort into the fight for emancipation, *Americanah* presents a teleological ending that implies an erasure of the achievements attained in this cause.

### **Speaking Subjects: The Embodiment of Black Female Subjectivity in Africa**

African women in literature are often depicted as “subservient...passive, as always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and, therefore, completely dependent on their husbands.” They are rarely pictured “as heroic characters, or self-determined subjects with agency” (Nfah-Abbenyi 4). Consequently, there has been an erasure of Black women from dominant heteropatriarchal, postcolonial, nationalist narratives. However, contemporary women writers of African descent, in both feminist and postcolonial discourses, have relentlessly created counternarratives that are subversive and

liberating in their presentation of the Black woman both in Africa and in the diaspora. These women are made capable of a subjectivity and identity that is unconstrained by patriarchal society in general, and men in particular. They are placed on a pedestal as “speaking subjects” (Nfah-Abbenyi 56). In Nigeria, Ifemelu demonstrates an intractable personality that even scares her mother who is thoroughly troubled by Ifemelu’s blatant criticism of corrupt male officials because, according to Ifemelu’s mother, men in power deserve reverence. For Ifemelu’s mother, a typical subservient, religious woman, to have a girl challenging authority of any kind is unheard of: “Why must this girl be a troublemaker?” she tells Ifemelu, “I have been saying it since, that it would be better if she was a boy behaving like this” (Adichie 64). Similarly, aunty Uju cautions Ifemelu on her assertiveness: “I have told you that you do not have to say everything. You have to learn that” (Adichie 64). Adichie’s deliberate decision to depict Ifemelu this way successfully subverts the conventional silent and submissive African woman characterization.

While Ifemelu functions as the figure of resistance to male domination, her mother is the counteracting force “entrusted and empowered by society to translate the rules of patriarchy” (Boyce 69). She calls out her daughter for embodying a personality that is in opposition with traditional expectations of femininity. Ifemelu’s mother’s rebuke is instigated by the fact that her daughter challenged Sister Abinabo, whose influence in church is likened to the male pastor’s hence placing her almost parallel with patriarchal and religious authority. However, sister Abinabo cannot be a pastor because “she is a woman” (Adichie 60) and is equally complaint to being curtailed by patriarchy as she portrayed as “powerful” yet pretending to “wear her power lightly” (Adichie 60). Sister Abinabo is well aware of her leadership capabilities but participates in the societal manipulation of female agency which solidifies female subordination. Women,

like Ifemelu's mother and Sister Abinabo, therefore, are complicit with their exclusion from national and social discourses while men are designated as leaders by default. Such placement of women within patriarchal confines overshadows their crucial role in "biological, cultural and political reproductions of national and other collectivities" (Nira Yuval-Davis 630). Later in this essay, I will move to argue that, although Ifemelu constructs an exemplary model of black female liberation, *Americanah* ultimately does little to deconstruct such structures of female constriction and subjugation established in the text.

Already labelled a "troublemaker" by her mother for her outspokenness to, and challenge of male authority, Ifemelu's subversive personality is further reified by her male schoolmates: "Ifemelu is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees" (73). For wanting girls to be meek and acquiescent, the younger generation not only reflects the dominant discourses of heteropatriarchy, but also keeps hegemonic masculinity in circulation. In order to understand how Ifemelu embodies her subjectivity, it is significant to emphasize that her identity is deliberately performative. Judith Butler ascribes gender performativity as a repetition of acts that correspond to the pre-existing gender identifiers defined and fixed on individuals through social interactions. These "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body ... Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (2519). Ifemelu is well aware of what is expected of her as an idealized passive African woman, but relentlessly resists this imposed identity by asserting herself as oppositional to patriarchal discourse: "[Ifemelu] liked this image of herself as too much trouble, as different, and she sometimes thought of it as a carapace that

kept her safe” (Adichie 73). It is therefore, not surprising that Ifemelu fleetingly wishes that “her mother was not her mother” (Adichie 63) due to the latter’s conventional performance of womanhood and unwillingness to disrupt the hegemonic order. Neither does Ifemelu identify with Aunty Uju who reminds her repeatedly to be silent. Aunty Uju, despite her empowering career achievement as a doctor, cowers under male authority; she justifies her sexual relationship with the General as an attraction to “his power” (93) and not money. Unable to land a job upon graduation, Aunty Uju settles for less as she is trapped in situations that cripple female agency and empowerment. Although critical of Aunty Uju in this moment, and later on in the novel as she further compromises her agency by relating with a man whom Ifemelu deemed not worthy of her, the novel’s trajectory complies with this form of female dependency on men. In spite of the creation of female identities that compete in professions traditionally reserved for their male counterparts, the women are still thoroughly immobilised and require men like the General to “take care” (Adichie 56) of them in a typical subject/object gender relationship.

The empowerment of women in Africa is manipulated by the existence of masculine authority that stifle female agency. As Wright states, there has been an erasure of Black women from dominant heteropatriarchal and postcolonial narratives. For instance, Wright satirizes Frantz Fanon whose scholarship put Black men on the pedestal while Black women are expected to remain in their “‘traditional’ role: veiled silent, and subservient” (*Becoming* 138). Similarly, this notion existed within Black nationalist discourses in which Black men were fighters for the rights of the Black community, while the women were to be “satisfied with their subordinate roles as assistants, lovers, and mothers” (Wright, *Becoming* 138). Ifemelu finds a role model in Obinze’s mother; an empowered college professor whose demeanor “made [Ifemelu] want to say intelligent things” (83). Obinze’s mother exists outside of the societal prescriptions governing



female behavior as she subversively strives to offset patriarchal restrictions and assert women as speaking subjects both literally and symbolically. As a result, she is slapped by a male colleague that she publicly accuses of allegedly squandering university finances. In asserting her role as an intelligentsia and an equal participant in integrity and responsible leadership, Obinze's mother radically opposes the exclusion of women from social and nationalist discourses. However, her voice is stifled by the man who "could not take a woman talking to him like that" (Adichie 71) and thus, physically asserts his masculinity. What fuels Obinze's mother's indignation is not so much that she was slapped, but the fact that people pitied her for being slapped yet she was widow. The society, thus, justifies both the objectification and abuse of the female body, and male dominance. Yuval-Davis posits that the "entitlement of men to democratic participation...conferred citizen status not upon individuals as such, but upon man in their capacity as members and representatives of a family" (625). Therefore, the absence of a male *representative*, in this case, renders the woman as invisible for she has no history and, therefore, cannot speak (, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 2120). As a reaction to this injustice, Obinze's mother stages a sort of feminist revolution; she writes circulars and letters about the indignity of the human impulse to slap another person, not just a woman. Her argument is that she should not have been "slapped because she is a full human being, not because she doesn't have a husband to speak for her" (Adichie 71). The insistence on the need to recognize women as independent beings puts Obinze's mother on the pedestal: she does not only instill a sense of collective agency within her female students but reassures Ifemelu of the possibility of individual emancipation.

Adichie's construction of strong female identities such as Obinze's mother and Ifemelu weaves a tale that actively stages a subversive agenda that seeks to reclaim, for women, identities

that have been narrated outside of them. They are both read “against normative femininity” and their difference is misrecognized especially by fellow women: they do not conform to “the acceptable patterns of female behavior” which places them “outside [of] the traditional symbolics of gender in [their] group” (Boyce 70). It is arguable that women in Nigeria are subjugated exclusively on the basis of gender and sexuality; race is practically a non-existent phenomenon. Deliberate performance of subversive gender roles that challenge heteropatriarchal structures simultaneously privileges a self-descriptive identity and a subjectivity that disavows silent subalternity. Understanding how Ifemelu navigates her identity in Nigeria is a significant prerequisite to understanding how her agency is redefined when she migrates to the United States.

Ifemelu’s migration to America inevitably complicates her identity as she is suddenly plunged into a system that recognizes her not just as a woman, but also Black. Race in America intersects with the categories of gender and sexuality and produces Ifemelu as the subordinate other in a heteropatriarchal system, the racial other, and colonized other considering her colonial relationship with the West. As Wright argues, “the origin of blackness as an identity does not begin in Africa” (“Can I Call you” 6) because African identities are determined in relation to ethnicity, cultures, languages, and distinct traditional origins. Realizing that she is Black calls for the reconstruction and readjustment of her identity as her subjectivity, sexuality, race, and gender are all interlocking issues that challenge her survival in a white, heteronormative, patriarchal system.

**Intersectional Identities of Black Women in the Diaspora: Race and Gender Oppression in America.**

In America, the intersectionality of gender, race, sexuality, class, and foreignness are intricately interlocking identities that are ground for the manipulation and repression of Black female agency. In attempting to redefine Ifemelu's agency, it is with the understanding that, unlike Black African's in Africa who "define themselves through shared histories, languages, and cultural values, Blacks in the diaspora possess an intimidating array of different historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences" (Wright, *Becoming* 2). The subjectivity of the Black female body in the diaspora is thus problematized in multiple ways: for being a woman, being Black, and being an immigrant. Although previously not racially marked, Ifemelu is automatically interpellated into a racially categorized system in which she navigates an identity that is predicated by her understanding of her positionality; a Black woman in America. Ifemelu is both in recognition of the hetero-masculine presence that hinders her expression within the patriarchal system, but also the white normative structures that cement her position as the voiceless subaltern outside of the hegemony. Exploring the question of Otherness and Black female subjectivity in the novel, Ndaka identifies the "silencing and policing of black female migrants" arguing that "The novel... explodes and disperses the mythical romance with the nation, disrupts and shifts epistemic and discursive centers by manipulating the subject/other and the observer/observed positionalities, and gives an incisive and self-reflexive portrayal of the hydra-headedness of racial pathologies" (102-03). Immigrants, and not just women, are confronted by systematic oppression and the evolving understanding of their now Black identity in a heteronormative white system structure. In a blogpost entitled "To my Fellow Non-American Black: In America, You are Black, Baby," Ifemelu chides fellow non-American Blacks for their reluctance in embracing Blackness because "black is at the bottom of American race ladder and [they] want none of that" (273). She writes:

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't black in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the society of former Negroes (Adichie 273).

The need to accept a Black identity that Ifemelu's advocates for is necessary in the creation of collectiveness and empathy among Black people in America. There is need for Non-American Blacks to be socially cognizant of their racial Otherness and the fact that they are not immune to systematic oppressions regardless of their histories. As Aretha Phiri argues, "Ifemelu's blog persistently problematizes the generalized notion of black authenticity. In particular, black race is here presented as a social construction that is learned and into which Africans are ((un)wittingly) initiated" (133). The homogeneity of racial categorization and oppression in America is like a sausage machine.

Although homogeneously recognized as Black women, African women in the diaspora do not always share similar subjectivities with their African American counterparts because their identity does not include a history of racism and slavery. As Mindi McMann posits:

The shared racial significance of "black," imposed by the American hegemonic order, is not enough for shared identification between the African Americans and the Africans living in America. It is this distinction—between being African American and being an African who happens to be living in America, but who was not born there, is not the descendent of slaves, and has not experienced institutionalized American racism and oppression for generations—that is at the heart of Ifemelu's articulation of racial identity and her understanding of blackness in twenty-first century America. (207)

Re-labelled as marginalized in this racially categorized system, Ifemelu inevitably redefines her agency in accordance to the experiences of Black womanhood in America. She shares with Blaine's friend her conception and initiation into American Blackness: "I come from a country where race is not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie 359). Ifemelu's idea of "becoming Black" is not an isolated case among African immigrants to America. This ideology reifies, though subtly, the differentiation between being black and becoming black. Wright defines "Blackness" as "a concept [that] cannot be limited to a particular national, cultural, and linguistic border, or produced in isolation from gender and sexuality" (4). Becoming Black, therefore, "signifies the complex negotiation between dominant and minority cultures that all peoples of African descent in the West...must make in order to survive, whether physically or psychologically" (*Becoming* 26). For Ifemelu to successfully redefine her agency, she has to first accept the label of Blackness and the underlying frameworks of gender and sexuality with their complexities and implications on her identity.

In addition to race and gender, the class dynamics significantly inform how Black female subjectivity is lived in the United States. The pre-existing class structures do not accommodate either Auntie Uju or Ifemelu just because they were wealthy back home. Although holding a degree in medicine from Nigeria, Auntie Uju lacks a sustainable income and "never bought what she needed; instead she bought what was on sale and made herself need it" (133). Previously well-to-do in Nigeria, her American identity is complicated by the presence of class structures that delimit her economic ability. Ifemelu notes how "America had subdued [Auntie Uju]" in the way the latter wore scruffy braids with a massive growth and loosely fitting pants (135). Auntie Uju's Black, lower class identity makes her concern about physical appearance and public image irrelevant as she is constantly frustrated and overly conscious of her oppressions as motivated by

her Blackness. Auntie Uju encourages Ifemelu to conform to the pressures of the overarching dominant discourse that is oblivious of gender oppressions because “you are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed” (Adichie 146). Auntie Uju’s acquiescence is better demonstrated in her indifference to Ifemelu’s confiding to her that *she went to work for a man in the suburbs who paid her a hundred dollars*. The economic pressures accentuate the sexual and gender oppressions of the Black woman as Ifemelu is caught in circumstances that compromise her female dignity and agency. The heteronormative structures of oppression produce men like the Tennis coach who take advantage of the vulnerability of the Black woman to sexually exploit Ifemelu. Specifically requesting for a female personal assistant in his job advertisement, the coach asks Ifemelu to “give [him] a massage, help [him] relax” (Adichie 177) certain of Ifemelu’s vulnerability at this moment. Ifemelu’s predicament demonstrates “The myth of black women’s unrestrained sexuality” which “operated in both slavery and freedom as a means of justifying racial and gender exploitation” (Melissa Harris-Perry 58). Ifemelu’s blackness is misrecognized as a ground for sexual lasciviousness which justifies sexual exploitation of the Black female body. (The tennis coach case is not isolated, as Ifemelu is met with a similar situation when a man at a gas station reads her body as an object for sexual consumption and remarks, “You’re here for the attendant position? You can work for me in another way” (178).) Ifemelu is speechless and lacks the instrument of power against the oppressive hegemonic masculinity: She is asphyxiated by the overpowering forces outside of her making her feel like “a small ball. Adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around empty” (Adichie 190).

As she sinks into the depths of depression, Ifemelu demonstrates her helplessness towards her predicament as she ponders murdering the tennis coach for defiling her: “She would

plunge a knife into his muscled chest. He lived alone, he probably had other women coming to his room to spread their legs for his stubby finger with its bitten-back nail. Nobody would know which of them had done it. She would leave the knife sunk in his chest and then search his drawers for his bundle of one-hundred-dollar bills, so that she would pay her rent and tuition” (191). In Ifemelu’s murder fantasy is a reflection of her anger towards a system that takes away her dignity and agency as a Black woman, yet she lacks the appropriate instrument of revenge. In wanting to kill the man, Ifemelu demonstrates the desire to eliminate the oppressive heteronormative patriarchal structures that subjugate her and barricade any means to self-improvement that is untethered to sexual subservience for Black women.

As a woman, Ifemelu’s Blackness accentuates her difference as she, naturally, is perceived to exist on the peripheries of social and sexual interactions in *white spaces*. Black women are meant to exist as the Other, the helper, the outsider with heteronormative white patriarchal structures. Although she is initiated into white circles through her relationship with Curt who finally ‘sees’ her as female, Ifemelu is otherwise quite invisible as a woman to other white men. For instance, Abe “liked her well enough, who thought her smart and funny, even attractive, but did not see her as female” (Adichie 236) or Don who “thought she was attractive and interesting, and thought Curt was attractive and interesting, but it did not occur to him to think of both of them, together, entangled in delicate threads of romance” (Adichie 240). With Curt, Ifemelu is met with judgemental stares, sometimes open resistance and overt racism because her Blackness is seen in relation to Curt’s whiteness; society judges Curt for dating a Black woman, and her for existing in spaces designated for whiteness. Ifemelu’s black body is automatically disoriented by inhabiting a white space thus becoming a recipient of the hostile white gaze that seeks to banish Blackness from its midst.

The separation of Black from white spaces in a white heteropatriarchal hegemonic structure places the Black woman at the bottom of the racial ladder. The carpet cleaner at Kimberly's house cannot conceive a world where Black women like Ifemelu can be homeowners. Systematic oppression does not end at the perception of Black women as inferior and undeserving of such an achievement, but their achievement becomes a threat to the hegemony which bestows wealth and home ownership to the white members of the society. In Ifemelu's interaction with the white characters, there is an explicit image of the Orient that is reified by her being identified not only as foreign, but African in particular. Edward Said in *Orientalism* discusses the Orient as helping define Europe or the West as "its contrasting image idea, personality, experience" (1866). Ifemelu interacts with people who asserted their *white savior* identities over Africa in versions of Orientalism featuring "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1868). At Kimberly's party, the apparent presentation of Africa as the inferior needing charity and redemption creates in Ifemelu the desire "to be from the country of people who gave and not those who received, to be one of those who had and could therefore bask in the grace of having given, to be among those who could afford copious pity and empathy" (Adichie 209). Ifemelu realizes the domineering power that the West holds against her as a colonial subject, but also a Black woman who "never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history" (Said 1870) as the West speaks for Africa. In addition, Laura, Kimberly's sister, constantly emphasizes the inferiority of Africa in comparison to America which is "civilized, advanced, and superior" (Wright, *Becoming* 27), while Africa is the image of abject poverty and nothingness (Adichie 183). Laura is also keen to remind Ifemelu of her Otherness and foreignness even in her question about whether Ifemelu can "drive legally"



in the United States (202). Regardless of her credentials, Ifemelu's Blackness places her in situations that derail and manipulate her agency especially within privileged white spaces.

America's racial system complicates Ifemelu's agency and trivializes her voice through the pre-existing mechanisms of oppressions. The intersectional identity of Black women and their consistent counter-narratives to the oppressive power structures recalls the woman that Spillers evokes in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe":

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (65)

Ifemelu's previous assertiveness demonstrated in Nigeria is engulfed and lost in Blackness that refuses to acknowledge her autonomy. Her agency is reconstructed through the discovery of new channels of expression such as the Blog, and Ifemelu's decision to defy normalized restrictive identities imposed on the Black woman in America.

### **The Construction of Black Female Agency in the Diaspora**

Despite the oppressive system, Ifemelu is enabled to speak back to the hegemony, to counter white heteronormative discourses that relegate her to a voiceless other, and fashion an agency for Black women in America. In addition to race, Black womanhood in America is under constant surveillance from the public. Within the societal structures dictating gender identity and performance, is the unspoken requirement for women to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty: Ginika loses weight because of the American preference for slimness, and aunty Uju has

to relax her hair for an interview since braids are seen as unprofessional. Although Ifemelu gives in to the pressures of conformity at first by adapting an American accent and relaxing her hair, she defies this restrictive identity by first, deciding to stop faking an American accent and reverts back to her Nigerian English. I read Ifemelu's newly found self-expression as her experience of quiet interiority. Ifemelu resists an identity imposed on her by the dominant culture by discovering her inner worth that is unaware "of an audience, a watcher or listener" whose scrutiny motivates defiance or withholding that is tethered to public opinion. Instead, Ifemelu comes into quietude which is inward and, therefore, "watcherless" (Kevin Quashie 22). Ifemelu is immensely pleased with her new self: "This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake" (Adichie 216). Speech becomes a way to empowerment as she appropriates the conquerors language to suit her own identity, thus redefining how she embodies her history and subjectivity. In the same way, Ifemelu strongly asserts her agency by cutting her hair and refuting being imprisoned, "caged in," and ruled by her hair (Adichie 258). Ndaka reads Ifemelu's decision to go natural as "a form of deviance that enunciates difference which is often interpreted by the mainstream society as threatening to their structures of privilege and power (Ndaka 113). Ifemelu is automatically thought to be making a political statement by shaving her hair, or using it as an indication that she is lesbian. In addition, a man wonders how Curt likes Ifemelu "looking all jungle like that" (263) and Auntie Uju considers natural hair "scruffy and untidy" (269), hence not attractive especially now that Ifemelu is dating a white person. The reception of Ifemelu's short and natural hair further accentuates the way the bodies of Black women are policed.

Wright revisits the external dominant discourses that, through history since slavery, have dictated the presentation of Black women with regards to hair:

White American society has issued strict dictates on Black women's hair. Ranging from the ubiquitous and telling image of the mammy in a handkerchief, hair invisible, the approved, staid image of the Black woman with straightened hair, to the demonic stereotype of the angry Black women with her hair in its "wild" (read natural) state, African American women's hair has always been read as a dangerous excess that must either be hidden or else made to imitate true ("white") femininity. Unlike Black men, therefore, Black women were encouraged and coerced, by white and sometimes Black communities, either to straighten their hair or hide it (Wright, *Becoming* 149).

I read Ifemelu's action as resistance to being defined by external forces and identifiers. Ifemelu falls "in love with her hair" (Adichie 262) in the same way she felt happy after dropping the American accent. Her inward satisfaction with herself illustrates what Quashie refers to as "the expressiveness of the inner life unable to be expressed fully but nonetheless articulate and informing of one's humanity" which explores "black subjectivity from beyond the boundaries of public expressiveness" (24). Ifemelu is able to express her identity and autonomy in ways that are both challenging and incomprehensible to the public around her. She finds agency in her ability to fashion her own identity and at the same time debunk the myth of the Mammy associated with Black womanhood.

Owing to the manipulation of female agency both through racial oppression, masculine domination, and Black sexism, Black women, as Hines argues, developed a model of dissemblance as a resistance to the public scrutiny while guarding their inner selves against its negativity:

Black women, as rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of

dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle. (Hines qtd. in Harris-Perry 60)

Ifemelu fashions collective agency with the women on the HappilykinkyNappy.com website. Comprising of self-selected members who are collaboratively defying the societal pressures to assimilate, Black women are afforded a space in which they can express themselves freely without fear of judgement and need for public approval. I read this as a version of dissemblance in which Black women are able to express their identities in a platform that is within interiorized, closed circle community. Forming a collective identity as Black women, they are afforded self-expression and empowered to withstand public pressure while still appearing happy and content in their own unique ways. Hair becomes a unifying factor for Black women to find a representation that allow them a sense of self-defined identities. HappilykinkyNappy.com and the women in the African salon who offer “products and services that are consumed predominantly by blacks in a racially oppressive sphere” demonstrate, as Iromuanya indicates, “nuanced illustrations of African feminisms” (165). Hair politics in *Americanah* take on a central stage in illustrating how the dynamics of representation permeate social, cultural, and economic spheres and play a role in Black women expressions and empowerment.

Black women are generally excluded in mainstream representations, more so because the dominant white population is ignorant of this lack of representation. Curt, a representative of the privileged white hegemony, calls the *Essence* magazine “racially skewed” (364) for featuring only Black women. I read Curt’s judgement as an expression of domineering whiteness that is so

entrenchment and permeating in ways that make other races susceptible to erasure. Ifemelu challenges hegemonic speech when she confronts Curt's remark and further demonstrates to him the underrepresentation of Black women in fashion and beauty mainstream. This experience motivates Ifemelu's frustration and anger towards the racial situation in the United States as she expresses to Wambui "the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished...digging, questioning, unearthing" (Adichie 366). For feeling voiceless and stifled within a suppressive hegemonic structure, Ifemelu's speech act is first realized with another Black woman, and then extended to the public through her blog. Ifemelu as a Black woman brings women into writing and puts "herself into the text - as into the world and into history- by her own movement" (Hélène Cixous 1942). Ifemelu's blog is not only a way for her to understand and live American racial history but it also becomes a powerful agency and direction for not only Black women, but for all people working to defining their identities as Black people in white America. As Ndaka argues, "Ifemelu's engagement with the hostland troubles and transcends the socio-political and epistemological boundaries placed upon her person as a result of her skin color, immigrant status and gender" (Ndaka 119). Through her blog, Ifemelu is enabled to speak, but is she inserted into the road to hegemony? Later in this essay, I will move to argue that, although the subaltern is enabled to speak, the existing power structures trivialize Ifemelu's speech act rendering it unheard and unread by the hegemonic audience she targets.

As a speaking subject, Ifemelu asserts her identity and desire to be seen and heard through the way she navigates unfamiliar environments. Ifemelu is an outsider within white circles represented by Curt and his friends who were "sunny and wealthy people who existed on the glimmering surface of things. She liked them, and sensed that they liked her. To them, she was interesting, unusual in the way she bluntly spoke her mind. They expected certain things of

her, and forgave certain things from her, because she was foreign” (Adichie 256). Regardless of her Otherness, Ifemelu is not intimidated by white privilege and power as she is still able to express herself and be heard. In the same case, Ifemelu does not quite belong with Blaine and his African American friends: “There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate. With his close friends, she often felt vaguely lost” (Adichie 388). Although technically part of the Black community, their cultural references, social, and political sentiments are removed from Ifemelu’s own: she is amazed by their self-righteousness and “impractical, luminous earnestness that moved her but never convinced her” (Adichie 389). Ifemelu, however, establishes strategies of conversation even in these unfamiliar environments as she inserts her opinions on racial dynamics in America through her blog and verbally. For instance, she challenges the idea that “race is never an issue” among interracial relationships drawing from her experience with Curt; her expression reinstates her as the bold, assertive Black woman she is:

Even though Ifemelu by then understood that people like the woman said what they said to keep other comfortable, and show they appreciated How Far We Have Come; even though she was by then happily ensconced in a circle of Blaine’s friends, one of whom was the woman’s new boyfriend, and even though she should have left it alone, she didn’t. She could not. The words had, once again, overtaken her; they overpowered her throat, and tumbled out. (Adichie 359)

Ifemelu holds a certain power in her speech and expressiveness; her refusal to conform to dominant discourses and her advocacy for minority voices puts her on a pedestal even among foreigners and representatives of the hegemony that she should otherwise cower before. Ndaka argues that the placement of Ifemelu’s voice in such contexts and her ability to inhabit these spaces “contravenes the injunctions of docility, passivity, invisibility and vulnerability by

dropping the pretensions of propriety, challenging patriarchal certitudes and white racial comfort, entitlement and expectations” (106). Foregrounding the unspoken racial tensions and at the same time disavowing the pretentiousness prevalent in interracial interactions is a major step for Ifemelu to cope with her racial identity in the diaspora.

As I have demonstrated, I recognize the strong womanhood that Adichie establishes through Ifemelu; however, Black women are still significantly stifled both in America and Nigeria. Although the oppression of Black women in history is cyclic, it is one thing to point out how delimiting it is to Black women, and another to move towards a collective emancipatory agenda. *Americanah*, as I will demonstrate in the next section, presents instances in which Black women are constricted both in the diaspora or in Africa, but fails to recognize or outline a collective emancipatory agenda as we are left to grapple as to whether the liberating efforts laid down previously in the novel can come into fruition.

### **Like a Game not Taken Seriously: The Limitations to Black Women Emancipation.**

Black female agency is compromised by the existence of overpowering oppressive structure which relentlessly relegate the Black woman to the subordinate other. With the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, Black women in the United States are constricted in numerous ways. Ifemelu is unable to find a job, a situation she naturally attributes to her foreignness and race. More so, black women are forced to conform to certain ideals or representation in order to be competitive enough in the job market. Ifemelu is strongly advised to relax her hair before an interview so that, when she finally gets the job, she wonders if her hair had anything to do with it (Adichie 252). For seeing natural kinky hair or braids as unprofessional, the dominant discourses limit Black women’s expression and police their bodies.

To achieve emancipation from the limitations of heteropatriarchal systems, Black women require a self-constructed representation which they do not have access to. Ifemelu feels guilty that Curt knows “some people [his] dad did business with” and “folks in this other bigger place” who can easily get Ifemelu a work Visa and green card (Adichie 249) while other immigrant women like Wambui and Aisha are working against the grain to get their papers through fake marriages. Ifemelu feels like “a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top, propelled by things outside of herself. She felt in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (Adichie 250). This passage does not only demonstrate how the system is structured to undermine the racially other, but also how the hegemony works selectively; the rules are designed to accommodate the people closest in contact with it. Although Ifemelu’s process is simplified, she, just like Wambui and Aisha, is dependent on the heteropatriarchal hegemonic influence to gain status that are otherwise not easily accessible to Black women in Diaspora. I perceive in this women’s situations their existence on the peripheries of power which not only stifle them, but also keep their kind in circulation so that the hegemonic power is upheld. They cannot “know and speak” (Spivak 2119) for themselves given the circumstances of their subalternity.

Ifemelu is afforded a voice and agency through her blog, but is she enabled to speak? And is she heard? Ifemelu receives a derogatory email after giving a talk on race and diversity: “YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GLAD WE LET YOU INTO THIS COUNTRY” (377). This reaction from an audience reveals to Ifemelu that “The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves” (377) making her resort to “say what they



wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog” (378). Returning to the claim I advanced earlier, Ifemelu’s revolutionary speech is unheard by the hegemony who refuse her speech act and thus compromise the insertion of the subaltern “into the long road to hegemony” (Spivak 2125). Ifemelu’s expression is stifled by the paradigms that ensnare Black women in silence, conning them into “accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem” (Cixous 1947). The inability to express her true beliefs makes Ifemelu’s engagement in dominant discourses, and her hope to effect change, unachievable.

In addition to the white heteronormative restrictions, Ifemelu’s expressiveness through her blog is even surveilled by Blaine who imposes his political voice on Ifemelu’s blog:

At first, thrilled by his interest, graced by his intelligence, she let him read her blog before she put them up. She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said. Then she began to resent it. Her posts sounded too academic, too much like him. She had written a post about inner cities - “Why are the Dankest, Drabbest Parts of American cities Full of AFRICAN American Blacks?” - and he told her to include details about government policy and redistricting (Adichie 386).

Blaine’s intrusion and influence on Ifemelu’s voice communicates the Black masculine dominance that he exudes. He, as man, feels entitled to address the world from his point of view; a heteronormative perspective which “justifies narrations of Diaspora wholly or almost wholly through men by assuming that (heterosexual) male bodies are active agents who create history, and (heterosexual) female bodies are passive objects that simply live it” (Wright “Can I Call you” 7). Ifemelu becomes the passive subject experiencing American Black history, but her observations have to be authenticated by one who is *really Black* and holds masculine authority.

Blaine further accuses Ifemelu of not living as she believes: “You know it is not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don’t really take seriously, it’s like choosing an *interesting* elective evening class to complete your credits” (Adichie 428). For failing to attend the demonstration with the other Black community, Blaine’s accusation is premised on the belief that Ifemelu lacks “zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American” (Adichie 428). Ifemelu exists as a subaltern within a subaltern group who make “the possibility of collectivity...persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency” (Spivak 2118). Africanness is perceived as a derailing the fight for racial equality in America as well as contaminating the radical revolutionary agenda that Blaine advocates.

It is not only Blaine who trivializes Ifemelu’s voice and expression. Shan, herself an African American woman writer, is skeptical about Ifemelu’s blog attributing its success to the fact that Ifemelu is African: “she’s writing from the outside. She doesn’t really feel all the stuff she’s writing about. It is all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all the accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she’d just be labelled angry and shunned” (Adichie 418). Shan is aware of the scrutiny of the white gaze which labels African American stereotypically as a means to curtailing their freedom of speech. This accusation from Shan silences Ifemelu who “race was not embroidered in the fabric of her history; it had not etched on her soul” (Adichie 418). Akingbe Niyi and Emmanuel Adeniyi acknowledge this conflict and tension existing within the Black community arguing that “Perhaps to achieve transcultural ideal under the current situation, both African Americans and American Africans should have evolved a black identity capable of ending their misery, but this fails due to persistent inter and intra-Other hatred or rivalry” (52). This goal seems unachievable

for Ifemelu who Shan is openly antagonistic towards even in the fact that Ifemelu gets attention from white men more. Shan associates this to the “exotic credential, that whole authentic African thing” (Adichie 397) identity that Ifemelu embodies. Although a Black woman, Shan embodies her subjectivity in very different ways than Ifemelu, which trivializes both Ifemelu’s identity and her agency because she is an outsider. As Ifemelu’s agency is premised on her identity as a non-American Black woman without a history of slavery and institutional racism in her generation, Shan is embittered by the multiple systems of oppression that deny her these forms of expression, and is frustrated by a system that relentlessly continues to oppress African American women. The antagonism and resentment Ifemelu receives begs the question as to whether African American women can be capable of a subjectivity such as the one Ifemelu is afforded in the text.

Although Ifemelu does not articulate the origin of her longing to leave America, her decision to break up with Blaine, pull down her blog, sell her condo and return to Nigeria can be read as her way of exercising her autonomy in a world that constantly problematizes her expression and liberty. Aretha Phiri reads Ifemelu’s decision as a reflection of “Afrodiaporic metaphysical mode of not finally being able to make (real) sense of or place (for) the self,” hence, her longing points to home “not as a final, concrete geographical locale or ideological destination, but as a spatiotemporally experienced subjective space and route characterized by persistent uncertainty and flux (136). However, I read her decision to pull down the blog as encouraging the erasure of Black women’s voices from mainstream societal discourses. Although Ifemelu extends her blogging to Nigeria and tackles topics that are more suited for her current audience and context, her identity as an outspoken Black woman in America is compromised. She is complacently situated within a conventional patriarchal African community

whose women are significantly silenced, yet complicit with the dominant hegemonic masculinity.

In one of her Nigerian blogs, Ifemelu is critical of the lifestyle of most Lagos girls, including her friend Ranyinudo, with “Unknown Sources of Wealth” which affords them flashy lifestyles and “define their lives by men they can never truly have, crippled by the culture of dependence, with desperation in their eyes and designer handbags on their wrists” (Adichie 521). Ifemelu’s criticism is motivated by the realization that, instead of changing, the gender dynamics in Nigeria have become even worse as women are now the objects of consumption in a world that is “Depressingly transactional” (Adichie 530). Adichie communicates a keen resistance towards this objectification of women; however, the women Ifemelu exposes are explicitly compliant with this system. The likes of Ranyinudo have given up the need for agency, and love, in a relationship as they settle for men who “can best maintain [a woman]” (Adichie 492) regardless of age and character. Although initially critical of these relationships, Ifemelu’s sexual affair with Obinze is no different from the other women in Lagos who rely on men for both sexual and economic power. Despite being an independent woman, I read Ifemelu’s reunion with Obinze as her complicity with this system that predetermines women as reliant on masculine power in a patriarchal system. Ifemelu exercises her agency and freedom of choice to love but at the same time, deprive Kosi, Obinze’s wife, of the security and dependency she finds in her marriage to Obinze.

Kosi is a representation of how the women in Nigeria are still significantly limited by patriarchy. Spivak demonstrates how within the subaltern subjects, the female is doubly effaced as her participation in anti-colonial uprising is obliterated and the male is kept dominant both as “object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency” (2120). The stifling of female

agency in Africa is not only on the national level: the society is predominantly heteropatriarchal with women existing outside of the hegemonic structures in all spheres beginning at the family level. Predetermined as voiceless and submissive, a generation of women such as Ifemelu's mother unquestioningly conform to their subordinate positions and expect their progeny to assimilate. Ifemelu's mother "denied that things were as they were" (Adichie 63) turning to religious fanaticism with obstinate dismissal of the gender dynamics that relegate women to subordinate others. In line with this identity is Kosi who is presented as a conventional and complacent in her relegation to the subordinate Other. By ignoring Obinze's criticism of his wife's unintelligence and conventional womanhood, Ifemelu is in compliance with the system that suppresses women. In addition, the structural progression of the novel reverts to the elevation of man creating a dichotomy of object/subject, master/servant in the way Kosi relates with her husband. Obinze remarks how talking to Ifemelu is "refreshing to have an intelligent person to talk to" (Adichie 539), implying that his own wife is not intelligent. The explicitness of this statement is easy to grasp, and Ifemelu does recognize its implication:

She looked away, wondering if this was in reference to his wife, and disliking him for it...She was irritated about his comment about an intelligent person because it was, it had to be, about his wife, and she wanted to ask why he was telling her that. Why had he married a woman who was not intelligent only to turn around and tell her that his wife was not intelligent? (Adichie 539).

However, Ifemelu does not act upon this demeaning of female character; instead, she encourages Obinze's disparaging of his wife by extending their relationship to an intimate, sexual one. For being oblivious of Obinze's remarks about his wife, Ifemelu participates in, rather than resists the subjugation of the female; which speaks to the complexities of gender subjectivity and

relations that keep the masculine Black male dominant. Her choice to ignore Obinze's remark seems malicious and puts women in opposition to each other: a situation that further cripples the efforts for collective emancipation. As Wright argues, "Gender subjectivity must grapple with a history of presence and invisibility, a revolutionary era that complicates the minority's relationship between Black men and women, as well as Black women among themselves" (Wright, *Becoming* 150). In her conventionality, Kosi is consciously complicit in the patriarchal domination which dictates woman as the voiceless subordinate to man. Obinze remarks, "Kosi never liked the idea of me cooking. She has really basic, mainstream ideas of what a wife should be and she thought my wanting to cook was an indictment of her, which I found silly. So I stopped, just to have peace" (Adichie 555). Obinze's overt ridicule of his wife and preference for Ifemelu offers a ground for the willingness or tendency of the hegemony to adjust to the involvement of women in the mainstream. However, the women are either complacent or self-centered in ways that complicate this process.

Obinze is attracted to Ifemelu because "She's gone, she's learned, and she's conquered" (Adichie 534) as opposed to Kosi who was comfortably living in deception and did not make an effort to participate in responsibilities that can effect change in public or even familial contexts. Obinze lies to Kosi deliberately, yet she does not consider questioning the very structures that control her life: "he sometimes told her senseless lies such as this, because a part of him hoped she would ask a question or challenge him, though he knew she would not, because she wanted to make sure the conditions of their life remained the same, and how that happened she left entirely to him" (Adichie 27). Kosi is satisfied by her subordinate role as an assistant, lover, and mother, lacking interest in societal discourses dubbing it a man's world. By contrasting Kosi and Ifemelu, Adichie presents two parts of the African womanhood: Kosi conforms and upholds the

traditional precepts of what a woman and wife is supposed to do, while on the other hand, Ifemelu presents African womanhood that is not tethered to marital security and masculine authority; yet both are still complicit with the heteropatriarchal system.

Ifemelu and Obinze's reunion at the end of the novel constructs a romantic, happily-ever-after moment which brings the novel to a final closure, and by extension, re-establishes the systems of oppression pervading Black womanhood both in Africa and the Diaspora. I read *Americanah*, in constructing this kind of teleological closure, as failing to provide any structural change to the quest for female emancipation or communicate its ongoing involvement in the cyclic nature of the intersectional oppressions of Black women. The revolutionary feminist and multi-dimensional postcolonial text conversely assumes a romantic narrative at the end thus significantly downplaying Black women agency.

### **Conclusion.**

Adichie's spotlight on Black female subjectivity in Africa and America brings into focus the complexities of context and female subjectivity. Placing Ifemelu in a position to have a voice in America is an act of "woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak* hence, her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on *her suppression*" (Cixous 1947). However, this process is compromised by erasing her engagement in the dominant discourses which complicates the ability of Black women to participate in female emancipation regardless of their national setting. Donna Haraway in "A manifesto for Cyborgs" argues that "The permanent partiality of feminist points of view has consequences for our expectations of forms of political organization and participation. We do not need a totality in order to work well" (2213). Black women in Africa, in the African and in America, are subjected to varied forms of intersectional oppressions. The fact that there is no wholeness or sameness in their forms of oppression should not change the

feminist agenda. Women in their capacities and their different contexts can still work together towards their inclusion in the hegemony.

Most importantly, Adichie's representation of Black female subjectivity and agency is in correspondence with the existing intersectional experiences of Black women in the diaspora; however, the agency that Ifemelu demonstrates while in America is foreclosed and not made accessible to African American women. This agency, I argue, does not advance inclusive emancipatory power for the Black women in America. On the other hand, the lack of structural change in the novel writes Black African women as complicit and complacent in male dominance, cements the narration of history outside of the lives of Black women, re-establishes hegemonic masculinity, and keeps hegemonic patriarchy in circulation. Although Black female oppression is cyclic in nature, the novel's closure fails to demonstrate a commitment to the continued fight for female emancipation.



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