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Triple Oppression and Transnational Identity: the Immigrant Black Woman in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

Americanah (2013) is a semi-autobiographical novel written by the internationally renowned author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in which Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who emigrates to the USA with the hope of better education prospects, suffers different forms of racial, class and gender oppression. *Americanah* aims at deconstructing the social categories associated with black women by questioning the triple oppression experienced by Ifemelu throughout the story. These simultaneous forms of oppression – together with the discrimination she suffers due to her immigrant status – have a dramatic impact on the development of the protagonist's identity, who feels increasingly alienated as she becomes aware of the threats emanating from the world which surrounds her. As a matter of fact, Ifemelu's sense of unbelonging eventually leads her to consider returning to her homeland. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the evolution of Ifemelu's transnational identity by paying attention to the multiple forms of oppression she endures. Ultimately, my aim is to show how the novel reveals the current situation of most immigrant black women in the First World by denouncing discriminatory practices against this stigmatised social minority.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Transnational Identity, Otherness, Triple Oppression.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, black women have gained more visibility in the social, cultural and political spheres. Denouncing that early second-wave feminism "failed to address those forms of oppression not experienced directly by […] white, Western, middle-class and heterosexual women" (Weedon 2002, 179), women of colour advocated for an intersectional approach in order to create and develop autonomous organizations aimed at deconstructing "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said 1979, 7) and acknowledging the centrality of women from different sociocultural backgrounds. Pioneer black women activists – including Bernice Johnson Reagon and Barbara Smith – devoted a great deal of effort to raising awareness that women of colour had been 'double colonised'; that is, they had historically been oppressed by both imperialism and patriarchy. Additionally, class started being considered a key variable from which prejudice may also emerge. In this context, many so-called "Third World women" began to write works describing their own experiences and re-telling historical facts from their female ancestors' perspectives to combat multiple forms of discrimination and challenge the authenticity of the Caucasian race as well as its position of power in an increasingly globalised world.

From that moment onwards, female African writing has proliferated at a rapid pace. Indeed, a significant number of literary works produced by contemporary well-known Nigerian authors – such as Sefi Atta, Akwaeke Emezi, and Helen Oyeyemi – have largely contributed to the discipline of postcolonial criticism by questioning binary oppositions and power relations which, despite being conceived as remnants of a colonial era, continue to cause political strife in today's society. These writers have created stories whose primary goal is to give voice to the voiceless, in this case referring to black women; therefore, these stories clearly have a crucial political role. Influenced by this literary legacy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has earned a place among the most distinguished members of the young generation of Nigerian female novelists and social commentators. An ardent reader of British and American stories from an early age, Adichie used to believe that fictional characters had to be foreign by their very nature (Adichie 2009, 01:47) Nevertheless, thanks to her discovery of books written by African authors – like Chinua Achebe or Camara Laye – some years later, she realised that the protagonists of books could also be "girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails" (02:19). From that moment onwards, Adichie has written a series of award-winning narratives – *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) – whose main characters are Nigerian people to whom she feels more closely related.

Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013) expresses the author's concern about the western misrepresentation of African immigrant women. It tells the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who emigrates to the United States to pursue higher education and find a job. However, Ifemelu's optimistic expectations are frustrated when, after a series of traumatic events which have made her feel 'othered' for the first time, she concludes that the U.S. is a nation where prejudices against social minorities are still very much prevalent. In effect, Adichie conveys the idea that powerful states sell themselves better than they really are and, as a result, the American dream can become an authentic nightmare for those people who do not meet social and cultural norms. Moreover, *Americanah* contains many autobiographical elements, including the migrant experience, the settings and the student life. In this regard, a major point in the story is the fact that the protagonist develops a hybrid identity, of which Adichie has first-hand experience as she also had to assume a new perception of herself and adapt to the dominant culture to a certain extent when she arrived in America at the age of nineteenth. Hence, readers can easily find connections between Ifemelu and the author herself, which makes them empathise with the protagonist and reflect on situations experienced by real immigrant black women. Certainly, *Americanah* is a politicised novel that issues an appeal to its audience to reformulate their conception of black women and diminish the impact that cultural differences and dominant ideologies exert on African minorities to prevent some types of potential discrimination.

Ifemelu experiences multiple oppressions that shape her complex cultural identity. Even though at first she tries to assimilate to the new culture due to social pressure, eventually she empowers herself by adopting various forms of resistance in order to claim her place in society and contest myths and stereotypes related to immigrant black women. This essay will draw on intersectionality and identity negotiation theories to argue that Ifemelu, the main diasporic subject of the story, finds it necessary to re-evaluate and re-define her *self* and construct a new idea of home due to the constant identity crises that she faces in the U.S., which I discuss in the following pages. Using an intersectional approach to race, gender and class, in the first section I examine different forms of oppression experienced by the protagonist and how she comes to terms with American conceptualizations of foreignness and blackness. In the second section, I focus on Ifemelu's identity negotiation and transformation – from object to subject – throughout the novel by analysing her sense of belonging to various cultural groups and the attitudes she adopts to defend her own integrity. Lastly, it will be shown that Ifemelu regains her voice and agency by taking ownership of her Nigerian heritage. As I specify in the conclusion, substantial progress needs still to be made to embrace diversity and boost the status of immigrant black women, whose image has been degraded by normative regulation.

2. Questioning Triple Oppression in *Americanah*

Difference is an ongoing historical and cultural construction that is structured on the basis of western tendency to establish distinctions between opposing categories. Based on the premise that privileged social groups need to subjugate and scoff at other marginalised groups in order to ensure their own prosperity (Amonyeze 2017, 4), official discourses have created deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes aimed at disempowering non-standard subjects, frequently regarded as 'generalised Other'. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, "dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" (1989, 140). Nevertheless, the reality is that people may be victims of multiple forms of social injustice deriving from multiple and interacting variables that may not comply with normative standards: race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, sexual orientation, ability, among others. On those grounds, intersectionality has been adopted and developed as an "analytical strategy" to understanding power relations and social practices concerning marginalised people in contemporary times (Dill and Zambrana 2009, 4). Definitely, a multi-dimensional approach is required to interpret interlocking categories and eradicate ingrained prejudices which affect all aspects of non-normative subjects' lives.

Black women living in former colonial powers have experienced discrimination in a singular manner. Historically, "dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century" (Anzaldúa 1987, 22) on account of white supremacy and misogynist thinking. At present, although remarkable progress has been made in promoting and safeguarding the rights of black female immigrants, equality of opportunity and satisfactory working conditions have not been achieved yet. In actuality, they continue "waging battles on class, racial, and sexual fronts" (Williams 1984, 510). This triple oppression arises from the conviction that society is arranged following a hierarchy in which white middle-class man occupies the most privileged position. From a Eurocentric perspective, he is the "I", the observer, the ruler. Conversely, those people whose race, gender and class categories diverge from the norm are usually 'othered', deemed inferior and powerless. Following this line of thought, black lower-class women are considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy, which may be the reason why they are often abused and marginalised from mainstream society.

Race in the United States has traditionally been used as a mechanism of social division. In colonial times, Africa was repeatedly depicted "as a place full of non-human monsters, idolatry, barbarism and unbridled sexuality" (Mama 1995, 18). By contrast, European people

thought of themselves as being endowed with rationality, beauty and purity for the purpose of justifying the slave trade and western domination. In addition, Edward Said states that the Orient[1] and the Oriental are denied the possibility of transformation and human development: they are perceived as "static, frozen, fixed eternally" (1979, 208). These portrayals of the Other create stereotypes which insinuate that indigenous peoples are in need of Occidental support in order to progress and be saved. This idea is closely connected to the responsibility implied by the 'white man's burden', a task by which Western culture, politics, ideology and language were imposed on the black natives of European colonies. In her TED talk, Adichie explains that the single story, the one written by colonisers to describe subjugated communities, "show[s] a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" (2009, 09:17). Needless to say, black populations never had a voice in deciding the images with which they would be represented and which would determine their destinies.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu witnesses different levels of racism from the moment she sets foot in the U.S. Without any hesitation, she asserts that "I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie 2017, 290), which suggests that race is a social marker used to undermine black inhabitants in the West. This defamation is manifested when one of Ifemelu's flatmates, Elena, after noticing that Ifemelu has not petted her dog, treats her disdainfully: "You better not kill my dog with voodoo" (152). In this case, Elena mystifies Ifemelu taking into account the racial stereotype that Africans, by their very nature, have a fevered imagination which prevents them from developing intellectual skills (Mama 1995, 19). Ifemelu also observes veiled racism when a shop assistant avoids specifying the skin colour of her black female colleague to refer to her because in America "you're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things" (Adichie 2017, 127). The other side of that coin is exemplified by the fact that some characters, such as Kimberly or Curt's aunt, praise African peoples and cultures in Ifemelu's presence to over-assure her that they like black people (293). These commentaries imply the assumption that black individuals supposedly have an "African essence" that makes them differ from white-skinned citizens, yet the latter approve it. Although these people intend to express their sense of 'white guilt', they actually transmit, albeit unintentionally, the view that black folks are not equals and still need Whites to green-light their existence.

Like other black feminist authors, such as Bernardine Evaristo or Lorraine Hansberry, Adichie is concerned about the impact that western beauty standards and social politics of hair have on immigrant black women, which is reflected in *Americanah*. Far from being objective,

[1] In Edward Said's work, the Orient is geographically imagined. The regions to which he refers by using this term include: Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.

beauty ideals and norms have been designed in accordance with racial preferences for Whites: supremacist colonial ideologies have suppressed or annihilated "other cultural perceptions of beauty, particularly the Africans" (Dasi 2019, 141). On that account, capitalism, the media, pop culture and Hollywood have reproduced and extolled images of white woman – "not in her real self but as a media construction" (Yerima 2017, 6) – in order for all women to seek perfection. These racialised definitions of beauty have had detrimental effects on black women, who have developed an inferiority complex as their anatomy is incompatible with conventional notions of femininity and beauty. They have come to believe that "there is something scruffy and untidy about [their] natural hair" (Adichie 2017, 216) and, consequently, in some situations they mimic white hair to conform to imperial aesthetics. Ironically, however, it is not frowned upon that a white woman appropriates a traditional African hairstyle (Sneddon 2018, 4), which provides compelling evidence that racial bias is full of contradictions.

Throughout the novel, Ifemelu eschews western beauty practices that deteriorate the physiques of black individuals. She is incapable of understanding why some black people, like her hairdresser Aisha or Bartholomew, apply bleaching creams on their skins, or why her friend Ginika has stopped eating to the point of resembling a "dried stockfish" (Adichie 2017, 122). In Nigeria, in contrast with the U.S., neither black skin nor voluptuous bodies are associated with 'ugliness', so it is not surprising that Ifemelu feels bewildered by this instance of cultural ambiguity. Apart from that, the protagonist is reluctant to use chemical products to alter her nature as she is aware of the adverse effects caused by skin whitening: "uneven complexion, dark patches, thinning of the skin and in severe cases, cancer" (Yerima 2017, 11). In this sense, the protagonist denounces painful processes underwent by black characters to fit into western society, which leads readers to believe that Adichie is also critical of them in real life.

Be that as it may, Ifemelu's self-willingness does not prevent her from gradually become a victim of American beauty standards. It does not take long for her to conclude that white hair is a yardstick of success in America; hence, Ifemelu decides to relax her hair as she knows that only by doing this will she be able to find a decent job. Nevertheless, the drawbacks of such decision outweigh the benefits: "She did not recognize herself. […] the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss" (Adichie 2017, 203). This 'sense of loss' can be interpreted both literally, as her hair gets burnt and falls out from using relaxers, and metaphorically, since this experience cuts herself off from her Nigerian roots and, consequently, dampens her spirits. Beyond that, "blackness can never be mitigated in the way the beauty industry demands, so the time, money, and energy spent on trying to achieve 'good' hair will always be invested in a losing battle" (Sneddon 2018, 7).

Certainly, racialised beauty is a source of conflict as it affects cultural identity formation and inflicts permanent physical and psychological damage on black women, who are indoctrinated to believe that their bodies are flawed.

In order to understand the double colonisation experienced by female Afropolitans like Ifemelu, it is fundamental to analyse western conceptions of gender identity and black sexuality. Taking into account that women have been traditionally ascribed an inferior status than men, it makes sense that their attributed personal qualities – passivity, meekness, weakness – have been chosen in opposition to the stereotypes linked to masculinity – activity, assertiveness, strength – to satisfy males' caprices. All this notwithstanding, as "black men and women live in a society that creates sex-based norms and expectations which racism operates simultaneously to deny" (Crenshaw 1989, 155), neither black men are seen as superior nor black women are viewed as passive. By the same token, whereas white women are expected to embody an "asexual purity and beauty", black women are defined as being "pornographically sexual and crudely featured"[2] (Mama 1995, 149). In addition, drawing inspiration from Edward Said's notion of "feminine penetrability" to depict the Orient (1979, 206), Amina Mama declares that Africans have been "identified as the females in the human family" (1995, 19). Therefore, black women's identities are determined not only by race, but also by gender and sometimes ethnicity: a combination of variables which reduces this social minority to easy prey for male chauvinists.

Ifemelu's black sexual identity transformation can be examined by paying attention to her relationships with American white men.[3] Her first sexual partner is a wealthy tennis coach whom she contacts to apply for a suspicious job as a "personal masseur". Ifemelu knows that this work is illegal, yet she has no other alternative but to accept this offer as she urgently needs money to pay her rent. Although Ifemelu warns her employer that she will not have sexual relations with him, they end up touching each other erotically. The protagonist is uncomfortable with this situation; nonetheless, she cannot complain as nobody has forced her to use her sexual capital. Not only that, but the tennis coach abuses of his economic power due to the stereotype that African peoples are mired in poverty. As a result, after each session, "even if she washed her hands, […] her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her" (Adichie 2017, 154). Otherwise stated, her perception of being sexually harassed leads her to lose ownership of her sexuality and, as a consequence, the heroine of the novel experiences self-alienation.

[2] Black women's associated hypersexuality is clearly related to the 'Jezebel' stereotype, which depicts them as promiscuous and sexually ravenous.

[3] Ifemelu's relation with African American Blaine is also relevant to appreciate her black sexual identity evolution, but this character will not be analysed as the scope of the paper limits the quantity of cases to be quoted. In addition, white men are more significant for the purposes of this study as they objectify Ifemelu both racially and sexually.

Simone de Beauvoir compares males' erotic lexicon with military language: "the lover has the ardour of a soldier, his sexual organ stiffens like a bow, when he ejaculates, he 'discharges', it is a machine gun, a cannon: he speaks of attack, assault, of victory" (2010, 444). From this standpoint, the tennis coach would act like a 'conqueror' since he takes advantage of his economic power to take possession of Ifemelu's body and, following this logic, the black girl would be 'sexually enslaved'. Because of that, she falls into severe depression: "she was bloodless, detached, floating in a world where darkness descended too soon" (Adichie 2017, 155). A victim of sexual abuse, Ifemelu experiences oppressive solitude, despair and emotional breakdown as never before, a response that calls into question the myth that black women are always willing sexual partners.

Curt, Ifemelu's first boyfriend in America, also objectifies Ifemelu, albeit in a different way. Curt is a handsome well-off white man who personifies the white male power-fantasy of validating the self through the opposition with an 'imagined Other' (Lyle 2018, 113). Indeed, Curt has a kind of fetish for exoticism that is confirmed by the fact that, while staring at Ifemelu, he wishes "to suck her finger, to lick honey from her nipple, to smear ice cream on her belly as though it was not enough simply to lie bare skin to bare skin" (Adichie 2017, 195). Curt shows his passional love for Ifemelu by treating her like a goddess, securing her financial stability and enhancing her social standing. It is thanks to this interracial and interclass relationship that she can enjoy white privilege and easy life: she finds a job effortlessly, gets a visa to travel to many countries – England, Mexico, Bermuda – and squanders money on whims. Nonetheless, Curt's love is not unconditional at all since he expects to receive Ifemelu's compliments and "be the fucking love of [her] life" (224) in exchange for his benevolence and open-mindedness. In brief, this partnership is not equal since Curt considers himself as a giver and Ifemelu as a taker that should be adoring him at all times.

As Curt's attraction for the protagonist only exists inasmuch as she retains her "African authenticity", he is eager to control her appearance and behaviour. By way of illustration, Curt glorifies Ifemelu when she "look[s] all jungle like that" (212) and deplores her decision of straightening her hair to attend an interview. Moreover, Curt demands from Ifemelu what he is not willing to give. For instance, despite the fact that Curt disregards his sexual infidelity to Ifemelu, he gets deeply offended when she gives him a taste of his own medicine. In effect, he cannot forgive Ifemelu owing to his inflated sense of self-importance; instead, he hurls terrible insults at Ifemelu and breaks up with her immediately thereafter. Curt's love-hate relationship with the black woman demonstrates that *otherness* "is at once an object of desire and derision" (Bhabha 1994, 67). Ultimately, Ifemelu ascertains that Curt's charms overshadow emotional

immaturity and selfishness, which makes him unable to fully understand her, a more realistic and mature person. Aside from the fact that they are like chalk and cheese, Ifemelu realises that she is a mere passing fancy for Curt and that, in the long run, she will be replaced or discarded. For the above reasons, even if Ifemelu has taken pleasure in Curt's vivacious and stimulating company, she presumes that she will never achieve true happiness with him.

Whilst race and gender in *Americanah* have been exhaustively researched in previous literature, class has not been sufficiently discussed, in spite of it being an indispensable social category to explore the triple oppression suffered by most black women in highly-developed nations. In the United States, class has traditionally been defined in racial terms. Against this backdrop, black women have had to work outside the house far more often than white women so as to supplement the meagre salaries usually earned by black men (Williams 1984, 507). As if that were not enough, unmarried black women have often applied for two or several jobs to guarantee a minimum subsistence income. This occupational exclusion has been motivated by sexist and racial stereotypes – including the myth of the superwoman[4] or the matriarchal black family[5] – as well as the perception of black-skinned immigrants as "subhumans, lazy and only fit for the menial jobs rejected by Americans" (Amonyeze 2017, 2). What is more, Eurocentric beliefs are so inherent in the American mindset that even black females have come to terms with their alleged "inferior caste". Surely, these assumptions have exacerbated the already tense relations between whites and blacks in the workplace and have made black women indisputable victims of precarious work, black economy and triple colonisation.

In America, Ifemelu soon becomes the target of class prejudice. Unlike the author of the novel, Ifemelu was born into a low-middle class family that lacked the privilege of having a phone at home (Adichie 2017, 120). Notwithstanding her socio-economic hardship, she strove unceasingly to educate herself and thus be someone in life. Actually, she was bound to have a promising future in America, "the land of freedom and opportunity for all". On that ground, Ifemelu gets disconcerted when she applies for different jobs – waitress, cashier, bartender, hostess – but she never succeeds: she "waited for job offers that never came, and for this she blamed herself" (66). She knows that something is not right with her, yet she cannot deduce that the problem is her African appearance. Effectively, Ifemelu has undergone a process of "downward mobility" due to western misrepresentations of immigrant black women that lead

[4] In Western society, the term 'superwoman' refers to a woman with the ability to perform several time-consuming activities while taking multiple roles in her daily routine: worker, student, homemaker, amongst others.
[5] Black women have often been the family's main breadwinners since slavery sold black families apart, which disrupted black nuclear families.

white Americans to entirely disregard her previous higher studies in Nigeria (Amonyeze 2017). Evidently, Ifemelu's social status is conditioned by her race, gender and nationality in the U.S., where she becomes a second-class citizen for the first time.

Western misrepresentations of black women are so influential that this social minority is still ostracised nowadays. The invisibility of black femaleness is reflected on in *Americanah*. As an instance, Aunty Uju encourages Ifemelu to impersonate Ngozi Okonkwo, another black woman, so that she can take advantage of her Social Security card and driving licence. Although the two girls are not similar in appearance at all, Ifemelu will not be likely to imperil herself considering that in America "all of us look alike to white people" (Adichie 2017, 120). At the political level, black women are also relegated to the margins: "Isn't it funny how they say 'blacks want Obama' and 'women want Hillary', but what about black women?" (355). Even though all citizens are supposed to be equal before the law, this comment connotes that in reality black women's voices are not as heard as those of black men or white women. As a sufferer of constant exclusion, Ifemelu experiences self-alienation due to her "extreme marginalization and lack of agency as a black female lower-class immigrant who is forced to work illegally" (Lyle 2018, 107). These negative views of blackness, femaleness and foreignness absolutely have a detrimental impact on immigrant black women's identities.

3. Ifemelu's Immigrant State and Transnational Identity

Globalisation has radically modified traditional social structures in western nations. In the light of postcolonial migrancy and the incessant struggles spearheaded by minorities of colour to foster their rights, an increasing number of people agree that hegemonic definitions of history and national identity have lost credibility (Weedon 2002, 180). As a matter of fact, colonial ideas of racial purity or cultural superiority are no longer justifiable since we live in the age of synchronicity, "juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered" (Foucault 1997, 330). Despite the fact that contemporary societies are marked by their heterogeneous and multicultural character, most influential political figures in the U.S. remain aloof when it comes to interrogating ethnocentric ideologies and imperial aggression "due to the selfish interest of the privileged race in perpetuating certain myths" (Amonyeze 2017, 2). In view of American nationalist anxiety, diasporic populations have opted for defining "themselves under the shared umbrella of a collective identity that is not always territorially ascribed" (Benessaieh 2010, 24). Generally, immigrants to the U.S. know that this nation is a melting pot, yet they have to protect their cultural heritage from the racial hatred and bigotry that still exist in America.

Even though West African massive migration and displacement began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the impetus of transatlantic commerce and the triangular slave trade, migrant flows are now commonly considered a threat to American values and way of life. From the moment the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in the United States, over one-third of the country's population started perceiving immigration as a menace to the status quo and the welfare of all Americans (Amonyeze 2017, 2). Xenophobic tendencies have been further aggravated by the Financial Anti-Terrorism Act of 2001 and reinforced by what Adichie refers to as "the single story": a narrative of marginalised peoples that is not open to divergent interpretations and which "makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult [as] it emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (2009, 13:46). Today, it is true that there is an increasing awareness of the harmful effects caused by prejudices against social minorities and, at the same time, many native Americans put themselves in the shoes of traditionally excluded groups to understand them better. However, the condition of "being an immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes be understood only when experienced" (Moschkovich 1983, 83). It should be noted that diasporic identities undergo an ongoing process of transformation owing to the fact that immigrant individuals are continuously shifting between dissimilar worlds and cultures.

Ifemelu's case is a good illustration of how immigrant black women have to negotiate their sense of self due to cultural clashes. Like most newcomers to America, she is "faced with the dilemma of attempting to reclaim what is left of [her] original cultural identity, and aligning with the imposed Anglo-American standard which has been politicised and publicised to make it dominant" (Dasi 2019, 142). During her stay in the U.S, Ifemelu realises that the new country is not at all in line with her previous prospects. As the story unfolds, the reader observes the emergence of different situations and a series of unknown cultural products which cause the cultural shocks experienced by the protagonist: the "blandness of fruits" (113), the unfamiliar food – including McDonald's hamburgers, wraps, bologna and pepperoni – the well-stocked American stores (147), the western positive conception of thinness (124), the habit of tipping – which Ifemelu calls a "bribing system" (129) – the European tendency to categorise Africa as a country, and the fact that people dress down at parties, where they "stand around and drink" (129) but nobody dances. Ifemelu feels alienated to the point of rejecting her obvious depressive episode – which is triggered by her experience with the tennis coach – only because "depression is what happened to Americans, with their self-absolving need to turn everything into an illness" (157). To deal with these cultural conflicts, immigrant black women like Ifemelu either try to assimilate to the dominant culture or overemphasise their cultural differences.

During the first years of her stay in America, Ifemelu adopts an assimilationist approach in order to integrate into mainstream society and achieve professional success. With this aim in mind, she accommodates to the American dialect: she repeatedly uses the response *Oh really*, starts sentences with the word *So* and pays attention to the openness of her mouth to sound like a North American native (173). For the same purpose, she notices that other African women lie about the number of years they have lived in the United States. They are conditioned to embrace western ideas and practices as a large portion of the American society believes that "immigrants to this country should learn English, act American, and stop trying to keep their own culture" (Moschkovich 1983, 83). This attitude leads the protagonist to experience a loss of selfhood, since language is an essential cultural marker that influences identity formation. Nevertheless, on account of the fact that "whiteness is the thing to aspire to" (173) in America, she accepts this cultural loss and keeps imitating American speech, which can be interpreted as a shield against her insecurity.

Not only does Ifemelu resort to linguistic accommodation, but she also alters her hair to adjust to the new culture. The issue of social politics of hair has already been dealt with, yet in this section some key points will be revised to examine black hair culture from another angle. Having said this, Ifemelu is particularly interested in straightening her hair because of the fact that, when you are alienated from your homeland, "you do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (119). Her decision to change her physical appearance results from the assumption that she will not look like a professional unless she conforms to white beauty standards: "I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky" (204). However, it is a fact that mimicry is a colonial strategy aimed at subduing the 'Other'. In words of Homi K. Bhabha, "mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (1994, 85) in order to be efficient. This means that no matter how hard Ifemelu tries to assimilate to whiteness, since she has fallen into a 'colonial trap' that will ensure the perceptibility of her markers of difference.

The alternative reaction of immigrant black women to cultural conflicts is their display of a strong sense of pride and love for their African heritage. This connects with the idea that immigrants must claim their space when they are deprived of the right to maintain their cultural customs, behaviours and values (Anzaldúa 1987, 22). Having spent more than a decade in the U.S., Ifemelu decides to braid her hair before her return to Nigeria; she is absolutely sure that "I like my hair the way God made it" (124). Moreover, she is not mistaken when assuming that the African Hair Braiding Salon will be "in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank building

and no white people" (9). Owing to black segregation, African hair salons were relegated to the ghettoes, the outskirts of American society. This phenomenon occurred despite the fact that in the past – as explained by Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps – hair salons were located in the centre of the African village as a result of the widespread belief that "a person's spirit was […] nestled in the hair" (quoted in Sneddon 2018, 2). In this regard, Mariama Hair Salon would be what Michel Foucault refers to as "heterotopia of deviance" (1997, 333) or, in other words, a place occupied by cultural groups whose attitudes or conducts deviate from the norm.

In the hair salon, Ifemelu observes many cultural signs and situations that make her feel right at home, such as the deafening noise, the intermingling of different languages, or the fact that air conditioners are switched off in the summer (9). Moreover, Ifemelu sees that Halima, one of the hairdressers, is more congenial to African individuals: "she would not smile at an American in the same way" (11). African people in the hair salon overtly express their feelings of identification with an 'imagined black community' that is not monoculturally ascribed but rather composed of transnational members from diverse African nations. They also establish the difference between being *in* a place and being *of* a place, so white Americans may stay in the hair salon but never truly belong there. Yet, keeping in mind that geographical culture has alienated immigrants from their lands – besides the fact that culture evolves across space and time – they cannot actually repossess their cultural loss, but only create "imaginary homelands" (Rushdie 1991, 428). These examples show that immigrant black women may create a sense of community and stick to their 'imagined' African roots as a response to white supremacy culture.

Returning to the topic of language, the protagonist of the story undergoes a process of self-discovery by gradually recovering her Nigerian vernacular tongue. In addition to being a tool for communication, language carries memory and cultural meaning (Amonyeze 2017, 5); indeed, it provides the lens though which individuals understand the world. By integrating Igbo lexicon into her speech – a feature of Nigerian language – Ifemelu asserts her bicultural identity. Certainly, she would be incapable of expressing her real thoughts and emotions without using Igbo terms and phrases such as *ndo* 'I am sorry', *obi ocha* 'clean heart', *ngwa* 'quick', *chelu* 'wait a moment', *inugo* 'take my words', *biko* 'please', among others (Koziel 2015, 104-6). Bearing in mind that these words are introducers, motivators or emphasisers that "suggest and reinforce the contextual meaning" (106), they do not hamper the reader's understanding of the text. Additionally, Ifemelu starts writing a blog entitled "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" that allows her to express her inner feelings and rediscover herself after all the crises she has endured by reason of racial, gender, class and ethnic oppression.

For most of her time in America, Ifemelu's identity remains liminal. According to Homi K. Bhabha, *liminality* is an "in-between state or space […] characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change" (quoted in Chakraborty 2016, 146). This transitional phase suggests that liminal subjects find themselves in a "third space" which expands their field of view, thus transcending the limited barriers established by western binary thinking (149). Following this line of thought, hybrid identities and cultures also bridge the gap between whites and blacks *and* the Orient and the Occident. As a transnational subject, Ifemelu is constantly negotiating and redefining her identity, which becomes blurred from the moment she leaves Nigeria. Certainly, she feels dislocated since she shares with other immigrants the feeling that "our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (Rushdie 1991, 431). In turn, the reshaping of Ifemelu's bicultural identity questions the already mentioned idea that the Orient is condemned to stagnation and failure to progress.

In America, Ifemelu goes through a process of independence and self-determination which becomes increasingly evident towards the end of the novel. Although at the beginning of her transnational experience the protagonist becomes the object of triple oppression as well as offensive prejudices against foreigners, she ultimately manages to become a full subject by positing herself as the 'observer' rather than the 'observed' and, at the same time, presenting white Americans as 'others'. Thus, this role reversal challenges hegemonic definitions of both historically oppressed and privileged groups. Aside from that , Ifemelu empowers herself in the following ways: first, recovering her Nigerian dialect, second, writing a blog, and finally, being contented with her natural hair again (Lyle 2018, 118).

By virtue of the abovementioned changes resulting from Ifemelu's new self-perception, the protagonist regains her voice and starts taking control of her life. In fact, it is thanks to her new sense of agency that she decides to reconnect to her native land, "the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (Adichie 2017, 6). Yet, this does not mean that Ifemelu's identity is "authentically Nigerian"; indeed, the fact that the protagonist's experience in America has transformed her into a bicultural person is confirmed when her friend Ranyinudo welcomes her back in Nigeria and, after noticing changes in her comportment, calls her "Americanah" (385). Be that as it may, Ifemelu's return to her homeland represents the high point of her empowerment. Making reference to the *routes/roots* dichotomy, the protagonist reaffirms her sense of belongingness to Nigeria (roots) as a result of her experiences in America (routes). At this point in the story, Ifemelu cannot be considered a liminal subject anymore as she has asserted her true cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

The present paper has focused on the specific case of Ifemelu, the protagonist of Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013), as a model to explore the triple oppression confronted by immigrant black women in First World countries and the development of their transnational identities. The results obtained from this project prove the thesis postulated at the beginning of the dissertation, which stated that Ifemelu undergoes a process of identity formation and negotiation as a result of the triple oppression she endures as an immigrant to the United States. The findings suggest that Ifemelu's self-perception varies according to her relationship with different individuals and social groups. In the first section, Ifemelu is discriminated since her race, gender and class categories do not comply with western norms and conceptualisations of power. Taking as a reference postcolonial theories as well as recent studies on intersectionality, I have analysed a selection of scenes which illustrate the degradation of the protagonist's self-esteem due to the triple oppression she faces in America. First, I have shown that Ifemelu is left with feelings of guilt and self-hatred by reason of western ideals of beauty and the Eurocentric tendency to dehumanise black people. Then, her sexual objectification and abuse by American white men have revealed that stereotypes associated with black women reduce them to "hypersexual" and "exotic" 'Others', which causes their self-alienation. After that, I have reflected on the fact that Ifemelu's race, gender and nationality relegate her to the status of second-class citizen, an issue that is relevant yet remains insufficiently investigated.

In the second section I have concentrated on Ifemelu's liminal identity as a transnational subject. Drawing attention to ideological clashes and cultural groups appearing in the novel, evidence has been provided that Ifemelu is faced with the dilemma of either assimilating to the dominant culture or resisting white supremacy owing to her sense of dislocation. However, she eventually embraces her bicultural identity and attains a new agency that leads her to return to her homeland. This study has offered a framework through which to conduct further research on how contemporary fiction authors describe the impact that multiple and interacting forms of oppression have on the formation of African women's identities. Ifemelu's experience of toil and of learning through suffering may have aroused strong feelings among the readers, which is entirely reasonable as her experiences parallel those of real people. Yet, although *Americanah* tells Ifemelu's story from an optimistic perspective, the bitter reality is that many black women are still victims of multiple forms of violence, and their stories do not always have a happy ending. Definitely, awareness raising on this matter and willingness to take action are urgently needed to empower social minorities and combat discriminatory practices against them.

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