



**Universitat de les  
Illes Balears**

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

**Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau**

# Remaking Beauty in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Esther Montes Moll

**Grau de Estudis Anglesos**

Any acadèmic 2019-20

DNI de l'alumne:41572899P

Treball tutelat per Miquel Pomar Amer  
Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna i Clàssica

S'autoritza la Universitat a incloure aquest treball en el Repositori Institucional per a la seva consulta en accés obert i difusió en línia, amb finalitats exclusivament acadèmiques i d'investigació	Autor		Tutor	
	Sí	No	Sí	No
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Paraules clau del treball:  
*Americanah*, Diaspora, Afropolitanism, Identity, Beauty



## **Abstract**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* deals with middle-class characters that migrate due to choicelessness. She explores the hardships immigrants undergo in order to adapt to the new setting. Thus, focusing on three secondary character of the novel, this paper seeks to explore the way in which the characters of Uju, Ginika, and Aisha adapt to the new environment they live in. The aim of this paper is to disclose the different factors contributing to the development of the character's identity as diasporic subjects. To do so, I will demonstrate how the characters' identity of Uju, Ginika and Aisha are the result of the incorporation of cultural constructs of the West, which are reflected in the beauty practices of these characters. I will also investigate the way in which the three characters identity resonates with the term Afropolitan.

**Key words:** *Americanah*, Diaspora, Afropolitanism, Identity, Beauty

## **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction	4
2. Becoming an Americanah	6
3. Beauty and the importance of Relationships	9
4. The Afropolitan in the Beauty Salon	12
5. Conclusion	15
6. Works Cited	16

## Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote *Dear Ijeawele, a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) after she had received a letter from a friend asking her how she should raise her daughter a feminist. While she addresses her Nigerian friend, she also addresses all of us. As Adichie said in *We should all be Feminists* (2014), “imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations.” In chapter 10 of *Dear Ijeawele*, Adichie suggests how to engage with a girl’s appearance. In doing so, she exemplifies how society imposes a western beauty canon and suggests alternatives to what is considered “good.” In the novel *Americanah* (2013), published earlier than *We should all be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, Adichie already criticized the configuration of the “other” through the imposition of the social practices of the colonizer.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria in 1977. She started university in Nigeria, but at the age of nineteen, she moved to the United States, after she had gained a scholarship to study communication at Drexel University in Philadelphia. After finishing her superior studies in America, she gained popularity with her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). Her TED Talks “The Danger of the Single Story” (2009) and “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013) have started a conversation about the danger of stereotypes and feminism.

The novel *Americanah* resonates with the life of the author. *Americanah* deals with a middle-class young woman called Ifemelu as she navigates life between Nigeria and America. The novel starts with Ifemelu being on her way to a beauty salon in Trenton, on the outskirts of Princeton (US). It is the salon that frames the story of Ifemelu’s adolescence in Nigeria and her life as a migrant in America. Although much of the novel takes place in America, Nigeria is the starting point of the storyline and at the same time the final part, creating some kind of symmetry that leads to the concept of Return. Despite having a new life in a foreign country, there is always a place where one was born and raised. And yet, when one returns to that place over the years, the perception of what has changed there and what has changed in oneself is disturbingly blurred. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she returns as an Americanah, rediscovering a different country than the one she left. Even though she rejected the assimilation of the beauty practices and other customs of the West, criticizing Uju, Ginika and Aisha for doing so, she still returns to Lagos having acquired American values.

Recently, African people have majorly migrated to the United States. One of the countries that sends more immigrants to America is Nigeria. In the US, there are about 348,000 Nigerian immigrants (Rahiminezhad and Arabian 2018). Eventually, some of these immigrants will return to Nigeria, having incorporated new American values and identities. In *Americanah* the characters of Ginika, Uju, and Aisha, the focus analysis of my paper, migrate from Africa to America, embodying the concept of diaspora that is central to the novel.

The term diaspora comes from the Greek terms *dia* ‘through’ and *speiro* ‘dispersal, to sow or scatter.’ Vertovec (1996), following recent uses of diaspora and its adjective diasporic, distinguishes between 4 different approaches to the term. The first approach is the notion of diaspora as a social category. In the past, the term was used to refer to the Jews’ traumatic experiences of their exile from the homeland and their dispersal to other lands. Now, the term is used to describe a community which is transnational and includes immigrants, guestworkers, ethnic minorities, refugees, expatriates, and travelers. The second category that Vertovec differentiates is diaspora as a form of consciousness. It refers to the individual who is aware of being at home away from home. The third category is diaspora as mode of cultural production. As Vertovec states, “In this approach, the fluidity and identities among diasporic people is emphasized. These are evident in the production and reproduction of forms which are sometimes called “cut’n’mix,” hybrid, or “alternate” (1996). Finally, the last category understands diaspora as a new kind of problem. As Vertovec asserts, it is “typically associated with rightwing groups” as they perceive diasporic identities as “assaults on traditional (hegemonic and assimilative) norms” (1996). However, such judgment is counteracted by cosmopolitans who “welcome the construction of new compound identities” as that of the Afropolitan (1996).

While Ifemelu, the main character of the novel has been mainly studied by other authors in terms of blogging, hair, and bildungsroman (Guarracino 2014; Cruz-Gutierrez 2018; Reuter 2015). This paper will examine the Afropolitan identity in *Americanah*, exploring the characters of Uju, Ginika and Aisha. I will investigate the role that society has on people’s identity, especially how one’s position in society and cultural background modifies one’s identity, applying the different categories of the diaspora. The aim of this paper is to disclose the different factors contributing to the development of the character’s beauty practices as diasporic subjects. Thus, I will demonstrate how the characters’ identity of Uju, Ginika and Aisha are the result of the incorporation of cultural constructs of the West, which are reflected in the beauty practices of these characters.

## **Becoming an *Americanah***

In her article “Bye Bye Babar” (2005), Selasi coins the term ‘Afropolitan’, a blend of ‘African’ and ‘cosmopolitan.’ Selasi defines the term as

the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz bar lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, [...] we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: [...] We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (2005)

This idea of Afropolitanism resonates in the title of Adichie’s novel since ‘Americanah’ makes reference to the hybrid identity of the characters once they have lived in America or Europe. Afropolitans “define [their] relationship to the places [they] live; how British or American [they] act is in part a matter of affect” (Selasi 2005). Mbembe also understands the Afropolitan as someone who is aware of “the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativization of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness, and remoteness” (2017,105). Selasi and Mbembe’s definition of Afropolitanism value the hybridity of cultures as the Afropolitan embraces and acquires social practices of both cultures. Afropolitanism, then, involves class, identity and race; and these changes are reflected in the beauty practices of the characters in *Americanah*.

The first time ‘Americanah’ is introduced in the novel is when Ginika tells her friends at school that she is moving to the United States (Adichie 2017, 64). Emigrating to America relates to the first notion of the diaspora as a social category, which is associated with “any community which is transnational, that is, whose social economic and political networks cross the orders or nation-states” (Vertovec 1996). Ginika’s parents see themselves forced to migrate. As Ginika’s father says: “This regime is treating us like sheep and we are starting to behave as if we are sheep. I have not been able to do research in years because every day I am organizing strikes and talking about unpaid salary and there is no chalk in the classroom” (Adichie 2017, 64). Due to social circumstances as it is the political atmosphere of Nigeria, some people need to leave the country if they want

a better future. As Ginika's parents cannot prosper in Nigeria, they decide to migrate to the US. Although Ginika's family find themselves in a difficult situation in Nigeria, they are still a middle-class family, which allows Ginika's father to obtain a place as a professor at a university in Missouri (65). Africans do not only migrate in search for a better education or to know other cultures, but as Pucherova articulates:

Africans are driven to the West for socio-economic and political reasons that make it impossible for them to attain happiness at home. This includes civil wars and terrorism, lack of access to clean water and electricity, an inability to complete university, find a suitable job, feel safe, or simply have choices. (Pucherova 2018, 411)

Class is then a key issue in becoming an Americanah, as other characters do not have the opportunity of going abroad, as Ifemelu's father says: "At least they are fortunate to have that option" (Adichie 2017, 75). As Hallemeier states: "Adichie's *Americanah*, feature[s] upper-middle-class protagonists who reflect the economic privilege of a portion of the African diaspora that has been rapidly expanding since the 1970s" (2015, 233). Portraying characters that usually do not correspond with what Adichie calls the "single story," challenges the stereotype of what an African is or looks like (2009).

In *Americanah*, Ginika is sad that she is moving to the America. Although all Ginika's friends were happy she was moving to the US, "Ginika complained and cried, painting images of sad, friendless life in a strange America" (65). Despite Ginika's initial reluctance to going to America; eventually, as her friend Ranyinudo says: "She'll come back and be a serious Americanah like Bisi" (65). The term Americanah is used in Nigeria to refer to the people who have been Americanized or pretend to have been. The word American is modified in order to reflect the changes involving appearance, language, and values.

The second category of the diaspora as a form of consciousness refers to being "home away from home" (Vertovek 1996). When Ifemelu migrates to America, Ginika is already well-established in America. While Ifemelu just arrived there, she realizes that Ginika has already adapted to the existing norms of the West. The first thing Ifemelu notices is Ginika's accent. Guarracino states that "an 'Americanah' can be markedly distinguished by her speaking affections and her knowhow on up-to-date fashion trends" (2014, 12). As Ginika's friends told her before departing to America, she was "adding a slurred *r* to every single English word" (Adichie 2017, 65). However, when Ginika picks Ifemelu up at the airport, Ginika tries to prove to Ifemelu that she has not changed. Ginika, in her

speech uses Nigerian phrases and tells stories of when she arrived in America about differences in meaning regarding Nigerian and American English (123). Nonetheless, Ifemelu notices Ginika is making an effort to sound Nigerian (123). Ginika embodies the Afropolitan whose language and look have been affected by their diasporic condition.

Appearance is crucial in the construction of identity. Vertovec's third category of the diaspora as a mode of cultural production is made evident regarding Ginika's appearance. In Nigeria, Ginika was considered the prettiest girl because she "had caramel skin and wavy hair that, when unbraided, fell down to her neck instead of standing Afro-like" (55-56). Ginika was praised by her friends for having an appearance that resembled the beauty canon of the West. However, once she migrates to America, she is insulted for her physical appearance, she is called "Pork" (124) at school because she does not follow the beauty conventions of the American society. In order to adapt to the new beauty standards, Ginika changes her physical appearance. As Ifemelu notices "Ginika was much thinner, half her old size, and her head looked bigger, balanced on a long neck that brought to mind a vague, exotic animal" (122). Not only does Ginika lose weight, but she also wears straight hair with "blond streaks shiny in the sunlight" (123). By incorporating a new hairstyle, Ginika shapes her identity and her conception of beauty.

What is considered beautiful or not regarding black women is widely discussed in the novel in terms of beauty, a concept which is closely connected to race:

Classical ideologies of race established a classificatory symbolic system of colour with 'black' and 'white' as signifiers of a fundamental polarization of human worth - 'superiority/inferiority'. Distinctions of aesthetic value, 'beautiful/ugly', have always been central to the way racism divides the world into binary oppositions in its adjudication of human worth. (Mercer 1987, 35)

As Adichie portrays in the novel, race is not a problem in Nigeria. However, once Ifemelu arrives to America, she has to face what is like to be black for the first time. In fact, Ginika explains to Ifemelu that while she was praised back at Nigeria for her skin color and felt the contrary of being offended when called "half-caste," in America that was problematic (Adichie 2017, 123). As Ginika tells Ifemelu

I was telling them about back home and how all the boys were chasing me because I was a half-caste, and they said I was dissing myself. So now I say biracial, and I'm supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste. I've met a lot of people here with white mothers and they are so full of issues, eh. I didn't know I

was even supposed to *have* issues until I came to America. Honestly, if anybody wants to raise biracial kids, do it in Nigeria. (124)

By portraying Ginika as a biracial Nigerian who is comfortable in her own skin, Adichie criticizes the American society. This matter resonates with Vertovek's fourth category of diaspora as a new kind of problem. As Ginika is told that she should change her vocabulary in order to fit in to what is politically correct. Her vision of race and skin color is disregarded because she is from Nigeria, where being biracial is valued in a positive way.

By characterizing Ginika as an upper middle-class young woman, whose parents enjoy a privileged position in American society, her struggles to adapt to a Western society are caused by her physical appearance. While her beauty was praised in Nigeria for being biracial, having wavy hair, and a big bottom, in the US she was abused. However, unlike other characters, "Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth [and] the cultural cues had shaped into her skin" (Adichie 2017, 125). Ginika is the embodiment of the Afropolitan as she welcomes her hybrid identity.

## **Beauty and the Importance of Relationships**

In *Americanah*, another character who migrates to the US is Uju, Ifemelu's aunty. Although she will become an Afropolitan, Aunty Uju's journey differs from that of Ginika's. Aunty Uju throughout the novel is characterized towards her relationships with other men. Thus, her physical appearance will vary depending on who is she having a relationship with.

The first time Aunty Uju appears in the novel is when Ifemelu remembers her adolescence in Nigeria. Before migrating to America, Uju is in a relationship with the General. Even though Aunty Uju is the General's mistress, she is portrayed as someone who is economically dependent on him. Due to the fact that the General belongs to the upper class, Aunty Uju configures her appearance taking into account the beauty standards that are socially correct regarding class. Even in Nigeria, the Western beauty canon is imposed, regarding as naturally beautiful lighter skin and straight hair. This imposition of the Western beauty canon is reflected on Aunty Uju: "She avoided the sun and used creams in elegant bottles, so that her complexion, already naturally light, became lighter, brighter, and took on a sheen" (Adichie 2017, 74). Despite Aunty Uju's having already lighter skin than other Nigerian women, she still applies lighting creams in order

to imitate the beauty canon. She does not accept her skin tone as her natural appearance is “indicative of an ‘inferiority complex’” (Mercer 1987, 33). Not only does Aunt Uju lighten her skin but she also straightens her hair and uses the “latest version, shiny and straight” extensions in the market (77). While Aunt Uju behaves as someone superior in Nigeria, which is reflected in the way she manifests beauty; once her relationship with the General ends after he dies in a plane accident, her social position changes.

Aunt Uju becomes a diasporic subject when she migrates to America with the child she had with the General. In the US, Uju’s life changes considerably to the life she had in Nigeria. Even though she could work as a doctor in Lagos, she cannot do that in the US, she first has to pass some exams. Besides studying for her medical exams, Aunt Uju has to work 3 jobs to be able to afford life in the US. It is evident that Uju does not have the same economic security that she had as the General’s mistress. Due to her struggles as a migrant, Uju’s physical appearance has been Americanized. As Ifemelu points out when she arrives to the US: “There was something different about her. Ifemelu had noticed it right away at the airport, her roughly braided hair, her ears bereft of earrings, her quick casual hug, as if it had been weeks rather than years since they had last seen each other” (Adichie 2017, 104). After years of living in the US, Aunt Uju’s identity resonates with that of the Afropolitan, for it connects with the category of the diaspora as a mode of cultural production (Vertovek 1996).

Because Ifemelu comes from Nigeria, she cannot accept why her aunt would want to change her identity. Ifemelu even criticizes her aunt when Aunt Uju decides to relax her hair. In order for Aunt Uju to get a job, she has to straighten her hair, as braids are considered “unprofessional” (Adichie 2017, 119). As Cruz-Gutiérrez pinpoints: “Hair is a key component in Black women’s acculturation and socialization, for it influences the concept(ion) of femininity” (2018, 3). Black women’s natural hair is regarded as the opposite of femininity, the “hair texture that is valued is straight or swingy, and hair that is valued falls down rather than stands up” (Adichie 2017,45). Making these women not accepting their natural hair, causes them to suffer the consequences of strengthening Afro hair. Women with Afro hair are exposed to chemicals which not only damage the hair itself, but they also burn people’s scalps. For many women hair is linked with pain (Adichie 2017, 44). In fact, Ifemelu tells her experience concerning hair suffering when she was an adolescent. She remembers how Aunt Uju used to comb her hair and one day she burned “the skin behind her ear” (Adichie 2017, 204). The result of such process became “an almost expected experience traditionally considered a rite of passage into

adulthood” (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2018, 6); a process which “terrified” Ifemelu and “excited” her at the same time “at the prospect of straight, swiny hair” (Adichie 2017, 2014).

Hair is also connected to culture, especially natural hair. In her essay “Black Hair/Style Politics”, Mercer (1987) connects hair with the idea of ‘cultivation’ that a Jamaican hairdresser made in a comment. The hairdresser implied that hair needs to be taken care of to look beautiful. With this metaphor, Mercer states that it can be understood in two different ways

On the one hand, it recuperates the negative logic of white bias: to cultivate is to transform something found ‘in the wild’ into something of social use and value [...] It thus implies that in its ‘natural’ given state, black people’s hair has no inherent aesthetic value: it must be worked upon before it can be ‘beautiful.’ But on the other hand, all human hair is ‘cultivated’ in this way in that it merely provides a raw material for practices, procedures and ritual techniques of cultural writing and social inscription. (Mercer 1987, 38)

This idea of natural hair seen as wild, with no inherent value is seen in Auntie Uju. When Ifemelu tired of suffering the chemical process of relaxing her hair, she decides to cut her hair. When she pays a visit to her aunt, Auntie Uju disapproves of Ifemelu’s natural haircut. Auntie Uju links natural hair with “something scruffy and untidy” (Adichie 2017, 216). As many other women, Auntie Uju regards as ‘bad’ wearing natural hair, as it is not considered beautiful from a Western beauty standard that favors straight hair.

When Auntie Uju is well established in American and about to pass her exams to become a doctor in the US; she presents Bartholomew, her boyfriend, to Ifemelu, a Nigerian middle-class man who in the eyes of Ifemelu is “unsuited for, and unworthy of, Auntie Uju” (116). In fact, when Auntie Uju asks Ifemelu what she thinks of him, Ifemelu answers that she would have never been with a man like that in Nigeria (118). Nonetheless, Auntie Uju is aware that she is not living in Nigeria anymore, as a diasporic subject, she is aware that she is “home away from home”. Thus, Vertovek’s second category of the diaspora as form of consciousness is reflected in this part of the novel in the character of Auntie Uju (1996).

Auntie Uju wanted to be with Bartholomew to seek security and for the sense of familiarity that he brings as a Nigerian (118). However, that search for familiarity turns against her after having adapted to the American social standards. Uju resents Bartholomew because he expects her “to give him [her] salary,” to cook for him and to obey him (217-218). Rahiminezhad and Arabian state that “it should be mentioned that

immigrants grew up in a culture where husbands were mostly responsible for all the living expenses, while responsibilities for household chores including cooking and cleaning were the tasks of the wives” (2018, 3) Bartholomew is characterized as diasporic subject who is conscious that “home [is] now a blurred place between here and there” (117); and as a consequence, his Nigerian values prevail. In fact, Ifemelu notices how Bartholomew considers American appearance as immoral when he says that “a girl in Nigeria [would] never wear that kind of dress” (116). Adichie criticizes this kind of behavior as it is also seen in her book *Dear Ijeawele* (2018) stating that a girl’s appearance should never be linked with morality, as clothes have nothing to do with it, it is a matter of attractiveness and taste (2018, 43-44).

Uju’s moving to New England with Bartholomew is a key aspect that influences her identity. By living in a small town, she is confronted by the color of her skin. Even her status as a doctor does not protect Auntie Uju from suffering from racist comments. She explains to Ifemelu “how she walked into an examining room and a patient asked “is the doctor coming?” and when she said she was the doctor the patient’s face changed to fired clay” (Adichie 2017, 182). As Amonyeze points out “the major dilemma faced by these Black immigrants is social integration as they have an identity deemed to be socially inferior” (2017, 7). This idea of feeling inferiority is depicted in Uju’s appearance. As Ifemelu notices: “how much weight [Auntie Uju] had put on, the beginning of a double chin, the new flare of her nose.” (Adichie 2017, 217). Then, race is an issue that influences Uju’s appearance and thus, her identity.

Auntie Uju becomes an Afropolitan after she was forced to change her physical appearance in order to have a job and to fit into the American society. These difficulties that Uju has faced are connected with her failing relationships and it is not until she meets Kweku, a Ghanaian doctor, that she “take[s] on a new light-heartedness:” wearing a “tiny anklet,” which becomes a “hopeful flash of gold” (299). In this manner, Uju’s happiness regarding her relationship is reflected in her appearance.

### **The Afropolitan in the Beauty Salon**

Aisha is a Senegalese hairdresser that works in a beauty salon in Trenton, America. The novel starts in Aisha’s beauty salon, which serves to frame the novel in the present time and to introduce flashbacks of Ifemelu and her boyfriend’s life in Nigeria. Although Aisha is a minor character in the novel, she also embodies the identity of the Afropolitan.

However, Aisha's background differs from that of Aunty Uju and Ginika. As a diasporic black woman, Aisha portrays the struggles migrants have to face in the US. While Aisha is working on Ifemelu's hair, the two of them and other women at the salon discuss issues of beauty and migration.

Hair is a practice that reveals how the characters of Ifemelu and Aisha contrast with each other. When Aisha starts combing Ifemelu's hair, she does "not understand how anybody would choose to suffer through combing natural hair, instead of simply relaxing it" (Adichie 2017, 12). Despite Aisha being a hairdresser, she does not know how to treat natural hair. Because long, straight hair is desired, and not kinky hair, many black women do not value their own hair as it is regarded as inferior and thus 'ugly'. By adapting to the beauty practices of the West, Aisha's identity resonates with that of the Afropolitan. Vertovek's (1996) the third category of the diaspora as a mode of cultural production is emphasized in the character of Aisha.

While texture is one of the most relevant traits of hair, color is also important. Brighter and lighter colors prevail, rejecting darker hair colors which are natural African traits. This idea of rejecting African traits is seen when Aisha asks her costumer what color of hair attachments does she want. When Ifemelu responds that she wants color four, Aisha disagrees. For Aisha, that color is too black, and therefore, it looks fake (Adichie 2017, 12). Despite being that color "closest to [Ifemelu's] natural colour," a lighter hair color would have been preferred, as darker tones contrast with that of the Western beauty canon.

Aisha does not only adapt to the hair textures that prevail in America, but she also applies skin creams to lighten her skin tone, which eventually, create health problems. As Ifemelu notices, Aisha "had a skin condition, pinkish-cream whorls of discoloration on her arms and neck that looked worryingly infectious" (10). Moreover, "Skin-bleaching creams, facial peels, chemical straighteners and hot combs all aid in the cosmetic transformation of black women who struggle to attain a Euro/Western aesthetic of beauty that is unrealistic" (Walters 2014). As much as black women keep adopting Eurocentric beauty practices, they will never fulfill the ideal of beauty.

Beauty salons are a representation of class in the American society. Ifemelu in her way to Trenton reflects that "it is unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton – the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids" (Adichie 2017, 3). As Adichie portrays in the novel, black women have to go to the outskirts of the city if they want to have their hair braided. Cruz-

Gutiérrez states that beauty salons “serve Adichie’s purpose of depicting the beauty shop as a contested terrain where beauty constructions blend and clash with the interchange of knowledge and experiences between Black women of different origins and social status (2018, 4). While Ifemelu enjoys having a higher social status, Aisha for example struggles to make a living in America. Aisha tells Ifemelu that she wants to marry one of her two Igbo suitors to obtain a green card. Even though it may seem like Aisha wants to marry just to obtain the papers, she also wants to do it to visit her mother in Africa after having lost her father (Adichie 2017, 364). Because she is an illegal citizen, if she leaves the country, she will not be able to return “because of papers” (364). Aisha’s situation reflects the struggles that many immigrants have to endure in order to prosper.

Aisha is conscious that she is from ‘here and there.’ When Ifemelu tells Aisha that she is returning to Nigeria, Aisha is surprised that someone who has been living in America for fifteen years would want to return home (16-17). After having adapted to the American life, many immigrants find it difficult to cope with life in their country of origin, as they see everything with “American eyes” (385). Even though Aisha wants to go visit her mother in Senegal, she knows that she would not be able to cope there; she has been affected by her diasporic condition. Aisha is then an Afropolitan; an African of the world (Selasi 2005).

The beauty salon acts as a safe place where black women can talk to one another. As bell hooks says, “the beauty parlor was a space of consciousness raising, a space where black women shared life stories—hardships, trials, gossip; a place where one could be comforted” (1988). While Aisha and Ifemelu do not connect at first, by the time Ifemelu’s hair is finished, the both of them have confided to one another. Part of this discomfort between them is that the hairdressers consider Ifemelu superior to them due to her fellowship at Princeton and the status she has won as a renowned blog writer. At the same time, Ifemelu is bothered by the gossip of the hairdressers. However, after having Aisha told Ifemelu about her struggles as a migrant, she feels compassionate for Aisha, as she was only interested in Ifemelu as a fellow African (363-364). The beauty salon acts as a place for raising awareness, questioning the beauty canon that prevails in America. In this manner, the beauty parlor is a place where different accents, styles and cultures are welcomed, that is the Afropolitan.

Besides appearance, language is another key issue that pertains to what it means to be Afropolitan. For Auntie Uju and Ginika English is the official language of Nigeria, although they adapt their accent to American English. However, Aisha is Senegalese, that

means that French is the official language, and thus, her English is affected by her diasporic condition. As Ifemelu notices when she enters the beauty salon “The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to costumers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before talking on a slangy Americanism” (Adichie 2017, 9). By conflating different languages in the same space, the salon comprises the concept of ‘the here and there’ that characterizes the Afropolitan.

While Aisha’s identity is affected by her diasporic condition, and also becomes an *Americanah*, she is characterized by the beauty parlor, which acts as a safe place. Aisha embodies the African who rejects natural beauty practices due to the impositions of Western beauty standards which are present since colonization began. She is opposed to Ifemelu, as she does value natural hair. In this manner, Aisha represents those Africans who because of their low status in society struggle the most to survive in the US.

## **Conclusion**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Americanah* depicts the migrant experience in Europe and, mostly America. However, as she explained in *The Danger of the Single Story*, she abandons the patronizing story of portraying Africans as poor, struggling to make a living (2009). Adichie’s novel challenges the ‘single story’ by depicting middle-class characters that migrate to the US in order to prosper.

Through the term *Americanah*, Nigerians refer to those who have been changed by having lived in America. The Nigeropolitan Club is representative of the transformation of the returnee’s identity, as they list “the things they missed about America” and share their experiences there, with a foreign accent and “with an extra gleaming layer” (Adichie 2017, 408). In this manner, Adichie reflects the embodiment of the Afropolitan.

Through the characters of Ginika, Auntie Uju, and Aisha, Adichie represents the Afropolitan, whose language, style, and social practices have been affected by their diasporic condition. However, Adichie reflects that the journey of becoming an *Americanah* is not an easy one. In order to prosper and achieve the “American Dream,” the characters are forced to adapt to the American standards of life. Moreover, because the cultural and economic background of these characters differs from one another, how they adapt to the new territory differs too.

While in Nigeria the beauty canon that prevails is that of a “a big, firm, curvy woman, exulting in her weight and height (386), in America the opposite is valued. Therefore, if these characters want to be valued in the US, they feel pressured to change to the Western beauty standards. In this manner, the same process of adaptation happens regarding hair texture and color. These beauty practices that black women have to undergo are closely connected to class and race. In some social environments, Western beauty standards are required as they are considered more professional. Then, characters such as Auntie Uju or Ginika wear straight hair to have better job opportunities. Another major concern in the novel is the treatment of race. While in Nigeria, race is not a problem, in the US it is. Notwithstanding, lighter skin is considered more beautiful in both countries. As Adichie portrays in the novel, bleaching creams are used by black women to lighten their skin tone, even if that means hurting themselves, since this kind of products have harmful effects. Yet, by adapting their beauty practices to the Western standards, these characters become hybrid identities as a result of their diasporic condition.

The beauty salon stands as a place of Africanness, where the Afropolitan identity is reflected. Black women from Africa, the Caribbean or the US understand the beauty parlor as a safe place where women can share their hardships and be comforted. It is also a place where different languages are spoken, and different beauty practices converge.

Moreover, Adichie illustrates how being dependent on other men also influences beauty. In this sense, Auntie Uju’s relationships with other men affect how she performs beauty, depending whether she is happy or not. Therefore, if she feels valued, her looks will reflect as well. Thus, through the exploration of these characters, this paper shows how each character adopts American customs as they struggle with issues of class, race, and identity, which are reflected in the beauty practices of these characters.

## Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda. 2017. *Americanah*. London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate.
- Adichie, Chimamanda. 2018. *Dear Ijeawele: or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate.
- Adichie, Chimamanda. 2009. “The Danger of the Single Story”. Youtube, May 24, 2020. <https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg>
- Adichie, Chimamanda. 2014. *We Should All Be Feminists*. New York: A Vintage Short. Google Play

- Amonyeze, Chinenye. 2017. "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." *Journal of Black Studies* 7 (2): 1-9 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017712773>
- Cruz-Gurtiérrez, Cristina. 2018. "Hiar Politics in the Blogosphere: Safe Spaces and the politics of self-representation in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 55 (3): 1-14 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1462243>
- Guarracino, Serena. 2014. "Writing 'So Raw and True': Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Between* 4 (8): 1–27.
- Hallemeier, Katherine. 2015. "To Be from the Country of People Who Gave': National Allegory and the United States of Adichie's *Americanah*." *Studies in the Novel* 47 (2): 231–245.
- Hooks, Bell. 1988. "Straightening Our Hair." *Zeta Magazine*. Accessed May 21, 2020. <https://zcomm.org/zmagazine/straightening-our-hair-by-bell-hooks/>
- Mbembe, Achille. 2017. "Afropolitanism." In *Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Horta Paulo Lemos and Robbins Bruce, by Appiah Kwame Anthony, 102-07. New York: NYU Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gk09g6>
- Mercer, Kobena. 1987. "Black Hair/Style Politics." *New Formations* 3: 33–54.
- Pucherova, Dobrota. 2018. "Afropolitan Narratives and Empathy: Migrant Identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference*." *Human Affairs*, 28 (4): 406-416. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2018-0033>
- Selasi, Talyie, "Bye Bye Barbar", *Lip Magazine*. Last modified March 3, 2005. Accessed May 21, 2020. <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>
- Rahiminezhad, Vida, and Soheila Arabian. 2018. *Acculturation, Otherness, and Return in Adichie's Americanah: Outside the Homeland*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Reuter, Stefani. 2015. "Becoming a Subject: Developing a Critical Consciousness and Coming to Voice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." Anja Oed (Hg.): *Reviewing the Past, Negotiating the Future: The African Bildungsroman*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2808396>
- Vertovek, Steven. 1996. "Diaspora." In *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations* by Ellis Cashmore, 99-101. New York: Routledge.
- Walters, Tracey. 2014. "Black British Women's Literature and the Politics of Hair." In *Diasporic Women's writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)Gendering Literature and*

*Performance*, edited by Emilia María Durán-Alzamora and Esther Álvarez-López.  
New York: Routledge.