

# Identity and Hair Narrative in Adichie's *Americanah*

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**Abstract-** *Although the social construction of the human hair varies from culture to culture, the symbolic function of hair varies from person to person. In Adichie's Americanah, the characters are primarily defined by their hair before the construction of their race, career and personality. The human hair becomes the premise for brotherhood and sisterhood in. Many episodes take place in the salon, thereafter a person's hair is qualified as either good or bad. The theoretical framework for this paper is New Historicism which interrogates social life and power relations among people in the society. In this work we conclude that Adichie tells the story of human hair not for its sake but to portray the problem of immigrants, religious fanaticism, disruption of academic calendar and the frustration therein, loveless marriage, the environment and other human conditions. Finally, the hair shows that every person is a complete human being first and foremost.*

**Key words-** *Adichie's Americanah; Ifemelu; Nigeria*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls herself a story-teller in TED Conference. Like Achebe she tells stories from all perspectives. Adichie and her parents lived in a house previously occupied by Achebe in University of Nigeria Nsukka. The opening expression in *Purple Hibiscus* is an obvious allusion to *Things Fall Apart* (*Purple Hibiscus*, 11). She tells stories about every conceivable human condition having been inspired by Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Moreover, realism is writing about domestic life of ordinary and middle-class people. Beginning with her first novel *Purple Hibiscus*, the story is told of a fastidious father whose religious fanaticism attracts hatred from his only son and wife and his eventual death, by installment tea poisoning (Anusiem –Dick, 98-99). In *Purple Hibiscus*, the dominant hair style is cornrow which Kambili wears to school. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, two sisters, Olanna and Kainene return to Nigeria to have divergent views about life during the Nigeria-Biafra war 1967-1970. Her short story, *Something around Your Neck*, tells every person something about life. You choose who you are in those short stories including wearing low cut or long straight hair. *Americanah*, is the story of young, middle-class, Nigerian men and women who travel to the United States of America and England to seek better options and social stability. There are two narrating voices, Ifemelu and Obinze stylistically contrived as teenage friends who leave Nigeria at different points after university education. *Americanah* is a discourse in what young African immigrants and other nationals in diaspora face in America. The author aesthetically crafts the human hair into immigrant discourse. The character of each immigrant is delineated first hair style. Other realities of daily life as lived at home, on the streets, in the malls and markets, offices, party time are portrayed without embellishments.

The pages of *Americanah* bristle with such expressions as: medium kinky hair, short spiky hair, hair the way God made it, ribbon in the hair, wavy hair, low afro (10, 12, 32, 28, 55, 68). Hair shows that all the characters are first and foremost human beings. The status people acquire, the status forced upon them, is socially constructed by those who have power. Ifemelu is a happy girl who likes her hair “the way God made it” (12). In her choice of hair extensions she rejects colour one: “It is too black, it looks fake. . . . Sometimes I use colour two, but colour four is closest to my natural colour” (12). There is radical honesty in this speech because *Americanah* is set in contemporary age where women use relaxers and conditioners to soften and straighten their hair. The process of relaxing or conditioning makes the hair easier to style or manage, makes the woman reach perceived beauty, gain social acceptability, and self-esteem. Theorizing about the African woman's hair in one of her articles Marco, a South African scholar states that: “Hair is the projection of the self, it is constantly re-defining itself and its meaning in a progressive social culture” (7).

## 2. HAIR, BEAUTY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

In *Americanah*, the hair style constructs or deconstructs the character. Ifemelu feels beauty that is why she describes all the hair styles of other characters. Hair is linked to clothing. Opara structures clothing as “serving a parameter for gauging female individuation adding that there is a close relationship between clothing and female autonomy (62). Let us begin with the beauty treatise of Ifemelu's mother in Lagos, Nigeria:

*Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair. It was back-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under*

*the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory. Is it your real hair strangers would ask, then reach out to touch it reverently? Others would say, 'Are you from Jamaica (41)?*

Woman's hair is celebrated in Igbo land beginning from childhood and it reaches its climax during marriage celebrations and festivities (*Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*). During widowhood, the woman's hair is dethroned moments after lowering the spouse's corpse in the grave. The woman's hair is cut by *umuada* (daughters of her husband's family) or other widows in the family. This practice, however, is gradually being eroded by Pentecostalism. From the excerpt, Ifemelu's mother's hair is celebrated first by her father and secondly by other salon users. Her mother's hair takes on the theology of woman's hair in 1Cor, 11.15 which states that the woman's hair is her glory. According to Boone, an anthropologist, who researched in Mende culture of Sierra Leone: "West African communities admire a fine head of long, thick hair on a woman? A woman with long thick hair demonstrates the life force, the multiplying power of profusion, prosperity, 'a green thumb' for bountiful farms and many healthy children" (Qtd. in Tharps and Byrd, 1). We can also cite Asha Zulu Mandela, who wears the longest dreadlock measuring nineteen feet. Asha states that she uses between four to six bottles of shampoo to wash her hair, and it takes three to four hours to dry. Asha calls her hair "my baby" (iscincetimes.com), serving as aesthetics and as cure for cancer. Asha's hair has since been recorded in the Guinness Book of Records.

Hair is in the domain of beauty. During TEDTalk interview with Andrew Park, Denis Dutton espoused a provocative Darwinian theory on beauty. According to him: "Art, music and other beauty things, far from being in the 'eyes of the beholder': are a core part of human nature with deep evolutionary origins."

In *Americanah*, a woman's hair does not only represent her femininity and beauty, it is a measure of personal identity, self-confidence, self-worth and freedom. While discussing the minority question in Nigeria, Kukah, a Nigerian Catholic priest defines identity as: "uniqueness, distinctiveness, something that sets you apart . . . Identity remains a major issue in the drive or quest for inclusion or exclusion" (64). Identity in this novel is fraught with everything including hair style. Self-worth is the first thing the reader feels in the woman exposing her fat legs on the Trenton platform. Ifemelu narrates:

*. . . [S]he looked admiringly at one of them, a woman in a very short skirt. She thought nothing of slender legs shown off in miniskirts- it was safe and easy, after all, to display legs of which the world approved – but the fat woman's act was*

*about the quiet conviction one shared only with oneself, a sense of rightness that others failed to see(8).*

Women feel beauty and freedom simultaneously. Ngugi foregrounds beauty, self-definition and freedom in his novel entitled *Devil on the Cross*, and in the short story "Minutes of Glory" while discussing disillusionment in post-Uhuru Kenya. Ifemelu feels different things according to her hair style. Before she gets the job through Curt's intervention she feels confident, as confident as she feels in Nigeria. She rules herself, "determining the margins of her own life," because she wears her hair natural but the relaxed hair she wears to attend the interview for that job and thereafter: "is like being in prison. You are caged in. . . . You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do (208). When Ginika cuts that straight hair for her, Ifemelu feels repulsive: "Ifemelu looked in the mirror. She was all big eyes and big head. At best she looked like a boy; at worst, like an insect. I look so ugly I'm scared of myself" (208).

Ifemelu's mother distorted her personality by cutting her long hair when she found salvation in one of the new churches in their neighbourhood and began to dress like the congregation. Her essence takes flight before her ten year old daughter (43). We can call it personality regression. This scene is re-enacted in one of the short stories "Imitation" in the collection entitled *The Thing around Your Neck* (28). Here Nkem cuts her hair then watches the hair "float like brown cotton wisps falling on the white sink" (28). Now wearing a low cut Nkem imitates the Benin girl now her husband's mistress in Lagos.

There is no limit to human imagination and what ingenuity can overcome. When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria she joins Zoe Press in Lagos to re-coup love with Obinze. Doris, one of the been-to, and editor of Zoe Press wears boring hairstyles (sister locks) to the resentment of her co-staff (402).

### 3. RACE AND IMMIGRATION

Hair has implication beyond aesthetics. Hair is political and its symbolic undertone varies. The politics of hairstyle can suggest anything from good looking to bad looking. Ifemelu records warm reception in the communication company when she is newly employed, wearing straight hair: "you will be a wonderful fit in the company" (204). She remains a wonderful fit until she wears low cut that labels her a lesbian (211). Her self-confidence deflates and she resigns (212).

The complexity of hair styles shows the complexity of human nature. The author's fascination with hair further interrogates race and the political structure that conceived racism. No other human physiology than the hair is a worse metaphor for race in America. The hair narrative in *Mariama African Hair Braiding* in Trenton constructs race as a potent fear for American blacks, non-American blacks and non-American white immigrants.

People migrate for various reasons. The minds of the Nigerian immigrants have been conditioned through a process of socialization that sees real life outside Nigeria (291). Ifemelu, Obinze, Emenike and others flee Nigeria to seek more choices, long for more, and ultimately to escape from the familiar. Racism is a new experience for the immigrant characters like Ifemelu who discovers her blackness in a new form. In Nigeria it is not like that. The author uses Mariama Hair Salon to define a new space for blacks and whites to connect as one people. Through Ifemelu, distinction is made of the difference between ethnicity as we have it in Nigeria and racism as a political tool of superiority and subjugation in America. In Nigeria, ethnicity breeds corruption and mediocrity, not fear, not hate, not segregation, not subjugation. We need anthropological research to determine an approximate term for the principles of Boko Haram in Nigeria. The salon in Lagos does not discuss race but the commonplace. Imperial femaleness is determined by the worth of handbags and shoes (77). Adichie uses the hair to focus on human beings, our brotherhood and sisterhood.

Immigration is a fact of life. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's Okonkwo lives part of his life in Mbanta in forced exile after committing *female ochu* (female murder.) Most of Buchi Emecheta's characters are Nigerian immigrants in Britain. In *Second Class Citizen*, for example, Adah migrates from Eastern Nigeria to London to unite with her husband, Francis. Migration is the movement of people from one place to another. Migration happens for many reasons. According to Dustmann and Weiss (236-256), human migration could be occasioned by economic reasons, natural disaster, war or persecution. The Neoclassical economic theory of migration links wage difference between two geographical locations to migration (wikipedia). The narrator does not disclose why other national immigrants come to America. Nigerians venturing into America do so because of the disruption of academic calendar at home (Ginika, Ifemelu, Obinze), economic reasons, escape from persecution like Aunt Uju.

Ifemelu is centred in the hair narrative when she waits to board a taxi from Princeton to Trenton to braid her hair (*Americanah*, 1). This movement foregrounds the grossly, self-effacing jobs Nigerians and other Africans in diaspora do to keep their heads above water. The following insight is telling:

*She hoped her driver would not be a Nigerian because he, once he heard her accent, would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job . . . all the time nursing humiliation that this fellow Nigerian, small girl at that who was a nurse or an accountant or even a doctor, was looking down on him. Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers (8).*

The immigrant construction in *Americanah* is real and global. We recall Syrians fleeing from war in Aleppo. The world has never witnessed destruction and human violation on the scale of Aleppo. Economic uproar caused a lot of movement for the characters in the novel. Roads, streets, new homes, new jobs, going from one party to the other are the motifs crafted by the author to heighten the problems faced by each immigrant. Journey motif is a literary craft that improves the essence of characters so that they are fully equipped to resolve conflicts. Through journey motif, the personalities of the characters improve, they become wholesome, and they are fulfilled and acquire skills to assist others on their own journey of self-definition.

The development of Aunt Uju's son, Dike is coloured by race. Dike's self-confidence is deflated when the white girl and group leader in his first camp denies him sunscreen lotion because black skin do not need protection or shade from the sun (183). Najm responds to Dike's humiliation in these words: "The process of becoming black, of being marked and cast in shadow, is experienced by both the American black and the non-American black"(3). Ifemelu herself does domestic sex therapy for a white coach to earn her house rent and prevent eviction (153-154) others lose their names, swap international passports, and arrange fake weddings to gain permanent residency.

#### 4. HAIR AND RELIGIOUS FANATICISM

Religious fanaticism is the distortion of the tenets of world religions for selfish purpose. Ifemelu's mother is panic-stricken with the retrenchment of her husband. The hair has determinate meaning in *Americanah* for every character. For Ifemelu's mother, hair interrogates spiritual peregrination which is finance driven. Ifemelu's father fails to observe the prevalent official norms of addressing a female boss as Mummy. Do we address male bosses as Daddy? He loses his job while his wife registers her protest by cutting her long flowing hair and abandons her Catholic faith (41). While she repents, she does not fail to praise Uju's new status from an amorous relationship with a senior army officer in the Nigerian army. New religious fundamentalism robbed converts of their meager finance while the new religious leaders enriched themselves from that. Esther in Zoe Press deposits all her emoluments as tithe but begs even transport money from her colleagues who she erroneously intend to convert. Zemaye reveals this on one of such conversations about new churches: "But Esther you have to stop all that fasting o. . . You know, some months Esther gives her whole salary to her church, they call it sowing seed, then she will come and ask me to give three hundred naira for transport" (417-418). Kosi renounces her best friend Elohor because her pastor preaches "intemperance and dislike for unmarried women" (35)



## 5. LOVE STORY IN AMERICANAH

Love story in the novel is highly itinerant underscoring the search for *romantic satiation and mutual intellectualism* (emphasis mine). Adichie's treatment of love is intense and radically honest. There is no romantic infantilism or romantic innocence between Ifemelu and Obinze rather the narrator makes them intensify the search for mutual satiation. With Curt and Fred, Ifemelu does not feel anything. The love Ifemelu has for Curt and Blaine is frost by *personality algebra finding the value of shared sexuality on their different identities*. The lack of personality union, the broken or missing part in algebraic equations that are not solved posits a sense of bereavement. Moreover, the romance with Curt and Blaine does not provide Ifemelu with someone or something she will think of as an environment which promotes feelings of ease which she is familiar with. Significantly, the degree of rootlessness or racism obscures every good intended in their love lives. They experience significant culture shock resonating in Ifemelu feeling "a step removed from things [Blaine] believed in" (310). There is intellectual distance between Ifemelu and Blaine and she is excluded in his circle of friendship. "She had been with Blaine for more than a year, but she did not quite belong with his friends . . . because of [her] exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing (320)". Although Curt resists actions that target Ifemelu because of race, his treatment of her when she confesses to him underpins race. "Bitch, he said. He wielded the word like a knife" (289). Ifemelu laments about her feelings about Curt: "There was a feeling I wanted to feel that I did not feel" (288). Their differences do not hold them together: "The thing about cross-cultural relationship is that you spend so much time explaining. My ex-boyfriends and I spent a lot of time explaining. I sometimes wondered whether we would even have anything at all to say to each other if we were from the same place. . . ." (457). The romance with Curt and Blaine lacks homely content which is incredibly filled by Obinze.

The love between Obinze and Ifemelu is loud. According to Triangular Theory of love espoused by Steinberg, love has three components: intimacy, passion and commitment. Let us look at intimacy. It consists of feelings of attachment, closeness, connectedness and bondedness (Sternberg, 1). The love between Obinze and Ifemelu transcends romance itself, and the material world. With Obinze, Ifemelu "was at ease, he made her like herself, her skin felt as though it was her right size." Obinze helps her realize her personhood resulting in the representation of their sexuality in radical honesty. The following aptly describes their intimacy:

*There was between them a weightless, seamless desire. She leaned in and kissed him, at first he was slow in his response, and then he was pulling up her blouse. . . . She remembered clearly the firmness of his embrace, and yet there*

*was also a new firmness to their union; their bodies remembered and did not remember. She touched the scar on his chest, remembering it again . . . she thought how apt it was, that expression 'making love' (Americanah, 447).*

Their search for childhood self and romance is consummated in Ifemelu's flat in Lagos. However, the resolution of their search for each other is an attack on African feminist epistemology espoused by Rose Acholonu, Zaynab Alkali, and the present writer. It is hardly open to doubt that Okwudibia reminds Obinze about the sanctity of the Igbo marriage as he voices his resentment:

*Look The Zed, many of us didn't marry the woman we loved. We married the woman that was around when we were ready to marry. So forget this thing. You can keep seeing her, but no need for this kind of white-people behaviour. If your wife has a child for somebody else or if you beat her, that is a reason for divorce. But to get up and say you have no problem with your but you are leaving, for another woman? Haba. We don't behave like that, please (471)*

What about Buchi, Obinze's daughter? What about Kosi, a loving and startling beauty? Kosi is an unintelligent person to talk to (Americanah, 436). She fits into Chukwuma's description of a non- feminist woman "acquiescing, passive, parading beautiful face and fertile ovary" (xii). Wife abandonment in African Literature had been exhaustively discussed in Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Nwapa's *Efuru*, Alkali's *The Stillborn* among others. Nevertheless, Adichie is returning to that theme not to trivialize sex but to remind prospective spouses to marry not because of misfortune. Obinze mourns what should have been:

*Kosi never liked the idea of my 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. I make omelettes but that's it and we both pretend as if my onugbu soup isn't better than hers. There's a lot of pretending in my marriage, Ifem. I married her when I was feeling vulnerable. I had a lot of upheaval in my life at the time (451).*

Obinze is an honest character, a virtue Adichie is impressing on her audience. When he presents that honest love speech to Ifemelu, there was nothing else to prove his credibility and the vulnerable then. In the bland marriage between Obinze and Kosi, Adichie uses Obinze to denounce Kosi and other women who "are not cast in the role of actors, decision makers and signifiers of meaning . .

. ” (Okereke, 593). Ifemelu on the other “is cast as subject, occupying the centre in creative writing” (Okereke, 596).

## 6. VALUE OF READING

Ifemelu finds reading a profound experience (11, 67, 364, and 417). Obinze’s first gift to her is a book. : “He gave her a copy of *Huckleberry Finn*, the pages creased from his thumbing, and she started reading it on the bus home. . . (67)”. While the author crafts elitist, educated characters, they do not stop reading. The characters read all sorts of texts varying from novels on the evolution of African-American Literature like Jean Toomer’s *Caine* (11), racially skewed magazines like *Essence* (464), or engage in creative writing (417).

## 7. LITERARY STYLE

In *Americanah*, the hair narrative is told back and forth, through series of flash back. The reader works hard to make the plot linear through a rigorous process of suturing to make the story complete (Okereke, “Woman’s Quest for Autonomy, 98”). The story has multiple narrating voices especially Ifemelu, Obinze, Ranyinudo, and Auntie Uju , to harmonize with the numerous settings like the United States of America, Nigeria and The United Kingdom, thus, portraying the author’s concern for globalization. The blog links people across geography making the novel global and contemporary. The author’s language use is flawless and greatly resonate honest details that recall realism. The following description recalls the coarseness of the General’s exterior characteristics:

*The General had yellowish eyes, which suggested to Ifemelu a malnourished child. His solid, thickset body spoke of fights that he had started and won, and the buck-teeth that gaped through his lips made him seem vaguely dangerous. Ifemelu was surprised at the gleeful coarseness of him (79).*

Jealousy, unacknowledged mistresses, contentions among women, meetings of the been-to’s indict pettiness as lived in the human community (397- 450). Journey motif is used to portray restlessness among the migrant characters. The novel opens with the main protagonist waiting for a train at Princeton to go to Mariama African Hair Braiding at Trenton (1-18). Hair foregrounds every theme portrayed in *Americanah*. At Mariama’s salon, Ifemelu describes her hair style to symbolize the end of her stay in the United States of America and her resolve to redefine her life with a job, and Obinze in Nigeria. The plot is woven with fine threads of descriptive competence and honesty as depicted in love-making episodes between Obinze and Ifemelu. The swapping of Igbo proverbs between Ifemelu and Obinze, the use of Igbo names overlap with metaphor of the hair to bring out self-confidence. The hair narrative began on the street in the United States of America but ends in Ifemelu’s flat in Nigeria with the prospect of Ifemelu and

Obinze living out their romance in marriage thus resolving the theme of immigration.

## 8. CONCLUSION

*Americanah* is the honest story of lived experiences. The hair has been used as metaphor for race, self-definition, self-confidence and search for better options. Using journey motif, local colour, Adichie bristles hair narrative with incredible power of description akin to Achebe’s literary model. Let us applaud Adichie’s incredible incursion into human condition by upholding what one of the foremost feminist critics, Virginia Wolf, states about women writers:

*So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters, and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference of some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery (qtd.in Warner, 308).*

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