



Gender Issues of Immigrants: An Analysis of Female Characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This study examines the situation of Nigerian women in America depicted by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* in terms of how they are subjugated and marginalized in their day to day lives. It also investigates the problems and hurdles faced by Nigerian women in their own and American society due to migration and immigration. The study, furthermore, delineates the suppression of the desires and needs of Nigerian women and lays bare how it affects them. By deploying the theoretical paradigm of impression management with an exclusive focus on gender issues, this study highlights how the socio-domestic progress of Nigerian women is impeded in the name of culture and race. Finally, the study reflects on the ability of Nigerian women to convert their miseries into opportunities. It is, therefore, a picture of both their strengths and weaknesses that reveal the potential of these women which the world needs to appreciate. The paper tries to find the true picture of the miserable life of female immigrants with some of the applicable solutions.

Keywords: *Gender Issues, Adichie's Americanah, Problems of Immigrants, Nigerian Women*

Background of the Study

This study aims to highlight the challenges that immigrant characters face in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels *Americanah* (2013) in terms of gender issues. The study focuses on the discussion in *Americanah* that deals with gender issues as well as gender equality. In this novel, Adichie covers almost every aspect of her characters' lives as immigrants and migrants dealing with gender issues. Furthermore, Erving Goffman's theory of Impression Management is used as a theoretical basis for this study as it is a public relation theory (Johansson, 2007). Goffman is a well-known sociologist whose theories are relevant to this research since he discusses living situations, expressions and impressions, front stage and back stage, excuses and justifications, self-enhancement, self-motivation, self-disclosure, and in other dimension of human social attachment.

The word "immigrate" comes from the terms "emigrate" and "migrate." Both of these terms refer to the movement of people/animals from one location/country to another. There is,



however, a minor distinction between them. The words "immigrate" and "emigrate" are grouped under the name "migrate." When it comes to individuals, the term "migrate" usually refers to a permanent move, but it may also refer to a temporary move (Shumsky, 2008). For example, after retiring, the majority of Pakistani bureaucrats move to the United States or Europe. Husain and his family moved to Kuwait after signing a ten-year contract with an oil company. When the term "migrate" is used to describe birds or animals, it typically refers to a temporary or seasonal change of habitat. Thousands of swans, for example, migrate to Pakistan every year during Russia's harsh winters.

The words 'emigrate' and 'immigrate' have somewhat similar meanings. It also refers to an individual who relocates permanently to a foreign country. The main difference is that 'immigrate' means to join a foreign country and begin living there, while 'emigrate' means to leave one's home country and live in another. For example: Ali's family immigrated to Canada. Zawar's uncle emigrated from Pakistan.

Adichie's novel *Americanah* is perhaps her most well-known amongst all her works. It is ranked third among Adichie's novels in terms of chronological order. It instills a sense of Americanization in all immigrants, especially African immigrants. A vein of Nigerianism, on the other hand, flows through several of the novel's pages. It is, indeed, a multifaceted novel, with various critics presenting it from various angles.

Americanah is examined by Tetteh-Batsa (2018) through the prism of Afropolitan feminism. Taiye Selasi (2013) defines Afropolitan or Afropolitanism as "the newest generation of African emigrants who belong to no single geography" in her LIP Magazine essay *Bye-Bye Babar* (2013). She refers to the multilingual Afropolitan community as cultural morons with an American accent, London fashion, and African values who were "bred on African shores then shipped to the West for higher education." Adichie considers this character the main protagonist of the novel, which embraces Adichie's feminism at its finest. *Americanah* depicts the life of a female immigrant in America named Ifemelu as she tries to develop her own African identity. Tetteh-Batsa's understanding of Afropolitan feminism in Adichie's work is strengthened by the presence of a female protagonist of African descent. *Americanah*, in her academic view, portrays Afropolitan feminism as a sovereign bureau for black African women with non-American identities who are constantly subjected to racialized and gendered segregation. In the book, Ifemelu responds to the difference in national exclusion disclosures



and is subjected to racial and gender discrimination. She tries desperately to 'own herself a little more,' but she struggles, and Afropolitanism forces her to return to her homeland. In this report, Tetteh-Batsa clarifies the situation of female African immigrants. She discovers that *Americanah* is full of Afropolitan feminism and wants to prove her point to the best of her ability, but the whole thesis focuses only on female immigrants' issues, ignoring other important issues in the novel.

Onunkwo et al. (2019) look at the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in America and Europe, with a focus on *Americanah*. They generalize on two major challenges confronting Nigerian immigrants in America and the United Kingdom: racial segregation and economic exploitation. Concerning *Americanah*, they examine Ifemelu's blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, which evokes both a contemporary and historical debate about race. This blog simultaneously exposes the past of racism and the realities of America.

African immigrants, as reflected by Adichie in her award-winning novel *Americanah*, are described by James and Omagu (2018) as straddling two stools. They believe that immigrants, especially African immigrants, suffer greatly and are restless in their new surroundings. Cultural shock, racial exploitation, social discrimination, discontentment, and self-realization were the main concerns they had when they first arrived. Adjusting and readjusting, disgruntlement and dissatisfaction, fermentation, and restiveness are all experiences that African immigrants go through. White ethnocentrism prevents them from being at ease. They also suffer from an inferiority complex that prevents them from being satisfied, often after achieving economic success and other milestones in their lives. Return migration occurs in the majority of cases of immigrants. In this regard, Ifemelu, the protagonist in *Americanah*, is a living example. She is a successful blogger, financially secure, and lives a respectable life, but she is never satisfied with her self-realization in America. As a result, she returns to Nigeria and settles in Lagos. She does, however, carry with her the influence of Americanism on her personality, and Adichie is right to refer to her as an 'Americanah.' Ifemelu truly straddles the America-Nigeria divide.

Theoretical Perspective

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, published in the United States in 1959, Erving Goffman (June 1922 – November 1982) proposed the philosophy of Impression



Management (Goffman, 1959). He was a leading figure in the history of contemporary American sociology as a Canadian-American sociologist. Impression Management is a practice that can be done consciously or subconsciously. It is the effort that affects or regulates how others perceive an entity, an individual, or an occurrence. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman discusses the Theory of Impression Management that can be broken down into the following six aspects.

Definition of Situation

There is found immense potential to radicalize sociological thoughts within Goffman's studies based on the established framework of sociological inquiry (Sharrock, 2002). Goffman believes that in all social circumstances, individuals want to convince others to agree with their interpretation of the situation. When someone walks into a car showroom, for example, the dealer tries to define the case by claiming that the visitor is a superior social being who deserves to drive one of the cars in the showroom. The notion of framing the situation is central to the understanding of the situation.

Expression and Impression

Goffman notifies Sign Vehicles. These are, in reality, the mechanisms by which individuals introduce themselves to others. The social environment, appearance, and manner of communicating are the most popular sign vehicles. In this case, personal space should also be taken into account. Simply put, people make impressions by their facial expressions. It is noteworthy to mention that self as a social product mentioned by Goffman are those facets of performance named as sign vehicles, which can be operated in order to generate a wanted self-presentation (Kalinowski, 2009)

Front Stage, Back Stage

Our front, as described by Goffman, manifests our age, hairstyle, sex, clothes, and so on. We generally strive to adjust them to meet the circumstances. Our attire for ceremonies communicates to everyone that we will be attending a wedding or other formal event. Similarly, Goffman calls circumstances in which one approaches her or his comfort zone known as a back stage. After getting rid of a skunk-type passenger, a taxi driver, for example, expresses his contempt for the passenger publicly inside the cab. Actually, the concept of front stage and back stage as mentioned by Goffman is unwontedly described by Picca & Feagin (2020) in their study titled, *Two-faced racism: Whites in the backstage and frontstage*.



Accounts - Excuses and Justifications

Accounts are comments made by individuals in response to unexpected and unwelcomed actions. There are two different categories of accounts that are often used. Excuses are used to avoid taking responsibility. Justifications are used to exonerate the offending conduct. The theory of excuses and justification has been thoroughly brought under discussion by Shaw, Wild and Coloquitt (2003) by saying that everybody gives explanations for her/his dealings with others. Mostly, excuses and justifications are used to hide or unlawfully correct the mistakes.

Self Enhancement and Ingratiation

The attempt to change the situation through flattery, exaggeration, unjustified favors, deception, and so on. To put it another way, it signals an exaggerated self-presentation. Moreover, it also includes a false presentation of oneself to others in order to promote a self-exaggerated social status. In this connection, the surrounding flatterers play a key role to strengthen this deceitful presentation (Tan, 2014).

Self-Awareness, Self-Monitoring, Self-Disclosure

We speak of self-awareness as we turn our attention to ourselves. It's normally done in the privacy of our minds. It is the element of the self whose actions are impenetrable to all. Self-monitoring is the modification of actions due to the situation, and Self-Disclosure is the presentation of self-based on society's awareness of the exhibiting self. When one's attention is fixated on the self is known as self-awareness. The self can be categorized as the private self and the public self. The private self conceals one's attitudes while the public self exposes one's manners and behaviors (Tan, 2014).

Discussion

In *Americanah*, in a Christian and patriarchal culture, Adichie provides the reader with an overview of sexuality. She notes that improvement is possible in terms of how her sexuality is handled and lived by Ifemelu. A new conception of her own identity is accomplished by Ifemelu, riven between Christian orthodoxy and modernity. In many parts of Africa, female sexuality is a particularly important issue. While sexuality is the intimate and confidential realm of a person, for example, in Christianity, the sexuality of a woman has been defined and enforced since Eve's tale. Mostly focused on a patriarchal power system, Christianity also instructs girls and women that their body is a lure to men and that it is their duty to reduce the trajectory of a man to destruction (Adichie, *Feminist*, 2013). Girls are supposed to value their



virginity as the key asset in a 'man's heart' and thus a good marriage since virginity primarily determines a woman's honor. In the case of premarital sexual intercourse, women are typically blamed for abortion and must deal with the effects of pregnancy, which often ostracizes them and decreases their chance of marriage.

In the socialization of Ifemelu, Christianity plays a prime role. Her mother moves from one church to another, and each transition instills one fundamental message within Ifemelu, namely that a woman must properly portray her body. Here, her mother is told by male clergy how to keep her hair and that "jewelry [...] was obscene, unfitting a woman of righteousness" (Adichie, 2013, p. 43). The fact that clergy govern how women can portray their bodies shows how restrictive some of the teachings of Christianity are. However, not only do men decide how women can act, but women also regulate each other and thereby reinforce the functioning of patriarchal social structures. The experience of Ifemelu with the highly influential Sister Ibinabo, a woman regarded as "the saviour of young women," since she taught girls to become less "troubled and troublesome," suggests that there is judgment and disdain among women members of the church (Adichie, 2013, p. 50). Sister Ibinabo specifically belittles a young girl named Christie, infamous for discovering when a girl acted "ungodly," arguing "I saw you wearing tight pants last Saturday [...]. It's all legal but not helpful. Any girl who wears tight pants allows the offense of temptation to be committed. It is best to prevent it" (Adichie, 2013, p.50).

This scene shows how women 'in their place' hold each other. The idea that Sister Ibinabo discusses that on a non-church-related day she saw this girl wearing tight-fitting clothes shows how girls and women are under constant observation. The statement of Sister Ibinabo "[e]verything is permissible but not beneficial" suggests that a "good Christian girl" should follow the law and how to prevent attention from men (ibid.). Therefore, her choice of clothes immediately suggests that she "wanted to commit the crime of temptation" and deceive people. Girls and women can be believed not only to be exposed to the attention of their religious culture but also to be extremely objective and sexually explicit in their bodies. Subsequently, some form of public embarrassment expects them if they overstep boundaries. Since the verbally reprimanded girl Christie is "humble, compassionate [and] carri[es] her guilt" (ibid.) finds out that girls are conditioned to experience shame about their bodies and sexuality, which eventually prevents them from voicing their sexual urges and in their potential sexual



relationships often deprives them of freedom. This scene illustrates how the stigmatization of the patriarchal and misogynistic and racist power system is maintained not only by men but also by women in the church.

The next example reveals Ifemelu's perception of sexuality constitutes a taboo topic and is protected with the "cloak of religion" (Adichie, 2013, p. 50). This is explained by the fact that Aunt Uju "talked to her after her first menstruation cycle, substituting the lecture of her mother that was ample of religious citations about morality but lacked helpful details about nausea and pads" (Adichie, 2013, p. 54). Her mother links the need for "virtue" with this inevitable transition to womanhood. Therefore, instead of supplying her valuable and accurate knowledge on menstruation, postpartum syndrome and, most importantly, contraceptives, she impedes Ifemelu's correspondence and lectures on modesty and how to prevent God's outrage. The fact that the mother of Ifemelu destroys her sanitary pads signifies her subtle hostility to womanhood and sexuality and indicates that menstruation is seen as corrupting and that her intrinsic innocence is offered by the burning of its proof (pads) (Adichie, 2013, p. 41). The "religious guidance" of her mother does not encourage Ifemelu's awareness of her evolving body, but still expects the virginity of her daughter until the wedding. This mindset establishes a space between them, instigating Ifemelu to practice confidentiality. Not only does her aunt subtly supply her with "James Hadley Chase novels covered in newspapers to conceal the near-naked women on the front" (Adichie, 2013, p. 54), but also that her mother is oblivious of her boyfriend, suggests that she has perfected the art of pretense to avoid conflict with her mother (Adichie, 2013, p. 69).

Since the talk of sexuality is condemned by her mother, Aunt Uju becomes the person who also openly admits her love for Obinze. In Ifemelu's training on her sex, she plays a key role and thus tells her to "let him kiss and touch but not put it inside" (Adichie, 2013, p. 54). Even though this advice shows the liberal viewpoint of Aunt Uju on sex, Ifemelu still has an ambiguous definition of sex. It is the mother of Obinze who thoroughly teaches her about her duties and also her privileges. Although in high school, Obinze and Ifemelu have been dating for some time, and his mother wants to invite her, to Ifemelu's surprise. Ifemelu considers it "odd" that his mother is receptive to their relationship (Adichie, 2013, p. 68). This helps Ifemelu to see through the veil of her Christian beliefs and to realize that it is possible to see sex as natural and not immoral and prohibited. The circumstance, which emphasizes this,



happens during another visit when the mother leaves home for a shopping trip. Here, both begin to get close, and the sudden return of the mother surprises both. She instantly detects their act and asks "Ifemelunamma, come please" (Adichie, 2013, p. 72). Ifemelu, who hopes to take the responsibility for their actions, is stunned by the remarks of her mother, "If anything occurs between you and Obinze, you are both accountable." But for women, culture is unjust. An action is performed by two individuals, but one individual takes it all alone if there are any repercussions. You explain that to me?" (ibid).

Ifemelu is met with a response that is not expected of mothers. She is not, to her delight, treated as a pariah who misleads Obinze into temptation. This discussion rather tells her that both she and Obinze are equally responsible for their actions. While the mother of Obinze concerns Ifemelu with the fact of pregnancy and her corresponding obligation, she does not blame her for her mother's "religious guidance." "In the words of Obinze's mother, Ifemelu, who initially feels embarrassed at being found in flagrant, finds comfort, "absence of guilt and "normality" (Adichie, 2013, p. 72) since she explains that abstinence is not seen as a symbol of purity, a value to satisfy God and a potential spouse. Virginity, instead, is often seen as the timeframe in which a woman starts to understand and embrace her own body so that the opposite sex will not take advantage of her. The mother of Obinze meets her with a relatable tale that shows that her conduct is individual, natural, and thus free of remorse.

There is one aspect worthy of review, however. The mother of Obinze provides Ifemelu with awareness of her rights and obligations and still wants her to come to her before she decides to become sexually involved with Obinze. In other words, her discussion with Ifemelu did not provide her with realistic knowledge on abortion and, more specifically, sexually transmitted diseases. It can be concluded that her strategy not only seeks to build a foundation of confidence with Ifemelu and Obinze but also intends to exert control over both and can therefore prevent their sexual activity. However, Ifemelu and Obinze had sex during their university years without informing the mother. Because "she had envisioned his mother observing them, the image thrust itself into her mind [...], Ifemelu interpreted her first time negatively." She knew she could not tell Obinze's mother what had occurred, even though she guaranteed to, and had presumed then that she would" (Adichie, 2013, p. 94). In several Nigerian and African cultures, the post-intercourse sex education Obinze's mothers provide reflects the critique of sex education.



Ifemelu states that the "tone of the mother had changed, becoming authoritarian" (Adichie, 2013, p. 97). Her frequent usage of "should" means that the acts of Ifemelu and Obinze are condemned because they should be mindful of safe sex. Both are criticized for their acts and accused, and the mother should not doubt her negligence. If she had given the above knowledge the first time that Ifemelu and Obinze were close, both of them would have been more equipped. This example is an African story in which a daughter is seated on the floor with her legs extended and twisted. For a longer period of time, the mother chooses to abandon her daughter and demands the daughter to guarantee her that no man should step over her crossed legs. The mother returns to her pregnant daughter a few months later, and when she asks what happened, the daughter tells her that she didn't let any man step over her crossed legs (Unknown). In many African communities, this anecdote illustrates the lack of comprehensive and comprehensive sex education, as sex is often seen as taboo and most often assumed to be performed after marriage. There is no detailed discussion of crucial points such as sexually transmitted infections, leading to uninformed women and men, a disassociation from one's sexuality, unnecessary pregnancy and life-threatening diseases such as AIDS in their unfortunate situations.

While Ifemelu is polarized between her Church's sexually restrictive doctrines, a more progressive stance to sexuality and the lack of extensive and practical knowledge, she still becomes sexually inspired and takes her sexuality into her own hands. This becomes apparent when she meets Obinze for the first time personally. It is generally predicted that men will 'chase' a woman and thus begin sexual contact. Nonetheless, to the shock of Obinze, Ifemelu asks him, "Aren't we going to kiss?" (Adichie, 2013, p. 62). As Obinze argues that he wants her to believe that he is only concerned about her physical characteristics, she continues, "What about what I want?" (ibid.). Ifemelu holds her sexuality into her own hands and does not assert flippancy and expect the actions of a man implicitly. Again, Ifemelu does not comply with the established standards of gender, but rather communicates her fantasies freely and accepts her sexuality. "She is also admired by her boyfriend Obinze when he thinks that "[other girls] may have claimed that they had never let another boy near them, but not her, never her. A vibrant truth about her was there (Adichie, 2013, p. 20). Ifemelu is not repentant for her life and does not deny her sexuality and femininity.



The double existence of Ifemelu between Christian orthodoxy and more liberal yet inadequate response to sexuality reflects Adichie's critique of the church's teachings as well as society. By going toward what is acknowledged and planned, Ifemelu seeks to accept and practice her sexuality and here Adichie emphasizes that progress is achievable and that women should take control of their sexuality. The need for sexuality to be publicly discussed and that woman must not remain in the small closet created by a patriarchal culture and the church is also stressed.

Conclusion

The study deals with gender issues that are primarily related to immigrant female characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. It endorses multiple narratives and themes that are mainly related to African-American women's problems like oppression, sex-role stereotyping, patriarchy, social norms and helplessness underpinning the theoretical paradigm of Impression Management. Adichie's novel informs about the lives of African-American women in American society, as it unveils the hard work and struggle of her female characters in their quest of self-realization. She explains how they undergo severe pain to get autonomy and achieve perseverance. It also shows the injustice and bias against African-American women. Despite the fact that the major part of the novel is set in America, the novel brings forth the problems of women and oppression across various social and religious communities in Nigerian society.

This study thrives on the issues that account for female oppression in Nigerian society. As the plot shows, the protagonist and other female characters are dominated by the men of their family and society. They are puppets in the hands of men, and cannot live a life of their own. The men dare to rape; they beat, exploit, suppress, belittle, cheat and torture women. African-American women also suffer double marginalization. The present study also exhibits whether Adichie's portrayal of Nigerian women in *Americanah* is based on reality, or is merely fictitious. Despite the dominant patriarchal system in Nigeria, Adichie's female characters are strong, brave, and courageous. They dare stand against men, the culture, and the social taboos, and promote women-centrism. Adichie dexterously deals with the husband-wife relationship, and shows the lives of boxed up women whose desires and needs are suppressed before and after marriage. Moreover, female immigrants need to study global mobility literature to ease their selves up to some extent.



To sum up, it is found that female immigrants face gender issues at large because there is lack of strong family support, comparatively low wages and more importantly, they are vulnerable to forced intercourse for male natives. Furthermore, gender issues delineated by Adichie's *Americanah* are realistic in the sense that Adichie herself remained a female immigrant in the United States.

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