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LITERATURE

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Hair as a Form of Resistance in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to establish the hair salon in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) as a microcosm of social interactions, which contributes to the transfigurations of self-representation within postcolonial discourse. The novel's main character, Ifemelu, grows up in the shadow of her mother's hair. When she comes to the United States as a student, she starts to straighten her hair in order to appear professional. The moment of epiphany occurs when her hair starts to fall out and she decides to go from relaxed to natural hair. Her decision to preserve her natural hair is often perceived as a form of resistance to Western standards of beauty. Nevertheless, the perspectives of other women present at the hair salon still remain disentangled, as they expose the gendered, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides that lead to discordant encounters. Hence, for that reason, the novel illustrates the necessity of intersectional analysis. The lengthy process of hair braiding, however, makes it an ideal location for ironing out any discrepancies and achieving a consensus between the female interlocutors who come from various backgrounds within the African ethnography. Drawing on the Bakhtinian concept of *heteroglossia,* Adichie's *Americanah* can be perceived as a form of transgressional writing which offers a broader nexus of polyvocal forms of self-representation.

Keywords: gender; hair; resistance; postcolonialism.

1. Back to the Roots: An Introduction

Black hair has been utilised as both a repressive and uplifting emblem, and Western society's perceptions of Black hair have a significant influence on how Black people are perceived today. Throughout human history, various African cultures have emphasised hair for reasons other than aesthetics. Braids and other elaborate hairstyles were

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traditionally used to indicate marital status, age, religion, affluence, and social position. In fact, there are indigenous African epistemologies that explain the spirituality and cultural significance of African women's hair. For instance, as noted by Alfred Button Ellis, girls among the Akan community signified their eligibility for marriage by embellishing their hair with elaborative accessories: "The hair is covered with gold ornaments, necklets, armlets, anklets of gold and aggry beads encircle her neck" (Ellis 1894, 235). Conversely, grief was often conveyed through dishevelled hair, a departure from their typically well-groomed appearance: "No sooner has the breath left the body than a loud wailing cry bursts forth from the house, and the women rush into the streets with disordered clothes and disheveled hair, uttering the most acute and mournful cries" (Ellis 1894, 237). Hair was also used as a powerful extension of an individual who had passed away; hence, it was often utilised as an essential component of a ritual mask, a protective sculpture, or an amulet which, it was believed, brought good fortune. Additionally, the potential to craft talismans from hair that could harm their rightful owner served as proof of the risk linked to possessing hair that was in the hands of an enemy. Hair also marked a stage of life and a role in society; infants and toddlers may have their heads partially shaved, leaving only small clusters of hair to safeguard the fontanelles on their skulls. Girls either received or crafted dolls "depicting local hairdos; these figures promote their adult responsibilities as mothers" (Siebler and Herreman 2000:56). Thus, the responsibility for hair care was always entrusted to trusted friends or relatives. Furthermore, hair braiding was a major social activity, especially among women. While styling one another's hair, they could socialise, reflect on their own experiences, and strengthen their community bonds.

Given the importance attached to hair in African communities, one of the first things slave traders did to the captives they abducted was to shave their hair during the transatlantic slave trade era (Byrd & Tharps 2014, 10). It was an especially degrading act intended to cut Black people off from their communities. Because of the process known as texturism, indicating that certain hair patterns are superior to others, Black representatives have fallen prey to the good vs. bad hair dichotomy. The texture of an enslaved person's hair was believed to define their worth and working circumstances. As illustrated by Tracy Owens Patton, Black female representatives with lighter skin tones and traits associated with mixed ethnicity, such as wavy or straight hair and White/European facial features, tended to be house slaves, whereas those with darker skin tones, kinky hair, and wider facial features were most likely to work in the plantation fields (Owens Patton 2006, 26).

Accordingly, when free Creole women in the South began wearing their hair in complex hairstyles, many people regarded it as a threat to the existing norms, hence the governor of Louisiana issued the Tignon Law in 1786, which forced Black women to wear "a tignon (scarf or handkerchief) over their hair to signify that they were members of the slave class, regardless of whether they were free or enslaved" (Griffin 2019). In response to these requirements, Black women wore colourful textiles decorated with diamonds, transforming the head wraps into stunning, empowering fashion

statements. Consequently, the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, an offshoot of the civil rights movement, attempted to transform the Black community's perceptions of itself and its effect on society. The natural afro became a popular expression of strength, pride, and resistance, as many people believed that straightening their hair represented a history of forced assimilation and that embracing their natural textures was a method of reclaiming their roots.

2. Curling Back to Self: Ifemelu's Hair Journey

This historical context is crucial in the analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah.* An in-depth analysis of the text shows that the main character's relationship with her hair consists of multiple layers of meaning. If one focuses on Ifemelu's childhood, the narrative unfolds a picture of a girl who was forced to live in the shadow of her mother's "crown of glory" (Adichie 2013, 49). She was raised by an unsupportive and emotionally distant mother. Her mother's fervent religious preoccupation drives her to partake in excessive fasting to divert herself from the harshness of reality. At one point in the novel, Ifemelu recalls the day her mother came home from work, looking completely different, not in the physical sense as such, but more generally in terms of the ambience stemming from her mother's unconventional behaviour. As Ifemelu explains, "her face was flushed, her eyes unfocused" (Adichie 2013: 49), and she orders her daughter to fetch the scissors. The main protagonist observes her mother cutting her hair off and then walking throughout their apartment, gathering all the Catholic paraphernalia, only to set a fire and toss her tresses in, along with the objects of faith, one after another. Ifemelu, aged ten at the time, begins to cry, realising that her mother is no longer the same person, making the bald lady standing by the fire seem like a complete stranger to her. Exclaiming that she is now "saved" (Adichie 2013:50), Ifemelu's mother clarifies: "On Sunday, we will start going to Revival Saints. It is a Bible-believing church and a living church, not like St. Dominic's." (Adichie 2013:50). Following the adducted transition to a different church, Ifemelu notices how her mother undergoes a gradual transformation as she endeavours to conform to the prescribed teachings of her new religious leaders, consequently shifting away from her former self: "But after that afternoon, her God changed. He became exacting. Relaxed hair offended Him. Dancing offended him. [...] Everyone tiptoed around her mother, who had become a stranger, thin and knuckly and severe" (Adichie 2013, 51). Even at such a young age, Ifemelu's critical eye gives her the ability to see through her mother's new church's institutionalised deception. Therefore, Ifemelu's mother, who becomes progressively disconnected from the real world and, as a result, from Ifemelu herself, foregrounds the process of cutting one's hair off as a symbolic devaluation of the self in favour of indoctrinated values.

When Ifemelu comes to the United States, her friend gives her the advice to straighten her hair before a job interview in Baltimore in order to be considered credible,

highlighting the fact that, although no one discusses this issue openly, the appearance of one's hair is crucial in American society. In fact, Black women have made multiple attempts to secure legal backing for their right to wear their hair in its natural state while at work. As illustrated by Sanah Donahoo and Asia D. Smith, there are numerous cases of Black women who were punished by their employers for their attempts to "'wear' their Blackness on their heads" (Donahoo&Smith 2019, 9), although they have not demonstrated any significant changes in the job performance since they started to wear their hair naturally. This makes it evident that their hair is the main factor behind their unwelcome status at work. Although grooming policies prohibiting the display of Black hairstyles in the workplace do not explicitly mention race, the outcomes in court indicate that these policies disproportionately single out and impact Black women.

The adduced conversation between Ifemelu and her friend marks a point in the novel where Ifemelu starts her journey of relaxing her hair to blend in and appear professional, underscoring the discrimination that prevails in American culture, regardless of the consequences, which in Ifemelu's case equate with a sense of bereavement and a keloid behind her ear. The readers learn that Ifemelu "left the salon almost mournfully; while the hair-dresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning of something organic dying which should have not died, had made her feel the sense of loss" (Adichie 2013, 251). Interestingly, hair straighteners have a long history in the United States, dating back to the nineteenth century. Madame C. J. Walker's hair softener, which came with a hair-straightening comb, became popularised in 1905. Straightening one's hair was a method to resist the prevalent 19th century hostility towards Black beauty. Madame Walker's success story is characteristic to the point that her story inspired Netflix's creators to convey it on screen. The first episode of *Self Made*, as is the title of the biographical series, opens up with a voice-over narration introducing the audience to the inherent complexities of Black women's hair: "Hair is beauty. Hair is emotion. Hair is our heritage. Hair tells us where we were going. Hair is power. You can't imagine what it's like to lose it" (Siebler 2021: 25). Although Walker did not invent the hot comb *per se,* her beauty empire not only contributed to increased self-esteem in the Black community, but it also established a new employment market for attendees of her beauty schools. While some individuals praised Walker's entrepreneurial skills, others chastised her for propagating the myth that emulating Western beauty ideals leads to social and economic development. Among the most vociferous critics of hair straightening were figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington (both light-skinned Black men with wavy hair) and Marcus Garvey, the owner of the *Negro World* newspaper who famously claimed: "Don't remove kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain!" (Byrd & Tharps 2014, 38–40).

Nevertheless, in Ifemelu's case, the question of straightening her hair is not about internalising the White beauty aesthetics but a hierarchical American society in which an employee's worth is measured not only by his or her diligence and/or professional skills but by the simple fact that straight hair is synonymous with professionalism. Her behaviour after leaving the salon indicates that she has lost some integral part of her-

self in order to survive in the conditions dictated by the Western system of values, in which the cartographies of her own self become somehow blurred. Although she gives up some of her freedom, she does not lack self-acceptance. Being aware of her social disadvantage, she succumbs to forces that combine institutionalised racial and gender discrimination. As suggested by Cruz-Gutierrez, "the beauty myth does not serve to compensate for Ifemelu's sense of loss, what does work is the sense of social acceptance in being hired, and this overpowers the pain when, two days later, scabs appear on her scalp" (Cruz-Gutierrez 2018:9). Because Ifemelu symbolically loses a part of her identity after relaxing her hair, Adichie's metaphors elicit an association between hair and the self. The moment when Ifemelu's hair begins to fall out marks an unexpected turn in her life when she resolves to switch from relaxed to natural hair. This climactic point of her life's trajectory propels her to participate in online discussions held at HappilyKinkyNappy.com, where the debates are focused on natural hair maintenance, and they provide a modern safe space for women where they share their experiences and support each other, providing a sense of belonging to a community of women who defy the beauty standards imposed by American culture. In fact, some scholars argue that such digital communities echo the therapeutic elements found in group therapy, where the host explicitly communicates the purpose of the space as one focused on healing. According to such statements, these bloggers might serve as potential catalysts for helping to form groups of supporters on their websites by setting up Internet platforms dedicated solely to natural hair care for Black women who advocate chemical-free hair regimens and aim to subvert the cultural paradigms regarding Black hair (Davis, Mbilishaka, & Templeton 2019, 107). In this sense, Black hair might be seen as a point of entry to the shared experiences of Black women. Accordingly, using Black hair as an extension of the Black body, Amani Morrison introduces the idea of "black hair haptics" (Morrison 2018, 82) as a framework for analysing the racial and gender dimensions of everyday public interactions. She argues that Black hair, similar to Black bodies, is performative in nature, prompting people to engage in haptic encounters related to it, many of which are influenced by historical narratives that portray Blackness as devalued, leading to deviations from societal norms of acceptable behaviour, "involving individuals touching or feeling entitled to explanations of their hair" (Morrison 2018, 92). Additionally, Afro-textured hair has consistently undergone scrutiny and careful observation, dating back to slavery, as people have sought still attempt to control its distinct characteristics, specifically the natural curls and coils that set it apart visually: "The unique way in which Afro-textured hair is said to feel, and is imagined to feel, in the hand becomes a part of understanding blackness with hair fiber serving as another surface for objectification" (Cobb 2023, 14). Because this mutual experience of being a Black hair wearer shared via online interactions translates to Ifemelu's enhanced self-esteem, she becomes increasingly active in the political sphere and criticises the repressive impact of racial and gender stereotypes in various social realms. Consequently, her decision to keep her natural hair has been interpreted as a sort of opposition to Western beauty standards.

3. Disentangling Perspectives in the Hair Salon

Notwithstanding the main character's contribution to the global discourse on Black female hair, the perspectives of other women present at Mariama's hair salon still remain disentangled, as this setting exposes the gendered, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides that are responsible for the divergence of perspectives among African women in a race-tensed American society and, in turn, lead to discordant encounters. Adichie does not seem interested in using race or gender as the only analytical instruments to investigate identity and belonging in today's global environment. For example, Ifemelu and Aisha, the hairdresser, have diverse immigrant experiences and go through various processes of marginalisation. Before Ifemelu enters the hair salon, her behaviour indicates a set of prejudices based on class divides. Because her regular hair salon has been closed, she is forced to travel to Trenton, where Mariama's hair salon is located. During her taxi ride, the readers discover that Ifemelu has preconceived ideas about what the salon and the individuals she will meet will look like:

> it would look, she was sure, like all the other African braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders [...] The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism (Adichie 2014, 10–11).

Furthermore, significant differences between Ifemelu and her hairdresser, such as education and economic status, as well as the fact that Ifemelu is from the Anglophone part of Africa and Aisha is from the Francophone part, heighten tensions during their conversations, especially when Aisha's questions about Ifemelu's personal background contradict the main protagonist's restrained demeanour. Ifemelu seems to be taken aback by Aisha's relationships and condemns her desire to marry. She also expresses concern when confronted with Aisha's lack of understanding on how to care for kinky hair. Aisha proposes using a relaxer to cope with the treatment and then mentions that Ifemelu's hair is tough to comb.

One could suggest that Aisha's opinions show that she has assimilated Western aesthetic standards, adopting perspectives that favour people in dominating positions. While her remark might indicate inexperience, it does not imply that she has adopted mainstream notions. Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden suggest that not every woman who uses a hair straightener or wears contacts to modify the colour of her eyes thinks that beauty is fundamentally intrinsic to whiteness. Trying on a new appearance, especially the one commonly associated with Europeans, does not indicate self-hatred, as it is "possible to dye your brown tresses platinum and still love your Blackness"

(Jones & Shorter-Gooden 2003, 178). After all, Aisha's suggestion to use a straightener is motivated by a desire to save time that she might dedicate to other clients in order to earn her keep, as her existence depends on it. Just because she wants to make her job easier does not indicate that she has internalised Western standards of beauty, nor that she wants to impose them on her clients.

At one point in the novel, a woman named Kelsey appears at the salon in order to get her hair braided. Being a white American customer, she admits to her interest in African literature. She explains how everyone recommended *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe to her, but she claims it does not help her comprehend the concept of Africa at all. In a setting where she may learn a lot about modern Africa by interacting with Black female hairdressers and other clients, she chooses to ignore their viewpoints, demonstrating ignorance as well as a lack of empathy. She appears to evaluate the veracity of the reading material on how well they match her assumptions and she views Africa through the lens of a distorted past moulded by a narrow Western perspective. Hence, for that reason, she eulogises *A Bend in the River*, a novel which Ifemelu despises for its main character's desire to be born a European man. For her, the novel unravels the bruised ego of an Indian man born in Africa who felt limited by the colour of his skin. Ifemelu attempts to depict a current Africa beyond this narrative, only to abandon her efforts, realising that there is no prospect of a mutual agreement between the two agents. In Ifemelu's viewpoint, Kelsey is the embodiment of xenophobic tendencies of the American individuals who openly criticise their country but do not want immigrants to do so, as they "[...] expected you to be silent and grateful, and always reminded you of how much better than wherever you had come from America was" (Adichie 2013, 232–233). While the two clients discuss with each other, the staff in the salon remain unnoticed in the background, and their silence emphasises the passivity of the subaltern women. As a result, this encounter "[...] between the tourist, the minority cosmopolitan, and the various migrant laborers exposes how colonial and Eurocentric assumptions persist in daily encounters between people of different cultural and racial backgrounds, which influences how they maneuver space" (Vlahaki 2021,113).

Nevertheless, the encounter between Ifemelu and Aisha suggests that the latter has the ability to manifest her own agency in a plethora of ways. Regardless of her client's negative attitude, Aisha does not fall prey to the pitfalls of Ifemelu's prejudice. Given her location of origin and economic background, Aisha realises that her role will always be reduced to the subaltern position within American society. This acknowledgement keeps her from succumbing to societal expectations. Furthermore, Aisha exhibits skin depigmentation and she does not fit into the tight racist classifications, hence her assertiveness which reveals itself when Aisha publicly critiques American society for its tendency to see things from a particular point of view. When Ifemelu asks, "Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?" Aisha responds: "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that?" (Adichie 2014, 18). Furthermore, her strong reaction to the scene of domestic violence portrayed in the Nigerian film which perpetuates a stereotypical image

of gender relations in Nigeria prompts the hairdresser to create her own self-image by refusing to be put into the general category of the oppressed. In her attempt to change the existing status quo by deconstructing the stereotypical image of gender relations in Nigeria, Aisha weaves her viewpoint into the world and challenges the notion that some thoughts and voices are more important than others. In this context, *Americanah* emphasises Pan-Africanism, an African cultural expression formed to resist prevalent preconceptions that oversimplify the complex continent of Africa and its people.

Some individuals go as far as to scrutinise Adichie's writing through the lens of Afropolitanism. The genealogies of this particular term are commonly credited to Taiye Selasi's essay "Bye-Bye Barbar," in which she generally uses the phrase to describe the Africans who reside outside of Africa and who were typically born outside of the continent. She depicts Afropolitans as the "newest generation of African emigrants [...] not citizens but Africans of the world" (Selasi, 2005). This particular expression was later popularised by Achille Mbembe who maintains that Pan-Africanism relies heavily on racial categories, whereas Afropolitanism does not because it recognises that having African roots does not automatically imply being Black: "Afropolitanism emerges out of that recognition of the multiple origins of those who designate themselves as "African" or as "of African descent" (Mbembe&Balakrishan 2016, 30).

However, the term gradually became a focal point of criticism due to the way it has been defined over the years of ongoing discussions. For instance, Binyavanga Wainaina states his scepticism regarding the legitimacy of Afropolitanism in his plenary lecture entitled "I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan." He labels Afropolitanism as another attempt to commercialise African culture, listing *The Afropolitan* magazine and the online retailer, The Afropolitan Shop, as examples (Bosh Santana 2016, 121). Furthermore, Adichie herself firmly resists identification with Afropolitanism, claiming that is not a recent phenomenon, for historical records demonstrate that several African monarchs sent their children to study in Europe in the past. She asserts that the very mobile generation that her father belonged to has seen multiple waves of re-entrants who started to fluctuate between the continents in the 1960s and continue to do so. Hence, for that reason, she claims: "I am tired of this word. I am African" (Bosh Santana 2016, 122).

In this sense, it is crucial to point out that the rhetoric of Afropolitanism appears to replicate the already existing ideas embodied in such terms as Pan-Africanism or the African diaspora which operate on a global scale. As Paul Timbaye Zelaza illustrates, the latter displays the characteristics that are "shared across the boundaries of time and space that frame 'indigenous' identities in the contested and constructed locations of 'there' and 'here' and the passages and points in between" (Zelaza 2005, 41). These particular features are what constitute an intrinsic part of *Americanah*, which traces the experiences of various characters who come from different backgrounds within the African ethnography.

As the narrative shifts between numerous urban places, the novel reveals how the African immigrant experience varies across the globe. In one of the interviews, Adi-

chie elucidates that, for her, coming to the United States meant not only discovering that she was Black but also the various ways of being Black. As a consequence of this process, she wanted to explore the notion of Africa as embedded in the beauty salon. She admits that there is a link between Ifemelu and the Senegalese and the women from Mali but there is also a divide which leads to multiple tensions throughout their encounter, hence, that is why, she wants to "[...] explore that stew of layers" (Werman, 2013). Thus, drawing on the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia*, Americanah* can be perceived as a form of transgressional writing which offers a broader nexus of various forms of self-representation, as it is built from a variety of individual perspectives and voices that are integrated into an organised aesthetic system that arranges diversity in a specific manner.

In the case of Ifemelu and Aisha, the lengthy process of braiding hair makes Mariama's hair salon an ideal location for ironing out any discrepancies and achieving a social equilibrium between the female interlocutors who come from various backgrounds within the African ethnography. According to bell hooks, the beauty salon in the African context equates with "consciousness raising" (hooks [1988] 2001, 112) in a space where Black women share their life stories. Such an assumption is also confirmed by the main hair salon depicted in Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me,* where the main protagonist, Yejide, says:

> My salon held the warmth of several women, Women who sat in the cushioned chairs and submitted themselves to the mercies and ministries of the wooden comb, the hooded hairdryer, to my hands and the hands of the stylists I was training. Women who quietly read a book, women who called me 'my dear sister', women who made loud jokes that still had me laughing days later. I loved the place – the combs, the curlers and the mirrors on every wall (Adebayo [2018] 2021, 32).

Thus, in an African socio-cultural framework, the space of a hair salon might be perceived as a spiritual refuge where women might be comforted and temporarily forget about their existential challenges. Such a perspective of the hairdressing facility as an intersection of individual women's perspectives interwoven with the bonding process matches the hair salon depicted in *Americanah* as well. For it is during the process of styling Ifemelu's hair that she learns more about Aisha's struggles with the bureaucratic system that prevented her from attending her father's funeral and the illness of her mother to which Aisha sends the money she earns. Although Ifemelu initially decides that she does not like Aisha and wishes to reduce the conversation to what was necessary during the six-hour period (Adichie 2014, 19), one might notice the gradual change in her attitude with the progression of the narrative. Consequently, the readers learn that "Suddenly, Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in this place, a gossamered sense of kinship grew [...] and in this new bond, she saw yet another augury of her return home" (Adichie 2014, 450–451).

4. Conclusions

Adichie challenges the monolithic representations of the Black community in the United States by inserting a multiplicity of voices inside the novel's framework, while emphasising the fact that, despite their differences in Black experiences, they are still able to find common ground using hair as a point of entry to straighten out their disagreements. Shifting multiple points of view in the setting of a hair salon, she accentuates how one's tresses are inextricably linked to the self. By moving the issue of hair from a parenthetical position to the centre of her own dialectics, she has paved the way for the writers to explore this territory in their own novels such as Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (Emezi 2018, 66–67), and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (Evaristo [2019] 2020, 427). Thus, the hair salon depicted in *Americanah* might be perceived as a microcosm of social interactions with tangled interconnections which contribute to the creation of multiple transfigurations of self-representation within postcolonial discourse.

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