



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale
in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali

Ordinamento ex D.M. 270/2004

Tesi di Laurea

***Americanah* or Various Observations
About Gender, Sexuality and Migration.**

A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Anno Accademico 2016/2017

**AMERICANAH OR VARIOUS OBSERVATIONS ABOUT GENDER,
SEXUALITY AND MIGRATION.**

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1. INTRODUCTION: GENDER GETS POP. THE ADICHIE EFFECT

1.1 From De Beauvoir to Beyoncé: a New Approach to Gender

The debate around gender issues has today assumed a central relevance not just in the academic field but also in popular culture: examples such as Dellal's 2015 movie *Three Generations* and the hit "Flawless" by Beyoncé make clear how the perception of identity in its link with biological sex and race has become a crucial and thoroughly discussed artistic topic. Moreover, they sum up the complex development of the concept of gender itself, by proving not just how this is still negotiated today, but also how it has significantly changed in less than a century, that is, from 1949 pivotal treatise *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir.

Starting from the French intellectual, in fact, the conceptualizations of gender and sex gained relevance and a new connotation: deeply influenced by the existentialist philosophy, de Beauvoir tackled for the first time the question of the relationship between identity and biological sex by highlighting the issue of what it meant to be a woman and implying that this was not as clear-cut and given as it had been suggested by the patriarchal schemata (Tolan, 2006:321), but a far more multifaceted process of negotiation and different instances. As a consequence, the nature and performance of femininity became the object of enquiry of a new critical feminist wave, which established a new approach to several disciplines such as psychoanalysis (see, for instance, Mitchell's 1974 *Psychoanalysis and feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing, and women* and Irigaray's 1977 *This Sex Which is Not One*) and critical theory (which saw the creation of masterpieces such as Greer's 1970 *The Female Eunuch* and Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble*).

Despite the initial enthusiasm in applying the new feminist discourse to different fields, however, gender studies' forerunners were mainly concerned with the analysis of

white female oppression (Ellena 2010:128), thus ignoring the issue of femininity in its link with racism and colonization within postcolonial frames: as a consequence, this initial narrow perspective has been largely criticized, in particular by scholars such as bell hooks in *Ain't a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and Mohanty (1984), who denounced the so-called 'white feminism' and led to a new development of the field with the aim to include also women from "Third World" into the feminist discourse. In particular, this "postcolonial" feminist wave has significantly re-shaped the approach to literature: on the one hand, female writers such as Maryse Condé and Alice Walker gained relevance and conveyed through their works different and previously ignored literary subjects; on the other hand, literary criticism started to embrace black feminism in its approach to literature, giving birth to linchpins such as Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Today, the interest of feminist academic research has established a wider approach by including a postcolonial perspective that considers the social, cultural and political implications of black femininity and sexuality (Davies 1994; Henderson 2010; Katrak 2006)

Due to these new perspectives on gender issues, the analysis of male identity and masculinity has gained importance as well among scholars with the establishment of the so-called Men's Studies. In doing so, their main intellectuals (such as Michael Scott Kimmel, co-editor of *Men & Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia* and Michael Connell) aimed not just to draw the attention to and define all the issues related to masculinity, but even to support gender equality and debunk stereotypes by fostering a new and fairer conceptualization of manliness. Despite the initial white-centric and monolithic approach to masculinity, men's studies have today embraced the analysis and study even of different masculinities in relation to "race" issues, thus resembling the development of feminist discourse and finally giving voice to long demonized or ignored aspects of manliness.

It can be said, therefore, that the academic research offers today a complete overview of all the issues related to gender and sexualities; moreover, through their peculiar multidisciplinary approach, gender studies have both significantly contributed to the development of pre-existing disciplines and laid the groundwork for the creation of new subfields of enquiry, such as Queer Studies and 'Feminist Critical Race Studies' (Varma 2006). Interestingly enough, even though gender issues have been thoroughly

discussed in academic research, these prove to still lead to fruitful debates and further understandings of the different ideas of masculinities, femininities and sexualities (partially because of their constantly muting and negotiating natures), thus offering a meaningful and challenging perspective on today's conceptualizations of these matters. This holds true especially for the study of popular culture since, as Nickianne Moody puts it, this latter "provides a valuable area for those who hope to understand social change" (2006:172): in this sense, the study of popular artistic products plays a crucial role in mirroring the different ways in which both gender and sexualities are performed and perceived within certain cultural and social frames (ibid).

In this view, the academic debate around the iconic popstar Beyoncé is thus not surprising, since the singer offers an interesting case study on the relationship between race and sexuality in pop music, as Adrienne Trier- Bieniek's *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism* (2016) aims to prove. In particular, the above-mentioned hit 'Flawless' is worth mentioning since it constitutes a relevant and peculiar starting point to the current research. In the song (along with its video) Beyoncé breaks down some of the stereotypes linked to women and reverses some "musical" gender representations by adopting a harsh vocal technique and broken, aggressive movements while dancing. In particular, the lyrics' schema is interesting, since Beyoncé's vocal line is at one point interrupted by an extract from the well-acclaimed TEDx talk delivered by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which conveys the core message of the song:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls "You can have ambition but not too much, you should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man." [...] Because I am female I am expected to aspire to marriage I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same? [...] We raise girls to each other as competitors not for jobs or for accomplishments which I think can be a good thing but for the attention of men. we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. [...] feminist: the person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.

(Adichie 2014: 27-34)

Beyoncé's hit thus proves how today feminist discourse is a relevant topic embedded both in literature and popular culture and suggests how these are intertwined in Adichie's case: her 'pop' *formula* constitutes, therefore, a worth-analysing phenomenon.

1.2 Rethinking Feminism: the 'Happy African Feminist' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Among the several contemporary writers who deal with the representation of gender within a postcolonial frame, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stands out as one of the most outspoken and popular figures. The Nigerian writer initially gained popularity with her first successful Nigeria-based novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), followed by *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) but became an iconic figure when in 2012 she delivered the 'TEDx talk' entitled "We Should All Be Feminists". This went immediately viral, also thanks to the above-mentioned Beyoncé's hit and when the *motto* 'We Should All Be Feminists' subsequently featured on T-shirts in Maria Grazia Chiuri's debut Dior show (Yotka 2016); furthermore, its adaptation into essay is today a well-acclaimed feminist *manifesto*, which has been chosen by the Swedish Women's Lobby as one of the books that every 16-years-old girl of the country receives in order to foster gender equality (Flood, 2015).

Along with her successful writing career, the Nigerian writer thus bravely combines her interest in gender issues with fashion – she even posed for the cult magazine *Vogue* in 2016, for the 'Boots No7 Make up' campaign (Niven 2016) – openly debunking the dichotomy 'feminism/fashion', which is one of first issues discussed in her above-mentioned essay. In its opening, in fact, she immediately defines herself as a "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men" (2014:10), tackling thus the issue of misleading stereotypes linked to feminism especially in the Nigerian culture. In this well-acclaimed talk, the author additionally stresses the negative aspects

of gender-based social impositions and roles, arguing that these still hold true and limit the personal freedom; in doing so, Adichie's feminist perspective proves to be not just multicultural (due to the several references both to her Nigerian and American personal experiences) but also complete since she addresses even men in her discourse, by underling how these are negatively afflicted as well by stereotyped representations of masculinity and somehow forced to perform a very narrow male identity (2014:26). Furthermore, Adichie includes men in the definition of feminist, by claiming that a feminist is «a man or a woman who says, “Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix, we must do better” » (2014:48).

Apart from *We Should All Be Feminists*, the representation of masculinity and femininity plays a crucial role in Adichie's whole narrative, which has subsequently become object of enquiry in feminist literary criticism: in particular, her two first novels have been thoroughly discussed by scholars such as Stobie, who has analysed the issue of gendered bodies in the patriarchal frame of *Purple Hibiscus* (2012). However, still little importance has been given to the analysis of a quite recent novel published in 2013: *Americanah*.

1.3 A Novel of Gender: *Americanah*

Adichie's diasporic novel *Americanah*, published in 2013, signs a significant shift from the two previous 'African' novels: in fact, as its very title suggests, the story presents a different main setting from Nigerian-based *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, that is, The United States. Moreover, its narrative structure is quite complex since it is based on numerous analepses, shifting of settings and focalizations: by adopting a third-person narrating voice, Adichie namely manages to easily shift from one point of view to another, offering thus more than one distinct perspective and giving voice both to female and male characters in the different cultural and social *scenarios* by them experienced.

The story follows the vicissitudes of a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who leaves Nigeria to attend university in the US and faces numerous issues in starting a new life

and career in the new country before becoming a successful blogger; in doing so, the narrator fully reports her love and sexual life, which she constantly critically observes often denouncing racist and sexist episodes. Along with the description of her present story and Nigerian past, the narrating voice reports also the story of her previous Nigerian boyfriend Obinze, who experiences similar difficulties in leaving Nigeria to look for better career opportunities in the UK after Ifemelu's departure; in doing so, the narrating voice puts the emphasis on Obinze's migrant experience and subsequent return to Nigeria, when he becomes a successful business man and starts a family with another woman. Both the main characters, although with different timings, thus end up going back to Nigeria and finally meet again after a long separation to become lovers again.

As it can be easily grasped, the theme of identity is at the basis of the story: Adichie traces the process of self-knowledge and construction bearing in mind the transnational and postcolonial frame in which both the protagonists are embedded. In this process, the narration interestingly draws the attention in particular to the ways in which the protagonists both perceive and perform either femininity or masculinity, often critically thinking about gender stereotypes and reacting to them in the different cultures they experience. This holds true in particular for Ifemelu, being her the main protagonist within *Americanah*: the narrator namely focuses on her constant negotiation of her racial and gender identity in the USA and Nigeria, presenting in detail her sexual life both in her adolescence and adulthood and how she performs her femininity reversing stereotyped conceptualizations of women. Additionally, Ifemelu's perception of her body is a crucial topic presented in the novel: the protagonist often reflects on her appearance both in the lights of the different cultures she experiences and, above all, the men she loves, proving how the black female body is still a site of contestation and negotiation of racial, social and cultural issues. However, the attention given to Obinze is equally significant: the narrating voice namely tackles several aspects of masculinity often silenced or demonized, such as the feelings that men are usually not allowed to experience because related to the feminine sphere, a more positive approach to femininity and affectivity and the pressure and negative outcomes of gender-based social impositions on men.

Therefore, *Americanah* can be defined as a modern novel of manners, or, more precisely, ‘of gender’, in which the protagonists thoroughly address and resist the expectations related to culturally-bounded conceptions of both black femininity and black masculinity, proving how these are still misleadingly conceptualized and often silenced.

1.4 Writing *Black Gender back*: Aim and Method of the Current Work

Due to the complete perspective given by the presence of both a female and a male focalizer and of different socio-cultural environments in which the protagonists negotiate their identities, *Americanah* offers an interesting case study on black femininity and masculinity in their links with sexuality, “race” and migration. The little attention given by the academic research to the gender issues discussed in the novel appears in a way surprising: the previous studies of the novel have in fact mainly focused on the role of blogging within the narrative structure (Guarracino 2014), the diasporic feature of the plot (Arabian and Rahiminezhad 2015) and its resemblances to the *Bildungsroman* (Reuter 2015). However, the novel bears a more multifaceted and crucial significance since, by tackling gender and “race” issues and creating in her work “complex identities and interrelated, if not overlapping, spaces” as Lionnet would have it (1995:7), Adichie offers a significant understanding of the dialectic of pre-existing stereotyped images of black gender and a more inclusive and fairer conceptualization of these. Additionally, the novel gains relevance if we bear in mind Adichie’s recent success both as a writer and public figure, which makes of *Americanah* a popular product that yet conveys crucial topics discussed mainly on an academic level. The reasons of the lack of academic interest in *Americanah* may lie in the very nature of the novel, the plot being quite linear and “pop” and based on a romantic love story; this aspect, however, may be considered on the contrary positive, since it makes complex gender and “racial” issues more accessible and visible to common readers.

The aim of the current work is thus to fill this gap and discuss how the representation and performance of gender, sexuality and race works in *Americanah*, in

order to understand whether and how this fosters a new contribution to a fairer re-conceptualization of these issues. Each of the two main protagonists will be separately considered both in their adolescence and adulthood by studying the main narrative passages in which s/he is the main focalizer and thus personally relates to the above-mentioned matters. In particular, these will be discussed in relation to the Nigerian, British and American contexts experienced by Obinze and Ifemelu, to highlight how migration re-shapes masculinity and femininity and sheds a light on the political and social implications of “Africanness”. In conclusion, the different analyses will be compared and discussed in the light of Adichie’s feminist manifestos *We should all be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, with the aim to understand whether *Americanah* actually mirrors the issues raised by the author in her essays.

The method adopted will follow the recent wider and interdisciplinary development of feminist criticism and gender studies, that is, it will include not just a strict literary and stylistic perspective, but also a postcolonial, psychoanalytic and linguistic approach, in order to grasp and contextualize all the items that may offer a meaningful contribution in the study of Ifemelu and Obinze; additionally, a crucial role will be played by socio-anthropological findings when discussing the migrant experience of the two protagonists. A preliminary remark must be made: being the research on gender and sexuality in the Nigerian context and in its related migrant experiences still little conducted, few studies that specifically tackle these issues have been found (particularly if compared to the numerous ones conducted on African American population); however, the findings on sexual education and perception of sex among youngsters in Nigeria will play a fundamental role in the analysis of Ifemelu’s sexuality as an adolescent.

In her Hips, There’s Revolution, focuses on the female protagonist of *Americanah* to highlight how she relates to and negotiate her femininity within the novel; being Ifemelu’s perspective predominant within the narration, this first section consequently occurs to be more substantial than Obinze’s. The main aspects of her femininity (namely the relationship with her body, sexuality and love life and her subverting gender expectations) will be presented in the frame of her migrant experience, to stress how she reacts to and is inevitably influenced by the American and

Nigerian cultures in performing her sexuality and gender. In doing so, the different social and political implications of her being an African woman will be considered by stressing in particular how the protagonist becomes aware of the “racial” aspect of her femininity in the USA.

The second section *The Black is A Man* discusses how Obinze contributes to foster a new and fairer representation of black masculinity, this being still little presented in contemporary literature. The male protagonist will be studied in the lights of the above-mentioned men’s studies’ approach: in particular, attention will be paid to his attitude towards sexuality, gender-based social impositions and femininity, to prove how he critically considers and debunks stereotyped representations of black masculinity. Additionally, his migrant experience in the UK will play a crucial role in understanding how illegal immigration afflicts masculinity and how the protagonist denounces negative attitudes towards black immigrants in the country.

The analyses of the two main protagonists will include also the study of the approach to gender and sexual issues of Ifemelu’s mother, Auntie Uju, Obinze’s mother and Obinze’s wife Kosi, to understand how these characters play a meaningful role in influencing and shaping the femininity and masculinity of Ifemelu and Obinze. Furthermore, the generational comparison will aim to highlight social and cultural changes within postcolonial Nigerian culture, in particular in its conceptualization of gender roles and social expectations.

IN HER HIPS, THERE'S REVOLUTION:
IFEMELU

IN HER HIPS THERE'S REVOLUTION: IFEMELU

The happy marriage of feminism to African and postcolonial studies has led to a significant new approach even in literary criticism, which has started to embody in its corpus also the analysis of literary representations of women facing gender issues in a postcolonial frame. In particular, the black female sexuality and corporeality have gained a new relevance, since misleading conceptualizations of black femininity have been discussed and denounced by intellectuals (see, for instance, bell hooks 1981; Brown 2011; Katrak 2006).

In this frame, *Americanah* offers a meaningful contribution by portraying a young Nigerian woman facing several gender-related issues and reacting to stereotypical perceptions of femininity both in her homeland and in her migrant experience in the USA. The aim of this section is thus to offer an analysis of Ifemelu's way of perceiving and performing her black femininity, to better understand how the novel contributes to a new conceptualization of femininity and draws the attention to numerous gender and race injustices.

Chapter two discusses the relationship of Ifemelu with her body both in her adolescence in Nigeria and adulthood during and after her migrant experience in the USA, to understand how she experiences different and conflicting standards of beauty and how these significantly reshape her perception and definition of the female body.

Chapter three studies the protagonist's sexual life, presenting initially the unfair sexual education imposed on young women in Nigeria and how this defines Ifemelu's first sexual experiences; subsequently, the study of her adult sexuality will be presented by focusing on her most important sexual partners and on the ways in which the protagonist experiences sex and either judges or submits to her lovers' sexual behaviour.

Chapter four presents the love life of the protagonist in relation to feminist debate on relationships and marriage: the love life of Aunt Uju will be initially

presented in order to understand whether and how this influences Ifemelu in her adult love life. Subsequently, her relationships with Obinze, Curt and Blaine will be studied to highlight her approach towards her partners.

Chapter five considers the ways in which Ifemelu does not resemble prototypical representations of femininity and reverses gender expectations: her strong-minded and loud personality will be described both in her adolescence and adulthood and how this is misperceived, in particular in the Nigerian environment. In conclusion, the ambiguous attitude towards marriage will be taken into account, to stress how the protagonist rejects it and yet is influenced by the social norms that impose marriage to women.

2. HAPPILY KINKY: NEGOTIATING STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

2.1 Body Matters: *Americanah* and the ‘Hybrid’ Postcolonial Body

“The body is not, for all its corporeality, an originating point, not yet a terminus: it’s a result or an effect.”

Starting from Michael Foucault and Nobeert Elias, the conceptualization of the body has gained a new critical perspective aimed to consider its cultural and political implications (Schleibinger 2000:1): additionally, this began to be perceived not as a static but rather as a dynamic entity deeply embedded in a cause-effect mechanism, as the above remark by Denise Riley exemplifies (1999:221). As a consequence of this new approach to corporeality, the body has become a crucial topic in the feminist and postcolonial discourses, firstly due to the meaningful cultural and political implications in perceiving (as much as negotiating) corporeality and beauty in their link with “race” matters: in particular, this perspective has been further enlarged by several writers who have made of the black body a *leitmotif* that engages the readers in a challenging deciphering and reconceptualization of the social implications of the body (Brown 2012:3).

A good starting point in the understanding of postcolonial body can be offered by the concepts of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’ proposed by the Indian theorist Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), in which the author drew the attention to the peculiarity of postcolonial discourse by stressing its hybrid and ambivalent features. As a consequence of the encounter of different cultures in the postcolonial experience, Bhabha claims that a third individual instance is created which bears the complexity and ambiguities of the different cultures melded together: this dynamic perspective thus challenges the previous simplistic and monolithic concept of culture and holds true as well in the analysis of the construction and negotiation of beauty standards of postcolonial bodies. What happens, in fact, to a body when this is shaped by a specific

environment and subsequently forced to experience a different cultural frame that puts in doubt not just its aesthetical value but, in a way, even its epistemic and ontological essence?

In this view, the diasporic experience of Ifemelu described in *Americanah* may provide an answer by offering a worth-considering example of postcolonial corporeality in relation to femininity: in the novel, in fact, the body becomes not just the site of a meditation upon culture, gender and racial perception of beauty, but also an essential component in the performance of femininity in different social contexts. The narrating voice in fact thoroughly describes and reports Ifemelu's beauty routine, observations on issues related to the body and, above all, her struggle in perceiving her appearance and negotiating it both in her adolescence and adulthood. The protagonist often stops in front of the mirror trying to understand her physical appearance, especially when this is commented by strangers: it is thus not a chance that the novel opens with episodes such as Ifemelu going to Trenton to braid her hair or looking critically at herself in the mirror to see whether she is really fat as a man told her at the supermarket (Adichie 2013:6). Additionally, Ifemelu's self-awareness and acceptance are further complicated by her migrant experience: the beauty standards that Ifemelu assumes during her adolescence in Nigeria are immediately challenged as soon as she arrives in America; however, even the American beauty standards that she has learned and unconsciously adopted are subverted when she comes back in Nigeria.

Americanah thus suggests how standards of beauty are particularly embedded in the different social and cultural frames that the protagonist faces and constantly analyses: this web of contrasting views of the body puts in doubt the pre-existing corporeal perception and judgement of the protagonist, consequently challenging her self-awareness. The relevance of standards of beauty must not be disregarded, since they play a crucial role both in the physical and psychological development: as Andrea Dworkin states,

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. They define precisely the dimension of her physical

freedom. And, of course, the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility and creative potential is an umbilical one.

(1974: 113)

It is thus worth starting the current research with a thorough analysis of how Ifemelu deals with the perception of her body and, more generally, female beauty both in Nigeria and America, to better delineate the different representations and perceptions of femininity in their social dimensions. Firstly, the role of hair in the novel is discussed by underling the different social and aesthetical values it assumes in Ifemelu's experience; secondly the issue of body size both in Nigerian and American culture is considered to understand Ifemelu's reaction and negotiation of different standards of beauty; in conclusion the role of race in the perception of beauty and individuality that Ifemelu's witnesses in America is presented in relation to mainstream Western-centric representations of the female body.

In particular, this chapter aims to understand whether Ifemelu's postcolonial experience leads to the creation of a third 'corporeal' space rather than a simple negotiation of the two different cultures she assimilates; moreover, the analysis of Ifemelu's constant observation of bodies in her adolescence and adulthood will offer a preliminary contribute in understanding both her agency and reactionary attitude towards gender and racial stereotypes, as it will be later discussed.

2.2 Girl, You've Got the White-Girl Swing!: a Kinky Odyssey

Americanah opens with a rather ordinary scene that might be at first seen even as superfluous, that is, a girl who wants to get her hair done. However, if the girl in question is African and is forced to take a train to braid her hair because in her American city no hairstylist can deal with kinky hair, this episode can assume a quite different and powerful meaning. The issue of African hair is a recurrent and worth-considering element in the novel and functions as a cue of the development of Ifemelu's perception of beauty and, above all, of its social and racial implication: in the case of the

protagonist, hair namely highlights the complex identity politics in their relation to race, gender, sexuality and beauty, to put it in Ingrid Banks' terms (2000:13-14). In doing so, moreover, *Americanah* mirrors on a fictional level the academic interest in the politics of African hair, which have been widely discussed by scholars such as Banks (2000) Keith and Herring (1991) and Lake (2003).

At the beginning of the novel, namely when she is an adult and successful blogger in the US, Ifemelu shows self-confidence and resolution in choosing her hairstyle at the hairdresser, since she firmly chooses the braid colour and reacts to the disapproval of the hairstylist for not using the relaxer by claiming "I love my hair the way God made it" (Adichie 2013:12). This initial self-esteem is nothing but the result of an extremely complex process of negotiation of culturally-bounded standards of beauty, which the reader gets to know in the narration: as it becomes clear later in the novel, in fact, Ifemelu constantly restyles her hair according to the different situations she must face, trying to understand the social and cultural implications of hair which were initially unknown to her.

Interestingly enough, in her Nigerian adolescence hair does not have a political or social connotation but is rather a crucial element both in the shaping of her self-esteem and awareness and at the basis of the relationship between the protagonist and the women of her family. As a young girl, Ifemelu both observes the hair care and beauty of her mother and aunt and critically interprets it; in particular, the first comparison with her mother in terms of beauty is crucial since it influences the future relationship of Ifemelu with her body, mirroring thus the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in shaping the self-esteem and understanding of the body of the adolescent discussed by Douglass (2005) and Ogle and Damhorst (2004).

The first beauty standard that Ifemelu gets to know is not just structured upon the maternal figure, but remarkably focused on a singular part of her body:

Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair. It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the saloon, 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

(Adichie 2014:41)

In the further description of her mother's hair, the narrating voice adopts several linguistic items related to the semantic sphere of royalty and devotion, such as 'crown', 'glory', 'reverently' and 'objects of faith' (ibid.), stressing thus the point of view of strangers and, above all, of the protagonist. As a consequence, the observation of her mother's hair assumes the shape of an effective devotion and challenge, in which the protagonist is not just defeated but also led not to accept the shape of her hair: as a child, in fact, "Ifemelu would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate the coils will it to become like her mother's, but it remained bristly and grew reluctantly; braiders said it cut them like a knife" (ibid.). This Lacanian scene shows the young protagonist not just trying to imitate her beauty goal, that is, her mother (who is constantly glorified in a *quasi*-universal way), but also realizing her own (rather different) type of hair, which does not fit her expectation and familiar beauty standard.

Interestingly enough, her mother's hair stands out as a symbol of beauty and femininity which, as soon as she joins a radical Catholic group, is perceived as offensive and evil and thus carefully removed. As a consequence of her mother's decision to cut her hair, Ifemelu seems not to recognise her anymore and to lose her object of desire: she senses a far more complex change in her mother's identity and personality, who now avoids femininity because linked to sin, as professed by the God she believes in. The narrating voice reports a list of actions strictly linked to femininity which are considered now sinful: "Relaxed hair offended Him. Dancing offended him" (Adichie 2013:42). This passage is crucial in starting to understand Ifemelu's attitude: the narrator here seems to quote Ifemelu's mother statements but somehow filters them through the perspective of the protagonist who, regarding these as false, reports them ironically in what Sperber and Wilson would define as "echoic irony" (1981:303). This initial point thus sheds a light on Ifemelu's agency and critical attitude towards pre-imposed and misleading beliefs, especially when these relate to and demonize femininity.

Along with her mother, Aunt Uju plays a significant role as well in shaping Ifemelu's view of her hair, since she involves her in her hair routine before she meets her lover, the General (Adichie 2013:81). Remarkably, her aunt asks Ifemelu to help her to trim her hair down since "it disturbs him"(ibid.): hence she changes her hairstyle according to her lover's taste. Ifemelu closely witnesses the adult woman's attitude and

reacts to a more general submission of her to the man she loves, proving therefore to be aware and critical of Aunt Uju's malleability.

Apart from these episodes related to her mother and aunt, Ifemelu's hair routine as an adolescent in Nigeria is not particularly foreground in the narration; however, this is said to drastically change both in practical and symbolical terms when she moves to the US, since she must face different beauty politics. First of all, the protagonist experiences a shift of the prices of hair care: as Aunt Uju warns Ifemelu before leaving Nigeria, in the US "it is very expensive to make hair" (Adichie 2013: 100). The young woman has thus to reschedule her hair habits, since they seem to be incompatible with the American society:

Since she came to America, she had always braided her hair with long extensions, always alarmed at how much it cost. She wore each style for three months, even four months, until her scalp itched unbearably and the braids sprouted fuzzily from a bed of new growth.

(Adichie 2013:203)

However, what strikes most Ifemelu is the social and racial implications of the different hairstyles, which were previously invisible to her in Nigeria. The politics of African hair in the US have been thoroughly debated by several intellectuals such as Wendy Cooper who stressed how hair in the American environment is an "easily controlled variable that can denote status, set fashion, or serve as a badge" (1971:7): as the author remarks, hair is additionally one of the most important physical feature in racial classification, further proving its political (and often racist) implications. This socio-political emphasis on hair thus comes to Ifemelu as a surprise and a first cultural shock. When chosen for a job interview, Aunt Uju's first concern is with her hair, which cannot be braided if she wants to get the job (Adichie 2013:119): Ifemelu is significantly surprised by her remark and criticizes her aunt for her decision, yet she follows the same 'relaxer-ritual' before getting interviewed, understanding thus the social mechanism at the basis of American beauty standards. Additionally, this episode sums the powerful significance that hair bears for the black community and its history: as Maxine Leeds Craig suggests (2002:13), the various steps of black women's struggle were symbolically mirrored by

different hairstyles. When struggling to obtain equality and social justice, black women proudly supported black beauty by sporting Afros; however, they subsequently returned to straightened hair, thus embracing a Western standard of beauty. Remarkably, Craig describes the consequent attitude towards hairstyle among black women by underlying how straightened hair was at the basis of every young black woman's routine, since it was taught them that kinky hair "couldn't be shown" (2002:122): therefore, even in the African American negotiation of hair style, natural or short hair became increasingly considered as unkempt. (ibid.). In this view, *Americanah* further develops Craig's idea and makes clear how hair gives the (black) owner a certain social connotation, suggesting even its attitude and personality and becoming thus relevant in the job interview.

Even though she senses the ambiguous and meaningful implications of this decision, Ifemelu surrenders and submits to the American hair politics by relaxing her hair. As a consequence, all her certainties regarding her femininity and beauty are broken down and she is led to a sort of estrangement, which is visible also to strangers: the hairstylist tries in fact to reassure her and make her comfortable with her new look by saying "But look how pretty it is. Wow girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" (Adichie 2013: 203). The woman thus implicitly associates white-female hair with the ideal of hair type that every woman should aspire to sport, mirroring the misleading perception of several black communities that, in adopting 'white' standards of beauty comes to regard positively straighten hair texture and to define nappy hair as "bad" (Banks 2000:13; Lake 2003: 86). This change in Ifemelu's hairstyle, however, shocks in particular her American boyfriend Curt, who does not understand why she did not have her hair done natural or braided as usual. The conversation between the couple is relevant since it highlights the different perceptions of cultural implications of hairstyles and, in particular, his unawareness of the mechanisms at the basis of American society: as Ifemelu suggests him, her natural fuzzy hair would not give her a professional air, but would rather fit in a jazz band (Adichie 2013:204). Although Curt initially still does not understand her need to relax her hair, once discussed with her he fully sympathizes with her in denouncing the injustice of hair-linked stereotypes (ibid.).

Despite Ifemelu's attempt to fulfil this implicit social requirement, her natural hair seems rather to reject her decision: after the protagonist gets burned by the

straightening, she is in fact forced to cut her hair short (Adichie 2013:211). This episode occurs to mark a significant U-Turn in Ifemelu's acceptance and performing of her natural beauty, since she subsequently feels weak and deprived of her sensuality and femininity. Moreover, this drastic change is misunderstood by people, who seek in Ifemelu's cut a political or social message before understanding it was due to practical reasons: Ifemelu is namely asked whether it is a political gesture or she is even lesbian (ibid.). Once again, hair is thus a metaphor for a social, political and even sexual instance instead of being understood in its mere natural features.

The regret of the protagonist for her short haircut is further worsened by the concern that this might not be liked by her boyfriend; however, in spite of this initial negative reaction, Ifemelu starts discovering again her natural beauty and gets informed about all the issues related to kinky hair through the website *HappilyKinkyNappy.com* (Adichie 2013:212). This web-community and the habit of sharing beauty hair-care tips play a crucial role in Ifemelu's rebirth: on the one hand, the website offers beauty advice that helps the protagonist dealing with her natural hair; on the other hand, shared experiences about racism in beauty magazines make Ifemelu more critical towards racist issues that were before unknown to her in Nigeria. As a consequence of this increasing attention and awareness, she comes to challenge mainstream representations of black beauty by denouncing how magazines do not portray alternative natural hairstyles as she reminds Auntie Uju, who does not accept her new cut (Adichie 2013:216). After the initial crisis, therefore, the protagonist starts loving her natural hair and gains self-esteem: for the first time, when she sees looks in the mirror she defines her hair with an adjective that was before used uniquely to describe her mother's hair, that is, "glorious" and she realizes "that simply, she fell in love with her hair." (Adichie 2013:213).

Through her American 'hairy' odyssey, the protagonist gets both to know the social (and racist) implication that may be linked with hair and to discover her natural beauty. It is worth mentioning that she understands and positively reacts to the cultural gap that leads to prejudices about Afro hair by letting, for instance, an old white woman touch her hair (Adichie 2013: 313), to let her know the nature and consistence of black hair: the key to solve this gap, to Ifemelu, is thus to know what seems at first so different. This final step in Ifemelu's process is significant and worth considering: it can

be said that, after an initial and ‘blind’ submission to American standards, she has reacted not just by discovering and valorising her natural style, but also by trying to share information about African hair both in web communities and everyday experiences.

To conclude, Adichie makes hair a *leitmotiv* within *Americanah* which bears relevance not just on a narrative level, but in particular on a symbolic one: in a metonymical sense, it stands out as a metaphor for beauty and identity, as perceived both by the protagonist and the society that surrounds her, in particular in terms of racial stereotypes. Ifemelu’s hair experience suggests the complexity of socio-political additional meanings attributed to postcolonial bodies and the possible different reactions to a newly acquired (and imposed) beauty standards: in both accepting and refusing American hair policies, the narrating voice stresses the different steps of Ifemelu’s self-awareness and increasing understanding of the new culture she is experiencing, making clear how this process is not linear but rather often ambiguous and impactful.

2.3 *There’s Nothing to Shake!:* Re-sizing Bodies

The debate over the role of culture in shaping specific standards of beauty is strictly linked to a more general understanding of the relation between culture and nature which, as Butler observes, has proposed various models that imply “a culture or agency of the social which acts upon a nature, which is itself presupposed as a passive surface, outside the social and yet its necessary counterpart.” (1993:4). The author additionally stresses that the different positions in discussing sex and gender have proved to be mainly incomplete and often too focused on the agency of society on nature; be that as it may, the female (as much as the male) body is undoubtedly challenged by a corporeal culture deeply embedded in specific temporal and spatial instances: women, as much as men, today often struggle either to accept or change their bodies when these do not satisfy the main beauty trends. Due to the complexity and philosophical implications of these issues, the relation between women and their bodies has become a fruitful object

of research among scholars. In doing so, however, they have initially adopted data based uniquely on the experience of white women in an American context without focusing on the reaction of Black women to mostly white-based dominant canons (Poran 2002); however, data has recently included even Black, Asian and Latina women to better delineate the different perceptions of beauty in relation to the dominant Eurocentric standards of beauty (Evans & McConnell 2003; Grabe & Hyde 2006). In particular, the perception of the body of Black women has become object of interest, proving how they do not hold an uniform conceptualization of beauty in considering physical traits (Parker et al. 1995; Poran 2002) and are more satisfied with their bodies than white women (Streigel-Moore, Schreiber et al., 1995).

In this frame, Ifemelu's perception of her body is interesting, since it seems to differ from such general findings. As much as hair, the body size plays in fact a crucial role in understanding the complex perception of the feminine body of the protagonist, who often does not accept her body nor is able to define it. Ifemelu's sizing of the body in the novel is a constantly negotiated process which can be divided into three main stages: firstly, the protagonist is influenced by Nigerian standards of beauty, which she does not fully fit; secondly, Ifemelu's parameters are subverted by the American ones which define the feminine body in a rather different way and, as consequence, make her unable to classify her corporeality anymore; finally, when she comes back to Nigeria she realizes that she has partially assimilated the American body sizing and thus struggles to negotiate the two different corporeal schemata she has acquired. A preliminary reading of these stages suggests, once more, how femininity is deeply embedded in cultural representations of beauty and how the migrant experience further complicates the already ambivalent relationship of Ifemelu with her body: by facing different and contrasting perceptions of her own body, the protagonist consequently struggles to define and even understand her body shape.

Ifemelu's first approach to body size occurs during her adolescence in Nigeria: as many young women, she hardly accepts her body and compares it to the other girls', who seem to better fit beauty standards in Nigeria. In particular, she compares herself with her friend Ginika who is considered the prettiest girl of the collage and to whom Ifemelu feels inferior (Adichie 2013:56). However, the first who significantly contributes in defining the body of the protagonist is her Nigerian boyfriend Obinze. As

the narrator stresses, from their very first meeting Obinze makes Ifemelu not just feel at ease with her body, but even like it: “He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size.” (Adichie 2013: 61). This initial positive impact of Obinze on her self-esteem holds true even in their subsequent relationship, as the narrating voice makes clear by reporting, for instance, that she feels at ease with her body when dancing in underwear in his bedroom, even when he teases her by calling her bottom ‘small’(Adichie 2013:90). Despite its apparent levity, this episode is meaningful since it offers both Ifemelu and the reader a precise beauty standard of Nigerian culture: in this case, Ifemelu’s perception of her bottom will be highly influenced by this remark so as to adopt this taxonomy when describing her body even as a young woman in America.

This first ‘Nigerian’ body taxonomy is significantly subverted when she arrives in America and faces a different conception of body size: as she meets her friend Ginika after a long time, she is immediately surprised by her slim body, so as to ask her why she has stopped eating (Adichie 2013:124). Ginika reacts to this judgement by explaining her friend some of the American beauty standards and underlying how Ifemelu’s body fits them, being her “thin with big breast” (ibid.). Interestingly enough, Ginika functions as a cultural interpreter even of the linguistic differences between American English and Nigerian English; as a consequence of this new awareness, Ifemelu becomes quite concerned with the different body taxonomies that might bear negative implications in the American culture. This holds true especially for the linguistic sphere related to body size: she starts avoiding, for instance, the adjective ‘fat’ since, as Ginika told her, in America this has a negative connotation (Adichie 2013:5); additionally, she learns the various terms in describing slimness with a positive connotation. Therefore, Ifemelu re-thinks and re-sizes body particularly from a linguistic point of view, adopting a new terminology and subsequent perception even of her own body.

It is worth highlighting that Ifemelu does not passively approach to the new standards of body sizing in her migrant experience, but rather is a critical observer especially of American bodies in order to understand the different beauty ‘trends’: she observes, for instance, how Ginika’s friends look “almost interchangeable, all small-boned and slim-hipped, their chestnut hair ironed straight” (Adichie 2013:127). At first,

to the protagonist the American feminine bodies thus lack of identity and match a rather different ideal of femininity from the Nigerian one.

These different white-based beauty standards, which the protagonist does not fit, contribute to worsen a more general sense of estrangement that Ifemelu feels in the first years of her American period. Moreover, her concerns related to the lack of money and difficulties in finding a job lead her to neglect her beauty routine and care: quite significantly, the first routine described by the narrating voice takes place just when Ifemelu must prepare herself to the meeting with the tennis coach, which will be considered in the following chapter.

A third figure who significantly contributes both in helping and challenging Ifemelu's perception of her body is her first American boyfriend, Curt. Interestingly enough, both of them seems to observe each other's body and try to understand its features and beauty. On the one hand, Ifemelu inevitably compares Curt's body with Obinze's but yet she finds him "sexy" (Adichie 2013: 195). On the other hand, to Curt Ifemelu is an exotic body to be discovered: he often seems captured and enchanted by Ifemelu's body, which he defines as perfect "He told her that he had never [...] seen a body so beautiful, her perfect breasts, her perfect butt."(ibid.).

The protagonist, although flattered by his compliments, does not accept them easily but instead compares his statements with Obinze's view of her body: "It amused her, that he considered a perfect butt what Obinze called a flat ass, and she thought her breasts were ordinary big breasts already with a downward slope." (ibid.). To the American standard, Ifemelu's body seems thus to be rightly sized, whereas in Nigeria this was considered small or, at least, regular. These contrasting classifications of her body consequently lead to a crisis in Ifemelu, which might be defined in epistemic and even ontological terms: the system that she has learnt to use in order to understand and classify bodies is in fact put in doubt by a complete different taxonomy that consequently offers a different classification of her body, whose features she cannot define anymore.

In particular, Ifemelu expresses a new concern, that is, to be fat, as it emerges from the beginning of the novel. When initially accused in a subtle way by a stranger of being fat (Adichie 2013:6), she negatively reacts showing thus that she has assumed the American negative connotation of the adjective. Additionally, this episode leads the

protagonist to critically look at her body to see whether its shape is actually big: “she was not curvy or big-boned; she was fat, the only word that felt true” (Adichie 2013:6). This ‘contemplation’ is interesting, since it points to the constant negotiation of Ifemelu in trying to define her body, even though she is an adult woman who has been perfectly integrated in the American culture. Ifemelu thus seems not to fit the findings of Streigel-Moore, Schreiber et al. (1995), who have highlighted how Black women adopt a larger ideal body size, feeling therefore less social pressure about weight: on the contrary, she has not a satisfying relation with her body size which makes her more susceptible and insecure.

Remarkably, in observing how skinniness is an essential beauty value in the American culture, Ifemelu argues that this is ambiguously adored by the Western media: when she sees on a magazine a skinny white woman holding a black African baby she underlines how to the latter thinness is not a choice of style and beauty but a consequence of its starving (Adichie 2013:163). Therefore, the narrating voice makes clear how the protagonist’s attitude is critical and makes her constantly de-contextualize and reverse American beauty standards.

Despite her critical attitude towards American standards of beauty, Ifemelu starts unconsciously adopting these not only when considering her own body, but also when defining and judging other women’s beauty. This aspect clearly emerges when the protagonist meets Blaine’s sister Shan and describes her beauty: “Her body was a collection of graceful small curves, her buttocks, her breasts, her calves” (Adichie 2013: 318). Therefore, whereas initially she adopted the Nigerian standards of beauty which privileged more curvier and fatter bodies (especially in their most sensual parts such as the breast, the bottom and hips) now she links beauty with slimness, further proving how she has been influenced by the new American conceptualization of the female body.

Ifemelu’s body is thus initially defined in terms of Nigerian beauty standards and then negotiated through the American experience; however, this process is not linear nor unambiguous, as the final return of the protagonist to Nigeria makes clear. Her beauty expectations and standards are namely influenced by the diasporic experience, since Ifemelu’s struggle to understand the female body has its roots in Nigerian culture but is naturally shaped by her American experience as well;

consequently, Ifemelu's own standards of beauty and, in this case, body size is a third instance that does not accept American corporeal culture and yet does not fit the Nigerian one anymore. Therefore, when she comes back to Lagos, she senses that she must do sport since her clothes are tight and her body size is not the one she wants to show to Obinze at their first meeting (Adichie 2013:411). Interestingly enough, Obinze underlines how her new perception of body sizing has been shaped by American misleading conceptualizations of the female body: he stresses that she has gained weight but she cannot define herself fat, since she is still slim. Therefore, Obinze's reply proves that Ifemelu's perception of her body does not fit the Nigerian taxonomy anymore but is rather significantly influenced by her American experience.

In conclusion, Ifemelu's experience stands out as the emblematic conflict of contrasting body images presented to her in the different cultures experienced in migration: her complex process of self-awareness proves in fact that culturally-bounded beauty standards come to struggle in the postcolonial experience and contribute to complicating women's awareness and self-esteem, witnessing therefore the social and cultural implication behind perceptions of the body. It cannot thus be said that Ifemelu either simply accepts or refuses the new standards she gets to know in the US; rather, her consequent performance of the feminine body is a third instance which is perceived (even by the protagonist herself) as highly ambiguous and hybrid in not completely fitting the Nigerian nor the American standards that have previously influenced and shaped it.

2.4 This Magazine's Kind of Racial Skewed: Beauty Injustices

In the current analyses of Ifemelu's relation with her body and hair little attention has been given to its mere 'racial' component; this is however a crucial aspect that emerges in particular when the protagonist becomes more self-confident and critical of the American culture. Whereas racial issues are invisible to her as a child and adolescent in Nigeria, when she migrates the construction and perception of her body are significantly influenced by the acknowledgement of a white-based mainstream conception of beauty,

which significantly re-shapes her perception of Black femininity; as a consequence, she starts seeing bodies in terms of the dichotomy Black/White and reacting to negative “race”-based stereotypes.

This last section discusses how Ifemelu precisely relates to “race”-linked aspects of beauty and misleading representations of femininity in the US. It initially focuses on skin tones within the novel and its different connotations; secondly, attention is given to the misrepresentation of black women in fashion magazines and online communities which share information about beauty for black women, such as *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*.

Although often not particularly foregrounded, Ifemelu’s attention to skin tone is a recurrent and crucial element within *Americanah*: this is not just presented in her ‘American years’, that is, when her black skin assumes a ‘political’ connotation, but even when she is an adolescent in Nigeria. On a stylistic level, adjectives related to the complexion are frequently used to define characters, especially when these are described from the point of view of Ifemelu: see, for instance, “light-skinned” African American girl (Adichie 2013: 139), Blaine’s “skin of the colour of gingerbread”(2013:176) or “caramel-skinned African American” counsellor Ruth (2013:201). Furthermore, Ifemelu’s tone of complexion is presented from the very beginning of the novel, when the protagonist is at the hairstylist: as it is noticed by the hairdresser Aisha, the protagonist’s skin is perceived as unusually dark to be a Igbo, who are usually fairer (Adichie 2013: 14). This initial remark is worth considering since, by suggesting that Ifemelu’s complexion differs from the Igbo standard, it mirrors a distinctive beauty standard among African American communities: due to the Eurocentric beauty standards, black people with white-like features, such as a lighter skin tone, are considered more attractive by both blacks and whites and subsequently gain a more privileged position (Keith and Herring 1991; Lake 2003; Reece 2016:139).

This point seems to hold true also for the Nigerian beauty standards, as two precise moments of the narration prove, namely, when the narrating voice describes Ginika and the beauty routine of Aunt Uju. On the one hand, Ginika is considered the prettiest girl of their school (Adichie 2013: 55-56): interestingly enough, however, the description of her beauty is based mainly on the tone of her skin, which is “caramel”, that is, lighter. This is due, as Ginika herself claims, to the fact that she is “half-chaste”

(ibid.): this adjective, however, does not bear a negative meaning in the Nigerian culture, but on the contrary implies a higher degree of beauty. On the other hand, light skin is presented in *Americanah* as a core component of Nigerian beauty care, in particular of Aunt Uju's. As previously mentioned, as an adolescent Ifemelu is particularly attracted by the complex beauty routine of her aunt. More precisely, she observes how Aunt Uju "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 2013: 74). Aunt Uju's skin care thus suggests how fairer skin is perceived as more desirable than darker one to be considered beautiful, so as to become one of the goals of skin care.

Conversely, during the American years Ifemelu starts seeing complexion in a different light and reacting to the race-based stereotypes she faces for the first time. When, for instance, Ifemelu meets Aunt Uju's new pretender Bartholomew and is asked to tell her what she thinks about him, the first thing she notices is that " He uses bleaching creams [...] His face is a funny colour. He must be using the cheap ones with no sunscreen. What kind of man bleaches his skin, *biko*?" (Adichie 2013:117). It is interesting to notice that, whereas in Nigeria the use of creams to get fairer skin by her aunt was considered as a normal part of beauty routine, here Ifemelu blames Bartholomew for using them: she perceives that his action is not linked to beauty matters, but rather aimed to reach a better social status.

The first episode that signals a significant shift in Ifemelu's understanding of social implication of skin tone occurs, however, when she is doing shopping with Ginika and they are asked which shop assistant has helped them to get her commission (Adichie 2013:127): in order to do so, the cashier asks the two friends unhelpful questions, whereas, as Ifemelu lately points, it would have been easier to ask whether it was the white or black girl. To this remark, Ginika answers "You're supposed to pretend you don't notice certain things" (ibid.). This episode thus proves both how the protagonist does not see skin colour as discriminant and how she is quite surprised by American almost hypocritical tendency not to name such a distinctive aspect in order not to run the risk of being racist.

Once become aware of racial implications related to skin, Ifemelu makes skin an object of social analysis in her blog *Raceteenth or Various Observations of American*

Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black such as in the emblematic post entitled “Why Dark-Skinned Black Women – Both American and Non-American – love Barack Obama”, in which the protagonist wittily comments on the various perceptions and classifications of skin colours. In the same post, Ifemelu states that “In American pop culture beautiful dark women are invisible” (Adichie 2013:2014). This point is strictly linked to her critical observations on fashion magazines, which are part of her everyday readings in the US. The narrating voice namely thoroughly stresses Ifemelu’s passion for fashion magazines and her reactions to their mainly-white representations of women, further embedding thus her perception of femininity in a racial discourse.

The role of fashion magazines and, more generally, media, must not be disregarded since, as Poran states, the environment in which women learn about the politics of the body is saturated with media presentations of what a woman’s body should be (2002:66). Moreover, fashion (along with theatre) is a key arena “for the performance of identities from the ‘individual’ to the ‘national’ ”, implying thus “the performative of gender, race and nation” (Kondo 1997:5). Fashion magazines, therefore, play a crucial role in the construction of the female identity and body: as a consequence, the misrepresenting of this latter is a crucial issue that the protagonist does not ignore.

The first observation that Ifemelu makes regards the presence of Black women in magazines: she denounces the unique presence of “small-boned, small-breasted white girls” that prevail on “the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate” (Adichie 2013:78). Strictly linked to these statements, Ifemelu’s first strong argument over this issue occurs with Curt, when she despises magazines for being “racially skewed” (Adichie 2013: 294-295): later, she describes Curt the injustices she faces every day in reading them, that is, that she cannot find beauty tips on make-up or hair since they are uniquely based on white-women necessities and corporeal features; moreover, when presenting “different” images of women, Ifemelu stresses how magazines do not include black women but uniquely biracial or Hispanic models (ibid.). As Adams, Kurtz-Costes and Hoffmann’s analysis of the literature on bias and skin tone reminds, in fact, several studies have shown that “black women who appear in magazine and television advertisements are typically of light complexion, perpetuating the idea that Black women must be light skinned to be considered attractive/beautiful”

(2016:100). In Ifemelu's case, blog communities and websites fill the gap created by magazines by offering different tips and images of women even to Non-White girls: *HappilyKinkyNappy.com*, in fact, provides her several information regarding cosmetics and hair care routine based on different types of hair.

Ifemelu's experience thus proves how certain physical features are ambiguously perceived in American culture, although they do not bear negative connotation *per se*; moreover, the issues faced by the protagonist in not corresponding to the mainstream white beauty standards suggest how fashion and popular culture are still embedded in a Eurocentric culture.

2.5 Slipping out of her old skin: Final Considerations

This chapter has focused on the role of beauty and, more general, the female body in Ifemelu's experience: as it has emerged, these are crucial elements in *Americanah* both on a stylistic level (given by the creation of certain *leitmotifs* and in the choice of adjectives used in the descriptions) but, above all, on a symbolic level. Whereas initially the protagonist perceives and performs her female body according to the Nigerian standards without giving to these additional meanings, when facing the American culture she begins re-thinking and negotiating not just her beauty, but also to understand even the social and political implications behind certain fashion and corporeal schemata, which she does not forget once came back home to her original beauty culture.

As a result, Ifemelu does not simply negotiate nor react to different instances, but she rather bears all the complexities and ambiguities of culturally- and ethnic- based beauty assumptions, thus creating a third, hybrid way of perceiving her body and approaching critically to it. Ifemelu's corporeal story, therefore, contributes in understanding postcolonial bodies in relation to femininity, proving how the protagonist's attitude is quite aware and critical towards the misrepresentations and understanding of black femininity in the American culture.

3. UNSPEAKABLE THINGS: BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY

3.1 *Beached Whales of the Sexual Universe: Black Women and Sexuality*

“Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing,
awaiting their *verb*”

Hortense Spillers

Sex has always been one of the most discussed and controversial topics within human history. First examples of the interest in understanding and codifying sexuality can be found in the sacred precepts of the Bible, which both presents sexuality as a “central human reality” (Ellens 2006:7) and provides a first regulation of sexual practices and behaviour. Additionally, starting from the Greek times sexuality has increasingly become a crucial component in “the history of ethics and the history of selfhood” (Nye 1999:11) and more defined by social and juridical norms. As a consequence, the anatomical study of genitals and biological aspects of sexuality has been constantly considered within history, as Thomas Laqueur’s study on body and gender suggests (1990). However, the analysis of female genitalia and role within the sexual intercourse has been often misunderstood: in the Eighteenth Century the notion that women had no ‘sexual feelings’ highly influenced the conceptualization of female body in relation to the male one (Laqueur 1990:4); furthermore these misrepresentations of female sexuality have highly influenced even contemporary psychology, which often undervalues women’s sexual agency and empathizes mainly their emotional sphere in sexual intercourses (ibid.).

Whereas women were thus initially excluded from sexual discourse or treated as merely passive and frigid, in the last century they have been re-considered in sexual terms: both the academic field and culture have in fact drawn the attention to before-

unknown concepts such as female pleasure, masturbation and sexual instinct, suggesting a possible agency of women in experiencing their sexuality.

In particular, sex and sexualities have gained relevance in the postcolonial discourse, who has linked sexual and gender issues to 'racial' ones, proving in particular how the black female sexuality has been afflicted by colonialism and how even today perpetuated colonial visions of the black body are frequent. A "site of contestation", to use M. C. Holmes' terms (2002), black sexuality has been widely discussed among scholars, who have argued that black women's bodies were perceived by white conquerors as a site of primitive transgression and wildness that could be conquered and exploited by them, thus sexually mirroring the dominant relationship between conqueror and conquered and portraying black sexuality as opposite to the purity and chastity promoted to white women in Western society (Hammonds 1999:95). Recent studies have moreover stressed the representation of black women in pornography, suggesting how this continues to perpetuate male domination over misleading images of black women (Dines, Jensen & Russo 1998; Collins 2000).

Today the attention drawn to black sexuality aims to give it a new dignity and voice: the silence on black female sexuality, in particular, is the main issue raised by several intellectuals (Collins 2000; Hammonds 1999; Spillers 1984). In introducing black sexuality in her influential *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and The Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that black women, due to the lack of access to position of power, have been mainly silent about negative and passive representations of black sexuality (2000:123). Moreover, she stresses not only how black female sexuality has been neglected on an academic level, but also how in particular African-American women are still not treating female sexuality in their works (ibid.).

In this frame, *Americanah* offers a contrasting position, proving how sex can be a fruitful literary subject and how literature can contribute in defining the agency and performance of black femininity. The novel may be defined as a compendium of female sexuality which does not simply describe one sexual instance of the protagonist, but rather traces its development in link with various factors such as age, economy, culture and society. As a matter of fact, the narrating voice follows Ifemelu in particular in her sexual life both as an adolescent and as an adult, stressing how she is initially curious

about sex and yet does not enjoys it, whereas as an adult develops a remarkable sexual imagination and desire with different partners. As it emerges from a first reading of *Americanah*, Ifemelu's sexuality is thus not obvious nor easily experienced, since the protagonist waves between sexually-satisfying relationship and passionless ones. Despite the positive or negative value of the several sexual experiences, the narrating voice often includes detailed descriptions of the sexual intercourses and clear references to female masturbation, fully reporting how Ifemelu sexually relates to sex.

Bearing in mind Barbara Johnson's analysis of the role of literary texts in perpetuating certain negatives problems of sexuality and in creating actual sexual difference (quoted in Lauquer, 1990:17), Adichie's *Americanah* contributes thus to a better understanding both of 'black' female sexuality and its issues, by fictionally and fully representing it. The aim of the current chapter is thus to study Ifemelu's sexuality both in her adolescence and adulthood: it initially focuses on the sexual education that Ifemelu receives as an adolescent and its influence in her first approach to sex with Obinze; secondly, her experience with the tennis coach is considered in the wider frame of migration and prostitution; in conclusion, her sexual life as an adult firstly in the US with Curt and Blaine, and later in Nigeria with Obinze is discussed, in order to understand how she develops an adult sexual identity characterized by sexual curiosity, imagination and agency.

3.2 Wait Until You Own Yourself a Little More: a Sexual (Un)education

If women's sexual instinct and desire have been often ignored and misrepresented, the potential sexual subjectivity and desire of adolescent women has been initially almost completely concealed, particularly in sexual education as Sharon Lamb argues (2010:294). However, as the author underlines, starting from Fine's 1988 article "A Missing Discourse of Desire", the analysis of female adolescent desire and sexuality has gained relevance as an object of enquiry, inspiring further research which has focused, in particular, on the negative impact of those sexual educations which teach girls to suppress and deny their own desire (Tolman 2002).

Americanah, in this sense, follows this recent trend among scholars and feminist by meditating, on a fictional level, on the negative impact of misleading sexual education on girls. Interestingly enough, sexuality occurs as a central topic in the novel firstly through the sexual experiences between the two protagonists as adolescents in Nigeria; in particular, these are described through the point of view of Ifemelu, who appears to be more aware of the social implications of sexuality than Obinze as a consequence of the redundant sexual warnings given her by her mother, Aunt Uju and Obinze's mother. This section discusses the implications of a rigid sexual education on the first experiences of Ifemelu with Obinze in the light of the above mentioned studies and Adichie's feminist manifesto *We Should All Be Feminists*.

When Ifemelu meets Obinze for the first time at the party, the narrator immediately makes clear how the protagonist becomes increasingly aware not only of her feelings but especially of her physical attraction to him. Interestingly enough, she breaks the ice boldly asking him "Aren't we going to kiss? [...] I'm just asking. We've been sitting here so long." (Adichie 2013: 62). Obinze, quite surprised by her courage, makes clear that he does not want her to think that all he wants from her is something physical; however, Ifemelu replies once again claiming her agency and asking him "What about what I want?" (ibid.). Therefore, Ifemelu is initially presented as a self-confident adolescent who expresses her sexual desire and openly flirts with Obinze, foreshadowing her agent role in their relationship.

The first kiss between Ifemelu and Obinze is described in detail, and, moreover, compared to the kiss experienced by Ifemelu with her previous boyfriend: "they kissed, pressed their foreheads together, held hands. His kiss was enjoyable, almost heady; it was nothing like her ex-boyfriend Mofe, whose kisses she had thought too salivary". (Adichie 2013:62). This first brief description stresses and anticipates Ifemelu's attitude towards sex: she curiously observes not just her own reaction to sexual impulses but also the behaviour of her lovers, which she often compares to the her previous experiences.

The first person whom Ifemelu confesses her love for Obinze (as much as their first kiss) is Aunt Uju, who plays a significant role in the sexual education of the protagonist. She compensates in fact the religion-based education given to Ifemelu by her mother with a more practical explanation of female sexual organs and sexuality

“Aunt Uju [...] talked her through her first menstrual period, supplementing her mother’s lecture that was full of biblical quotes about virtue but lacked useful details about cramps and pads.” (Adichie 2013:53-54). The approach of Ifemelu’s mother to sexually-related issues must be seen in the wider frame of Nigerian Christianity and sexuality which has been described by Matthews A. Ojo (2015). In his account, he stresses how the sexual revolution in Nigeria has significantly challenged a religious-oriented sexual education, which has mainly promoted abstinence and condemned premarital sexual intercourses as sinful.

However, abstinence occurs as a main component not only of Christian-based sexual education, as Aunt Uju’s reaction proves: she warns the protagonist “to let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside” (ibid.). This remark conveys a passive view of women in performing sexuality, denying Ifemelu not only her subjectivity but also her sexual desire. Aunt Uju does namely not consider Ifemelu as a sexual agent with impulses and desire: the only agency given to the protagonist by her aunt is in forbidding her boyfriend to consume a complete sexual intercourse, and at the same time, in letting him do what he wants with her body. Therefore, sexuality is presented both as a forbidden and male-oriented mechanism rather than a natural impulse shared by both the sexes; moreover, Aunt Uju lacks in providing her niece an explanation of the prohibition she imposes her, by merely implying that abstinence is the only possible way of (non-) experiencing sexuality.

Aunt Uju’s position can thus be defined as strictly linked to the above mentioned sexual education which deny girls subjectivity and a sexual dimension; however, her advice must be linked to her personal experience in order to better understand it. As she later admits when she discovers to be pregnant, in fact, she had already had an abortion when she attended the university and therefore does not want to do it again (Adichie 2013:83). This episode further suggests that Aunt Uju is a complex and ambivalent feminine character: on the one hand, in fact, she seems to be strong and independent, having dealt alone with abortion; on the other hand, she does not provide Ifemelu with a complete sexual education by teaching her abstinence instead of contraception and denying her a sexual agency.

The person who fills the gap in the sexual education of Ifemelu is, interestingly enough, Obinze’s mother. When she realizes that Ifemelu and Obinze were concretely

approaching to sex while she was not at home, she asks Ifemelu to talk in private. The speech she delivers to the protagonist is worth considering:

If anything happens between you and Obinze you're both responsible. But Nature is unfair to women. An act is done by two people but if there are any consequences, one person carries it alone. [...] My advice is that you wait. You can love without making love. It is a beautiful way of showing your feelings but it brings responsibility, great responsibility, and there is no rush. I will advise you to wait until you are at least at the university, wait until you own yourself a little more. [...] Women are more sensible than men, and you will have to be the sensible one. Convince him. Both of you should agree to wait so that there is no pressure.

(Adichie 2013:71)

Her position is far more liberal and progressive than Aunt Uju's; nevertheless, it seems to be unbalanced and to waver between a male-oriented sexuality and a more inclusive one. On the one hand, Obinze's mother does not deny the existence of sexual desire to Ifemelu as Aunt Uju did: her speech in fact clearly includes both the adolescent in the desire of having the first sexual intercourse. On the other hand, she seems to contradict what she tells Ifemelu: in fact, she warns uniquely Ifemelu, even though, as she stresses, they are both responsible for their actions and consequences. Obinze's mother stresses in particular the adverse condition of women linking it to a natural matter, namely the pregnancy; however, as Aunt Uju did, she does not give precise information about contraception but uniquely suggests Ifemelu to wait, until she owns herself a little more.

Although fictional, the concern of both Aunt Uju and Obinze's mother regarding pregnancy has its roots in a social issue related to young adolescents and sexuality in Nigeria, which was debated in 1997 survey by Uche Amazigo et al. The authors have proved that the majority of Nigerian students (approximately 64%) do not have sufficient knowledge of contraception; moreover, the data underline that the majority of sexually active young girls have had abortions, infections or pregnancies. Interestingly enough, this survey has also stressed that the proportion of female students aware of correct contraception was significantly higher than male ones (1997:31). As a final remark, Amazigo reported that many young adolescents consider abstinence as the main

contraception: this datum can be seen as strictly linked with the above-mentioned Christian messages that promote pre-matrimonial chastity as the unique method of contraception.

Obinze's mother underlines how women are allegedly more sensible than men, giving therefore the protagonist the great responsibility to convince Obinze to wait. The speech mirrors what denounced by Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists*: Obinze's mother, in fact, denies him a sensibility, including thus him in the narrow representation of masculinity that represses men's affective sphere (2013:26) In this sense, she is not completely coherent to her message of equal responsibility; moreover it must be noticed that she does not include her son in this sexual education.

It is worth further considering Obinze's mother speech in the light of *We Should All Be Feminists*: in its central section, Adichie focuses on how just girls are praised for virginity and taught to feel ashamed of their own female body and sexuality (2014:32-33). As a consequence of this 'un-education', girls are condemned to be "women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves" (ibid.). *Americanah* seems therefore to initially mirror, on a fictional level, what denounced by Adichie: Ifemelu is in fact both taught to deny herself her own desire and, being considered more sensible than Obinze, overwhelmed by responsibilities. Despite the ambiguity of its content, the effect of this speech on the protagonist seems to be initially positive: she is not ashamed of talking about sex with the mother of her boyfriend and additionally agrees with her in waiting before having the first sexual intercourse. As a matter of fact, she reacts to Obinze's disapproval of her mother's suggestion by stating "Who told you we are ever going to start anything?" (Adichie 2013:73).

When the two protagonists move to Nsukka to attend university, two significant episodes occur, namely the meeting with Odein and the first sexual intercourse between Obinze and Ifemelu. On the one hand, the figure of Odein is worth mentioning, since the protagonist is curious not only to know him better, but also seems to be attracted to him: she imagines, in fact, "kissing him, sloe-eyed, thick-lipped Odein" (Adichie 2013:92). Therefore, the protagonist proves to be sexually curious and to feel free to imagine to kiss a different boy than Obinze.

On the other hand, the first complete sexual experience of Ifemelu and Obinze is described by the narrating voice from the point of view of the protagonist. When

sexually aroused by Obinze, she does not stop him and is convinced that they can have sex without using precautions; nevertheless, she cannot fully enjoy the sexual intercourse due to the sense of guilt she feels for having disobeyed Obinze's mother:

It felt, to Ifemelu, like a weak copy, a floundering imitation of what she had imagined it would be. After he pulled away, jerking and gasping and holding himself, a discomfort nagged at her. She had been tense through it all, unable to relax. She had imagined his mother watching them, the image had forced itself onto her mind, and it had, even more oddly, been a double image, of his mother and Onyeka Onwenu, both watching them with unblinking eyes. She knew she could not possibly tell Obinze's mother what happened, even though she had promised to, and had believed then she would.

(Adichie 2013:94)

Two preliminary remarks must be made: first of all, Ifemelu's orgasm is not mentioned; secondly their first time differs from the protagonist expectations. The most striking aspect of this description is, however, that it shows how Ifemelu's unconscious is pervaded by a sense of guilt and shame that leads her to imagine Obinze's watching them which hinders her sexual arousal and orgasm. Rather than focusing on her sexual pleasure, in fact, the description highlights just Obinze's sexual accomplishment which is significantly juxtaposed to Ifemelu's tension and disappointment.

The sense of guilt for not only having betrayed Obinze's mother but also for not having used contraception is worsened when Ifemelu starts feeling unwell. When she vomits and does not feel good, fearing a pregnancy she immediately phone Aunt Uju, who tries to reassure her but suggests to take a pregnancy test. At the lab, interestingly enough, Ifemelu is treated badly by the nurse, who seems to judge her "as though she could not believe she was encountering one more case of immorality" (Adichie 2013:95). On the one hand, from a semantic point of view, sex and its possible outcome are associated with the field of religion and, more precisely, of sin. On the other hand, from a narrative point of view, this statement can be considered as a form of Free Indirect Thought, in which the narrating voice reports the point of view of Ifemelu, who functions as a focalizer. Therefore, it is Ifemelu who interprets the thoughts of the nurse rather than the narrator reporting them. This distinction is worth underlying, since it

makes clear that, although Ifemelu does not treat sex as a sinful act, she is both aware that it might be perceived in this way by other people and also consequently influenced by this view.

When it is clear that Ifemelu is not pregnant but suffers from appendicitis, Obinze's mother is informed about what happened. Her reaction is once again worth mentioning:

you should never let the boy be in charge of your own protection. If he does not want to use it, then he does not care enough about you and you should not be there. Obinze, you may not be the person who will get pregnant but if it happens it will change your entire life and you cannot undo it. And please, both of you, keep it between both of you. Diseases are everywhere. AIDS is real.

(Adichie 2013:97)

Whereas she initially talked just to the protagonist, this time she involves both of them in her warning. On the one hand, she teaches Ifemelu that she must be in charge of her own protection instead letting someone else decide for her: therefore, she teaches her to be an agent of her own sexuality and health. On the other hand, she addresses Obinze and stresses how the consequences of a pregnancy would change his life as well forever, not just the girl's. Finally she reminds them of the possible sexual diseases that they may contract, in particular AIDS. The concern regarding HIV and sexual diseases is widely discussed in Nigeria, since, according to Arowojolu et al., whereas the danger and incurability of the disease are well known among sexually active adolescents, AIDS transmission reduction measures are almost ignored (2002: 61). Once again, *Americanah* fictionally mirrors social issues related to the perception and performance of sexuality in Nigeria.

The analysis of Ifemelu's sexuality as an adolescence has underlined several crucial aspects of her initial sexual identity. Although her first approach to sex is shaped both by the religious non-education of her mother and the absolute and unexplained ban of her Aunt, she does not at first refuse to enjoy her sexuality. Nevertheless, she feels a strong sense of guilt just when she betrays the promise made to Obinze's mother, which assumes the connotation of a sinful act. This section has also shown how, although

partially contrasted by the second speech delivered by Obinze's mother, sexual education in the Nigerian environment described in the novel is still given mainly to women and is partially misleading: whereas female adolescents are warned, young boys are not made aware of sexual diseases nor of the consequences of the pregnancy. Ifemelu's episode may therefore give, on a fictional level, an explanation and understanding of the different data which, as above mentioned, denounce the lack of measures against pregnancy and diseases in Nigeria especially among young men.

3.3 Sickening Wetness: the Tennis Coach Experience

The second sexual experience of the protagonist presented in *Americanah* quite differs from the previous one: not only does it take place in the US when Ifemelu is a young woman, but it is also an episode of prostitution, since the protagonist offers her body for money to a wealthy (and unnamed) tennis coach.

When Ifemelu is desperately looking for a job to pay her rent and university fees, she answers to an advertisement of a tennis coach who offers two job positions. During the interview it emerges that he is looking for a girl to help him 'relax': to Ifemelu's surprise, he seems disappointed when she asks him whether she can think about it before accepting the job, as if she were losing a great job opportunity (Adichie 2013:144). Although Ginika warns her not to try the escort job that is often publicized on magazine, since it is equal to prostitution (Adichie 2013:151), and the protagonist does not want to take the well-paid offer of the tennis coach, when not chosen for the babysitting job she decides to accept it and is asked to start immediately.

As soon as she arrives to the flat of the tennis coach, she clearly states that she cannot have sex with him (Adichie 2013:151); moreover, her tension is further worsened by the fear of being raped and killed. The narrating voice fully reports what happens between Ifemelu and the man when they lay in bed:

She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her. She had come here

on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers.

(Adichie 2013:154)

The description starts with a *tricolon* of the things she does not want to do and yet occur, in which the redundant use of the possessive adjectives his/her further stresses the division of the two parts in the sexual intercourse from Ifemelu's perspective. These linguistic patterns contribute in creating the sense of astonishment of the protagonist in realizing her sexual arousal, which she cannot bear and understand. The link between orgasm and forced sexual stimulations has been recently discussed by Roy J. Levin and Willy van Berlo's review (2004): the authors argue that many victims of sexual abuses experience unwanted sexual arousal and orgasm. However, this phenomenon has been often underrated in literature and omitted by the victims, who do not accept their corporeal reaction to violence. In this frame Ifemelu's sexual arousal and consequent denial can be explained as a possible outcome of forced sexual stimulation, which however does not imply her consent to the sexual intercourse.

As a consequence of this experience as an escort, Ifemelu shows signs of depression and estrangement: in the following days, she cannot touch her body and feels her fingers still "sticky". Additionally, she does not confess what happened to anyone, in particular to Obinze, whom she avoids since she cannot confess him what happened. The only person whom she hints her experience at is Aunt Uju; her reaction is however unhelpful, since she does not ask Ifemelu how she managed to get a hundred dollars with her employer, as Ifemelu indignantly accuses her (Adichie 2013:155), but simply pretends that nothing happened to her niece. As a consequence, the protagonist is completely alone in facing the negative sexual experience she had: she both decides and is forced to do so by the hypocrisy of her only relative, who instead of supporting her glosses over what happened.

This fictional episode regarding a negative sphere of the sexuality is crucial: not only does it mirror a social problem that many young migrant women face when dealing with money issues, but also presents little-known aspects of forced sexual stimulations. These latter are not merely hinted at by the narrating voice, but fully described in the narrative structure both in their actual moments and in their consequences: in this way,

Americanah contributes in giving voice to silenced aspects of sex, offering a wider frame of female sexuality.

3.4 *Foxy Brown* and *Curt the Adventurer*: A Neo-colonial Arousal

After the negative experience with the tennis coach, Ifemelu apparently enjoys a new sexual life as an adult woman with her first American boyfriend Curt: with him, Ifemelu experiences a quite satisfactory sexuality.

The first aspect that emerges from their first time is that it was the first time of Curt with a black woman: “ he told her this [...] with a self-mocking toss of his head, as if this were something he should have done long ago but had somehow neglected” (Adichie 2013:195). This first statement on their first sexual intercourse anticipates the ‘racial’ connotation that sex assumes for Curt: he in fact thinks about their first sexual experience firstly in race terms, as if he had skipped for long a fundamental sexual experience.

Despite the positive quality of sex with Curt, the protagonist often does not understand his tendency to always need extra sexual games that involve the exotic connotation of her body, as if ‘regular’ sex did not satisfy him enough: along with the use of food in the sexual intercourse, Ifemelu is surprised in particular by his inclination to do interpretations (Adichie 2013:195). This attitude is worth considering, since it offers two distinct key points in the analysis of both Curt’s and Ifemelu’s sexualities. On the one hand, Curt’s approach to Ifemelu is perceived by the protagonist as odd and can be even defined in terms of colonialism: the game of “ *Foxy Brown*” is not *per se* colonial, but namely an example of how Ifemelu’s body evokes fantasy of transgression and reversion, in the same way that black women were perceived by colonialists. Curt’s tendency to seek for exotic sexual games is strictly linked to his sexual taste in general: he seems to be inclined to ‘exotic’ experiences, since he had, before Ifemelu, a Japanese girl and a Venezuelan one (Adichie 2013:198).

On the other hand, although Ifemelu thinks about Curt’s sexual behaviour and tries to make it out, she nevertheless pleases him; interestingly enough, she is claimed to

be “pleased by his pleasure” (Adichie 2013:195). Therefore, her sexual satisfaction comes from his own and she is not fully sexually independent. It is not a chance, therefore, that there is no reference to her own sexual inclinations and taste apart from the desire of a ‘regular’ sexual intercourse without interpretations but simply “bare skin to bare skin” (ibid). Ifemelu thus still lives in a passive way in general the relationship with Curt, as it will be discussed in Chapter 4, especially from a sexual point of view.

The protagonist breaks this partially unsatisfactory sexual routine by cheating on Curt with a “younger man who lived in her apartment building” (Adichie 2013:287). The reason that moves Ifemelu is, as herself admits, curiosity: she is namely “curious about how he would be, naked in bed with her” (Adichie 2013:288). What follows is a detailed description of Ifemelu’s sexual intercourse in terms of her position and pleasure: interestingly enough, for the first time Ifemelu is described as extremely active not just in the flirting process, but, above all, in the sexual intercourse. Furthermore, for the first time there is a clear reference to her sexual pleasure which was previously uniquely hinted at. This episode, therefore, presents Ifemelu in terms of her subjectivity and desire, providing thus a positive representation of black female sexuality.

When Ifemelu realizes she has cheated Curt, she confesses him what happened by stressing that it was a mistake and happened just once. Curt’s reaction is rather meaningful: on the one hand, his first concern is whether the guy whom Ifemelu cheated him with is white; secondly he argues that she “gave him what he wanted” (ibid.). The first question of Curt surprises the protagonist, who cannot understand why Curt is concerned with the ‘race’ of her love. Additionally, in Curt’s view, Ifemelu’s sexuality is not just objectified but also seen as passive: as Ifemelu denounces, this way of perceiving female sexuality does not differ from that of women like Aunt Uju, who conceptualizes women as subordinated to men’s desire. Ifemelu further remarks this by correcting him “I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental.” (Adichie 2013:288). Therefore, the protagonist becomes aware of Curt’s misleading idea of female pleasure and claims her own agency. As a final remark, Curt calls Ifemelu “Bitch”. Given the situation, his insult might be at first understood; however, since he previously cheated Ifemelu and claimed nevertheless his innocence, this statement proves that he treats this episode of female infidelity in a more severe and negative way.

In conclusion, the way in which Ifemelu experiences sex with Curt is a further step in the process of development of her own sexual identity: she proves to be highly observing of her partner's sexual attitudes and behaviour but, at the same time, she is still subordinated to him in finding her own pleasure. The narrating voice lingers on the description of Curt's almost-colonial approach to sex, by proving how the heritage of Colonialism may be mirrored in sexual behaviour and perceptions of black bodies. In the end of the relationship with Curt, the protagonist manages to realize the negative value that he gives to female sexuality and to actively perform her sexuality, albeit in an adulterous context.

3.5 *Startlingly Clear Images: 'Male Frigidity' and Feminine Desire*

Along with her already-mentioned critical attitude, another characteristic of Ifemelu that emerges in the narration is her vivid imagination: in particular, this holds true for her sexual imagination, as the first meeting with Blaine suggests. When she talks with him for the first time, the narrating voice stresses that she begins "to imagine what he would be like in bed: he would be a kind, attentive lover for whom emotional fulfilment was just as important as ejaculation, he would not judge her slack flesh, he would wake up even-tempered ever morning." (Adichie 2013:180). She is so aware that her images are vivid and "startlingly clear" that she fears Blaine can read her mind and grasp her thoughts. The sexual imagination of Ifemelu, therefore, further witnesses not only her subjectivity and desire, but in particular her awareness of it.

The pronounced subjectivity of Ifemelu becomes increasingly clearer when they meet again after ten years at a conference and Ifemelu invites him to dinner: the protagonist is sexually impatient to meet him and, once again, prevailed by her active sexual imagination and curiosity: "she had imagined them both with ginger on their lips, yellow curry licked off her body, bay leaves crushed beneath them" (Adichie 2013:309). In this case, she is willing to experience a spontaneous and irruptive sexuality in the kitchen, thus involving the use of food which she previously did not understand when Curt wanted it. To her disappointment, however, Blaine's attitude is rather

“responsible”: they merely kiss in the living room and just later she leads him to her bedroom. (ibid.). Ifemelu’s expectations are thus reversed by a rather different sexual approach: in this new *scenario*, Ifemelu is the most active part, whereas Blaine seems to be passively and almost frigidly seduced by the protagonist. Later she blames Blaine for having done things too regularly instead of ‘improbably’ and immediately grasps from his answer his severe sexual attitude: this emerges even by the rigorous and excessively accurate way in which he puts on condoms, which strikes Ifemelu.

As the protagonist fears, sex with Blaine becomes a regular routine that suffocates her need of creativity and agency in the sexual intercourse. It becomes clear, in fact, that Ifemelu’s relationship with Blaine, especially from a sexual point of view, is characterized by a rigour that bores the protagonist and forces her to submit her sexual habits to Blaine’s taste for regular and responsible sexual intercourses. Therefore, the protagonist once again shapes her own sexual behaviour according to her partner’s taste, suffocating her own sexual fantasies and needs without trying to convince him or finding a compromise.

Ifemelu’s first intuition of the coldness in their sexual life is later confirmed and fully reported by the narrating voice. Ifemelu starts to feel for her partner uniquely:

Admiration for a person separate from her, a person far away. And her body changed. In bed, she did not turn to him full of raw wanting as she used to do, and when he reached for her, her first instinct was to roll away. They kissed often, but always with her lips firmly pursed; she did not want his tongue in her mouth.

(Adichie 2013:352)

Interestingly enough, Blaine’s ‘frigidity’ affects Ifemelu as well, who suffers from the lack of passion in her relationship and senses how they are almost stranger to each other. As a consequence, she starts not desiring him anymore from a sexual point of view, adopting thus a new sexual attitude far different from her natural approach to sex. Moreover, the absence of desire in Ifemelu assumes the connotations of an actual rejection of physical contact with her partner, which significantly differs from the sexual attraction she felt initially for him.

The only moments of intimacy and passion between the two occur, as anticipated at the very beginning of the novel, during the electoral campaign of Obama

in 2007 (Adichie 2013:7), further suggesting how the relationship between Ifemelu and Blaine is based on an intellectual and political kinship rather than a physical and sexual one. Furthermore, it must be noticed that the description of this new passion is not detailed and 'sensual' but, on the contrary, is mostly based on kisses and simply lying close to one other in bed (Adichie 2013:359).

The relationship with Blaine marks thus a significant change in Ifemelu's sexuality: the protagonist begins to pay attention to her sexual impulses and imagination, but at the same time she still submits her sexual behaviour to the partner's so as to, in this case, be influenced by Blaine's coldness and to deny her sexual desire. Interestingly enough, *Americanah* debunks mainstream representations of both female and male sexuality by associating sexual coldness and rigidity to the male sphere instead to the female one (as often happens) and presenting a more sexually active female partner. In doing so, the novel suggests that sexuality is not monolithically experienced but rather constantly challenged by both the sexes.

3.6 Who are we Kidding with this Chaste Dating Business? Re-discovering Sex

The final and most significant narrative step in the development of Ifemelu's sexuality is marked by her sexual affair with Obinze when she goes back to Nigeria as an adult. The protagonist re-discovers and performs an active sexuality from the beginning of her new relationship with Obinze: when they meet for the first time, in fact, she feels they are attracted to each other and clearly assuming flirting attitudes.

In the following meetings, Ifemelu becomes increasingly impatient so as that she boldly asks him "Do you have condoms in your pocket?" (Adichie 2013:444): to the negative answer of Obinze, she proves to be an independent and sexually active women by claiming that she has bought them. This contrasts the previous approach to sexuality she had as an adolescent with Obinze, when she did not pay attention to contraception and sexual diseases: following the advice of Obinze's mother, now she is in charge of her own protection.

Remarkably, whereas Obinze seems reluctant about a possible extramarital affair, Ifemelu is once again the one who soothes the situation by expressing the strong sexual feelings they have. In order to do so, she makes a clear reference to female masturbation by telling him “I touch myself thinking of you” (Adichie 2013:446): this brave statement gains relevance in the general frame of female masturbation, a topic still treated as a taboo and swept aside by several cultures because considered shameful (Hogarth, Igham 2009:558). Therefore, Ifemelu’s importance in fictionally debunking stereotypes linked to female sexuality is further proved.

Whereas the first sexual intercourse between Ifemelu and Obinze as adolescents is just hinted at, the narrating voice thoroughly describes their first sexual intercourse as adults; Ifemelu is in this case described as completely active in the sexual approach. Along with the sexual intercourse, attention is given to the description of the body of Obinze in sexual terms from the point of view of Ifemelu, who finds it sexy. The description that follows must be taken into account, since it highlights that Ifemelu often thinks about sex also in linguistic terms, trying to find the correct verb with the best connotation to describe sexual intercourse with Obinze; interestingly enough, the expression chosen is “make love” (Adichie 2013:447). Therefore, the narrator makes clear how this new sexual passion is however strictly linked to the affective sphere.

In the analysis of this sexual affair, moreover, it re-emerges another aspect of Ifemelu, that is, her tendency to compare and contrast her lovers. In fact, she notices that Obinze and her sleep together in a rather different way from that with Blaine: they are in fact not distant, but “entwined, naked, in a full circle of completeness” (ibid.). This positive intimacy is however threatened by the fact that he is married: they consequently cannot always sleep together and must schedule their sexual meetings, thus limiting their natural attitude to live sex spontaneously.

To conclude, Ifemelu experiences her sexuality in a free and active way just when she meets Obinze as an adult. With him she feels free to state her sexual desires both verbally and physically, often being the first to approach to the lover. The peculiarity and change in her sexual life is significantly mirrored in narrative terms, since for the first time her orgasm and references to her sexual arousal are fully reported. This final sexual subjectivity is, however, embedded in an affective frame, since sex with Obinze is not a mere physical act: nevertheless, the protagonist benefits

for the first time from her sexuality and from the male body in a complete and conscious way.

3.7 *Speakable Things*: Towards a New Representation of Black Female Sexuality

By presenting the development of the sexual identity of its female protagonist, *Americanah* fosters a new understanding of black female sexuality. On the one hand, in fact, the novel initially mirrors the issues that many young women face as adolescents in receiving a misleading sexual education which overwhelms them of responsibilities, does not give them complete information about contraception and at the same time denies them a sexual instinct and desire. On the other hand, the novel clearly describes the sexual life of the protagonist both in its negative moment of negotiation (in which the protagonist submits to the sexual taste or coldness of her partners) and in the satisfactory experiences which are fully reported by the narrating voice through the point of view of the protagonist.

By representing the sexual imagination and desire of the female protagonist the novel gives voice to black female sexuality debunking its stereotypes and recognizing its agency: subjectivity, desire and sexual fantasies become in *Americanah* the concrete achievements of a complex process of sex self-discovery which has been too often neglected even on a literary level. It can be argued, however, that the novel is worth in fostering a fairer representation of black female heterosexuality, since it does not include an analysis of lesbian characters; nevertheless, *Americanah* remains a linchpin in re-writing female sex and offering a challenging literary perspective on the topic.

4. For Both of Us? Love, Compliance and Agency

4.1 *Man Haters or Cinderellas?* Towards a Feminist Romance

Since its beginning, the feminist debate has drawn its attention in particular to the role of women in love relationships and marriage, trying to understand the historical and cultural implications of female passivity in depending on men (in particular from an economic point of view) and proposing a more equal approach to relationships. It is thus not a chance that the feminist masterpiece *The Second Sex* by De Beauvoir includes this issue in the pivotal chapter ‘The Married Woman’, which has significantly contributed to raise the topic and enlarge its perspective. Today, the outcomes of the feminist interest in the relation of women with love can be seen in particular in two main attitudes: on the one hand, as Rudman and Phelan argue (1999), feminism has been largely misunderstood in its way of treating romance and hence perceived as negative for relationships; on the other hand, love has gained relevance in Black Feminism especially in today’s black scholarship (Nash 2011:2), proposing thus a wider and more complete perspective on the issue.

Along with the academic debate on the complex balances of power in relationships, however, a significant role is played by the popular culture in representing various and often ambiguous examples of women relating to their partners: cult HBO series *Sex and the City* stands out as one of the most important examples, since it portrays different female characters either avoiding serious commitment (such as Samantha or Miranda) or struggling to find the perfect rich match, as Charlotte does. Popular products such this must not be underrated since not only do they prove how there is still not an unique and ‘feminist’ way of experiencing love in today’s Western society, but also how the topic is both mirrored and debated in contemporary culture.

In this sense, due to the popularity of the novel, the way in which *Americanah* depicts women experiencing love and behaving in their relationship may thus offer a worth contribution to the matter. In particular, the approach and attitude of Ifemelu to

love and commitment is significant and complex, suggesting her ambivalence in relating to men especially during the migrant experience: the reader, when considering the love experiences of Ifemelu, might in fact asks whether the protagonist is actually 'feminist' in her love life or rather merely submits herself to her lovers. The aim of the current chapter is thus to answer this question by providing a study of Ifemelu's main relationships, namely with Obinze, Curt and Blaine. It must be stressed that the analysis of the love life of the protagonist has been separated from her sexuality's on purpose: although *Americanah* portrays mainly the sexual life of the protagonist with her stable partners, Ifemelu experiences in fact sexuality and emotional commitment as two separated aspects of love.

Before considering Ifemelu's actual love life, the chapter initially focuses on Aunt Uju's experiences with The General and Bartholomew, which are presented in the book through the point of view of Ifemelu. These are worth considering since they both influences the protagonist and shows her attitude towards the way in which Aunt Uju relates to love; moreover, they are analysed in the light of Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, since they mirror actual issues raised by the author in considering unequal relationships and gendered stereotypes.

When considering Ifemelu's actual love affairs, firstly the relationship with Obinze is presented both in their adolescence and adulthood; since the analysis of Obinze's affective life will be taken into account in the following section, this relationship is considered mainly from the point of view of the protagonist. Secondly, the relationship with the first American boyfriend Curt is discussed in the frame of Ifemelu's migrant experience and compared to Aunt Uju's relationship with The General; finally, the relationship with Blaine is presented focusing on the tendency of Ifemelu to mimicry her partner. In particular, this chapter aims to understand whether Ifemelu's relationships mirror the different moments of her migrant experience and how they contribute in the representation of the development of her personality.

4.2 *Power and Toothpaste: Aunt Uju's Love Life*

As already anticipated in chapter two, the most influencing and crucial figure of Ifemelu's family for the development of the protagonist's sexuality and approach to love is Aunt Uju, who follows her both in her Nigerian adolescence and American period. Starting from Ifemelu's childhood, the two establish a strong and almost sisterly affection, Aunt Uju being just 10 years older than the protagonist and spending a lot of time with her (Adichie 2013:53). Nevertheless, Ifemelu's approach to her aunt as adolescent becomes increasingly more complex: on the one hand, she continues to seek her support and affection, on the other hand she often does not agree with her behaviour and criticizes it.

This holds true in particular for the love life of Aunt Uju: interestingly enough, she seems often to need Ifemelu's support, whereas the latter does not understand and share her sentimental choices. Nevertheless, as the following sections aim to prove, Ifemelu's approach to and role in relationships are significantly influenced by her aunt; it is therefore worth presenting and discussing the two main relationships of Aunt Uju, namely with The General and Bartholomew, in order to understand the possible implications of these in Ifemelu's approach to affection.

When Ifemelu is an adolescent, Aunt Uju becomes the lover of The General, a pivotal political figure in Nigerian society who is older than her and has already a family. When the relationship is for the first time mentioned in the novel, a curious linguistic item is used to define the nature of their affair: the General is described as a "Mentor" of Aunt Uju not just in Ifemelu's mother prayers but also by the neighbourhood (Adichie 2013:44). As the protagonist observes, the term is used by the mother to cover the real state of their affair, by giving the prayer and language the power to change the word. This proves how, in the Nigerian society (but in particular in the religion-shaped mentality of her mother) the approach to this type of extra-marital relationship is silenced and hypocritically covered; additionally, the role of the man in guiding and protecting the young woman is implicitly foreshadowed.

As it emerges from the beginning of the description of the affair between Aunt Uju and The General, the most significant aspects of the relationship are its benefits

both in terms of material goods and job opportunity. On the one hand, thanks to The General Aunt Uju can afford a new Mazda which she would not have been able to pay otherwise, being a young doctor. As Ifemelu notices, her mother and other women of the neighbourhood are envious of this privilege: although the protagonist understands the nature of the relationship between the two, she reacts bristling at the other women's jealousy and thinks that what Aunt Uju does is nothing but her affair. (ibid.). The narrating voice reports additionally other benefits of the affair with the wealthy man, such as the luxurious flat that is entirely paid by him: interestingly enough, Ifemelu's mother once again does not want to admit the real state of the thing and praises Aunt Uju for her success, whereas the protagonist understands the type of relationship with The General and wants her mother to see it "Mummy, you know Aunt Uju is not paying one kobo to live there" (Adichie 2013:49).

On the other hand, The General manages to get Aunt Uju a job in the hospital by making her a spot although there is no actual doctor vacancy. The social and political situation described in the novel makes clear how it is difficult for young graduates to find a job in the medical sphere and, as a consequence, many of them plan to go abroad. Aunt Uju's dream, in particular, is to open a private clinic: whereas she initially planned to make an effort in order to reach her dream, she passively abandons her plan and lets The General take control of her future career, as made clear by his statement "*I like you, I want to take care of you*" (Adichie 2013:46). Therefore, the woman does not start her career independently, but lets her lover be in charge of it and plasm her plan; in doing so, The General proves once again a paternal and controlling attitude which materially helps Aunt Uju but limits her freedom. Ifemelu does not ignore this aspect and thoroughly observes the impact of the benefits of this affair on Aunt Uju: she senses that her aunt is changing because of this relationship and asks herself whether she "ever looked at herself with the eyes of the girl she used to be." (Adichie 2013:74). Furthermore, she observes how "Aunt Uju had steadied herself into her new life with a lightness of touch, more consumed by the General himself than by her new wealth" (ibid.).

Despite these material benefits, it is interesting to notice that Aunt Uju is not independent from an economic point of view, even though she appears very wealthy to her family: as a matter of fact, as she admits, The General just pays the bill and wants

her to tell him if she needs anything, but the money she earns at the hospital are little. To the surprised Ifemelu, she explains: “Some men are like that” (Adichie 2013:76). Whereas he implicitly wants her to depend entirely on him, she thus accepts this control both by justifying his attitude as a natural feature of men.

If Aunt Uju seems initially not to see this negative mechanism at the basis of their relationship, later, to Ifemelu’s surprise, she finally speaks out the way in which she perceives her attraction to The General and openly admits that she is lucky to have charmed the right man:

I’m lucky to be licking the right ass. [...] I slept with him on the first night but I did not ask him for anything, which was stupid of me now that I think of it, but I did not sleep with him because I wanted something. Ah, this thing called power. I was attracted to him even with his teeth like Dracula, I was attracted to his power.

(Adichie 2013:77-78)

Aunt Uju’s remark stresses her awareness of the concrete benefits of sleeping with a wealthy man and blames her initial attitude, when she did not want anything from him. However, what is striking is her frank admission of her attraction to power: she makes clear how sex and love are embedded in a power mechanism that has attracted her to The General despite his ugly appearance. This latter is not the only aspect of the General that disgusts Ifemelu when she eventually meets him: namely, she cannot understand why her Aunt finds him attractive not just because his appearance, but in particular because of his behaviour. She understands that Aunt Uju feels for The General what she feels for Obinze, yet this seems to her “wrong, a waste”, since she finds him “irresponsible” and “undignified” (Adichie 2013:80). Moreover, Ifemelu compares him with Olujimi, the previous boyfriend of Aunt Uju, and subtly suggests her that she did not outgrow and move to something better by choosing The General. (ibid.)

Aunt Uju finally manages to break up with The General, when she invites him over for holidays and he decides not to come because of his family; as a consequence of this refusal, she treats badly other people and, when Ifemelu makes her notice that she should be uniquely angry with the General, she beats her for the first time (Adichie 2013:81): Aunt Uju realizes however the gravity of her reaction and in asking her niece

sorry she openly admits that the appearance of her lover is spectral and ugly and, remarkably, that she should not have been dating a married man with a family (Adichie 2013:82). Ifemelu feels thus wiser and older than her aunt and wishes she could wash all his flaws from her body: therefore, the protagonist, although does not give to the extra-marital affair of the Aunt a sinful connotation, nevertheless appears to be influenced by her mother's religious view in the linguistic externalization of her relief and desire to cancel what happened from her aunt's mind and body.

When later Aunt Uju reveals her pregnancy, she states she wants to have the baby and that The General will take care of the child. Her remark is however striking: "He is happy to know that he can still score a goal at his age, old man like him" (Adichie 2013:84). She implicitly stresses therefore the pride of the old man in realizing that his ability to have children, and consequently a dynasty, is still strong: The General thus implicitly relates his sexual fertility to a matter of power and social achievement, although the pregnancy occurs in an extra-marital affair. However, Aunt Uju takes her agency back in this frame by choosing the name of the baby alone and giving him her surname. The birth of Dike suggests a possible further union between Aunt Uju and The General, who supports her in raising Dike from an economic point of view; this is however vanished by his sudden death during Dike's first birthday, which forces Aunt Uju to move with Dike in the US (Adichie 2013:88).

The relationship with The General it can be thus said to sum up the main features of a pre-feminist approach to relationships, in which the female part is submitted to her man's economic power, whereas her main agency consists in attracting and seducing the best partner (Rudman, Phelan 2007:788); moreover, the General is described as a paternal figure who raises Aunt Uju by providing her all she needs except for a real economic independence.

The second significant relationship of Aunt Uju occurs when she is in the US and Dike is a young boy. The first description of Bartholomew provided by Aunt Uju to Ifemelu is significant since it highlights the qualities that according to her make him a perfect match "He is an accountant, divorced and he is looking to settle down. He is from Eziowelle, very near us." (Adichie 2013:115). Her description, therefore, is based on racial, economic and social connotations but significantly enough does not mention his personality nor their feelings; furthermore it implies that her searching for a partner

is clearly marriage-oriented. When she meets him, Ifemelu observes his behaviour from the very beginning, noting that he fakes American accent as if to compensate something; moreover she is surprised by the fact that he is not interested in Dike and seems even not to notice him. As a consequence, she thinks once again that Aunt Uju chooses unsuited and unworthy men of her (Adichie 2013:116): furthermore she notices that Bartholomew treats Aunt Uju with superiority as if she were lucky to have him and has a rather sexist and patriarchal approach to the relationship, since he immediately puts to the test Aunt Uju with her skill of cooking (ibid.). To this and to all what he argues, Aunt Uju submits and agrees, suggesting thus that she is ready to lose her dignity and subjectivity just to settle down.

Bartholomew's chauvinistic attitude is mirrored also in the way he criticizes not only the American way of girls to dress but also Ifemelu for not wearing a proper dress; Ifemelu, however, does not react passively as her Aunt but, on the contrary, replies to him that girls in Nigeria wear even shorter dresses (ibid.). Ifemelu is thus irritated by her Aunt's way of belittling herself and tries to compensate this negative attitude by reacting and showing her the fallacies of his way of perceiving the role of women in the relationship and in performing their independence.

Because of her bursting, Ifemelu is harshly scolded by Aunt Uju: this latter is particularly sad in hearing Ifemelu disliking him and tries to make Ifemelu understand that she is no longer young and wants to settle down as soon as possible to give Dike a paternal figure. Due to this reason, she decides to move soon together with Bartholomew (Adichie 2013:172), and she does not mention him to Ifemelu for a while, focusing uniquely on the issues faced by Dike in the new school.

The attitude of Bartholomew, however, becomes soon clear to Aunt Uju, who later confesses her niece that she is tired of him and certain behaviour that she lists her: on the one hand, she underlines that he does not help her in the housework and merely pretends to be served; on the other hand, she strongly criticizes him for wanting to take control over her financial situation. As a matter of fact, she tells Ifemelu that he asked her to give him her salary and forbid her to send money home or save them for Dike private school: whereas he wants to be the head of the family and tries to lessen her, at the same time he does not work nor manages to get the loan he needs to start his business (Adichie 2013:217-218). Therefore, Aunt Uju finally realizes that he is an

inept and implicitly envies her career and financial independence. It is worth considering Bartholomew's behaviour in the light of Adichie's manifesto *We Should All Be Feminists*: he seems in fact to sum up all the negative attitude of men in relationship underlined by the author, stressing how even today most of the men do not help women in the household (2014:35) and urge to control every aspect of their lives.

One morning Aunt Uju finally manages to leave him: although the *casus belli* might appear ridiculous, since she is horrified by the way in which he washes his teeth and does not clean toothpaste from the sink (Adichie 2013: 219), this is nothing but the final epiphany after a long period of submission and suffocated unease. Ifemelu, once again tries to comfort her and remind her that she deserves much more than Bartholomew, understanding therefore her aunt's feelings and delusion. The final reference to Aunt Uju's love life occurs when Ifemelu breaks up with Curt and her aunt blames her for what she did, stating that she is dating a divorced Ghanaian doctor who treats her like a "princess" (Adichie 2013:299). It thus is clear that Aunt Uju has not abandoned her narrow way of approaching to relationships based mainly on mainstream pre-feminist representation of the balance of power, in which the male partner is chosen because of his wealth, whereas the woman stresses the importance of being put on a pedestal, like a princess.

To conclude, these two relationships described in *Americanah* depict a negative approach to relationships which the protagonist observes and criticizes. As a matter of fact, Aunt Uju's love life presents aspects of female passivity and submission in relationships: her love life is marked by unequal relationships in which she lessens herself and lets her partners use her. Firstly, Aunt Uju as a young woman is attracted to the power of The General and benefits from his wealthy and position to reach the status and job she dreamt of. However, she never manages to gain economic independence, since she does not earn enough to scratch a living but at the same time can asks him to pay whatever she needs. As a single mother with a kid, Aunt Uju urges to settle down and chooses to date Bartholomew, but in doing so she does not consider the emotional aspect of relationships, but uniquely his social status, nationality and intentions. She manages to realize his sexist and patriarchal mentality just in the end and to claim her independence and respect by leaving him.

4.3 *A Restless Joy*: Ifemelu and Obinze's 'Feminist' Romance

The first approach of Ifemelu to love significantly differs from her aunt's, as it emerges firstly on a narratological level: the narrating voice thoroughly reports the first meeting between the protagonist and Obinze by focusing on her emotional reactions and thoughts, which are conveyed and foregrounded in the narrative structure through the use of free indirect discourse. Therefore, whereas the emotional sphere is not reported when considering Aunt Uju's relationships (since it does not play a crucial role in her way of experiencing love), these are at the basis of Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze.

During their first talk at the party, it becomes increasingly clear that the two protagonists are attracted to each other especially from an intellectual point of view (Adichie 2013:60). They in fact widely discuss about books, sharing their favourite readings and opinions on literature; in doing so, however, Obinze shows both his tendency to tease her and to teach her the "proper books" she should read. To this attitude, Ifemelu reacts by mocking him, proving thus not to be willing to change her opinion for him. Interestingly enough, in many episodes Ifemelu shows her agency by asking Obinze not to speak for her, such as when he claims that it was love at first sight for both of them (Adichie 2013:62). Therefore, whereas Ifemelu shows a strong and mature personality in relating to the boy she likes, Obinze likes her because she differs from the other girls, reads and has its own ideas that she follows without being influenced.

The relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze thus appears well balanced from its beginning, since they share their hobbies and do not limit their personal freedom; with him, the protagonist experiences a positive adolescent relationship, although sometimes she feels inferior and not well suited because of her economic situation (Adichie 2013:66). However, she partially loses her independence when she shapes her future according to Obinze's, namely when she decides to change her university application and to go to Nsukka with him. (Adichie 2013:89). For the first time, the protagonist is thus portrayed as clearly influenced by someone else in re-scheduling her

career plans which, however, seems not to include a serious commitment with her boyfriend. As a matter of fact, Obinze seems more interested than Ifemelu in planning their future together: he often jokes about their marriage and children (such as after their first time); to these jokes, Ifemelu answers by claiming her independence and telling him that she could meet more awesome and richer man than him (Adichie 2013:94).

The first moment of crisis between the two occurs when they are at the university and she meets Odein, a student with whom she openly flirts: quite remarkably, she does not feel the need to tell Obinze about it, treating thus this flirting as irrelevant. It becomes thus clear that the two have different ways of perceiving freedom in relationships: moreover, as Obinze accuses her, she tends to apply her own point of view to an universal scale and not to contemplate that this could hurt those who surround her (Adichie 2013:92).

Despite this moment of tension, Obinze strongly supports her when Aunt Uju suggests Ifemelu to move to America to attend there university: he wants for her a better university career, even though this will lead to a momentary separation, and positively reacts to it by discussing about their future and making plans (Adichie 2013: 99). As soon as she moves to the US, she involves Obinze in her American everyday life, sharing with him all the issues she faces as much as what she discovers, although it is not always easy to communicate through letters and brief calls. Obinze functions as a bridge between the solitary present American experience and the Nigerian past: as a matter of fact, he is not just interested in what happens there, asking Ifemelu to thoroughly describe him the American life (Adichie 2013:111), but he is also the only one whom Ifemelu feels free to confess how she really feels and her worries about money. To these first issues of her migrant experience, Obinze reacts helping her both on an emotional and concrete level: namely he suggests Ifemelu proper American readings that may help her getting accustomed with the American culture (Adichie 2013:135) and at the same time, he sends her money when she cannot find a job and does not know how to afford the rent (Adichie 2013:145). Therefore, despite the several issues that both the protagonists have to face and their young age, they positively deal with the distance, continuing to share their everyday life and to support each other. This positive yet complex equilibrium is however broken by the experience with the Tennis Coach, since Ifemelu cannot find the strength to confess what happened to Obinze: she

postpones the confession and eventually is unable to do it, since she is ashamed and thinks to have betrayed him. As a consequence, Ifemelu does not keep in touch with him anymore, and experiences new relationships, although she does not forget him.

After many years of silence and distance, Ifemelu decides to meet again Obinze when she comes back to Nigeria: interestingly enough, she chooses for their first meeting a bookshop, an emblem of the initial relationship based on their passion for literature (Adichie 2013:428). In doing so, therefore, Ifemelu shows an almost-romantic side which was at the beginning of the novel repressed by her mocking attitude. As the protagonist notices, his ability to reassure her and make her feel better has not changed (Adichie 2013:429). They immediately feel at ease and talk about their past experiences as equals: as a consequence, for the first time Ifemelu feels that someone truly listens to her and at the same time shares with her his life. However, when she hints at her plan for the new Nigeria-based blog and he suggests that she needs sponsors, she feels her independence somehow threatened and firmly refuses his money, proving how she wants to become successful alone (Adichie 2013:436). This reaction is nothing but the result of an ambiguous negotiation of independence and self-determination, as the following analyses prove.

A pivotal moment of their reunion occurs when she is asked to explain why she cut off contacts with him and she finally confesses what happened: in doing so, she feels free to cry and tell him how she felt because of his reassuring and supporting manners (Adichie 2013:439). This confession contributes to the acknowledgement that they actually still love each other; however, due to the complexity of their clandestine feelings, it is Ifemelu who approaches for first, as previously considered in chapter three. She does so not only sexually speaking but also in defining the nature of their affair and realizing that she is love with him (Adichie 2013:449): whereas their affair is initially presented mainly by the narrating voice in terms of a sexual passion, it increasingly becomes clear that Ifemelu is now more aware of her feelings and ready to twist their relationship. However, her awareness and determination are put in doubt by the presence of his wife Kosi, which haunts them and significantly shapes the habits of their love affair: they in fact often cannot sleep together or have to reschedule their meetings because of Obinze's familial life. Just when the difficulties of this affair overwhelm Ifemelu and she decides to cut off their relationship, Obinze reacts by finally

deciding to leave his wife and getting back together with his first love, giving thus to the novel a happy ending.

To conclude, the relationship between Obinze and Ifemelu as adolescent seems to be quite balanced and mature: they share their hobbies and are not influenced by each other's opinion, but rather use their fruitful debates to strengthen their opinions. In particular, Ifemelu is quite independent and almost brazen, since she does not think about a serious commitment as Obinze does and mocks him for this; moreover, she experiences their relationship more freely, not ignoring thus other boys when she attends university. When she leaves for the US, however, she joins Obinze in his planning their future life together and deals with the issues of long-distance relationship in an adult way: whereas Ifemelu shares with Obinze her everyday life, he reassures her and gives her advice and concrete help. When Ifemelu comes back to Nigeria, this well-balanced nature of their relationship seems not to have changed: they treat each other as equal and support each other in their plans. However, because of his complex familial situation, Obinze is more reticent to officialise their affair than Ifemelu, who on the other hand wants to give them a chance. Therefore, the protagonist proves to be not just independent in experiencing this relationship but also determinate in making it work; moreover, in doing so she fictionally debunks the stereotypes that depict independent and feminist women as not experiencing positive and romantic relationships.

4.4 *Lighter than Ego, Darker than Insecurity*: the Hot White Boyfriend Curt

The second relationship of Ifemelu presented in *Americanah* marks a significant change in Ifemelu's approach to love-life in terms of agency and independence: with her first American boyfriend Curt (namely the brother of her employee), in fact, she seems to be willing to adapt to the American culture even from an emotional point of view, by dating a wealthy American man. Curt helps her not only to make her integrate in the American society, from which she was initially partially emarginated, but also to like herself more in the US, as the narrator itself claims: "It was with Curt that she had first looked in the mirror and, with a flush of accomplishment, seen someone else." (Adichie

2013:191). Additionally, the relationship between Curt and Ifemelu seems to follow mainstream cultural romantic scripts in which the male initiative is praised whereas the woman is placed almost on a pedestal (Holland 1992; Impett and Peplau 2003), as their first date suggests.

It must be noticed that the description of this latter highly differs from the one with Obinze and anticipates many central aspects of their relationship: namely, the emotional sphere of Ifemelu is not presented, but uniquely her mocking and critical approach to Curt. Moreover, the protagonist is initially more pleased by the fact that she is desired by a wealthy man than like him: this is clearly suggested by the narrating voice which states that she began to like him because he did (Adichie 2013:192). This attitude seems thus to be strictly linked to the approach to love of Aunt Uju: as much as her aunt, Ifemelu does not consider at first the emotional sphere, but rather bases her affection on her need to be appreciated in the American context by an American upper-class man.

The personality of Curt is thoroughly presented by the narrating voice when describing the first date of the couple: he assumes an egocentric attitude by telling her episodes of his life which clearly aim to stress his success and wealth. The protagonist notices his coquettish personality but is nevertheless charmed by it and wonders whether they are actually dating as Curt believes; this differs significantly from the first reaction of Ifemelu to his certainty, when she mocks him and despises him for not having understood her irony (Adichie 2013:193). Nevertheless, she almost passively accepts Curt's view of their affair and immediately accepts to be his girlfriend.

Ifemelu's initial approach to the new relationship is yet ambiguous, since the protagonist dislikes the way in which Curt relates to their affair. On the one hand, she seems irritated by his sporting their relationship as if they were engaged (ibid.); on the other hand, she ironically suggests that she is more masculine and rational than Curt. As she notices, when he phones her after their first date and tells her that he could not sleep and was "*breathing*" her: "the romance novelists were wrong and it was men, not women, who were the true romantics." (Adichie 2013:194). Ifemelu is thus initially cold and sceptic towards Curt's emotive and excessive enthusiasm and implicitly criticizes mainstream representations of women's romanticism in relationships.

The initial reticence of the protagonist is however significantly reversed, since the narrating voice reports how Curt significantly changes and re-shapes Ifemelu's habits: thanks to his wealth and protective inclination, she begins to live a dreamlike life in which she feels free, accomplished and integrated with the American habits and culture. The narrating voice thoroughly presents the further development of Ifemelu's first American love story, by stressing its contrasting and problematic aspects. Although she starts noticing new negative aspects of Curt's personality, such as his childish behaviour and excessive optimism (Adichie 2013:196), at the same time she imagines of being married to him and raise a family, so as to start to joke about marriage (Adichie 2013:199). She clearly gets used to their life of comfort: Curt provides her gifts, pays their journeys and everything she wants (Adichie 2013:200). Hence, Ifemelu becomes implicitly dependent on him from an economic point of view, since she would not be able to afford such a lifestyle with her babysitting job. Despite this loss of economic independence and agency, when she is asked to quit the job she refuses by claiming that she "has to have a job" (ibid.), thus showing to be partially aware of the need not to be fully dependent from Curt.

Ifemelu's proud attempt to be independent and agent of her American achievement vanishes when Curt finds her a job thanks to his contacts, despite her initial refusal; once again he proves to be willing to be completely in charge of Ifemelu's life and to be overprotective. Ifemelu accepts the job offer, but nevertheless does not mention the way she got the job to anyone, proving thus to be ashamed of Curt's initiative (Adichie 2013:202). In this frame, Curt's attitude significantly resembles The General's: they both in fact protect their partners from an economic point of view providing them of all they need and sharing with them their wealth, but at the same time either they try to deny them an economic independence or they make job spots for their lovers, becoming thus the main actors of their careers. In Whitehead's terms (2003:30), they namely perform the function of "providers and protectors", thus adopting a patriarchal approach to the female counterpart in the relationship.

Ifemelu further seeks to maintain her independence by deciding not move in with him but to rent an apartment for her own (Adichie 2013:207); moreover, she continues to notice further different aspects of Curt's personality that she does not understand, such as his constant need to plan their free time, to do something and move

instead of simply “being” as she has been used to (ibid.). Moreover, she does not like his insecurity, since he often seeks for approval but yet seems not to believe her. Ifemelu thus struggles in reconciling her practical nature with Curt’s enthusiastic and always frenetic need to move.

A significant shift in Curt and Ifemelu’s relationship occurs when she by chance finds out that he is cheating on her via e-mail with a blonde “Sparkling Paola”; Curt’s reaction to Ifemelu’s delusion and anger is significant. The man stresses in fact his passive role in cheating on her both by claiming that he did not know how to stop the lover’s e-mails and that he met the woman during a congress which the protagonist did not want to attend with him. He therefore implicitly lays the responsibility for what happened on the two women instead of admitting his role in starting and perpetuating the affair, as Ifemelu notices: the protagonist, in fact, argues that he too was involved in it since he answered to the e-mails (Adichie 2013:210-211). Although this discovery significantly shocks her and puts in doubt their relationship, Ifemelu forgives him and treats “sparkling Paola” as “one more small adventure of his” (ibid.); she is persuaded that he did not cheat on her concretely and somehow even justifies his behaviour by linking this episode to Curt’s personality, he being always in need of new and exciting experiences to break the routine.

As a consequence of the cheating, Curt pays even more attention to Ifemelu and supports her: he reads her blog and does not give a personal and constructive criticism, but rather he exalts it and finds it fascinating. Along with this attitude, his constant need of dazzling and performing is worsened, as Ifemelu notices: not only does he seek her attention and approval, but also he wants to impress and talk to anyone so as to make Ifemelu wish he were quieter (Adichie 2013:216). Interestingly enough, although he is the one who has cheated on the partner, he seems insecure and in constant need of Ifemelu’s approval and shows this even from a linguistic point of view, by adopting harsh and catchy mottos: when, for instance, she calls him sweetheart he brazenly replies “I don’t want to be a sweetheart. I want to be the fucking love of your life” (Adichie 2013:224). Therefore, Curt shows a marked insecurity and need to experience their relationship in an exciting and almost extreme way.

When Ifemelu introduces Curt to Aunt Uju, the latter confesses her niece that she is lucky to have found a man that treats her like he does. The protagonist hence

realizes for the first time the way in which Curt relates to her: “Curt did indeed hold her like an egg. With him, she felt breakable, precious. Later, as they left, she slipped her hand into his and squeezed; she felt proud – to be with him, of him.” (Adichie 2013:219). This remark is significant since it sheds a light not only on the behaviour of Curt, but also on the perception and role of Ifemelu in their relationship. On the one hand, Curt treats Ifemelu as a fragile person who needs to be protected and oriented, as previously suggested; on the other hand, instead of being irritated as previously by this behaviour, the protagonist positively judges it and implicitly objectifies herself by stressing her pride to be *of* him. Furthermore, Curt’s tendency to protect the protagonist occurs also in race-based issues that the protagonist faces in America. The American boyfriend, in fact, seems to struggle in understanding Ifemelu’s perception of subtle forms of racisms which are initially invisible to him: either he ends up not seeing Ifemelu’s point or angrily reacts to these injustices to protect her, such as when a beautician refuses to shape her eyebrows (Adichie 2013:293).

However, whereas initially pleased, the protagonist gets eventually tired of his paternal behaviour and of being considered so fragile. In particular, Ifemelu comes to understand she was not really happy with him and how he was able to “twist life into the shapes he wanted” (Adichie 2013:288) just when they break up because of her affair with the neighbour, discussed in chapter three. Although she suffers during the break-up, she manages to realize not just the fallacies of their relationship, but also how this has negatively influenced the perception of herself (Adichie 2013:289).

In conclusion, Ifemelu experiences with Curt a sense of protection and integration within the American culture; her first American relationship thus mirror a first step in her migrant experience, marked by the need to be accepted and also positively influenced by the new culture. This, however, comes to a stop of the development of her agency and independence, since she positively relates to a new social and cultural environment yet in a rather passive way. As much as The General, in fact, Curt does not let Ifemelu be fully independent, in particular from an economic point of view and constantly feels the urgency to protect her and help her in facing career or racist issues. Although the protagonist initially submits to the benefits of his wealthy (like Aunt Uju did), she increasingly becomes aware and tired of his paternal

yet often childish personality and realizes how this relationship has silenced her and make her unhappy.

4.5 *In Her Voice an Echo of His: Between Love and Mimicry*

The second significant love affair that Ifemelu experiences in America is with a young African American Professor, namely Blaine. The two meet for the first time during a train journey and, although they were clearly flirting during the trip and Ifemelu tries to contact him later, do not keep in touch. Interestingly enough, one of the first remarks of the protagonist is that “she has not merely been attracted to Blaine, she has been arrested by Blaine, and in her mind he had become the perfect American partner that she would never have” (Adichie 2013:191). The narrating voice thus emphasizes Ifemelu’s tendency to unconsciously seek a ‘perfect American partner’ not just in describing Curt, but also in introducing her second boyfriend.

They eventually meet after ten years during a conference where Ifemelu delivers a speech about her blog and start immediately to flirt and plan a date. As discussed in chapter three, during this the extremely rational personality of Blaine emerges and surprises Ifemelu. The narrating voice makes increasingly clearer how from the very beginning of their relationship, Ifemelu shapes her habits on his, as much as she did with Curt: in doing so, however, she immediately perceives and subtly criticizes his methodical approach to several aspects of everyday life, especially health- and food-related issues. When describing their routine at New Haven, the narrator once again adopts Ifemelu’s ironic attitude in echoing her interlocutor’s point of view on the food they are eating: “chocolate that was too rich, croissant that were too grainily whole wheat (Adichie 2013:311). Ifemelu is thus particularly critic of his obsession with organic food and cleanliness which influences her routine in washing her food and even treating her body: even though his habits are positive for her health, these nevertheless significantly differs from her past ones, which Blaine strongly criticizes.

As a consequence of his criticism, Ifemelu starts to imitating his lifestyle. Her way of mimicking Blaine’s routine is nevertheless not linear nor uncritical: on the one

hand, it mocks it and implicitly resists to his paternalistic approach to her habits; on the other hand, the protagonist is naturally influenced and fascinated by it. In doing so, thus, the protagonist partially resembles Bhabha's concept of mimicry, which sheds a light on the complex and ambiguous meaning of the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized:

Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers.

(Bhabha 1984:126)

The attitude of the protagonist thus seems to resemble the double articulation proposed by Bhabha on a relational level. Although this parallelism with a colonialism-related concept might be considered inappropriate, it must be bared in mind that the personality of Blaine is portrayed as paternal and extremely dominant, he imposing his ideas and habits on Ifemelu and not letting her share her owns. In particular, he seems almost to experience their relationship as an educational mission when teaching her the benefits of organic food; in this sense, the balance of power in their relationship can be understood and described in terms of both discipline imposed by Blaine and fascination and rebellion of Ifemelu in imitating his 'norms'.

Ifemelu is somehow sceptical of and intimidated by his constant examination of her behaviour but nevertheless thinks of him as a man of discipline who would be a perfect father of her children (ibid.). Once again, the protagonist fervid imagination is thus applied to her unconscious need to settle down with a stable and apparently reassuring partner. In doing so, she partially resembles the attitude of Aunt Uju when dating Bartholomew, namely she unconsciously chooses her partner according to his paternal features.

A second significant aspect of Blaine's personality that lessens Ifemelu's agency and happiness is his sense of superiority that emerges in particular when he critically

comments her posts not in a fruitful way but rather suggesting that she should have shared his point of view from the beginning (Adichie 2013:313). His position is thus firm and does not consider the protagonist's opinion, treating it as inferior or wrong. This holds true especially for his perception of literature, as anticipated at the beginning of the novel: he in fact suggests Ifemelu books that he is sure she will consider superior to her readings because of their style and cultural references (Adichie 2013:10-11); despite Ifemelu's struggle to read and appreciate them, she often forgets them. Her reaction thus differs significantly from her adolescent quarrels with Obinze about literature, in which she held her point of view: in this case, she submits reverentially to Blaine's opinion and starts feeling both inferior to him and the need to catch him up.

This sense of inferiority is further worsened by Blaine's alleged kinship with her previous girlfriend Paula who, in Ifemelu's view, has more intellectual affinity and empathy with Blaine than her (Adichie 2013:329-330). Interestingly enough, Ifemelu's jealousy has nothing to do with the sexual sphere which, as argued in the previous chapter, is almost absent in their relationship: as the protagonist claims, in fact, he does not turn back to see pretty women on the street (*ibid.*) but rather seems more charmed and excited by intellectual affinities. On the other hand, Blaine is jealous as well just when he realizes that Ifemelu admires the Senegalese Professor Boubacar and is charmed by his personality: interestingly enough, for the first time Ifemelu openly challenges Blaine by standing away and telling him that she appreciates a man that he on the other hand does not (Adichie 2013:339).

Starting from this small although significant epiphany, the protagonist starts realizing that she is increasingly mimicking him, especially in the linguistic expressions she uses: as a matter of fact, she often hears "in her voice an echo of his" (Adichie 2013:343). Ifemelu's initial reaction to Blaine's suffocating and obstinate presence culminates when she decides not to attend the protest he has organized and to lie to him: when he finds out what happened and Ifemelu tries to explain him that she did not feel up to it, he cannot understand why she does not share his same interest and zeal, proving once again his stubbornness (Adichie 2013:345). Moreover, he accuses her not of laziness, but rather of 'Africanness', thus giving a negative and almost racist connotation to Ifemelu's origins which appears in contrast to his political beliefs.

As a consequence of this first real fight between the two, he treats her coldly and does not communicate with her, forcing the protagonist to leave the flat. Moreover, Ifemelu starts a silent revolution by avoiding the healthy food imposed by Blaine and eating chocolate bars; on an intellectual level, her reaction leads her to avoid the book he likes (Adichie 2013:353): for the first time she thus avoids completely all the things he approves and likes and does not submit to his habits and taste.

When Blaine finally forgives her and decides to meet her, their reconciliation is initially marked by coldness and a lack of affection, since he continues to criticize her, making her angry (Adichie 2013:350). They begin to be more intimate (both sexually and emotionally) just during Obama's campaign, as highlighted in the previous chapter; nevertheless Ifemelu perceives her relationship in a more critical and aware way and finally comes to understand she is unhappy with him. The decision of going back to Nigeria, therefore, frees her from this stock-still situation, even though the protagonist finds it difficult to tell him how she feels; as anticipated at the beginning of the novel:

It was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her. She did not tell him this, because it would hurt him to know she had felt that way for a while, that her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out.

(Adichie 2013:7)

The last simile significantly contributes to understanding Ifemelu's way of perceiving her relationship with Blaine and her submission to him: as a matter of fact, she clearly postpones her confession just because she does not want to hurt him. Although Blaine was supposed to be the perfect American partner she dreamt of, in truth she cannot be fully content with him (Adichie 2013:8). Moreover, it mirrors the final stage in her migrant experience, that is, a complete integration within the American society which is nevertheless not experienced in a completely serene way, as if the protagonist were missing something in the achievement of this integration.

The analysis of the relationship between Blaine and Ifemelu has shown that the protagonist, after the ambiguous love affair with Curt, still does not find a positive and respectful partner: in fact, Blaine does not consider Ifemelu as his equal and thus tries to 'educate' her both from a dietary and intellectual level. Whereas she depended from

Curt on an economic and social level, with Blaine she is influenced in her routine and, moreover, is denied an intellectual independence. If the protagonist unconsciously and unquestioningly follows his advice at the beginning of their relationship, later she cannot deny anymore her unhappiness and uneasiness and thus claims back her agency and real self, although this process is not easily achieved.

4.6 *Rewriting Loves: Americanah* and Feminist Romance

This chapter has provided an analysis of Ifemelu's complex and various love life starting from the study of Aunt Uju's relationship, which significantly influences the protagonist. The two main negative relationships of the aunt prove her tendency to submit and underscore herself by depending totally from her lovers, firstly from an economic point of view with The General and secondly serving Bartholomew just to give her son a paternal figure. Initially Ifemelu seems not to be influenced by this attitude, which strongly criticizes both as an adolescent and as an adult; in particular, her first relationship with Obinze significantly differs from her Aunt Uju's one with The General, since it is balanced and egalitarian and the two do not try to prevaricate the partner nor to impose their habits but rather share their hobbies and everyday-life experiences.

Interestingly enough, Ifemelu loses this strong and independent attitude with her first American boyfriend Curt who, as much as The General, offers Ifemelu a wealthy life not only by buying her whatever she wants, but also by finding her a good job position. On the other hand, the third relationship of the protagonist with Blaine proves to be significantly unbalanced as well, since her partner influences her routine and ideas by imposing his owns. The protagonist manages to experience a better type of relationship only when she meets again Obinze in Nigeria and realizes that their affection has not changed and Obinze appreciates and respects her without trying to change her; although it starts as an extramarital affair, the two finally come to understand that they love each other and decide to make their relationship official.

Despite its linear happy ending, *Americanah* portrays complex and ambiguous types of relationships which often put in doubt the independence of female characters: in particular, although the protagonist tends to submit to her partners, she nevertheless proves to be aware of wrong relational mechanism and manages to claim back her agency. In this sense, Ifemelu reverses the mainstream representation of women in passively depending on her partner and offers, even in the significant about-turn during the American period, a new perspective on feminist romance, proving both that ‘feminism’ and ‘love’ are not in contrast and also that love can be still an impactful literary subject in its link with feminist discourse.

5. THAT BABE IS TROUBLE: A LOUD FEMININITY

5.1 *Narrow Cages: Ifemelu and the Subversion of Gender Expectations*

“The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are.”

C. N. Adichie

In discussing the main features of Ifemelu when dealing with her body, sexuality and love life, the previous chapters have highlighted how the protagonist is portrayed in particular in her adolescence as an active and rebel girl who debunks several negative stereotypes related to women. In doing so, Ifemelu does not however offer a simplistic and clear-cut redefinition of a femininity, but rather fictionally suggests all the complex implications and contradictions of her not conforming to a stereotyped conceptualization of gender.

This final brief section aims thus to focus on two significant aspects of her personality that contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which Ifemelu both subverts gender expectations and yet at the same time shows the impactful and sometimes contradictory reconceptualization of femininity. On the one hand, the debating and provocative nature of Ifemelu as an adolescent is discussed in relation to misleading representations of girl as silent, obedient and malleable; on the other hand, her attitude towards marriage as an adult (already mentioned in the previous chapter) is further taken into account to prove how she tries not to consider it as a relevant aspect of femininity and yet is influenced by the social pressure of her mother and friends in Nigeria.

Before starting, it must be noticed that the protagonist is perceived as subverting gender norms in particular in the Nigerian context both in her adolescence and adulthood; however, this aspect must not be explained in terms of culturally-specific gender stereotypes, since the mentioned studies on the matter were conducted in the US and prove how narrow representations of gender holds true both for the Nigerian and American cultures. The fact that there are fewer examples related to these issues when Ifemelu lives in the US can be rather explained in terms of narrative choices, since the narrating voice foregrounds the numerous issues and novelties that the protagonist experiences in her migrant experience.

5.2 *She can talk*: Female Silence Falls Apart

In their study of the contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes, Prentice and Carranza provide a list of the main characteristics related to femininity that Bem's survey highlighted in 1974, such as that women "do not use harsh language" and are "soft-spoken", "shy" and "gullible" (2002:269). Additionally, the authors argue that more recent data have confirmed the persistence of these gender stereotypes (2002: 270): in this frame it is thus not surprising that Ifemelu's personality is perceived as 'unusual' especially in her adolescence, since it is depicted as extremely distant to the above-mentioned norms of feminine personality. The protagonist in fact always expresses her strong opinions and does not negotiate them, even when these are thorny; her provocative nature additionally seems to be treated as a devilish threat to the social norms, in particular by her mother.

A first example of how Ifemelu's personality is perceived as masculine rather than feminine occurs when she joins her mother in the church activities: contrary to her mother's expectations, she does not passively listen and obey to Sister Ibinabo, but rather adopts a sceptic attitude firstly by noticing her harsh judgement on girls' dresses and total submission to the corrupted benefactors of their church. The protagonist rebels to this blind obedience not only by refusing to make the decoration for the chief who has financed the church, but in particular by openly accusing him of being a thief. The

description of her refusal is significant: “She folded her arms, and as often happened when she was about to say something she knew was better unsaid, the words rushed up her throat.” (Adichie 2013:51). Therefore, her impulsive personality is characterized by an almost physical reaction to silenced injustices and fallacies which she cannot physically contain and must denounce.

Her angry reaction thus subverts a silent norm imposed to girls which has been even condemned by Adichie in her feminist *manifesto*: “Anger [...] is particularly not good for a woman. If you are a woman, you are not supposed to express anger, because it is threatening” (Adichie 2013:21-22). In this sense, along with the content of her statement, Ifemelu’s action assumes thus a further social meaning, since it breaks the norms that shape the cultural and gender schemata. Hence the reaction of her mother is not surprising, since in her view what happened undermines the respectability of her daughter in the social (and even religious) system and is consequently an almost sinful and despicable event. Ifemelu’s parents however, react in two different ways, showing thus two different and relevant approaches to their daughter’s behaviour. Whereas to her father her reaction was merely an outcome of her personality which is marked by a “natural proclivity towards provocation”, her mother blames it mainly because this is not suitable for a girl: “Why must be this girl troublemaker? I have been saying it since, that it would have been better if she were a boy, behaving like this” (Adichie 2013:52-53).

This remark significantly mirrors the stereotyped representation of masculinity and femininity from Ifemelu’s mother point of view. On the one hand, she attributes certain behaviour patterns uniquely to a gender: in breaking this frame, Ifemelu thus reverses the gender expectations and puts in doubt her own social identity according to her mother. On the other hand, it must be noticed that Ifemelu’s personality would have been justified and accepted if she were a boy: therefore, the same action in Ifemelu’s mother’s point of view assumes a different value and acceptability according to the gender of the performer. The restriction imposed on Ifemelu and the gender-based judgment of certain behaviour thus mirror on a narrative level the issue raised by Adichie when discussing the fallacies and injustices in representing narrow genders: “We spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough,

which is bad enough, but then we turn around and either praise or excuse men for the same reasons.” (Adichie 2014:24).

It must be noticed that Ifemelu is perceived as an unusual girl not only by her mother but, interestingly enough also by her peers, as the first date with Obinze makes clear. Even the male friends of Ifemelu are namely threatened by her peculiar and strong-minded personality which does not resembles the other girls’, even though, as stressed by Connell and Messerschmidt, the impact of new configurations of women’s identity and practice on gender hierarchies among younger women are more likely to be acknowledged and accepted even by younger men (2005:848).

First of all, Obinze recalls the first time he saw her at school ironically noticing that she positively differed from the other girl because she was holding a book: “And I said, Ah, correct, there is hope. She reads” (Adichie 2013:60). He thus implicitly stresses how literary culture is not linked to girls and that, as a consequence, Ifemelu does not conform to this stereotyped norm. This first interpretation of Obinze’s point is further backed by what his friend Kayode said about Ifemelu “She is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees” (ibid). The intelligence and firmness of the protagonist when arguing is thus perceived as a negative aspect of her personality that may lead to troubles rather than positive debates.

When hearing this, Ifemelu is not sad but on the contrary feels proud of herself: “She had always liked this image of herself as too much trouble, as different and she sometimes thought of it as a carapace that kept her safe” (ibid.). She thus proves not only to be aware of her strong and unusual personality, but also to perceive it in a positive way, considering it as a reassuring and protective way of relating to the world.

These two episodes back thus the portray of Ifemelu as a strong and independent adolescent thinker who does not negotiate her ideas but rather expresses them; this attitude is however in contrast to the commonly shared representation of femininity as weak, silent and almost ignorant, as the statements of her mother and Kayode suggest. Therefore, the character of Ifemelu not only debunks this negative representation of women but also suggests its problematic implications when considering the reaction of Ifemelu’s family and friends to a new, loud femininity.

5.3 *The Spirit of Husband-Repelling: Marriage and Social Pressure*

Along with the misleading features attributed to female personality that Ifemelu does not resemble, the protagonist differs from the norms of femininity also in the way she relates to marriage as an adult. The analysis of the relevance given to marriage to women has been largely discussed by Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), stressing how the absence of marriage is perceived almost as a threat that girls must struggle to avoid and how women often are devalued if they are single or not willing to get married. This way of misrepresenting the importance marriage is also remarkably mirrored in *Americanah*. Chapter three and four have already discussed Ifemelu's problematic approach to the matter, since the protagonist both refuses serious commitments and yet at the same time she unconsciously thinks of her partners as potential fathers and husbands; however little mention has been made of how she is both influenced by and reluctant to the social pressure of her family and acquaintances as an adult single woman in the US and, in particular, in Nigeria. This final section thus aims to understand this complex mechanism by highlighting several episodes in which the protagonist differently deals with this social expectation.

The issue of adult women and marriage is raised to Ifemelu for the first by her mother when she visits her in the US after the break-up with Curt and asks her daughter whether she “has a friend” (Adichie 2013:301). Interestingly enough, Ifemelu attempts a justification by claiming that she is busy at work and has no time to find one. In doing so, however, she implicitly supports a quite misleading dichotomy, namely the one regarding women in either making career or starting a family. The answer of her mother is significant since it further highlights a pre-feminist approach to women and love: “Work is good, Ifem. But you should also keep your eyes open. Remember that a woman is like a flower. Our time passes quickly ” (ibid.). Her mother thus implicitly stresses how women must be more cautious because of their quickly passing of time, clearly making a reference to fertility. The concern of her mother about her unmarried daughter is further stressed when Ifemelu tells her parents about Blaine, and the

mother's first reaction is to start immediately to plan the ceremony of their wedding (Adichie 2013:315): in doing so, she once again treats Ifemelu's situation as an urgency that must be solved as soon as possible before it is too late for her daughter to start a family.

Interestingly enough, whereas Ifemelu seems initially to be annoyed by her mother's attitude and obsession, it becomes increasingly clearer that she is influenced by the social pressure and acts consequently. When she breaks up with Blaine and comes back to Nigeria, she in fact lies about her relationship status both with her family by telling them that he will soon reach her in Nigeria (Adichie 2013:17) and, surprisingly enough, with her friends as well, by claiming that she is in a serious relationship (Adichie 2013:398). In particular with the latter Ifemelu feels at unease due to their overvaluing marriage:

It surprised her how quickly, during reunions with old friends, the subject of marriage came up, a waspish tone in the voices of the unmarried, a smugness in those of the married. [...] marriage was the preferred topic [...] So she used Blaine as an armour. If they knew of Blaine, then the married friends would not tell her "Don't worry, your own will come, just pray about it", and the unmarried friends would not assume that she was a member of the self-pity party of the single.

(Adichie 2013:397-398)

The protagonist therefore notices how marriage comes to be a distinguishing matter not just for the older generation, but even among young adults and subsequently creates a fictional dimension in which she is approved both by her family and friends.

As a consequence of the relevance given to marriage and her defence mechanism, she even starts to believe her own lies and to imagine frequently her marriage with Blaine, thus proving that she is in actual fact influenced by the misleading value of marriage for women. It must be noticed, however, that this attitude is anticipated also before leaving the US, namely in the initial scene of the novel when she is at the hairdresser: she in fact pretends that she is going back to Nigeria with her man and that they probably will get married (Adichie 2013:17). Therefore, Ifemelu

adopts this solution even in the American context, she being aware of the relevance given to marriage not only in Nigeria, but also in the African American community.

Despite this influence, Ifemelu manages to claim back her criticism towards marriage and adolescent sceptic attitude when she works at the magazine *Zoe*, that is, when she frankly exposes her ideas and is consequently judged for her being overcritical. When she has a quarrel at work with one of her colleague and she leaves, she is reached by another colleague of her who tells her with an «earnest and low voice “You have the spirit of husband-repelling. You are too hard, ma, you will not find a husband. But my pastor can destroy the spirit”» (Adichie 2013:419). Her colleague Esther thus implicitly suggests that at the basis of a good marriage there is a silent and submissive attitude rather than a critical and strong one as Ifemelu’s. In this sense, this remark not only links Ifemelu’s love life with her strong personality, but also gives this latter a sinful and almost demoniacal connotation that can be corrected uniquely through religion. Furthermore, by reporting this episode in the frame of Ifemelu’s ‘rebirth’, the narrating voice makes clear how the protagonist has become more critical of the misleading connotations given to her personality and the overrated importance attributed to marriage by women themselves.

5.4 Should She Have Been a Boy? Claiming a New Femininity

This last brief chapter on the personality of Ifemelu has tried to enrich the perspective on the representation of femininity already discussed in the previous chapters, by focusing on two peculiar attitudes of the protagonist that significantly differ from the imposed norms that define femininity, namely her personality and her attitude to marriage. In both cases, the protagonist’s ways of subverting gender expectation are perceived as a threat, since the narrating voice makes clear how these break cultural and social norms.

On the one hand, the protagonist does not resemble the quiet and gullible attitude usually associated with girls but, on the contrary, proudly expresses her opinions even when she is aware of the implications of her point of view; additionally,

she is depicted as culturally curious and for this implicitly associated more to the masculine sphere rather than the female one.

On the other hand, Ifemelu is subtly urged to settle down as an adult both when she is in the US and when she comes back to Lagos: whereas she initially is reticent to this social pressure, she nevertheless shapes a false imaginary in order not to be negatively judged by the Nigerian society for not being married. Despite her final submission to this social pressure, her experience proves how marriage is still at the basis of the social dimension of women, as subtly accused by Adichie in her feminist manifestos.

The complexity of Ifemelu's character in this sense further enlarges the fictional representation of women providing a double articulation, that is, both offering a more critical and different female character and, at the same time, raising the issues of the impact of gender stereotypes and its consequences even on firm personalities such as the Ifemelu's.

THE BLACK IS MAN:

OBINZE

THE BLACK IS A MAN

Starting from the feminist debate, the concept of “masculinity” as a social, political and cultural construct has become a central topic among scholars, leading to the creation of Men’s Studies. Whereas these have initially focused mainly on the understanding of a white masculinity, thanks to the increasing attention of postcolonial studies and the denouncement of several intellectuals (such as Fanon), the features and issues of black masculinity have become a crucial issue tackled by contemporary postcolonial and gender studies. Moreover, recent studies have fostered a new conceptualization of masculinity as not an unique entity but rather as a series of masculinities that result from several factors such as race, ethnicity, religion and class (Connell 2000; Kimmel 2000).

Whereas the academic interest on men has thus led to fruitful research and a debunking of numerous stereotypes related to masculinity, still little voice has been given to a literary representation of a different and fairer way of experiencing and performing manliness: in this sense, *Americanah* stands out as a meaningful literary case, since it discusses African masculinity by presenting a Nigerian male co-protagonist which debunks several stereotypes related to manliness both in a Nigerian and British context. Due to the fact that Ifemelu is the main protagonist of the novel, the space given to the representation of masculinity is inferior and more fragmented than that of femininity; nevertheless, the fostering of a new masculine identity becomes in *Americanah* a new pop literary subject that may have a significant cultural impact on many readers.

The aim of the second part of this work is thus to discuss how Obinze redefines on a literary level the conceptualization of black masculinity; in order to do so, the research method of the third wave of masculine studies is employed, namely a wider and interdisciplinary approach that includes a perspective on black masculinity and sexuality as much as the employment of cultural and literary studies (Edwards 2006:2).

Chapter 6 discusses how Obinze is portrayed in experiencing and performing both affectivity and sexuality with Ifemelu and his wife Kosi: particular attention will

be given to his approach to female sexuality and to his sensibility in comparison to the misleading conceptualization of black masculinity denounced by bell hooks (2000) and gender stereotypes regarding manliness.

Chapter seven draws the attention of a quite common literary and “pop” *topos*, namely the mid-life crisis but considers it in a gendered frame, in order to understand how social expectations and impositions on men negatively afflicts Obinze’s work and personal choices and how he reacts to these by claiming back his agency.

Chapter eight concludes the analysis of Obinze by studying his migrant experience in the UK and how this relates to his masculinity: the complex socio-political *scenarios* of the novel will be taken into account, to understand the reasons that lead Obinze to leave Nigeria and become an illegal migrant in London. Particular attention will be given to his work experiences, affectivity and sexuality and, above all, to his perception of integration and misleading representation of immigrants by British media.

6. A BLACK MASCULINE ROMANCE?

“We do not commonly hear about black males and females who love each other.”

bell hooks

6.1 *Narrow Cages: Men, Blackness and Affectivity*

In the previous chapter, the role of gender stereotypes related to femininity has been discussed by considering Prentice and Carranza’s study (2002), which has suggested how these are still part of our cultural schemata and how certain behavioural aspects are considered to be either feminine or masculine. In this clear-cut frame, however, it has emerged how gender stereotypes significantly conceptualize and shape even masculinity, by associating it with dominance, aggressiveness, self-sufficiency (2002:269).

Interestingly enough, these features play a crucial role in particular in the representation of men when experiencing love and sexuality, which mirrors the sexual and affective education imposed on them by society. Men have in fact been taught either to hide their emotive sphere or to drastically reject it in order to preserve their virility, as denounced by Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists*: the author namely accused society of putting men in narrow cages by not letting them disclose their emotions and forcing them to “mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak, *hard man*” (Adichie 2014:26). As a consequence of this strict approach to masculinity in relation to affectivity, therefore, love and romance have been hardly ever described from men’s point of view by underlying their emotions and feelings.

In this black-and-white *scenario*, only recently has it emerged a more comprehensive understanding and representation of men, which has partially embraced romance and inner feelings as positive aspects of male affectivity instead of threats to

their virility. This attitude has been adopted not only by social studies, but also in popular culture and literary criticism, focusing however mainly on the representation of white men's emotive sphere (see, for instance, Shamir and Travis 2002; Penner 2010).

The voice given to a fairer representation of black masculinity is thus still little; in the early literary response to colonialism, in particular, emphasis has been put on the foregrounding of a new literary and agent subject, namely male characters coming from the former colonies: nevertheless, their characterizations have been mainly based on a highly virile portrait as a consequence of the previous submission (mirrored even in literature) and do not include an equalitarian view on sex and affectivity. The emblem of this approach is the foremost masterpiece by Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart*, whose main protagonist Okonkwo is depicted mainly in his virility and strength, whereas his emotive sphere and feelings towards his wives are put in the background of the narration.

Today, the stereotypes and misleading conceptualizations of black masculinity as linked mainly to rape and violence (hooks 2003; West 1993) and to negative romantic partnerships (hooks 2003) have significantly limited the characterizations of fictional black men when exploring their sexuality and love life. These issues in comprehending and performing black masculinity have been discussed by bell hooks in her pivotal *We Really Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*: the author argued that black male bodies, as much as female ones, have been mainly associated with hypersexuality and in particular black men sexualities have been either not discussed in the African context by the various studies or misunderstood in their complex socio-political frames. (2003:63-64)

In this sense, *Americanah* reverses this scenario by giving voice to a different black masculinity through the character of Obinze. Although the narrative space in which the co-protagonist is foregrounded is inferior to that given to Ifemelu, he nevertheless plays a crucial role since the narrating voice thoroughly reports his emotive sphere. As it emerges from the passages dedicated to Obinze, love and sexuality are in fact central topics in his narrative when the character is presented as an adult with a wife and yet still thinking about Ifemelu and subsequently starting an extramarital affair with her.

The aim of this chapter is thus to consider how Obinze is portrayed in experiencing love and sexual arousal both in the present and as an adolescent in his recalling past events; in order to do so, the passages in which he is the main focalizer are taken into account, so as to complete the above-mentioned frame and to consider precisely how masculinity works in the novel.

Initially the emotive sphere of Obinze in relation to Ifemelu is discussed in comparison to mainstream representation of masculinity, to see whether the male protagonist resembles the prototype of black man or rather suggests a new way of performing male emotionality. Secondly, the sexual life of Obinze is presented by considering on the one hand the way of in which he experiences it with Ifemelu, and on the other hand his marital sex with Kosi, who makes him meditate on female sexuality. This chapter does not include a thorough analysis of Obinze's marriage, since this will take place in the following chapter and will focus on the ways in which Obinze reverses gender expectations regarding marriage and family.

6.2 *Let's Really Hold Hands: Writing and Rewriting Emotions*

Men and romance have often been misperceived as two irreconcilable entities, due to the above-mentioned narrow stereotyped scheming of behavioural patterns in relationships: women are allegedly supposed to be romantic, sensible and even weakened by their love whereas men are often not allowed to show such an emotive sphere, but rather to maintain a rational, cold and dominant behaviour (Whitehead 2003:30). The gender stereotypes related to men when experiencing and uttering emotions have been thoroughly discussed by academics (Williams & Best 1990; Plant et al. 2000). In particular, as stressed by Plant et al. (2000), rather than differing in experiencing emotions, women and men express them differently due to cultural reasons; nevertheless, their findings suggest that women continue to be allegedly believed to experience and express more emotions than men and that the two sexes are still conceptualized as not similar in relating to and performing affectivity.

As a consequence, gender stereotypes significantly misshape and limit men in performing love; interestingly enough, this situation is worsened if the men in question are black. hooks reports, in fact, that romantic relationships between black men and women are negatively depicted and mainly associated with cheating, violence, separation and hate (2003:109). Additionally, the author suggests how patriarchy still negatively influences the relationships between black men and women, since it teaches men to consider themselves as superior to their partners.

In this negative frame, Obinze's quite differs from the unfair representations of black man in love: the narrating voice, in fact, thoroughly reports his inner thoughts and emotions through the use of the free indirect speech when he thinks about Ifemelu, stressing in particular his reactions to her e-mails when she is about to come back to Nigeria. Surprisingly enough, his emotionality is thus foregrounded and not censored by the narrative voice, but rather integrated as a core component of the narrative and aimed to contribute in shaping Obinze's character. This section reports and comments Obinze's experiencing and expressing his feelings towards Ifemelu, in order to understand how this characters subverts the above-mentioned misleading and narrow consideration of men in love.

When considering Ifemelu's love life and sexuality it has been partially considered also Obinze's attitude towards sex and his partner in their relationship: it has been stressed his extremely egalitarian approach to the protagonist in the relationship, suggesting how he both supports her and does not concretely influence nor limit her. However, Obinze offers a more significant contribution in presenting a different masculinity when he is introduced by the narrator as a focalizer, namely when he is an adult and wealthy man in Nigeria with a family and receives an e-mail from Ifemelu announcing her return to Nigeria (Adichie 2013:19).

His reaction to this news is particularly worth mentioning, since his contrasting feelings regarding the chance to see Ifemelu after so long are fully signalled by the narrator. The description of his surprise and tension puts immediately emphasis on the emotions of the male protagonist, which are conveyed even in physical terms, such as in his need to smoothen his head and trousers and his sudden muscle rigidity (ibid). The narrating voice subsequently stresses how Obinze does not simply read the e-mail once, but rather thoroughly studies it in all its details, trying to grasp as much details as

possible and noting, in the first instance, that he called him with the sobriquet she used when they were at college.

This passage makes thus clear not only how the male protagonist is not indifferent to Ifemelu but, in particular, how his reaction is emotional and nostalgic and at the same time scrupulous in noticing all the small linguistic items that might help him in understanding Ifemelu's feelings for him. This behaviour must not be treated as surprising and peculiar *per se*, but rather it stands out as an innovative narrative pattern since it presents certain behaviour previously silenced because associated more to femininity: it is thus surprising that the point of view of a male character is fully reported especially in his "irrational" and passionate features. In this sense, from the very beginning of his appearance as a protagonist, Obinze debunks the misleading and clear-cut vision of men when approaching to feelings and love.

This fostering of a new male approach to emotionality is subsequently backed by a flashback reported by the narrating voice, in which Obinze remembers the only precedent e-mail he got from Ifemelu before getting married with Kosi (ibid). His reaction to her e-mail is in this case far more interesting, since it condenses a series of behavioural patterns typically associated with women. Firstly, Obinze ironically comments on Ifemelu's e-mail by defining it "gracious" and noticing how she mentions also her current black American partner; secondly and most significantly, he openly shows his jealousy of Blaine and tries to grasp as much details on his rival as possible, by googling his name and reading Ifemelu's blog. In doing so, he seems to demonize his rival, since he strongly criticizes both his appearance and his works. Finally, he makes clear that he hated the e-mail and yet tries to pretend he was not negatively touched by it in his response; having read the e-mail, he recalls the time he and Ifemelu spent together as adolescent and asks whether she saw "the ceiling when the black American touched her?" (Adichie 2013:21), hoping that she had broken up with Blaine and that the relationship she had with him was not important as theirs.

The description of his reactions to the former e-mail of his ex-girlfriend thus proves how the narrating voice does not censure his emotionality but, on the contrary, foregrounds it in the narration, offering a different male behavioural schema which includes even jealousy, sensibility, affection and a "stalking-like" attitude in finding more details on the love rival and demonizing him by unconsciously putting himself on

a superior level; moreover, Obinze's reaction to Ifemelu's American life is marked by nostalgia, since he recalls memories of their past love when she was still in Nigeria.

Although many of the above-mentioned features do not mirror prototypical representations of masculinity, it must be noticed that Obinze's jealousy resembles a long literary tradition of depicting man as the jealous sex (Buss 2000: 49), which suggests how jealousy is, perhaps, the only emotion men are allowed to express in love. However, Obinze's jealousy must not be explained in terms of a concrete threat to the exclusiveness in relationship (whose roots are usually to be found in sociological and anthropological reasons, since adultery may threaten the legitimacy of offspring): it is rather an unconscious signal of his love for her, which he does not utter nor admit in the first instance because of his relationship status.

After this analepsis, the narrating voice describes the party at the Chief's, during which Obinze continues to think about the e-mail he received: even though he is busy making contacts and greeting the members of the Nigerian upper-class, he nevertheless continues to meditate upon Ifemelu's words in order to grasp from its linguistic patterns whether she is single or she is about to come back to Nigeria with Blaine (Adichie 2013: 32). In doing so he once again nostalgically recalls Ifemelu's strong personality when she was his girlfriend and thinks that "she was after all the kind of woman who would make a man easily uproot his life, the kind who, because she did not expect or ask for certainty, made a certain kind of sureness possible" (Adichie 2013:32). As an example of her mentality, he recalls in particular when she held his hand at the campus exposing him the ephemeral aspect of love: in doing so, Obinze stresses how she was a critical thinker in approaching to love and appreciates her for this. Once again, Obinze's consciousness fosters a different (and fairer) aspect of masculinity: despite his wealth and power, he is nevertheless dominated by passions, uncertainties and nostalgia when thinking of her beloved first girlfriend.

When the party is over and he is back to his house, before answering to Ifemelu's e-mail, he performs a sort of ritual, namely he puts on her favourite cd by Fela and remembers her musical tastes and how she danced with sensual moves with the hips. In writing and rewriting the e-mail, he interestingly avoids to mention his wife and, once sent the e-mail, checks over and over whether she answered (Adichie 2013:35). Therefore, Obinze is once again portrayed as extremely sensible and accurate

in the details regarding Ifemelu, thus not forgetting her and suggesting that his feelings towards her are complex, given his relationship status.

After a long narrative pause in Obinze's story, in which the narrating voice gives space to a long flashback based on Ifemelu's story and his experience of migration (which will be discussed in chapter 8), the male protagonist is re-depicted as waiting impatiently to see Ifemelu. (Adichie 2013:369). Interestingly enough, to Obinze the idea that Ifemelu has had different boyfriends and, in particular, an important relationship with Blaine becomes almost an obsession, as he himself admits: "The black American had become, absurdly, a rival" (Ibid.). Due to this rivalry, the first step of Obinze is to know better his enemy by checking his profile on Facebook and is even about to send Blaine a friendship request to look for Ifemelu's photos and see whether she has changed (Adichie 2013: 370). Quite interestingly, he is positively surprised when he finds out that she does not use a Facebook account as much as he did not, being happy that she had not changed and that they are similar. In doing so, he resembles Ifemelu during their first date, when she thought about the good omens of their relationship based on the things they had in common (Adichie 2013:61). Therefore, Obinze (as much as Ifemelu) pays a lot of attention to small details and hints of possible affinities, once again showing a sensibility which is usually not attributed to men.

Obinze's emotionality is further delineated when he recalls the death of his beloved mother and the e-mail he sent Ifemelu to give her the bad news. Along with the clear reference to his grief – which clearly debunks stereotypes regarding men as less likely to exhibit their mourning (Doka & Martin 2000:100) – it is interesting to notice the coda of one of his e-mails to Ifemelu, in which he confesses her that she was the only one who could understand him (Adichie 2013: 371): he thus openly shows Ifemelu his feelings and subsequently regrets having disclosed too much his emotional sphere and most intimate thoughts.

The sensible and protective personality of Obinze has already been presented in chapter 4 when discussing the way in which he relates to Ifemelu at the beginning of their long distance relationship; these aspects occur even when Obinze is the main actor within the narrative focalization, namely when Ifemelu writes him that Dike attempted suicide. His first reaction is in fact to take a plane and fly to America to "be with her, console her, help Dike, make everything right" (Adichie 2013:373). His attitude

towards Ifemelu is thus still protective, since he wants her and her family to be safe from pain even if they are not together anymore.

The emotive component of Obinze becomes definitively clear in the last section of *Americanah*, namely when he starts the extramarital affair with Ifemelu and, after many vicissitudes, he realizes that he is still in love with her in a very romantic way: “It was strange how lost of lustre everything was without Ifemelu, even the taste of his favourite beer was different.” (Adichie 2013: 456). Moreover he thinks of her routine, trying to imagine what she is doing when he is not with her and regretting not to have taken part in all what she has done without him (Adichie 2013:456-457); as a consequence of this epiphany, he decides to leave Kosi and to be openly in love with Ifemelu. Obinze thus offers a meaningful contribution to masculine romance by adopting and offering the reader a sensibility usually negated to man. Although the story concludes in a rather classic way, namely with the male character coming back to female protagonist and declaring his love and intention to leave everything for her, Obinze differs from other male characters since his emotive sphere and conflicting feelings are relevant topics within the narrative structure and contributes in the characterization of his figure. His ambivalent feelings and peculiar attitudes are not censored but fully reported by the narrative voice, which stresses how Obinze’s masculinity does indeed comprehend an emotive component which has been widely denied to men by culture, as denounced by Adichie.

Before concluding, it must be noticed that the complex and multifaceted ways in which he experiences his love for Ifemelu are presented as innocent and spontaneous and, above all, as coherent to his masculinity: experiencing and uttering his emotions namely do not threaten his power and wealth as usually thought when accepting the mainstream dichotomy of masculinity-emotionality. In this sense, Obinze fosters thus a different conceptualization of masculinity which embraces all the aspects of emotionality, proving that many behaviour in love do not belong uniquely to women but are actually common to both sexes.

6.3 A Statement of Desire: Re-shaping Men's Approach to Female Sexuality

Along with the approach of Obinze to love, a core aspect of the narrative episodes in which he is a focalizer is sexuality. Interestingly enough, when considering sex Obinze pays a particular attention to the way in which the female counterpart approaches to the matter: Obinze faces two distinct female approaches to sex, namely the free and feminist one of Ifemelu (who fulfils her sexual pleasure instead of merely submitting to her lover's) and the more rigid and religion-influenced one of his wife Kosi.

This section aims to focus firstly on the sexual experiences of Obinze with Ifemelu both in his adolescence and adulthood, and secondly on his sexual life in his marriage, to better understand how he perceives female sexuality and whether he resembles or debunks mainstream representations of male sexuality as indifferent towards female pleasure and sexual independence.

As it has been suggested in the previous chapters, Obinze is characterized in his adolescence as dominated by a sexual passion towards Ifemelu and lacking a sufficient knowledge about contraception, mainly because of the initial exclusion from the sexual education taught Ifemelu by his mother. Since the character of Obinze is portrayed as a focalizer uniquely when adult, little is said on his own approach to sex as an adolescent; nevertheless this emerges from the narrative passages in which he remembers his relationship with Ifemelu from a sexual point of view. For instance, he recalls the first time he saw Ifemelu's breast and how she experienced sexual arousal, often honestly uttering it in a playful way such as writing in his notes "*I'm longing for ceiling*" (Adichie 2013:20) and subsequently arousing him. Obinze, moreover, recalls in details his first sexual experiences, namely all the "simulations" of sex with her, underlying their movements and kisses and how they were looking forward to having real sex. (ibid.) Interestingly enough, Obinze's description of their first sexual experiences mainly focuses on Ifemelu's arousal and sexual behaviour, suggesting his attention to her pleasure. It thus emerges how, in Obinze's memories, the two experienced sex in a spontaneous and playful way.

An interesting aspect that must be stressed is that during their first moment of intimacy Ifemelu implicitly confesses Obinze that she has already experienced it with

other boys, but she stressed how with Obinze sex is different: he is surprised by her honesty and admires her behaviour (which quite differs from the other girls') rather than be angry at her for having had other boys before him. It is thus clear that his approach to female sexuality is positive, since he both pays attention to female pleasure and at the same time does not deny Ifemelu sexual freedom but, on the contrary, appreciates her spontaneity and sincerity.

A more detailed description of his way of experiencing sex with Ifemelu occurs later in the novel, namely when he has an extramarital affair with her and ponders whether to leave Kosi or not; in doing so, he firstly compares the two women in their ways of perceiving female sexuality and mainly focuses on Ifemelu's. He recalls how Ifemelu often asks him not to come and to wait for her orgasm and describes her physical reaction to pleasure: in doing so, he underlines how the female protagonist "expected to be satisfied" and how he felt consequently "accomplished to have satisfied her", when she achieved her pleasure (Adichie 2013:462). Therefore, he recognizes the importance for women to be sexually satisfied and suggests how this consequently positively influences his own sexuality as well. His attention to these issues must not be undervalued: in doing so, the male protagonist in fact approaches to sexuality in a more egalitarian and open-minded way if compared to other negative representations of men as highly critical of certain female sexual behaviour and indifferent to women's achievement of orgasms.

Along with the peculiar observation of her body during the sexual intercourse, Obinze recalls the shape of Ifemelu especially when he misses her and by thinking of her body is consequently aroused (Adichie 2013:457): it is clear how love and physical attraction are intertwined even in Obinze's mind and how the narrating voice fully reports episode of male arousal, thus offering a balanced representation of sexuality.

Whereas the sex experienced with Ifemelu is positive and satisfactory for both the protagonists due to their approach to the matter, the marital sex for Obinze is not positive nor fair. As Obinze himself notices, Kosi's approach to sex is namely a passive action of submitting and offering which is not linked to her own desire, but, rather, to a religion-imposed necessity:

It was not a statement of desire, her caressing his chest and reaching down to take his penis in her hand, but a votive offering. A few months ago, she had said she wanted to start seriously “trying for our son”. She did not say “ trying for our second child”, she said “ trying for our son” and it was the kind of thing she learned in her church.

(Adichie 2013:461)

Kosi’s sexuality is thus not spontaneous nor satisfactory but rather based on a marital and religious duty, namely assuring Obinze a son: her subsequent obsessive approach to sex is not linked to her own desire, as he notices, but is uniquely the means by which she can reach a social goal imposed to women.

This aspect further emerges from the following description of a sexual intercourse with his wife Kosi, during which the male protagonist notices how she highly differs from Ifemelu in perceiving and performing her sexuality:

She [Ifemelu] expected to be satisfied, but Kozi did not. Kozi always met his touch with complaisance, and sometimes he would imagine her pastor telling her that a wife should have sex with her husband, even if she didn’t feel like it, otherwise the husband would find solace in a Jezebel.

(Adichie 2013: 462)

Obinze stresses thus firstly Kosi’s passivity in performing sex: he notices how she tries to please him by almost mocking her pleasure but does not claim this back as Ifemelu does. Furthermore, he links her sexual behaviour with a religious schemata which significantly limits Kosi in performing a positive sexuality: sex is namely perceived by Kosi as a strict duty that she must fulfil in order to keep the family together and implicitly guarantee a dynasty to her husband. The wife is thus supposed to be always ready to fulfil her partner’s lust, even though she does not want to have sexual intercourses.

Obinze is aware of the strict and misleading sexual education imposed by certain religious branches to women: this becomes clear even when he notices the jealousy of Kosi of young single women. The wife seems in fact constantly in need to protect her husband from other temptations and dislikes girl for being a potential threat to her

marriage, even though (at least before Ifemelu's return) Obinze does not even think of cheating on her. As it will be discussed in chapter 8, Kosi lays off one of her servants just because she had condoms in her bag (Adichie 2013:33-34): interestingly enough, whereas Obinze tries to understand the reasons why the girl tried to protect herself by bringing condoms, Kosi accuses her of being a prostitute, thus linking immediately sex with sin. Obinze is surprised by her refusal of considering possible previous sexual harassment and proves to be far more sensible to the issue than his wife, although allegedly women are supposed to be more sympathetic towards victim of rape and sexual harassment than men (Weir and Wrightsman 1990, cited in Martin 2005: 167). Therefore, whereas Obinze's view on female sexuality is based on a more egalitarian and objective point, his wife's vision is stricter and based on religion: in Kosi's view, sex is uniquely perceived as a marital duty that must be fulfilled to keep the husband close and guarantee him children; however, the same act presents a negative connotation which forbids her to claim her own pleasure. (Adichie 2013:35)

Interestingly enough, when Obinze starts the extramarital affair with Ifemelu, not only does he avoid sexual intercourses with his wife, but also he cannot concretely get an erection (Adichie 2013:462); this reaction seems to differ from the role that he should resemble in the marital sex according to Kosi's view, who is worried merely because this situation reverses what she has been taught about sex and marriage by religion.

To conclude, even though the few examples of the descriptions of Obinze's sexuality with Ifemelu both in his adulthood and adolescence focus on Ifemelu's perception and action in sexuality, these are nevertheless significant in understanding how the representation of a different masculinity works in *Americanah*. As a matter of fact, in considering sex with Ifemelu, Obinze does not hold a dominant position which has often been treated as most masculine and desirable for men: on the contrary, he pays a lot of attention to the way in which Ifemelu freely experiences (as much as requires) sexual satisfaction in adulthood, and to the honesty and playfulness of Ifemelu's sex as adolescent, almost feeling nostalgic of this equalitarian sexual experience. At the same time, he is highly critical of misleading connotations given to female sexuality that lead women not to experience sex and pleasure in a positive way, as his wife Kosi proves. In this sense, by not paying uniquely attention to his own pleasure but at the same time

observing critically his partners' sexuality, he thus offers a different perspective on men and sex which debunks thus the negative stereotypes related to the matter.

6.4 *Men and Sensibility: Fostering a New Representation of Black Manliness*

This first chapter on the male co-protagonist of *Americanah* has focused on the way in which Obinze is portrayed in both experiencing love and sex by considering all the passages in which he is the main focalizer and deals either with Ifemelu or his wife Kosi. The analysis of his attitudes towards Ifemelu before meeting her again in Nigeria has highlighted several aspects linked to emotionality which are usually associated with women, such as jealousy, insecurity, impatience and romance; these are not put in the background by the narrating voice but, on the contrary, are the core aspect of the narrative structure in Obinze's sections.

The same innovative attitude of the protagonist occurs when he relates to sex: namely, he shows a marked sensibility in considering female pleasure and sexual satisfaction and denounces misleading sexual educations that limits women in approaching to sex. In doing so, he shows not a phallogentric approach to sex, but rather an equalitarian and open-minded attention to issues related to women. Additionally, he contributes in defining Ifemelu's character by confirming her feminist and strong approach to sex.

Americanah thus portrays a quite different black masculinity, proving how this has been frequently wrongly conceptualized and misrepresented. The novel literary releases men from their cold and narrow cages by offering a black male character who is frequently portrayed when dealing with emotions: these, however, do not threaten his social or economic status but rather contributes in making him choose a healthier and happier approach to life by avoiding and debunking gender expectations, as it will be discussed in the following chapter.

7. UNDER PRESSURE: MALE EXPECTATIONS

7.1 *And you May Ask Yourself, well, How Did I Get Here?* Men and Social Constrictions

In 1981 experimental music producers Brian Eno and David Byrne wrote and released a song that was about to become a masterpiece of Eighties' music, namely Talking Heads' *Once in a Lifetime*: the song, well-known for its almost obsessive yet minimal synth riff, foregrounds David Byrne's iconic voice which narrates the story of a male musical *persona* facing a midlife crisis and existentially recanting all the goals he has achieved in his life (such as a large car, a beautiful house and a beautiful house), so as to realize that his life is not what he really wanted. The song thus reports a recurrent theme within Twentieth-Century literature and culture, namely the midlife crisis of individuals often consequent to the pressure of social expectations and constrictions. However, this has been rarely discussed in its linked to masculinity, to understand how gender expectations play a crucial role in leading to such strong and total crisis.

Much emphasis has been given to the study of the social and cultural expectations regarding women in, for instance, finding a husband, starting a family and submitting their independence in order to keep their family together (De Beauvoir 1949). However, when it comes to men, still little is said about these issues, probably because of the initial emphasis of feminist studies and the fact that the social restrictions imposed on them include nevertheless a wider independence and a dominant position.

Nevertheless, the increasing attention given to the analysis of masculinity proposed by Men's Studies has provided a new perspective on the issue which has highlighted several aspects of social impositions on men previously ignored. In many cultures (such as in the Nigerian one considered in the current work) men, as much as women, are in fact supposed to reach a wealthy social status, find a perfect match and settle down: as a consequence of the rush imposed on men as well, many marriages are

often unhappy and based on social and economic interests, leading thus often to cheatings.

The ambivalence of these complex social impositions on men is a central issue raised in *Americanah*: the male protagonist Obinze is in fact portrayed in his adulthood facing a crisis due to the clash between what he is supposed to be and do and his real feelings. This is worsened, particular, by the extramarital affair with Ifemelu which helps him to realize that the marriage with his wife Kosi was mainly the result of a social expectation rather than based on feelings. Even though he is a wealthy and a successful business man with a beautiful wife and daughter, he in fact realizes that he does not feel at ease with his life:

He had begun, in the past months, to feel bloated from all he had acquired – the family, the houses, the bank accounts – and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to pick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free. He was no longer sure, he had in fact never been sure, whether he liked his life because he really did or whether he liked it because he was supposed to.

(Adichie 2013:21)

This passage highly resembles Talking Heads' lyrics in presenting a male character who experiences a sort of epiphany and puts in doubt the positive value of all the goals he has reached both on a professional and personal level. Even though the aim of the song was not to denounce the narrow social restrictions on men, this comparison nevertheless proves how the issues raised by Adichie both on a literary and social level are not uniquely Nigeria-rooted nor a contemporary phenomenon, but rather that they occur in different social and temporal instances and have influenced different artistic products.

The aim of this second chapter on Obinze is thus to highlight the effects of manliness-based expectations on the male co-protagonist: in order to do so, three main aspects are discussed, namely the job career and wealth of Obinze and his attitude towards it; his marriage with Kosi and the issues of adultery and divorce in relation to parental duties.

An interesting preliminary remark must be stressed before beginning the analysis. The social expectations and limits that lead Obinze to this mid-life crisis are not the result of a "foreclosure status" in the development of his identity as an

adolescent, to put in Marcia's terms (1966): namely, the achievement of a prestigious social and career status was not imposed him when he was younger by his mother, since the latter seems to be as much critical as his son in perceiving certain misleading limitations imposed by society. On the contrary, Obinze's crisis comes when he passively starts to accept the silent social requirements that are linked to the wealthy Nigerian class he becomes a part of.

7.2 *Outrageous Wealth: Chief and Thieves*

When firstly introduced in the novel as a focalizer, Obinze is presented as a successful member of the wealthy Nigerian class (Adichie 2013:19). The narrating voice highlights in Obinze's first appearance his wealth by richly describing it in terms of objects (such as his Range Rover, BlackBerry and house) which are marked by the stress of the use of the possessive adjective. It thus puts the protagonist on a upper social dimension and stresses the material aspects of his social achievement.

His wealth and approach to it are made increasingly clearer by the description of Obinze's coming back home and describing it as if he were looking at it for the first time:

Inside was his furniture imported from Italy, his wife, his two-year-old daughter, Buchi, the nanny Christiana,[...] and the new housegirl Marie, who had been brought from Benin Republic after his wife decided that Nigerian housegirls were unsuitable. The rooms would all be cool, air-conditioner vents swaying quietly and the kitchen would be fragrant with curry and thyme, and CNN would be downstairs, while the television upstairs would be turned on Cartoon Network, and pervading it all would be the undisturbed air of well-being.

(Adichie 2013: 21)

Interestingly enough, Obinze puts on the same level the material aspects of his life and the people who are involved in it: in particular, this holds true for the domestics which

are linguistically defined with expressions usually related to objects such as “brought from” and “unsuitable”; additionally, the use of the passive form further stresses how a social hierarchy is mirrored also in his private and domestic everyday life. It must be noticed that the description presents numerous references to the Western culture, such as the air-conditioner, the CNN and Cartoon Network which are intertwined with elements of the Nigerian one (such as the use of spices). This atmosphere of liberalism and well-being seems to be subtly despised by the protagonist in his description, which reports in actual fact mainly the point of view of his wife when considering the servants and the peace and regularity of their life.

The protagonist’s critical attitude (subtly hinted at in the initial passage) is made clearer when Obinze criticizes the rituals of Kosi before the Chief’s party: the male protagonist seems in fact not to be willing to wear the formal and expensive clothes as Kosi wants him to do, but rather to prefer a more casual outfit. Furthermore, he criticizes his wife for having spent an “outrageous sum” to buy his clothes for the party (Adichie 2013:22): in doing so, he makes clear his attitude towards the liberal approach of Kosi in being eager and happy to conform to the Nigerian upper-class and etiquette and, consequently, to sport their wealth. Despite his opinion, however, he does not utter it but, on the contrary, passively submits to his wife’s decision wearing what she has bought to please her.

At the Chief’s party, the narrating voice reports Obinze’s thoughts and critical observations by adopting a stream of consciousness. The male protagonist observes the rich attendants and meditates upon the way in which he has changed from a “normal” person to the rich, wealthy man as he was supposed to be. In doing so, he initially notices that “to have money, it seemed, was to be consumed by money” (Adichie 2013:25): Obinze thus linguistically stresses the passivity in embracing and performing richness; in this reversed *scenario*, money is personified and even possesses men who, on the contrary, become dehumanized because of its control. Therefore, Obinze is portrayed from the beginning as not completely integrated in the social dimension to which he is supposed to belong: although he is expected to be happy and easily join all the privileges of his social status, he contrarily perceives it as a cage which makes him unhappy and proves to be aware of the negative mechanisms at its basis.

Another significant signal of Obinze's epiphany in not accepting the life he has occurs when, always at the Chief's party, he realizes the ways in which he submits to the Chief by offering the latter his total support:

"Chief, if there is something I can help you do, please tell me. You can depend on me." His own words surprised him. He had stepped out of himself. He was high on pepper soup. This was what it meant to hustle. He was in Lagos and he had to hustle.

(Adichie 2013:25)

Interestingly enough, his way of relating to the Chief is not masculine since it is marked by an unconscious promptness to submission usually related to femininity. This total submissive attitude surprises firstly Obinze himself, who consequently experiences both a sense of estrangement and epiphany: on the one hand, in fact, he does not recognize himself in behaving like this and almost comes to an identity crisis; on the other hand he admits he has become of the hustler of Lagos as many other business men, sensing thus to have betrayed his former "self". Therefore he implicitly blames himself for having lost his integrity and having become someone else just to adapt to the standards of the newly achieved social class.

In doing so, moreover, he thinks about how differently he is treated now that he has become a rich man. In the first instance, he realizes that his wealth gave him power: whereas when he was younger he was not given the Visa by the American embassy because he was young and penniless, in the present he has been warmly welcomed by America and easily given a Visa because of his rich bank account (Adichie 2013:27). At the same time, however, he highlights also the negative aspects of this privileged position he has reached, since this has significantly limited his freedom and made him change, as previously stated: he senses that he has become that type of wealthy Nigerian man he was supposed to be and does not positively relate to this:

This was what he now was, the kind of Nigerian expected to declare a lot of cash at the airport. It brought to him a disorienting strangeness, because his mind had not changed

at the same pace as his life, and he felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be.

(Adichie 2013:27)

Obinze makes thus a clear distinction between what he is supposed to be and his real and actual personality, which are significantly in contrast. Although his social status has remarkably changed and he has gained richness, his mind is the same and has not been influenced nor touched in concrete by the mentality, hypocrisy and corruption of the Nigerian upper-class; as a consequence, he experiences a marked sense of estrangement and emptiness, of which he is highly critical and increasingly more aware.

Interestingly enough, in perceiving the strictness imposed by the upper class, not only does he recognize how he has conformed to something that does not resemble his real self, but also he is critical of other people's behaviour in conforming to certain behavioural patterns, in particular of his wife Kosi's "eagerness to conform"(Adichie 2013:29). An example of this attitude occurs when he joins a conversation about the educational system and which schools are the best to raise wealthy children: whereas when he was younger he admired and envied rich people especially for their better educational opportunities, now that he sees what lies beyond richness does not appreciate it anymore, nor aspires to send his daughter Buchi in one of those schools (Adichie 2013:29). In doing so he is not afraid to utter his opinion, which is in significant contrast to the one of Kosi's friend and does not try to negotiate his position as suggested by the wife: on the contrary he brazenly criticizes the point of view of his interlocutors. This scene further proves how compromises and convenient silences are required not only to women, but also to male members of the upper-class in prestigious contexts, such as the one described: therefore, Obinze breaks a social rule by expressing his own marked opinion and publicly criticizing his wife's friend.

As much as highlighting the strong crisis of Obinze and the hint at his reactions to it, the narrating voice reports however even the ambivalent aspect of Obinze's passive acceptance of certain behaviour typical of the rich class. For instance, during the first meeting with Ifemelu he alludes to the money that he must send to hundreds of students in his village and from his mother's one: to the surprised reaction of Ifemelu he somehow attempts an apologize by claiming "I do what rich people are supposed to do".

(Adichie 2013:438). Therefore, even if highly critical of all the social expectations related to his social class, he nevertheless accomplishes them and submits to what he is supposed to do.

This first section has proved how Obinze partially resembles the musical *persona* of Talking Heads' *Once in a Lifetime*: he experiences in fact both an epiphany in realizing that what he has achieved was not what he wanted but merely what he was supposed to achieve, and at the same time a marked sense of estrangement, since in adapting to the new mechanisms at the basis of the upper-class he does not recognize himself anymore and blames himself for doing what he does not feel up to only in order not to break social rules and expectations. Despite the few episodes of rebellion against this strict impositions and etiquette, Obinze's critical position is rarely uttered: he in fact passively conforms to the upper-class behaviour and expectations even when he negatively judges them.

7.3 *Find a Girl, Settle Down: A Touchstone of Realness*

As previously hinted at, the importance of finding a good match and settling down has initially been attributed more to women than to men: feminist discourse has highlighted how, particularly in the past, marriage and respectability were two core requirements that women had to achieve in order to have a better social position and reputation. As the analysis of Ifemelu's approach to marriage has proved, the consequences of this cultural and social impositions are still evident even today in some cultures, such as the Nigerian one: women are namely better considered when married and submitted to their husbands. However, feminist discourse has additionally reinforced "the notion that men and women face very different experiences in family life" (Kaufman and Goldscheier 2007:31). As a consequence, men have been initially considered by academics in their relationship with and need of marriage mainly in order to understand whether they are more privileged than women in marriage (Glenn, 1998; Waite and Gallagher 2000).

The expectations imposed by society and culture on men must nevertheless be taken into account as well, since men are not entirely free in shaping their affective life

and marriage: even though the patriarchal system has always privileged them and limited their freedom in a far more inferior way if compared to women, this however has also negatively shaped the attitude and decisions of many men when relating to love and marriage. In particular, as suggested by bell hooks (2003:111), black masculinity cannot be defined anti-sexist, for black men are usually taught to consider themselves the household of the family and subsequently superior to women. Additionally, the author suggests that black men are influenced by these beliefs even today, since they often choose their partners among peers whose careers are good but yet always inferior to theirs.

In this frame, the analysis of Obinze's marriage can offer an interesting case study on the consequences of social expectations imposed on men when choosing their partners and relating to them. The male character, as it will be proved, namely is initially significantly influenced by the need to find the "perfect" wife, and manages just in the end to realize his unhappiness and desire to look for a type of relationship that differs from what imposed by the society.

An implicit yet fundamental requirement for Obinze's newly achieved position is marrying a good woman with whom to start a "perfect family" with a numerous (and preferably male) offspring. Whereas initially Obinze is not aware of this social pressure, he comes to realize just in his adulthood how this has led him to choose Kosi as his perfect wife, envied and desired by all the other men. Kosi in fact resembles the prototypical perfect woman according to a chauvinistic system: first of all, she is presented as insecure and totally depended on his man, as her constant need to be reassured when she is not physically close to Obinze proves (Adichie 2013:21); secondly, it is stressed from the very beginning her girlish features, such as her voice (ibid.) and her extremely beautiful appearance (Adichie 2013:22).

In particular, Obinze mentions her glow fair skin, which often leads people to think of her as mixed-race and how this, to his astonishment, makes her happy. The figure of Kosi thus resembles the Nigerian standards of beauty previously discussed in Chapter two: the narrating voice makes clear how Obinze is not insensible to them (even though he does not fully understand and subtly criticizes them) but, on the contrary, he is charmed by her beauty, which plays a significant role in making him decide to marry her.

When at the Chief's party Obinze observes his wife both in the way in which she relates to the other guests and she is admired by them, he recognizes that despite her beauty and graciousness, what really characterize Kosi are her submissive attitude and her constant need to be considered a "wholesomely agreeable person" (Adichie 2013:29). The way in which he perceives this attitude is, however, sceptical: "There was something immodest about her modesty: it announced itself" (ibid.). Obinze thus suggests that her prostration and education are not spontaneous but rather forced and imposed by a cultural and social education that she has unconditionally assimilated: as he notices, in fact, she truly chooses peace instead of the truth and is "always eager to conform" (Adichie 2013:29). Therefore, the character of Kosi resembles all the features imposed on women which, on the contrary, Ifemelu blames and debunks: interestingly enough, even though Obinze knows that it would be unsuitable to their social position, he wishes that "Kosi feared less, conformed less" (Adichie 2013:34).

During his marriage crisis, namely when he begins to realize that he made a mistake by marrying Kosi even though he did what he was supposed to, he recalls all the past episodes which should have signalled him the negative aspects of Kosi's personality. Among these, it stands out her reaction to the birth of their first daughter Buchi:

"Darling, we'll have a boy next time". He had recoiled. He realized then that she did not know him. She did not know him at all. She did not know he was indifferent about the gender of their child. And he felt a gentle contempt towards her, for her wanting a boy because they were supposed to want a boy, and for being able to say, fresh from birthing their first child, those words "we'll have a boy next time." Perhaps he should have talked more with her, about the baby they were expecting and about everything else, because although they exchanged pleasant sounds and were good friends and shared comfortable silences, they did not really talk.

(Adichie 2013:458)

Instead of being happy, Kosi's first concern is that she had given birth to a girl instead of a boy, a far more desirable offspring among many cultures. In doing so, she thinks to

have not fulfilled her duty as a wife and, more generally, as a woman and consequently apologises to Obinze. Interestingly enough, the latter is far more open-minded than his wife and is almost disgusted by her reaction. In doing so, he feels the negative consequences of gender expectations both on Kosi and on their marriage and, at the same time, despises them. Additionally, he blames himself for having taken for granted that he and Kosi should be on the same page: in doing so, he realizes how their marriage is not based on love, but rather on friendship and a conventionality which has silenced him and made him passively adapt to Kosi's mentality.

A second significant episode recalled by Obinze is their first meeting at a wedding and the way in which she defined the bride as a "true woman of virtue" (Adichie 2013:459) without being ironic: in doing so, he admits that this foreshadowed her approach to sexuality and conformity and yet he did not notice it. Furthermore, he increasingly realizes that at the basis of his flirting with her, it clearly lies his attraction to her perfect beauty instead of a set of shared interests and affinity, such as the one he had with Ifemelu. Interestingly enough, just later Obinze admits that the newly achieved richness had confused him in shaping his relationship with her: "If he could be with her, so extraordinary beautiful and yet so ordinary, predictable and domestic and dedicated, the perhaps his life would start to seem believably his" (ibid.). Kosi, therefore, functions both as a further achievement in his new social position and, at the same time, as a desperate attempt to make him like and accustom himself to the new prestigious social class.

Kosi becomes part of his newly achieved life in which he is supposed to find a woman like her, namely beautiful, devoted and servile in everyday life, who takes care of him and wants to settle down. Even though he "recognized, and disliked her manipulation" in trying to settling down as soon as possible with him (Adichie 2013:460), he is nevertheless passively led to accept her as a wife and start a family, hoping that Kosi would help him in making sense of his strange feeling of uneasiness. This compromised and liberal marriage works, however, "until he owned his new life" thanks to the extramarital affair with Ifemelu: in this he experiences a completely different love, free from social impositions and realizes that he and Kosi do not share the same interests.

As the discussed passages prove, therefore, Kosi and Obinze's marriage lacks of emotional intimacy, as Thompson and Walker would have it (1989:846), since the two do not have a successful communication in particular of their feelings and do not share the same interests. Furthermore, the marital life of Obinze proves how misleading social and cultural assumptions about marriage as a fundamental and urgent step in men's life may significantly affect men in experiencing love and subtly forcing them to take the first good opportunity to start a family: whereas Kosi is fully certain of this approach to love, Obinze, on the contrary, is influenced by these just at the very beginning of their relationship and marriage. Due to the uneasiness provoked by this imposed step he comes to an epiphany and to understand that his approach to love in his social dimension differs from what his beliefs and feelings so as to decide to take his life back and act for the first time.

7.4 Keep the Family Together! Marriage and the “White-People Behaviour”

When Obinze becomes definitively aware of the mistake he made in following the social expectations and subsequently marrying Kosi, he wonders why he did not tell his wife immediately that he was in love with Ifemelu. In doing so, he recalls the first time he met Ifemelu and told Kosi about it: her reaction, curiously enough, mocks an indifference which was clearly not the case of (Adichie 2013:462-463). In this conflicting scenario in which he both understands his mistakes and yet cannot fully reacts to the social impositions and restrictions he submitted himself to, he attempts an apology by convincing himself that he wanted to prepare Kosi in stages instead of admitting immediately his love for Ifemelu.

Therefore, Obinze finds difficulties in confessing Kosi his intention to leave her and stay with Ifemelu, in particular because of his awareness of the his paternal and marital role. Nevertheless, due to his marked unhappiness and breakdown, he comes to understand that he cannot accept anymore the identity and behaviour imposed on him by society and confesses Kosi his affair with Ifemelu: “I'm not happy, Kosi. I love somebody else. I want a divorce. I'll make sure you and Buchi lack nothing” (Adichie

2013:463). In his confession, he immediately foregrounds his feelings, previously silenced, both in his uneasiness in their marriage and in the positive love of his extramarital affair; additionally, he stresses that he will pursue his paternal duties in helping materially his daughter and her.

The most interesting aspect of this narrative scene is, however, the reaction of Kosi: instead of wanting to know more about the affair and his decision, she silences him and subsequently kneels before him begging him not to leave his family. In doing so, she immediately blackmails him by stressing how she and Buchi need him: as a consequence of this emotive blackmail, Obinze feels a marked sense of guilt, since he is accused of not pursuing his paternal and male duties. Interestingly enough, he associates Kosi's reaction to her way of preying at the church and somehow wishes that Buchi won't become like her mother when grown up: he admits that he wished she were furious at him instead of passively accepting his adultery and begging him not to leave (Adichie 2013:464).

Obinze initially tries to be deaf at Kosi's requests and further stresses that he loves another woman and cannot help it; to his response, Kosi changes attitudes and utters an interesting reaction that condenses her approach to marriage and love:

It's not about another woman, Obinze. [...] It's about keeping this family together! You took a vow before God. I am a good wife. We have marriage. Do you think that you can destroy your marriage because your old girlfriend came into town? Do you know what it means to be a responsible father? You have a responsibility to that child downstairs! What you do today can ruin her life and make her damaged until the day she dies! And all because you have had acrobatic sex that reminded you of your time in university?

(Adichie 2013:464)

Her reaction makes clear that Kosi puts her marriage and respectability before everything, so as to be ready not only to forget his adultery but even to allow him doing it again as long as he does not leave his family. In doing so, she stresses the religious value of their union, thus emphasizing his sense of guilt for having betrayed a solemn pact. It must be noticed, however, that Kosi almost justifies his adultery and does not condemn Obinze's sexual freedom *per se*: namely, she rather accuses Obinze of having

put his sexual appetite before his responsibilities to his daughter, risking to ruin her future. In this sense, her approach to men's sexuality resembles the mainstream Nigerian conceptualization of men as more free to perform their extramarital sexuality in monogamous marriages, as stressed by Mitsunanga et al.(2005). Moreover, she denies Obinze the chance of having serious intentions with Ifemelu and loving her by considering his affair just a matter of "acrobatic sex": therefore, she reminds him the expectations and social impositions that he must pursue.

Facing these strong statements, Obinze is in particular stunned by the fact that she knew his affair with Ifemelu from the very beginning and yet pretended nothing was happening. Hence he feels humiliated and "multi-layered" guilty for both wanting to leave her and having married her at all: in admitting that he should not have done so, he is persuaded that he somehow owns something to her and, after a panic attack, decides that he must think of his daughter (Adichie 2013:465). It must be noticed that nor Kosi's reaction, nor Obinze's decision to stay with his family mention love as a fundamental aspect of marriage: therefore, even the protagonist is convinced of the mere social and religious value of marriage and, as a consequence, is initially ready to submit his feelings to this social imposition, partially because of his daughter Buchi.

The morning after the confession, Kosi's behaviour is aimed to further blackmail her husband: namely, she puts on their bed colour-coordinates outfits for her, Obinze and Buchi, to stress how they are a family and how this must be kept together. Moreover, she prepares him his favourite pancakes and acts as the perfect wife, pretending that nothing happened. Although Obinze cannot make her behaviour out, he leans back into the ease of Kosi's denial (as he himself admits) instead of talking again about divorce and going to Ifemelu to fix their relationship (ibid.).

Two worth mentioning scenes occur when they subsequently go to a friend's baby party and pretend to be a normal family. On the one hand, the narrating voice reports Obinze's inner thoughts, which suggests how he still thinks about what he was about to do and how his first concern regards Buchi instead of making Kosi suffer: namely he does not want his daughter to hate him in the future and plans to stay in Lagos even if he should divorce from Kosi. On the other hand, at the party Obinze meets his friend Makkus and has a conversation with him which stands out as one of the most crucial points within the Obinze's narration: he confesses his friends that he wants

to marry Ifemelu. Interestingly enough, Makkus' first reaction is not to consider the divorce but to joke about Obinze's possible conversion to Islam. When Obinze stresses that his intention are serious and he wants to divorce from Kosi, he replies:

Many of us didn't marry the woman we truly 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 white-people behaviour. If your wife has a son with 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 wife but you want to leaving her for another woman? *Haba*. We don't behave like that, please.

(Adichie 2013: 470)

Makkus' significant reply makes clear how marriage can be often a social imposition that leads men to get married not when they are really in love but rather when they are allegedly ready to settle down and start a family to fulfil their social dimension. In this sense, men's adultery becomes a tolerated response to the unhappiness of marriage, whereas divorce is treated as an extremely incautious and negative Western fashion. Related to this latter issue, it is interesting to notice the reasons of divorce which are, according to Makkus, acceptable: the first regards a socio-anthropologic aspect, namely the woman's adultery since this can undermine the legitimacy of the offspring; the second regards domestic violence on women, which is not tolerated by the society. Therefore, Makkus stands out as an emblem of social and cultural hypocrisies in giving marriage misleading features which clearly do not include love as the basic element of this social and religious union.

Despite the marked social pressure and negative influences of Kosi and Makkus' speeches, Obinze manages to get rid of all social constrictions and to act by going to Ifemelu and finally uttering and admitting that his marriage was a "floating-along" contentment and that he should have never married Kosi, since he knew from the beginning that something was missing (Adichie 2013:477). In confessing Ifemelu his love and decision, he stresses that he wants to see Buchi as much as he can, showing the awareness of his parental duties even in the case of divorce and begs Ifemelu to give their relationship a chance.

After a difficult and unfertile attempt to debunk of negative social expectations which suffocated his feelings and real personality, therefore, Obinze manages to claim his real “self” back and to act according to his personal feelings instead of basing his decisions on what he is supposed to do and be, shedding a light on the negative aspects of social restrictions and impositions even on men in relation to marriage and respectability.

7.5 This is not my Beautiful House, This is not my Beautiful Wife! Obinze and Byrne

This chapter has focused on a significant aspect related to masculinity that has been largely underrated, namely the negative implications of social impositions and expectations on men when shaping their career and affectivity. The figure of Obinze is portrayed as continually negotiating and meditating on his social status and achievements, to which he relates in an ambiguous and complex way. As a matter of fact, whereas he is supposed to be proud and happy to have gained such a wealthy and respectable position within the Nigerian society, he cannot fully accept its mechanism nor uncritically submit to its requirements. As a consequence, he both despises certain aspects of the Nigerian upper-class and at the same time realizes that he himself has become part of it.

This complex dichotomy of social-personal expectations is mirrored also in his marriage: he initially followed the implicit social requirements and fulfilled what he was supposed to do, namely find a respectable, beautiful and servile wife to start a family; in doing so he however senses that he is not emotionally close to Kosi and that the latter is hypocritical in putting respectability and appearance before their feelings and dignity, especially when she is told about his extramarital affair with Ifemelu. Hence, she is ready to forget and accept Obinze’s cheating in order to preserve their social reputation and keep their family together. On the other hand, Obinze is still malleable when he is accused of lacking of responsibilities towards his daughter and is about to passively stay with Kosi only to fulfil his paternal duties. Just at the end of the

novel, he manages to react to emotive blackmails and to contemplate a different compromise between his decision to leave Kosi and continue to be Buchi's father.

Americanah thus offers once again a clear and innovative perspective on masculinity in relation to, in this case, the Nigerian society and its silent impositions: in his experiencing both an epiphany and refusal of his social achievements, Obinze stands out as a peculiar literary alter ego of Talking Heads' *Once in a Lifetime*'s musical *persona*: both the men (despite their different national, temporal and fictional dimension) in fact, suddenly look at their lives, thinking about the way they have come to achieve "large automobiles, beautiful houses and a wives" just to finally deny the positive value of what they have gained. To this epistemic and ontological crisis, Obinze and his musical alter ego react differently, since uniquely Obinze manages to escape this negative and suffocating *scenario* and to claim back his real life by depriving it of social impositions.

However, both the fictional characters realize that what they have experienced in this peculiar epiphany has not suddenly appeared in front of them: after all, everything is "same as it ever was".

8. LIVING INVISIBLY: MIGRATION AND MEN

8.1 *Moving Men*: Immigration and Gender

The world is facing an extremely serious and widespread migration emergency due not only to the Syrian civil war, but also to the numerous conflicts and situations of extreme poverty of several African and Asian states that have forced individuals (if not entire populations) to leave their homeland and migrate in particular to European countries. This contemporary *scenario* sums up the main aspects of an historical phenomenon that has always been “closely related to economic, ecological and political conditions, problems or crisis” (Düvell:2006:210) and is putting to the test numerous political agendas. In trying to tackle the issue by proposing more efficient policies, however, several of these have at the same time offered misleading and negative portraits of the phenomenon and of the victims of these diasporas, as mirrored especially in mass media. Additionally, as suggested by Düvell (2006:5), due to the extremely complex nature of the phenomenon, which varies according to the historical, geographical and social context, most of the solutions adopted on an international level seems not to work efficiently to limit and better the thorn of illegal migration.

As a consequence of its complex features and political, social and economic implications, immigration plays a crucial role in the academic debate, in particular as an object of enquiry among socio-anthropological studies (see, for instance, Sassen’s pivotal research on migration and globalization in 1991 and 2007). These have shed a light on the different typologies of irregular migrations by proposing and discussing several taxonomies according to the their natures (Sassen 2007;Tapinos 2000) and possible different causes, which include also the will to find better career opportunities and escape economic crises.

To this precise typology belongs the migrant experience of the male protagonist of *Americanah*: as much as Ifemelu, Obinze in fact experiences a temporary situation of migration, since he leaves Nigeria after his graduation in order to find in London better

work opportunities which in his country are momentarily absent; however his experience differs from the female protagonist's since Obinze initially arrives to London with a temporary permission but, once this expires, he becomes *de facto* and illegal immigrant and invisible to society.

This final chapter studies Obinze's migrant experience in its most significant aspects in order to better understand the impact of this experience on his identity and whether *Americanah* fosters a different perspective on migration by giving voice to Obinze's issues faced during the migration process; in particular, by following the recent engendered approach to migration proposed by socio-anthropologic studies (see for instance Kofman et al. 2000; Hearn and Howson 2009), the chapter aims to understand the impact of this period of illegal immigration on his masculinity and approach to gender and sex issues. Being "socially constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts of gender relations" (Hibbins and Pease 2009:1), masculinity is in fact significantly touched by the migration process, since it redefines the social context in which this is performed and conceptualized.

The reasons that led Obinze to migrate to London are initially presented in their links to the tense socio-political situation of Nigeria portrayed in the novel; subsequently, his initial (and often humiliating) work experiences are discussed with a particular attention to the issue of illegal work. The third sections aims to shed a light on the emotive and sexual spheres of Obinze in relation to his approach to femininity and masculinity in the new cultural context he experiences. The fourth analysis considers the ambiguous attitudes and uncertainties of the protagonist towards integration, the fear of refugees in Britain and positive examples of Nigerian men's integrations. In conclusion, the final attempt of Obinze to become a legal citizen through a sham marriage is presented considering the policies regarding illegal immigration in the UK.

8.2 *Bottles and Bottles of Fanta: (Un)living the American Dream*

As the analysis of Ifemelu's story has highlighted, the two protagonists as adolescents grow up during a complex and tense political situation in Nigeria: the fictional context

of *Americanah* mirrors the actual economic crisis that reached its peak in the Nineties, when a significant number of students and young skilled people with means were almost forced to leave the country to find better career opportunities, consequently leading to the lack of skilled professionals in Nigerian economy (Falola and Heaton 2008:223). In particular, this difficult economic situation afflicts them during their university years: due to the strikes of several professors aimed to claim their wages, not only is Obinze's final leg of his education particularly fragmented, but also his family is forced to save up money to scratch a living since his mother is not paid by the government.

As a consequence of this precarious situation, Obinze escapes from the Nigerian reality by increasing his passion for America and portraying it as a place of richness even in its most common aspects of everyday life, such as the abundancy of Fanta bottles that, on the other hand, cannot be afforded by his family (Adichie 2013:233). America therefore becomes in his imaginary a place of wealth and opportunities where he can fulfil his plans and live the American dream. Whereas his initial reaction to the economic crisis is merely imaginary, this subsequently becomes concrete when the protagonist, fresh from graduation, decides to apply for his visa at the American embassy in Lagos (Adichie 2013:233). In doing so, he rigorously prepares himself to the interview by getting informed about the interviewer; despite his good will and university *curriculum*, he is nevertheless refused the Visa because "not qualified" (ibid.). After an initial stunned reaction and sense of failure, he tries over and over to get the Visa but, to his surprise, he is never given the application.

Interestingly enough, Obinze's mother tries to comfort his son by suggesting him that the increase of refusals is part of a more general change in America's policies that do not accept young men anymore because of the fear of terrorism (ibid.). Therefore, the refusal of Obinze must be understood on a twofold level: on the one hand, his skills and good education are lessened and not considered; on the other hand, his refusal is strictly linked to his origins and to a wrong conceptualization of Nigerian young newly graduated as a potential threat to America.

The impact of this event on the protagonist is crucial, even though initially margined by his mother's suggestion to wait before trying again to obtain the Visa and to look for a temporary job. This becomes clear, however, when all his applications and

travels to get interviewed are useless since he remains unemployed; furthermore, the marked delusion of the protagonist is further worsened when he gets to know that some of his friends with an inferior degree than his have nevertheless managed to find a job. In this frame, Obinze's masculinity is significantly put to the test by his unemployment, since work has always been considered one of the core components of masculinity and, in particular, as a key dimension of men's identity (Edwards 2006:7). Moreover, due to his unemployment, he is forced to live with his mother and be economically dependent on her instead of beginning his own life and fulfil his dreams. In depending on his female parent, therefore, he does not resemble the most significant requirements of masculinity, namely an economic independence, a successful career and dominance in being the householder and taking care of his family.

Saddened by this reversed *scenario*, he experiences an actual crisis and depression and spends his days reading and avoiding his mother who, on the other hand tries to reassure him that companies are flowering with the new Nigerian president (Adichie 2013:234): despite her attempt, he continues to perceive a marked sense of failure and estrangement both in not-living his present and in not finding a different plan. When his depression reaches its peak, Obinze's mother decides to act by putting his name in her British Visa application as her research assistant, in order to make him get a six-months visa and suggesting him to stay at his cousin Nicholas' house in the meantime. She resignedly comments her decision with " See what you can do with your life. Maybe you can go to America from there. I know that your mind is no longer here." (Adichie 2013:234). She thus admits that Obinze's mind has been uniquely shaped on his plans to go to America and that he has not fully recovered from this failure finding other destinations. On the other hand, Obinze meditates on his mother's reaction, realizing that she belongs to a different generation who resignedly does not understand contemporary Nigeria; furthermore, Obinze notices that by lying on her British visa, she has gone against two of her dearest values that she had taught him, namely sincerity and integrity, since she has lied for him. As a consequence, Obinze's sense of guilt and failure are increasingly more marked, even though the protagonist accepts his mother's decision.

The background of Obinze's decision to leave Nigeria is thus fully reported by the narrating voice which stresses the tense socio-political context represented in the

narrative that does not help new graduated in finding a good job position. In this precarious frame, Obinze's masculinity is significantly put to the test, since he is forced to be economically and emotionally dependent on his mother and cannot act concretely to live the life he had imagined was about to come after his graduation. In Obinze's case, the main push-pull factors of migration underlined by economists and sociologist (namely unemployment, better chances of employment and better pay) thus hold true, even though these do not sufficiently explain the multifaceted causes of migration (Sassen 2007:130-131). The crisis resulted from the unemployment significantly lessens the agency of the protagonist, as the final twist proves: it is namely his mother and not him who opts for a temporary migration to the UK even if this comes at a cost, namely the violation of some of the crucial values of his family.

8.3 *Dirty Epiphanies: Illegal Works, Legal Humiliations*

The background of Obinze's decision to migrate has highlighted how the male protagonist has entered in the UK legally (even though with a partially false motivation) with a six-months Visa; however, when his permission expires, he becomes an actual illegal immigrant. Obinze's case thus resembles a widely spread aspect of illegal migration, namely the case of those migrants who enter a country with a legal temporary permission but do not leave the country once this expires (Broeders and Engbersen 2007:1594; Tapinos 2000:16-17). Moreover, the migration process portrayed in *Americanah* highly resembles an actual increase of illegal migrate entrants and expulsions that the UK government experienced in particular starting from 1990 (Düvell 2006:50).

Obinze's first and most crucial issue as an immigrant in the UK is to find a job: despite his good education and skills, in fact, he cannot apply to good job offers because of his illegal status. As a consequence, he adopts a quite widespread solution among illegal immigrants, namely he assumes the identity of someone else by getting the documents of a legal migrant (Broeders and Engbersen 2007:1598). In order to do so, he is suggested by his friend Illoba to contact one of his cousins, Vincent: interestingly

enough, the first thought of Obinze is to imagine this latter's migration process and how his life was in Nigeria, thus proving again his sensibility and initial attention to the issue of migration. Vincent lends him his document but at a cost, since he asks Obinze to give him initially the 35 per cent of his income. The male protagonist is nevertheless forced to accept and thus becomes Vincent (Adichie 2013:250): in doing so, the narrating voice stresses how the protagonist perceives this as partial loss of his own identity and personal history, since he must learn to recite Vincent's life and experiences as if they were his owns.

Even though illegally, he thus manages to have the document he needs to be considered a regular migrant and be allowed to work: however, he finds uniquely humiliating job positions, which further worsen his sense of estrangement and difficulties in getting integrated in the British environment, namely two cleaning jobs and a job as a deliverer of kitchens for a company; these jobs are not humiliating *per se*, but rather if compared to Obinze's skills and education from his point of view.

The first work experience of Obinze in the UK reported by the narrating voice is cleaning toilets: the point of view of Obinze in experiencing this job is marked by a bitter irony, since he initially made many jokes about people going abroad just to find cleaning jobs and now finds himself in that situation (Adichie 2013: 236). In this experience, even though he has a young beautiful Ghanaian woman as a colleague, he cannot have a social and friendly exchange with her: whereas he seems to be willing to get to know her (and in particular to share their experiences of migration) the girl does not share the same intention and does not pay attention to him. As a consequence of this social isolation and coldness in pursuing the almost-humiliating job, his unhappiness and sense of failure become increasingly more marked as clearly foregrounded in the narration, since the narrating voice describes the ways in which Obinze feels when cleaning the dirty toilets:

Obinze stared at that mound of shit for a long time, feeling smaller and smaller until it became a personal affront, a punch on his jaw. And all for three quid an hour. He took off his gloves, placed them next to the mound of shit and left the building.

(Adichie 2013:237)

In this “dirty epiphany”, therefore, he realizes that he is losing his dignity for a humiliating job which is not even sufficiently paid and subsequently quits it as a way of claiming back his dignity. This initial crisis in not finding a better job position is further worsened when he tries to contact his Nigerian friend Emenike just to find out that he is now a busy man in career with a family (Adichie 2013:246): once again he senses that all his Nigerian relatives and friends have managed to achieve success and integrate within the British society whereas he is not able to find a good starting point in his career.

The second temporary work experience of Obinze only slightly differs from the previous one, since he starts working as a cleaner of “wide passages in a detergent-packing warehouse” (Adichie 2013:251). Despite the better object of the cleanings, Obinze stresses the bad conditions in which he works, since he is exposed to toxic detergents which he tries not to breathe too deeply when he cleans (ibid). However, this work experience is quite short since he is soon laid off because of the company need to reduce the staff.

The third – and last – job of his migrant experience in London is perhaps the longest and the most positive among the negative work experiences, namely “a temporary replacement with a company that delivers kitchens” (Adichie 2013:251). Despite the better wage and working conditions, it is interesting to notice that Obinze experiences the first explicit episode of racism, since he is initially treated coldly by some of his colleagues and defined by them “labourer” (ibid.). Nevertheless, his chief Roy treats him in a different way, showing empathy and an almost paternal attitude in welcoming Obinze in his staff and assigning him a young partner, namely Nigel, who in actual facts helps Obinze not to feel completely alone and isolated (Adichie 2013:252).

Along with positive brotherhood experienced with Nigel and other colleagues, the narrating voice reports another positive aspect of Obinze’s job strictly linked with the human contact, namely the relationship with his customers: the narrator makes clear how the male protagonist is happy when they appreciate his work and show him sympathy. In particular, the male protagonist recalls an episode when a Jamaican woman thanked him for his good work by giving him ten pounds when no one was looking and said “Thank you brother” (Adichie 2013:255). Interestingly enough, this reaction makes him so happy and proud that he consequently wants immediately to tell

his mother what happened, as if to compensate her initial delusion and to make her proud of his son. Therefore, the narrating voice focuses in particular on the emotive aspects of Obinze's last British work experience and underlines how he is satisfied and happy (even if the job does not resemble his expectations) only when he is not alone and finds positive customers.

This momentary positive job experience is interrupted when he is asked by the real Vincent to give him a higher amount of his wage (Adichie 2013:261): due to Obinze's refusal, Roy receives an anonymous call that denounces Obinze as an illegal immigrant and subsequently asks the protagonist to show him his passport the following day. Obinze tries to react calmly both with his chief by promising him to show him his passport and with his colleagues by acting normally, but the day after he quits the job.

Obinze's work experiences in England thus sheds a light on the different problematics widely discussed by social and anthropological studies related to migration and, in particular, those faced by immigrants when not able to obtain a regular visa and forced to find illegal solutions to find a job. Once given by Vincent his document to start to work, the male protagonist finds uniquely jobs that do not resemble his good education and skills and, as a consequence, his initial negative approach to the English environment is worsened. A second crucial aspect foregrounded in the narration is how, due to the solitude of the protagonist in his migrant experience, work becomes also the unique occasion to meet new people and find human contact: interestingly enough, when this happens, Obinze appreciates significantly more his job.

8.4 *A Tide of Lust: Solitude, Affectivity and Sexuality in the Migration Experience*

The analysis of Obinze's work experience has hinted at two crucial points in his migrating experience, namely his solitude (which further worsen in many cases his dissatisfaction) and his sexual impulses and attention towards femininity in the different culture he is experiencing. This section aims to better understand how the protagonist relates and reacts to solitude in the new context and, in particular, how he experiences

sexuality and shows attention towards gender issues in his period as an illegal immigrant.

The first period of Obinze's British experience is marked by silence and solitude, both because of his precarious migrant situation that does not give him the chance to meet new friends but also because of his own choice. As a matter of fact, he initially does not contact his mother for months because he wants to wait until he has something important to tell her (Adichie 2013:234). The narrating voice makes clear how in the three years of his permanence in the UK Obinze contacts her sporadically: interestingly enough, she does not ask him for details, but somehow respects his silence and understands his feelings (Adichie 2013:235). Therefore, the protagonist faces all the initial issues of his migration experience without his family supporting him in his difficult choices mainly because of his sense of failure and shame.

Along with the difficult relationship with his mother, an e-mail from Ifemelu after many years of silence comes to worsen this *scenario* of loneliness and sense of failure of his expectations in his initial period in London: despite her apologies, he recalls how her sudden silence broke his heart and made him "curled more inwardly into himself" (Adichie 2013:237), since he believed their relationship to be perfect and with a planned future. Because of his renewed pain, he cancels the e-mail of Ifemelu and meditates on his current situation, proving thus how memories from the past worsen his actual loneliness in the new country.

As a consequence of his realizing his loneliness and need to socialize, he seeks to establish a good relationship with his unique relative in London, namely his cousin Nicholas: when he meets him for the first time, he immediately realizes that the latter has significantly changed from his memories in Nigeria. Nicholas has in fact become a positive example of a successful migration and integration within the British society: he has a good career that allows him to benefit from material goods (for instance, he owns a house) and has also started a family in the new country. Nevertheless, Obinze is stunned by the way in which he treats his wife, since he seems to consider her uniquely as a servant and even a child that must be protected and taught (Adichie 2013:239), thus resembling a marked chauvinistic approach to women usually not expected or blamed in Western societies; in doing so, Obinze thus proves to be highly aware and critical of misleading behaviour towards women, even in the new culture he is experiencing.

Furthermore, when considering Nicholas' wife Ojiungo, he reflects on the conditions of women in the British context, namely a society and culture that may offer them better opportunities: in Ojiungo's case, Obinze notices, this has not held true, since she did not fulfil her career just to become a mother and wife, thus totally submitting herself to the family. As a consequence, he wonders whether women's tendency to submit and abandon their careers is an natural quality or rather something learnt (Adichie 2013:243); in doing so, Obinze's highly resembles many hot topics within the feminist debate, thus suggesting how his character fosters a different masculinity in his approach to women not only from a concrete point of view (previously discussed in chapters 7 and 8) but also on a more theoretical and philosophical level. A similar example of Obinze's observation on the perception and misrepresentation of femininity occurs when, at the lunch with his friend Emenike and his wife, the description previously given by his friend of his wife Georgina does not correspond to reality: namely, she is not a weak lawyer, nor ignoring the "evils of the world" but, on the contrary, is "frank, knowing, even world weary" (Adichie 2013:267). He thus asks himself why Emenike has depicted her as a "hapless English rose", subtly suggesting that his approach to women has not been changed but holds true also in the UK.

Obinze's equalitarian approach to gender roles and women empowerment is thus further foregrounded in the narration even in his experience as a migrant, which proves how he draws his attention to women facing various gender-related issues even in a Western country. In doing so, he is particularly critical of men misbehaving towards women and denounces their wrong idea of women as weak and inferior to them.

The sensibility and critical attitude of Obinze towards the different conceptualizations and approach to sexuality is made clearer by the narrating voice when it discusses his relationship with his colleagues in his third job. On the one hand, he has a good relationship with Nigel, with whom he talks confidentially about love and offers him an advice when his friend find difficulties in confessing his love to the girl he likes:

"You look like you know what to say to the birds, mate" Nigel added. "Just tell her you like her", Obinze said [...]. Nigel gave him a wounded glance. It was as if he had convinced himself

that Obinze was skilled in the art of women and expected some profundity, which Obinze wished [...] that he had.

(Adichie 2013:255)

It thus emerges how Obinze is treated as a trustworthy older brother by Nigel, whom feels free to confess him the real state of his affair with the girl he likes instead of lying as he does with the other colleagues. At the same time, the protagonist positively realizes to have found a friend in this new estranged context and, in particular, to be considered successful with women as he wished, thus implicitly hoping to have sexual and affective experiences even in the new country.

Apart from the positive confidence with Nigel, Obinze seems to be highly critical of his male colleagues in observing them and trying to make their behaviour out. As the protagonist observes, his colleagues' conversations are mainly centred on their sexual experiences: in the first instance, Obinze notices that many of them thoroughly study magazines with big-breasted women as if they were actual books or academic studies (Adichie 2013:252). The way in which he relates to their accounts on their sexual experiences is worth mentioning, since these are too exaggerated to be real in Obinze's view; in particular, the protagonist is initially stunned by their descriptions especially from a linguistic point of view, noticing how they tend to define their female partners as "birds (Adichie 2013:253). However, even Obinze's sexual behaviour is monitored by his colleagues and in particular by his chief Roy, who notices that he has not had sexual adventures in England: by replying ironically that he has a girlfriend back home who has "magical powers" (ibid.), interestingly enough Obinze plays on a widespread stereotype of African women as associated to witchcraft in their sexuality. However, to his surprise, his irony is understood by his chief and appreciated, further proving how their relationship is positive and not influenced by prejudices and uncritical approach to cultural differences and stereotypes.

Along with his marked attention to gender issues in the UK and need to socialize, a third crucial aspect of Obinze's migration experience is his approach to sexuality. The first explicit reference to Obinze's sexuality in London occurs when he meets an Indian woman at the café and notices that she seems attracted to him (Adichie 2013:258). Obinze is curious and excited about meeting a stranger and talking with her,

further showing his need of human contact. As a consequence of her interest, he thinks of love and is subsequently sexually aroused. It is important to stress that his need to be sexually active in this episode is reported in the most explicit way within the novel: “Then, quite suddenly, a sexual urge overcame him. A tide of lust, he wanted to fuck somebody” (Adichie 2013:258). For the first time, therefore, Obinze’s sexuality is presented as completely deprived of affectivity and love, but as a merely physical urge. As a consequence, he texts Tendai, a woman he had met at a party: interestingly enough, this latter is described as happy to know him because of Obinze’s positive way of treating her which significantly differs from that of her partners who usually abuse her. Even in this mere sexual context, therefore, Obinze meditates on the negative experiences that the woman he knows has experienced and proves once more to be highly sensible and alert towards gender-related injustices.

To conclude, the narrating voice describes Obinze’s experience as a migrant in particular in terms of isolation and loneliness, which lead him both to socialize with other peers and, in particular, to seek for affective and sexual experiences. The protagonist manages to create a small though trustworthy web of friends and sexual partners; in doing so, he proves to be always alert to gender-related issue in their link with cultural and social environments, such as, for instance, when denouncing the abuses on Tendai and the negative attitude of his cousin Nicholas and his friend Emenike towards their wives.

8.5 *Breathing Illegality: Between Integration and Refusal*

A third worth-considering aspect of Obinze’s migration experience regards his attitudes towards the British culture and his understanding of UK’s attitude towards immigrants. On the one hand, the protagonist seems not to be sympathetic to British people, but rather to envy them for their privileges which are invisible to them: “You can work, you are legal and you are visible, and you don’t even know how fortunate you are” (Adichie 2013:227). In Obinze’s view, therefore, his condition of immigrant significantly shapes not only his civil rights but also his ontological essence, since he is invisible to society:

in this sense, he blames British citizens for not being aware of their luck and chance to be socially “real”.

Another clue that signals Obinze’s attitude towards the culture he is experiencing is the way in which he reacts in order to escape from the strict reality: he often sits in a café and reads as many American books, newspaper and magazines as he can, as he previously suggested to Ifemelu, to know everything about the everyday life in America and about American people’s taste and habits, as if he felt the urgency to get accustomed to this culture as soon as possible (Adichie 2013: 256). Interestingly enough, he does not read British books, but seems rather to consider the UK still as a temporary solution. Therefore, his approach to his experience in London is negative, since he treats it as a suspended period of his life in which he passively waits for something to really happen and make his real life start in the US.

Moreover, the narrating voice stresses the conflicting approach of Obinze to British newspapers, which he does not read because of their numerous (and often harsh) articles on immigration (ibid.). As a consequence of his fear of being removed from the country, he notices all the negative headlines of magazines aimed to denounce migrants and bitterly mocks their apocalyptic tones which describe immigration in terms of a mortal pandemic:

The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous with fear of the asylum seekers, infecting everybody with panic of impending doom, and so articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. Yet he understood. It had to be comforting, this denial of history.

(Adichie 2013:258-259)

In this passage, Obinze sheds an interesting light on the perception of migration in Great Britain and the negative and dramatic conceptualization of migrant fluxes without a proper consideration of the colonial frame that has led to such a phenomenon: the mainstream portraits of immigrants, as the one mentioned by Obinze, negatively depict immigrants and refugees as a potential threat to the stability of the economy and society

of the state and are namely read by common people without a critical approach. Therefore, the fictional UK portrayed in *Americanah* presents the actual negative attitude towards the phenomenon highlighted by numerous surveys, which have discussed how in particular xenophobic and nationalist feelings and economic concerns have determined the bad attitude of citizens towards immigration (Broeders and Engbersen 2007; Rourke and Sinnott 2006). The protagonist thus attacks the hypocrisy and negative role of newspapers in influencing people's attitude towards foreigners which he himself experiences, such as when he is suspiciously scrutinized by a woman at the train station (ibid). As a consequence of these attitudes, he feels more excluded by the British society and consequently alone; additionally, he stresses how this *scenario* does not resemble the life he has imagined for himself, further worsening his sense of failure and estrangement (ibid.).

Due to this general scaremongering about immigrants, Obinze starts living in fear of being discovered as an illegal worker in England: this fear becomes immediately an obsession that leads him to feel constantly observed and to be about to be caught and deported. In experiencing this terror, Obinze feels almost paralysed, naked and weak (Adichie 2013:261): therefore, the description of his way of perceiving uncertainties and negative feelings does not resemble the prototypical conceptualization of masculinity, but it is rather presented through the use of patterns usually associated with women's fragility and psyche. In this sense, due to their extremely precarious and often complex implications, the migration process and experience undermine the main features usually linked with men and proves the far more complex nature of masculinity.

At the same time, Obinze both envies and is critical of positive example of perfect integration within the British society as it emerges from his encounter with his Nigerian friend Emenike, who has become a successful business man with a good family. When Obinze initially seeks his financial help to get the money for the illegal marriage, he is invited to lunch with other friends of his (Adichie 2013:266): in the convivial moment, the protagonist observes in particular how his friend has changed after his British permanence, becoming he and his wife (and getting surrounded by) liberals. The protagonist seems stunned, for instance, by their choice to buy mainly handmade objects by rural Indian women and to consider them beautiful uniquely for their social and cultural value (Adichie 2013:271); he notices how certain race-related

issues faced by Emenike assume different tones when he narrates them to his guests at the lunch in a playful and joking way, whereas he was angry and desolated as he told them to Obinze (Adichie 2013:274). Despite his envy, therefore, Obinze stresses certain behavioural patterns that rather than proving Emenike's integration stress his hypocritical approach to aspects that he previously treated in a far different way. Furthermore, when confronted with the different opinions and attitudes of both Emenike and his wife and their guests, Obinze comes to realize the issue at the basis of his sense of dissatisfaction and estrangement:

They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty.

(Adichie 2013:274)

This crucial passage exemplifies Obinze's personal and migratory experience, namely how the reasons that led him to migrate were not linked to a fight for survival, but rather the results of a dissatisfaction which convinced him to consider real "life" and career opportunities as not possible in his Nigerian socio-cultural environment but only somewhere else. He moreover marks the injustice that people like him have to face, since they are forced to do illegal things just because of their almost- Promethean attitude in reacting to a complex economic situation to look for something better and stable.

This section has thus considered the ambivalent feelings of Obinze towards the British environment, his perception of widespread prejudices against migration and attitude towards positive examples of integration. The protagonist is almost obsessed by the fear of being arrested because of his illegal status as a migrant, which highly differs from his usual sincere and honest nature. His obsession is further worsened by the negative approach of the UK in facing the refugees emergency which is portrayed in *Americanah* and finds its roots in an actual (and common) negative attitude towards migration, as highlighted by several sociological studies. Moreover, Obinze does not

resemble classic representation of masculinity but rather offers a more sincere and complete view of possible uncertainties and issues that men can face in precarious situations.

In his refusal to adapt to the British culture and consequent isolation, Obinze is highly observer of other people's integration, such as Emenike and Georgina's, envying them and sometimes implicitly blaming them for hypocrite attitudes.

8.6 *Becoming Illegally Legal: Sham Marriages and Citizenship*

A final worth-considering aspect of Obinze's migration experience is his attempt to obtain a legal paper to become a regular citizen through the means of an illegal sham marriage and the consequences of his decision: this final section discuss thus Obinze's migration within the frame of the policies adopted by several governments to punish such a crime.

When trying to figure out a possible way to become a regular citizen, Obinze is told by his cousin Nicholas to firstly find a NI number to be allowed to work and then to find a European citizen and marry her to get the papers: "Then your life can begin" (Adichie 2013:239). Additionally, he and his wife reassure him that things will work for him, even though Obinze is quite stunned by this process to make his real life start. Once convinced to follow his advice, he firstly calls his friends to raise money (Adichie 2013:231) and subsequently decides to recur to a sham marriage through a group of Angolans that run this type of illegal affair and finds him a girl who agrees to this temporary marriage.

The first encounter between Obinze and the group foreshadows the illegal and shady aspect of the affair, since the Angolans invite him to get in their car to discuss privately with him and ask immediately for his money: due to the unsavoury *scenario* and nature of the business, this scene reminds Obinze of a spy film, both scaring and amusing him (Adichie 2013:227). The male protagonist is subsequently strictly instructed on what to do in order not to be arrested by the police: in pledging to their instructions, however, Obinze increasingly perceives the potential danger of his

commitment with this illegal trafficking; nevertheless, due to his strong hope to become a legal citizen, he decides to submit to their rules.

Despite his submissive attitude to the Angolans, the protagonist manages to ask them to meet his “bride” Cleotilde before the marriage in order to know her, even if they are not supposed to be in contact: interestingly enough, his first concern is to be reassured by her that she really wants to do the marriage (Adichie 2013:228). Whereas they meet for the first time with the Angolans, the two manage to meet even alone to know their stories better; in particular, Obinze seems to be sensible to the girl’s complex familial situation and to be somehow glad to help her. The two happily share many steps of their sham marriage, such as the purchase of their rings: in doing so, the two resemble a real couple because of their delight and hope for a better future (Adichie 2013:275).

One of the most crucial scenes within Obinze’s migration experience occurs namely the day of his marriage: when he and Cleo are about to celebrate the wedding, a policeman comes and asks him for his real identity and whether he is aware that his visa expired. He thus realizes that what he has long feared is about to happen, namely that he is about to get arrested (Adichie 2013:278). When this happens, Obinze experiences a strong sense of estrangement since, as the narrating voice reports, he sees the scene as if he were not involved in it but rather from the outside. His reaction is however cold and not irrational as when he previously feared to be arrested: on the contrary, he is even almost ironic in noticing how Cleotilde’s reaction is theatrical and exaggerated, as if she were a real African woman (Adichie 2013:278).

He is consequently arrested and removed from the country, thus resembling the policies adopted by the UK with illegal migrants widely discussed among scholars (see, for instance Bosworth 2014; Broeders and Engbersen 2007; Cornelisse 2010; Düvell 2006). Interestingly enough, when arrested and told by his lawyer that he will be sent back to Nigeria he claims: «‘I’m willing to go back to Nigeria’, Obinze said. The last shard of his dignity was like a wrapper slipping off that he was desperate to retie» (Adichie 2013:279). Therefore, the detention to Obinze is perceived by the protagonist as a threat to his integrity and dignity, even though, as Cornelisse argues, this type of detention from a theoretical point of view is not a punishment nor a form of coercion but rather “serves to safeguard removal such as expulsion or deportation” (2010:15);

nevertheless, the protagonist claims back his dignity by announcing his lawyer to be willing to go back to Nigeria.

The reaction of this latter is interesting, since he reports to the police that his client is “willing to be removed. “Removed.” That word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing.” (Adichie 2013:279). Obinze’s reaction highlights how the attitude of British policies in tackling the issue of illegal immigration is mirrored also on a linguistic level, since the passive form of the verb “remove” is usually referred to objects rather than people: the protagonist senses therefore that he is significantly dehumanized and deprived of an identity in his lawyer’s statement.

To conclude, the analysis of Obinze’s sham marriage witnesses how the desperate need of being legal leads the male protagonist to loose part of his dignity and integrity by recurring to an illegal solution: nevertheless, the protagonist shows a marked sense of justice and sensibility in getting to know the personal background of his future bride and being sure that she has not been forced to do it. Moreover, the final scene of Obinze’s arrest and detention witnesses, on a fictional level, the policies adopted by the British government to expel illegal migrants and the negative attitude towards them, which the protagonist observes and denounces. In coming back home, Obinze seems to be happy to the familiar environment of Nigeria, even if this is partially perceived as a final failure and a return to the dependence on his maternal figure, who is ready to welcome him back home.

8.7 *Mired in Dissatisfaction: Towards a new Perspective on Immigrant Men*

This final chapter aimed to discuss how the theme of migration is presented in *Americanah* through the male character of Obinze: interestingly enough the narrative section dedicated to the topic stands out as a *compendium* of several issues related to migration and, in particular, the role of this in re-shaping the masculine identity.

The narrating voice firstly describes the difficult political-economic situation in Nigeria that does not allow him to fulfil his American dream and subsequently leads

him to leave for the UK: due to the initial difficulties of finding a job, it clearly emerges how unemployment puts in crisis the masculinity of the protagonist, being it normally associated with work and (because of Obinze's good education) a successful career. The theme of work is central even in Obinze's first period of migration, namely when through the use of an illegal document he manages to find only humiliating jobs which worsen his sense of estrangement and loneliness in the new country. A third crucial aspect that has been highlighted is how the protagonist perceives sexuality and femininity in the UK: this plays a crucial role, since it lies at the basis of his socialization with his colleagues and, for the first time within the narration, his sexual arousal is fully reported and not associated with love or emotionality. In particular, the analysis has proved how the male protagonist is sensible towards misleading conceptualizations of femininity even in the new culture, often meditating on the nature of female submission and devotion to the family.

The two final sections have discussed Obinze's refusal to integrate and attack to the British hypocrisy in denouncing migration without considering its historical background and Obinze's last attempt to become "legal" through a sham marriage: once again, the narrating voice foregrounds Obinze's sense of estrangement and critical observation of allegedly positive examples of both good integration and good policies to limit the issue of migration.

Obinze thus stands out as a modern literary example of the complex issues faced in performing and perceiving masculinity in the migrant experience, that is, one of the most controversial topics of discussion among scholars and politicians: thanks to the narrative device of the focalization, the uncertainties, ambiguities, feelings and contradictions of a man experiencing migration are offered to the contemporary readers who may find, perhaps, a different perspective on an issue still largely misrepresented and mistreated in several Western countries.

9. IT'S THE END OF GENDER AS WE KNOW IT

9.1 *Ceiling, Come in: Final Remarks*

Gender issues and new conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity have been widely discussed on an academic level and become a crucial component of today's culture so as to influence and draw the attention to literary and artistic products. In this frame, the attention given to the representation of masculinity and femininity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's latest novel *Americanah* has been little, even though this stands out as a compendium of numerous issues related to gender and sexuality in their relation with "race" and migration. This work has thus tried to fill this gap by proposing a study of how masculinity and femininity work in the novel. Both the main characters of *Americanah* Ifemelu and Obinze have been studied in their most significant features from a of socio-anthropological, psychological and literary perspective in order to understand their role in either debunking or fostering gender stereotypes in the different socio-cultural environments by them experienced; despite fictional, these find their roots in actual historical and cultural frames, thus giving to the novel a realistic and more relevant connotation and message.

This final chapter sums up the main findings of each of the two core sections of the research and briefly compares them in order to draw a general conclusion on the issues raised and suggest possible further developments of this study.

9.2 *In her Hips, there's Revolution: Ifemelu*

The first section of the research that has studied the female character occurs to be the most substantial and rich of contents due to the importance of Ifemelu within the

narration. The protagonist has been considered in the main aspects of her perception and performance of femininity foregrounded by the narrating voice, namely the relationship with her body and beauty standards, sexuality, love-life and reversion of gender expectations.

Chapter two has considered the ambiguous and complex approach of Ifemelu to her body (and in particular to her hair) in the light of cultural and social studies regarding standards of beauty, African hair and mainstream representations of white and “ethnic” bodies in the media. It has been underlined how the novel describes the complex issues related to the black female body and how this becomes a social and “racial” construct in particular in her migrant experience in the USA. On the one hand, hair functions as a leitmotif within the novel and as a powerful metaphor of the different social implications of beauty among Nigerian and American cultures. Whereas in her Nigerian adolescence hair does not have a socio-political connotation, this becomes evident in her American experience, where not only must she reschedule her hair-care routine for economic reasons, but she must also choose her hairstyle according to the silenced norms imposed by the American society which considers Afro style and braids as not serious nor suitable for certain job positions. The protagonist initially cedes to such a newly-acquired cultural norm, but once her hair reacts to the conditioner and straightening she decides to positively embrace her natural hair and proudly sports her Afro, thus rediscovering her natural beauty and rejecting American hair standards. The impact of the different culturally-bounded perceptions of the female body is significant as well: whereas her body initially did not fit the Nigerian beauty standards because too thin, in America Ifemelu finds out that this is considered sensual and almost buxom. This opposite conceptualization of the female body puts the protagonist in an ontological and epistemic crisis, since it makes her not able to define her body shape anymore, in particular when she comes back to Nigeria. Furthermore, the critical attitude of the protagonist towards the absence of black women in fashion magazine has been stressed, proving how the issues of Western-centric representation of the female body negatively limits the performance of black beauty. Ifemelu makes thus clear how the postcolonial female body is not the result of a simple negotiation or acceptance of newly acquired standards of beauty, but on the contrary leads to a third, hybrid corporeal space. Ifemelu’s observation and tackling Western beauty standards offers the

reader a significant frame of the ambiguous and even misleading approaches to black female bodies within a postcolonial frame and the possible impact and reactions to it.

Chapter three has studied the sexuality of the protagonist both in her adolescence and adulthood in relation to psychological and postcolonial studies, by considering the sexual education imposed on the protagonist and the ways in which she relates to and experiences sex: interestingly enough, by fully reporting silenced aspects related to female pleasure (such as female masturbation), *Americanah* fosters a significant re-writing of black female sexuality, which has been either largely ignored or misrepresented both on a literary and academic level. Ifemelu is portrayed since her adolescence as a sexually curious and active girl who debunks the stereotypes related to women as passive and not interested in sex. Along with clear references to her sexual pleasure and imagination, the narrating voice reports however even the numerous issues that the protagonist must face, namely the strict and unfair sexual education imposed on girls in Nigeria, the lack of knowledge on contraception and, as an adult, different sexual experiences which include even an episode of prostitution and of a case of “male frigidity”. Whereas Ifemelu initially accepts and submits to certain types of sexual behaviour of her partners which she cannot make out (such as Curt’s sex games or Blaine sexual coldness), she increasingly claims her sexual agency back, finding in conclusion a positive (and satisfactory) way of experiencing sex. Therefore, the novel depicts the ambiguities and complexity of the process of sex self-discovery of the protagonist, who initially negotiates and subsequently claims her sexual pleasure and independence.

Chapter four has discussed the love life of the protagonist both in her adolescence and in her adulthood in relation to the feminist debate on the role of women in relationships and the social impositions linked to affectivity and marriage: I argued that *Americanah* portrays a linear romance and yet conveys a new feminist approach by presenting the complex and often contradictory attitudes of the female character when experiencing affectivity. The love life of Aunt Uju has been initially taken into account to understand how her submissive and materialist attitudes in her two main relationships influence the approach of Ifemelu to love. Despite her observing and critical attitude, the protagonist is partially influenced by her aunt’s behaviour especially in her American experience, where she finds unbalanced relationships: on the one hand, she

unconsciously lets Curt help her to integrate within the new society and shape her career; on the other hand, she completely submits to Blaine's routine and ideas. However, the protagonist manages to find an equalitarian and positive relationship both in her adolescence and adulthood with Obinze, with whom she claims her agency and feels truly loved and emotionally involved. Therefore, despite its linear happy ending, I argued that *Americanah* stands out as a feminist romance, since it offers a compendium of the different and complex relationships experienced by the protagonist; furthermore, these in actual fact mirror the different stages of Ifemelu's migration experience and self-discovery.

The last chapter on Ifemelu has drawn the attention to the ways in which the protagonist debunks several gender stereotypes and expectations. The protagonist as an adolescent namely does not resemble prototypical representation of femininity, since Ifemelu is portrayed as strong-minded, independent and not malleable: as a consequence, she is often defined by her family as masculine and considered "different" from the other girls even by her male peers. Despite her "loud" femininity, the narrating voice shows however all the ambiguities and contradictory behavioural patterns when Ifemelu is both in the USA and back to Nigeria and feels the urge to settle down: on the one hand, she unconsciously considers partners as potential husbands and thinks of marriage especially when she comes back to Nigeria and is negatively judged for being single; at the same time, however, she denounces the excessive relevance given to marriage and several episodes that mirror this misleading social imposition. Therefore, Ifemelu proves to be critical of narrow representations of femininity in its relation to submission and marriage, but at the same time bears all the consequences and influences of such misleading conceptualizations that she manages to subvert just as an adult.

9.3 *The Black is a Man: Obinze*

Along with the marked attention given to the issues and features of black femininity, part two has considered a crucial topic within *Americanah*, namely the portrait of a new black masculinity through the character of Obinze. This has been studied by focusing on

the narrative passages in which he is the main focalizer of the narration and conveys, therefore, the most meaningful issues and features of his masculinity, namely the approach to sexuality and affectivity, the social impositions that leads him to a mid-life crisis and his migrant experience.

Chapter six has highlighted the ways in which Obinze relates to affectivity and sexuality by comparing them to mainstream conceptualizations of black manliness; these, as many intellectuals have denounced, have hardly ever considered its affectivity and genuine sexual sphere but have rather focused on alleged violence and chauvinistic attitudes of black men towards women. Interestingly enough, the analysis has proved that the protagonist does not resemble this stereotyped imaginary but, on the contrary, presents a far more complex emotive sphere that includes even several feelings and aspects usually related more to femininity. Additionally I have argued that the protagonist fosters an innovative and equalitarian approach to female sexuality, since he positively judges Ifemelu who freely experiences sex and denounces the misleading and wrong sexual education that limits his wife Kosi in reaching sexual satisfaction. The protagonist thus seems alert to the ways in which his partners enjoy sexuality and perceives it: in doing so, Obinze offers a different and fairer literary image of black men and promotes a new “black masculine” approach to sexuality and romance.

Chapter seven has considered a common literary *topos*, namely the mid-life crisis of the protagonist but putting the emphasis on a little-considered aspect of the phenomenon, that is, its gender-related causes: the narrow social impositions and gender expectations significantly shapes Obinze’s choices and leads him to wrong decisions both in his job and, in particular, in his private life, since he is convinced to get married with the “ideal” woman and start a family despite his uncertainties. As a consequence of these silenced impositions, he passively enjoys his achievements and familial life, until when he manages to concretely react and to claim back his life and agency. This process towards Obinze’s epiphany, however, has been fully reported by the narrating voice as not linear nor immediate because of his familial duties: the complex and ambiguous attitudes of the protagonist are in fact foregrounded especially when he finds difficulties in admitting his unhappiness to his wife Kosi and deciding to get the divorce. Because of his way of approaching to the wealth and prestigious social status he was expected to gain, the figure of Obinze has been compared to and considered as a literary alter ego of

the musical *persona* of Talking Heads' *Once in a Lifetime*, proving how the representation of men in their mid-life crisis has been wildly portrayed even in artistic products, despite the widespread lack of attention to its gender-related issues.

The final analysis in chapter eight discussed a widely debated topic among scholars foregrounded in *Americanah*, namely the migrant experience of Obinze to the UK by stressing the ways in which this influences and puts in crisis the conceptualization of masculinity. The socio-political reasons that lead Obinze to leave Nigeria in order to find better career opportunities in the UK have been initially considered: despite his good education and skills, the protagonist remains unemployed even in the new country and unconsciously perceives his work failures as a threat to his masculinity, being it based on the value of work and success. The protagonist either negatively reacts when realizing that some of his friend had managed to reach a better social status and integration or blames his illegal status of migrant and subsequently critically observes how British people judge him and other migrants. Moreover, it has been noticed that Obinze does not resemble the prototypical men in uttering his uncertainties and fears for being arrested, proving how masculinity is a far more complex concept especially in the transnational frame. Along with work and integration, the approach of Obinze to sexuality, affectivity and gender issues in the migrating experience has been taken into account, showing how the male protagonist presents a marked attention to injustices and negative approaches to women even in London, and how his solitude significantly shapes his sexual arousal. In conclusion, the attempt of the protagonist to obtain the citizenship and start his real life in the new country through the means of a sham marriage has been considered within the frame of UK policies towards illegal migration, stressing how these significantly objectify illegal immigrant. By accepting to run the risk of being arrested, the protagonist realizes that his migrant experience puts in doubts his core values and beliefs, further worsening his sense of estrangement; however he positively yet critically accepts his arrest and removal from the country, even if this means a possible undermining of his masculinity because of his lack of economic independence in Nigeria.

9.4 *Vivid Honesty: Rewriting Black Masculinity and Femininity*

The analyses have proven that the two main characters of *Americanah* do not resemble prototypical conceptualizations of black femininity and masculinity but, on the contrary, put in doubts their narrow features showing silenced and often demonized aspects of gender and sexuality. Both Ifemelu and Obinze constantly negotiate and re-perform their identities bearing all the influences and negative consequences of cultural normalisation of gender patterns. In doing so, they do not simply and immediately react to social constrictions and standards of gender: on the contrary, they are followed by the narrating voice in their process of self-discovery, which includes also moments of negotiating and ambiguous submissions to gender roles as a result of the education they have received. Furthermore, by reacting to these social and gender constrictions, the protagonists do not undermine their actual feminine or masculine identity but seem rather to benefit from a fairer and wider conceptualization of gender which does not “prescribe” them but, on the contrary, allows them to be truly themselves.

In representing this complex and contemporary topic, the narrating voice embeds the gender-related issues faced by Obinze and Ifemelu in a complex postcolonial and migratory frame and tackles further possible complications that individuals can face when forced to redefine their own cultural approach to their bodies and sexuality. In their migrant experiences, both the protagonists find difficulties in performing either their femininity or masculinity because of cultural clashes, economic issues, racism and become aware of the political and social meaning of their bodies and gender; when observing and facing prejudices against blackness in its relation to gender, however, they try to debunk them and make their fallacies clear even to those who are not afflicted by racism.

Both Ifemelu and Obinze can thus be considered literary representations of the main issues raised by Adichie in her feminist manifestos *We Should All Be Feminist* and *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*: firstly, they tackle all the issues denounced by the author when reacting to gender standards and prove how these are not uniquely related to a Nigerian context but, on the contrary, are universally shared; secondly they make clear that there is a possible different way of being either a

“black man” or a “black woman” that does not imprison nor limits personalities but rather embraces different behavioural aspects by not linking them either to femininity or masculinity.

9.5 *Offer me Solutions, offer me Alternatives*: Limits and Possible Developments of the Research

By giving voice both to a female and male black character through the literary device of the focalization, Adichie offers a significant contribution in fostering a different idea of gender identity, debunking several stereotypes linked to black femininity and masculinity. It must be stressed that the issues presented in the novel (and subsequently discussed in this work) are not new but rather linchpins in academic debate, particularly in social, psychological, literary and gender studies; however these have been rarely the core topic of a novel as much as in *Americanah*. The value and importance of the novel, rather than lying on its mere literary form and content (which is, in actual fact, quite linear and easily accessible to common readers) must be found in its value as a popular product: by offering in a simple and catchy way crucial and complex issues related to gender, “race” and migration, the novel offers the reader an immediate and impactful reversing *scenario* of commonly-shared and negative conceptualizations of these themes. In this sense, by creating an easy and pop romantic novel to convey crucial issues, Adichie makes these issues more visible and understandable to common readers, contributing therefore in a significant way to represent on a narrative and popular level her feminist manifestos.

The current research has tried to better understand how these crucial topics have been portrayed in the novel through the analyses of the most significant passages with the development of socio-anthropological, psychological, historical and cultural studies. However, being the research on gender and sexuality in Nigeria still little conducted yet recently increasing among scholars, a possible further enlargement and enhancement of this work may occur considering future findings, in the hope that Nigeria (as much as

different African and Asian countries) will play an increasingly more important role within gender and postcolonial studies.

Additionally, since the popularity of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie significantly reshapes her role as a writer and public figure (as initially discussed), a further interesting development may better consider the impact of her popularity on the spread of the gender and “race” matters discussed by her both in her novels and speeches, to understand whether and how this contributes to redefine commonly-shared assumptions on gender, sexuality and Africanness.

In general, the hope is that these more inclusive and fairer representations of gender, sexualities and “race” will increase, in order to enlarge literature with new subjects and themes that have been long censored and demonized.

Women, as much as men, must continue to write themselves back.

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