

**AFRICAN WOMEN'S RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI  
ADICHIE'S AMERICANAH**

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**Abstract**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* explores the complexity of the multidimensional struggle for empowerment experienced by African women immigrants in Africa and in the United States. The study delves into the central themes of identity, immigration, and gender roles as depicted through the lens of the protagonist, Ifemelu, in her quest for self-discovery and empowerment. This paper investigates Ifemelu's journey from her native Nigeria to the United States, where African women confront the challenges and complexities of being African women in a foreign land. Their experiences as immigrants provide an enlightening commentary on the issues of race, cultural assimilation, and clash of social norms. This paper is based on the theory of Postcolonial Feminism. The concept of intersectionality is used to highlight the impact of racism, gender, and class on African women. This study asserts that despite the hindrances due to immigration, racism, marginalization, cultural disorientation, gender biases and poverty, the African woman embodied by Ifemelu, is capable of resilience and achieve empowerment.

**Keywords:** African women, Empowerment, Immigrant, Self-assertion

**Résumé**

Le roman *Americanah* de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explore la complexité de la lutte multidimensionnelle pour l'autonomisation des femmes africaines immigrées en Afrique et aux États-Unis. L'étude se penche sur les thèmes centraux de l'identité, de l'immigration et des rôles de genre tels qu'ils sont dépeints à travers le regard de la protagoniste, Ifemelu, dans sa quête de découverte de soi et d'autonomisation. Cet article étudie le voyage d'Ifemelu de son Nigéria natal aux États-Unis, où les femmes africaines sont confrontées aux défis et à la complexité d'être des femmes africaines dans un pays étranger. Leurs expériences en tant qu'immigrantes fournissent un commentaire qui met en exergue les questions de race,

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d'assimilation culturelle et de choc des normes sociales. Cet article s'appuie sur la théorie du féminisme postcolonial. Le concept d'intersectionnalité est utilisé pour souligner l'impact du racisme, du genre et de la classe sur les femmes africaines. Cette étude soutient que malgré les obstacles liés à l'immigration, au racisme, à la marginalisation, à la désorientation culturelle, aux préjugés sexistes et à la pauvreté, la femme africaine incarnée par Ifemelu est capable de résilience et d'autonomisation.

**Mots-clés** : Femmes africaines, Autonomisation, Immigrée, Affirmation de soi.

### **Introduction**

Fictions by African women emerged as a watershed in the development of the history of African literature. In fact, early African narrative fictions were dominated by male writers. They were mainly preoccupied by the liberation of Africa from the claws of western imperialism. Their ideological stance was, on the one hand, a criticism levelled against the destructive enterprise of colonialism and neo-colonialism. On the other hand, it was also a self-criticism against African cultural, social and political flaws that hindered the progress of Africa. Prominent creative writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, for instance, sidelined, to some extent, women's specific issues in their creative writings to the benefit of the struggle for African political self-determination. From this remark, Susan Arndt (2002, P. 1) argues that African male writers "silenced African women in their texts" and portrayed them "stereotypically and thus excluded them not from literature but also from history".

The breakthrough of African female writers since the late 1970s has been characterized by a feminist agenda. Indeed, female writers, most of the time, debunk patriarchy and advocate empowerment. In their fictions, female characters are central and undertake a quest for self-assertion in a male dominated world. Today, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie follows the footsteps of the first African female writers of which one can mention the

Nigerians Buchi Emecheta, and Flora Nwapa, the Ghanaian Ama Atta Aidoo and the Senegalese Mariama Ba. As for A. L. Koussouhon *et al* (2015, P. 315), they consider these African female writers as “the ones who have increasingly contributed to the rehabilitation and the redefinition of the African woman’s image or identity by simply reflecting in literature woman promoting themes such as gender, equality, feminism, emancipation, etc”. Notwithstanding the generations, female writers explore a variety of topics: gender equity, racism, identity, politics, sexism, access to education etc. In sum, a new generation of African female writers have highlighted women’s problematics and paved the way to women’s liberation. Their commitment therefore, marks a significant contribution to the development of African literature.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian female writer whose oeuvre has achieved international recognition. Her works tackle a wide range of issues. Indeed, according to H. Habila (2011, P. 7), “Adichie should be referred to as the third generation of influential and representative African female writer”. Reading *Americanah*, the novel discloses a writer engaged in the promotion of African values, gender and culture. Within this context, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* emerges as a persuasive and illuminating narrative, exploring the multifaceted struggle for empowerment faced by African women immigrants in the United States. Through the lens of the protagonist, Ifemelu, the novel delves into the intricate intersections of being African, immigrant, and woman, shedding light on the challenges and triumphs encountered on the path to self-discovery and empowerment.

The novel's exploration of the immigrant experience becomes a potent commentary on cultural assimilation and its impact on self-identity. Ifemelu's trajectory illuminates the delicate balance between preserving one's roots and embracing the new, often conflicting aspects of life in a different cultural milieu. In this regard, the novel transcends the personal,

echoing the broader experiences of immigrants across the world who negotiate their identities in diasporic contexts.

This study explores the mental strength, role, and capabilities of African women through the characterization of Ifemelu. It also looks into how moving to America can empower them. Essentially, this article aims to show that even though African women encounter challenges in both Africa and in the West, immigrating is a key factor that enables them to break free from male dominance. In other words, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shows immigrant African women able to overcome hurdles and become resilient. The article therefore questions the motives, the forms and the outcomes of African women's struggle for self-assertion and empowerment. By examining the intricacies of identity, cultural adaptation, and intersectionality, this work seeks to highlight the resilience and strength exhibited by characters who dare to defy societal norms and carve their paths in pursuit of empowerment.

The work is guided by Postcolonial feminism which provides a more precise reflection of the gender dynamics in African and other formerly colonized nations, especially within their art and literature. Bill Ashcroft argues that: "feminist and postcolonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant" (B. Ashcroft and al, 2010, p. 173). Besides, the concept of intersectionality (2016) coined by Patricia Hill Collins is associated to postcolonial feminism to analyze the various manifestations of inequality undergone by African women in America. Through the characterization of the main protagonist Ifemelu, and other African women, the study intends to show these immigrant African women at the intersection of race, class, gender and sex in America where they challenge different forms of domination.

The commitment for empowerment is articulated in three main points. The first part deals with African women's refusal of subordination in a society dominated by androcentric ideologies and behaviors. As for the

second, it questions the experiences of African women in the West where they are at the intersection of race, class, sex, and gender. The last part recaps how in a context of globalization, Adichie's female characters show resilience through sisterhood.

### **1- The Rejection of Subordination**

Through the lens of feminism, this article intends to show the conditions, the position and the different roles ascribed to African women. As women are put in the backward of African societies, the work bespeaks the power of patriarchal system over African women. In this respect, S. H. Begum (2016, p. 87) admits that: the patriarchal culture in Third World Countries like Africa proves to be androcentric and enforces marginalization of women”.

Subordination is when “something else is less important than the other thing” (Cobuild, 2010, p..1559). In *Advance Learners Dictionary*, it is defined as “having less power or authority than somebody else in a group or an organization” (Hornby, 2003, p. 1296). This led Abeda Sultena (2011, p. 7) to argue that “women’s subordination refers to the inferior position of women, their lack of access to resources and decision making etc. and the patriarchal domination that women are subjected to in most societies.” These definitions show that postcolonial African literature represents African women as victim of subordination.

*Americanah* showcases the strength and resilience of African women as they navigate a world that often tries to subordinate them. Ifemelu's journey is characterized by her rejection to accept societal expectations that limit her potential. This section examines the various instances in which Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, Obinze’s mother and other Nigerian women challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, defying the subordination imposed upon her. Through her female characters, Adichie emphasizes the importance of self-empowerment and the non-acceptance of societal

constraints. She criticizes and rejects the societal norms that perpetuate the subjugation of women.

The novel portrays women struggling for their self-enhancement, search for self-affirmation and independence and respect from the male gender. B. Hajira (2016, p. 90) comments that: “Characters in Adichie’s novels are not submissive to exploitation but active in an effort to revolutionize their situation”. Based on this assertion, Adichie implicitly calls the African women to go for resistance. With the idea of empowerment, Ruth Parsons explains:

Empowerment is a process of internal and external change. The internal process is the person’s sense or belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her own problems. The external change finds expression in the ability to act and to implement the practical knowledge, the information, the skills, the capabilities and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process (Parsons, 1988, p. 27).

Ruth Parsons means that the empowerment of woman is a mental process and an action for change. Indeed, women's empowerment can be influenced by various factors, and one significant aspect of it can stem from their engagement in work, employment, and various activities. In the novel *Americanah*, Obinze’s mother embodies this aspect of women's empowerment. As portrayed in the narrative, Obinze's mother who is a lecturer at the University of Nsukka “had fought with a man, another professor at Nsukka, a real fight, punching and hitting, and she had won, too, even tearing his clothes” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p.55). That representation shows a woman occupying a position that was traditionally reserved for men, thereby challenging gender norms and emphasizing how women can assert themselves as equals to men in a modern society.

The above quoted excerpt from the novel highlights the challenges women face in their professional lives. This altercation between Obinze's mother and a male colleague happens because “they discovered that this

professor had misused funds” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p 59) and according to Obinze, she “accused him publicly and he got angry and slapped her” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p 59). This incident is used to illustrate the obstacles women encounter at their workplaces, where they confront gender biases and fight for their rights and dignity.

The quote from Adichie's "Feminist Manifesto" aligns with the depiction of Obinze's mother in the novel. Adichie's vision emphasizes the fact that: “her job is not to make her likeable, her job is to be her full self, a self that is honest and aware of the equal humanity of other people” (C.N. Adichie, 2017, p. 14). Furthermore, this authentic self should recognize and acknowledge the equal humanity of all individuals, regardless of gender, emphasizing the importance of gender equality and respect for others as essential goals in social interactions.

This section discusses the marginalization of women due to traditional societal expectations. Indeed, Adichie challenges the subordination of women as a traditional norm and promotes gender equality. The author presents a sharp dissection of traditional gender rules prevalent in Nigerian culture. Through Ifemelu's eyes, the reader witnesses the expectations imposed on women, ranging from strict physical beauty standards to limited career choices. Adichie confronts these norms head-on, deconstructing the idea that a woman's worth is determined solely by her looks or her ability to fulfill outdated societal expectations. By challenging these norms, Adichie underscores the importance of women asserting their wish for full independence.

Besides, throughout *Americanah*, Adichie explores, the concept of the male gaze, whereby women are objectified and seen through the lens of male desire. Ifemelu's experiences, both in Nigeria and the United States, reveal the pervasive reality of this phenomenon in shaping African women's lives. By critiquing the male gaze, Adichie highlights the importance of recognizing women as autonomous subjects, not mere objects created to

meet male needs. This critique calls for a collective effort to dismantle those ingrained perceptions and foster a culture of mutual respect and understanding between genders.

It is therefore a fact that Adichie represents in her novel female characters who defy conventional gender norms. The novel's protagonist, Ifemelu, is a strong, independent woman who stands out as a symbol of defiance against the patriarchal society she is a part of both in Nigeria and the United States. She challenges the stereotype of the passive, submissive woman and instead, exhibits intelligence, ambition, and determination. Adichie paints a picture of African women who navigate the complexities of life on their own terms, refusing to let patriarchal societal expectations dictate their choices.

A pivotal turning point in Ifemelu's quest for self-empowerment lies in her decision to create a blog dedicated to candidly discussing race and identity. Through that platform, she challenges the prevailing intellectual stereotypes and misconceptions about Africans, and offers instead a rare and authentic perspective on her experiences as an African woman immigrant. The blog becomes her instrument for reclaiming her voice and agency, empowering not only herself but also others who resonate with her narrative.

It is important to recognize that the experiences of African women encompass complex layers of identity that extend beyond race. This intersectionality, the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, gender, class, and more, plays a crucial role in shaping their lives. However, despite progress in challenging subordination, African women often find themselves grappling with an axiom of exclusion that emerges from these intersecting identities. This axiom highlights the unique and often marginalizing position that African women occupy within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. By delving into the concept of



intersectionality and its implications, one can better understand how African women navigate and resist exclusion in various spheres of their lives.

## **2- African Women and Intersectionality: An Axiom of Exclusion**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* is an exploration of the complexities faced by African women in a rapidly globalizing world. Through the lens of intersectionality, Adichie delves into the various challenges African women endure i.e. racism, gender biases, social marginalization and cultural differences. The idea of intersectionality acknowledges that people undergo varying degrees of oppression and discrimination due to the connection of different social groups they are affiliated to, such as race, gender, class, and more.

Indeed, intersectionality confronts different categories of social division such as gender, sexuality, race and class. In *Intersectionality*, Collins asserts that “Intersectionality exists because many people were deeply concerned by the forms of social inequality they either experienced themselves or saw around them” (Collins, 2016, p. 34). In *Americanah*, Adichie describes the struggles African women engage in highlighting how their identities interact to complexify societal biases and exclusions.

Adichie’s feminist advocacy is anchored in the concept of intersectionality. She portrays here the experiences of various women from diverse backgrounds. She highlights how race, ethnicity, and class intersect with gender to shape their realities. Her perspective of intersectionality highlights that the challenges faced by women are not all the same; instead, they are shaped by their personal and distinctive situations. At the end of the day, the novel underscores the need for an inclusive feminism that recognizes and addresses the diversified challenges faced by women with different backgrounds.

*Americanah* in the framework of the ongoing section sheds light on the complex realities faced by African women, through the lens of intersectionality. Ifemelu's and Auntie Uju's experiences reveal how gender, race, and nationality intersect to shape their identity and construct their interactions with society. Just like many African female characters, they face unique challenges rooted in both their gender and cultural background. This section explores the ways in which the African female characters' intersectional identity becomes an axiom of exclusion, subjecting them to discrimination and marginalization.

Through the experiences of various female characters, Adiche explores in *Americanah* how women's experiences can differ on the basis of the situations of race, class, and nationality. By acknowledging these intersecting identities, Adichie urges readers to cultivate empathy and understanding toward the struggles faced by women who belong to marginalized groups. This emphasis on intersectionality reminds that the fight against the subordination of women must be inclusive and encompass the experiences of all women, regardless of their varied backgrounds. Mona Khaled, a critic, explains the prejudices caused by the marginalization of black women in *Americanah*:

People of color in America go through different battles; they first deal with being labelled based on their race, and then they are placed at a non-satisfactory position in the society. Adichie indicates that racial prejudice is an implicit social problem in America where people are classified according to their obvious color (Khaled, 2019, p. 471).

Khaled's opinion highlights the challenging experiences faced by people of color in America. It avers that they are involved in a dual struggle. First of all, they are content with being stereotyped and judged based on their racial identity, which can lead to discrimination and bias. Secondly, they often find themselves in less favorable social positions due to these racial prejudices, implying that they can be denied opportunities and privileges because of their skin color. Ifemelu acknowledges that "she applied to be a

waitress, hostess, bartender, cashier, and then waited for job offers that never came” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 131).

The reference to Adichie in this context implies that the acclaimed author has pointed out the presence of implicit racial prejudices in American society. Her fiction explores how individuals are categorized and treated based on their visible racial characteristics, which can perpetuate inequalities and hinder social progress. This commentary acknowledges the importance of addressing racial prejudice as a significant social issue in America. Denouncing this racial discrimination in her blog, Ifemelu writes: “Many whites with the same qualifications but Negro skin would not have the jobs they have” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 361).

The protagonist of *Americanah*, Ifemelu, embodies the complexities of being an African woman in both Nigeria and the United States. Not only does her identity encompass her gender, but also her race and cultural background. As a result, Ifemelu faces a multifaceted form of oppression, which she must grapple with in her pursuit of happiness and success. Her experiences as an African woman elucidate the interconnectedness of race and gender, making it obvious that she cannot separate one aspect of her identity from the other. Writing blogs at the intersection of race in America is for her a way of writing back to express her feeling and disgust on the matter as she admits: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America...I speak from experience” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, pp. 290-1).

For African women, like Ifemelu who moves to the United States, assimilation becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they feel pressured to assimilate into the American culture. They are then constrained to often sacrifice elements of their African heritage to the benefit of host countries. On the other hand, this assimilation can lead to a loss of identity and a sense of disconnection from their roots. Adichie looks into this tension

through Ifemelu's struggles to find a balance between her Nigerian identity and the new American environment she finds herself in.

also underscores the prevalence of stereotypes that African women are reduced to, both in Nigeria and in the United States. These stereotypes further compound the challenges they encounter. In Nigeria, Ifemelu grapples with stereotypes about her gender, such as societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. In America, she confronts stereotypes about her race, often reducing her to a singular narrative as the exotic or impoverished African woman. Adichie emphasizes the psychological impact these stereotypes make on African women, affecting their self-esteem and aspirations.

Transitioning from the intricate interplay of intersectionality in *Americanah*, the focus now shifts to the broader context of globalization. Within this realm, the resilience of African women finds expression through sisterhood.

### **3- Globalization and Sisterhood: The Resilience of African Women**

Adichie explores the effects of globalization on African women, highlighting their ability to forge connections and find solidarity across borders. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's and Auntie Uju's experiences as immigrants in the United States expose them to the complexities of cultural assimilation, racial dynamics, and the forging of new identities. This section delves into the themes of intersectionality, sisterhood and the ways in which African women support one another, drawing strength from both their shared experiences and challenging societal norms.

As a major concept in feminism, sisterhood is considered a powerful weapon for women in their struggle against men's oppression in a patriarchal society. The illustration comes after Obinze's mother's contention with her colleague at the University of Nsukka. The narrative mentions that "the student union got involved" and "some of her female

students went and printed Full Human Being on T-shirts” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p. 59) in solidarity with Obinze’s mother who was slapped. In her book entitled *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, (b. hooks 2015, p. 43) contends that “women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression” and advocates for solidarity in the midst of women.

Reading *Americanah* through the eye of Ifemelu, the narrative shows how African women unite to struggle and survive in the West. In other words, the narrator in the novel highlights the presence of African braiders in American braiding salons, specifically women from Francophone West African countries such as Mali, Senegal, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p.9). This portrayal emphasizes the diversity and unity among African women living in America where “Race is totally overhyped” (C. N. Adichie, 2013, p.4). The unique aspect of these female braiders lies in the fact that they are foreigners in a country where discrimination against black people and Africans of origin, in particular, is prevalent. This situation adds to their distinctiveness and underscores the challenges they face as immigrants in a society marked by prejudice.

Globalization has significantly transformed the lives of African women by creating new opportunities and challenges. Economic globalization has led to increased migration, with many African women leaving their home countries in pursuit of better education, career prospects, or escaping political unrest. Ifemelu's journey from Nigeria to America mirrors the experiences of many real-life African women, as she grapples with cultural shock and racial discrimination while striving for success in a foreign land.

Besides, education becomes a key factor in the lives of these women, as they often see it as a means to uplift themselves and their communities. Ifemelu's pursuit of education in the US reflects the determination of African women to break the cycle of poverty and gain independence. Additionally, globalization has facilitated the dissemination of information

and ideas, empowering women to challenge traditional gender roles and fight for their rights.

Despite the opportunities globalization brings about, African women face various challenges, particularly in the West. Adichie presents these challenges through Ifemelu's experiences, as she faces racism, cultural alienation, and the pressure to conform to Western beauty standards. Ifemelu's blog, where she candidly discusses race and her experiences as a "Non-American Black," serves as a platform to address the struggles African women engage in while trying to find their place in a diversified yet discriminatory society.

The resilience of African women in the context of these challenges is evident throughout the novel. It is truly impressive how Ifemelu remains determined to preserve her identity and resist the pressures of assimilation. Moreover, the friendships she builds with other African women of the diaspora, such as her close bond with her cousin Dike's mother, Aunty Uju, and her later friend Blaine's sister Shan, highlight the strength of sisterhood in providing emotional support and understanding.

Adichie emphasizes the importance of sisterhood as a source of empowerment for African women. Ifemelu's connections with other African women serve as a refuge from the isolation she feels in America. These relationships enable her to go through the complexities of her identity and develop a deeper understanding of her roots and heritage.

Through Aunty Uju's characterization, Adichie portrays the resilience of African women who face exploitation and vulnerability, but who also demonstrate courage and perseverance. Aunty Uju's journey from Nigeria to the US mirrors Ifemelu's, as she seeks a better life and experiences the challenges of being an immigrant. The deep bond between Ifemelu and Aunty Uju tells about the strength they find in each other, transcending generational and cultural gaps.

Despite the many barriers they have to cross, *Americanah* also points to the resilience and determination of African women. Adichie highlights the power of sisterhood and the support networks they create to uplift and empower one another. By recognizing their shared experiences and understanding the significance of intersectionality, African women in the novel unite to challenge the forces that seek to marginalize them.

### **Conclusion**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* stands as a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and the rejection of the subordination of women. Through the lens of African women's experiences inside and outside Africa, Adichie dissects old and new gender norms, empowers women to assert their independence, challenges the male gaze, and highlights the importance of intersectionality and empathy in promoting gender equality. Again, she calls on the readers to question their own societies and cultures, identify the structures and behaviors that perpetuate gender inequalities, and work towards building a world whereby women can thrive without being constrained by subordination. Adichie's novel serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for change, inspiring her readers to strive for a more inclusive and equal future for all.

Adichie crafts a compelling narrative that delves into the intricacies of African women's lives, exploring the profound implications of intersectionality on their experiences. Through Ifemelu's journey, the novel sheds series of lights on the challenges these women face, from the burden of stereotypes to the struggle for empowerment. Adichie's storytelling prompts readers to reflect on the significance of intersectionality in the lives of African women and underscores the need for inclusive narratives that recognize the richness and diversity of their experiences. By doing so, *Americanah* becomes a poignant reminder of the importance of embracing intersectionality as an axiom of inclusivity rather than exclusion.

*Americanah* captures the impact of globalization on the lives of African women and the strength they derive from sisterhood. Adichie's narrative confronts the complexities of identity and resilience imposed by circumstances on these women in their pursuit of better opportunities. The novel serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of African women, who, despite confronting adversity, remain strong, resilient, and united in sisterhood across borders. As globalization continues to shape the world, the stories of Ifemelu and other African women in *Americanah* will undoubtedly resonate with women everywhere, highlighting the power of unity and sisterhood in a globalized world.

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