AFRICAN MIGRANT WOMEN'S AGENCY IN THE UNITED STATES

The Agency of Being a Black African Migrant Woman in America in Adichie's *Americanah*

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ABSTRACT • This article examines the agency of African migrant women in the United States as depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Existing scholarship indicates the entanglement of Black women's marginalisation with racism, a victim-focused perception of Black women, and a deliberate erasure of Black women's experiences and identities in the United States. This necessitates an exploration of how African migrant women define themselves in relation to black identity and racial hierarchies in the United States. Drawing on Nnaemeka's concepts of Nego-feminism and reinscription of womanhood, I explore how African migrant women traverse marginalisation while simultaneously developing empowering ways of being. The findings highlight three key dynamics: a tension between migrant women's resistance and accommodation of negative perception of Black identity; a contrast between their subversive engagement and systematic manoeuvring of racial objectification of Blackness; and an interplay between their resistance to racialised-patriarchal exploitation and a shift from compliance to emergent agency. This study provides insights into how African migrant women's agency operates in white American racist contexts and contributes to the broader discourse on women's struggle for social justice and representation of their experiences.

KEYWORDS • Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; *Americanah*; Agency; African migrant women

1. Introduction

This article explores the agency of African migrant women in the United States as represented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. I analyse how four migrant women namely Ifemelu, Wambui, Uju and Ginika in *Americanah*, negotiate and navigate America's racial and patriarchal obstacles to assert their agency in America. My reading of Adichie's African migrant women is informed by Barbara Bush and bell hooks' theorisation of the intersectionality of Black women's experiences on account of racism and sexism. Bush argues that going back to history, white patriarchal and racist representation of Black women throughout the diaspora is at odds with their true identity and lived experiences. She states that Black women are often "defined by a dangerous sexuality or passive subjection and masculinisation" (199: 420). The essence of Bush's argument is that white patriarchal and racist systems have historically not only erased Black women's lived realities and stripped them of agency but also constructed them through controlling images. These images justify Black women's marginalisation, oppression, and exclusion from dominant norms of womanhood and full citizenship of America. Bush's postulation resonates with hooks' argument

about the systematic erasure of Black women in both racial and feminist discourses which prioritise Black men and white women. She aptly asserts that Black women "are rarely recognised as a group separate and distinct from Black men, or as a present part of the larger group 'women' in [the American] culture" (2014: 7). Consequently, both Bush and hooks recognise how Black women are side-lined, rendered submissive, and their personalities and experiences dismissed.

Building on Bush and hooks' victim-focused perception of Black women in the United States, I examine how Adichie deploys literary representation to underline the agency of African migrant women. My specific focus is on how Adichie empowers her women characters to navigate racist and patriarchal sexism that undergird diasporic female experiences. It is important to recall that the women characters migrate to the United States in search for education and a good life. This means that they face challenges of adapting to an environment based on racial hierarchies. It is unsurprising that Adichie constructs agentic women with the grit to navigate this racialised society. Therefore, I define women's agency as how African migrant women strategically use their relationships with white Americans (women and men), African Americans, and African migrant men to navigate racial and patriarchal stereotypes and oppression. Consequently, this article conceptualises mainly two interrelated dimensions of African migrant women's agency in the United States. First, negotiated agency, which refers to African migrant women's strategic confrontational, survivalist or accommodative responses to racist marginalisation. Second, relational agency, which emphasises how women's agency is exercised within their series of interpersonal relationships. I further argue that migrant women's agency is complex due to the interplay of cultural expectations and social dynamics of their new environment. This brings to mind Edward Said's conception of the new environments as a contrapuntal phenomenon (2013: 191). Said borrows the term "contrapuntal" from music, where it defines independent co-existence of multiple musical elements (2013: 191). I apply Said's concept to my reading of the agency of African migrant women by arguing that their lived experiences and agency are akin to the interplay of musical notes. I argue that African migrant women in America simultaneously contend with marginalisation entangled with negative racial stereotypes while actively asserting their multifaceted agency.

I deploy Obioma Nnaemeka's concepts of nego-feminism and self-inscription to explore how fiction offers us insights into how African migrant women can claim their agency in contexts that discriminate and oppress them under the exegesis of racism. According to Nnaemeka, self-inscription allows women to inscribe themselves and assume any position on their own terms (Nnaemeka 1994: 154). Similarly, nego-feminism allows negotiation, adaptation, and synthesis of diverse experiences and perspectives to simultaneously constitute and assert one's identity. For Nnaemeka, the process of identity formation becomes "a constant interrogation of one's positionality at all levels […] an active subject location of shifting reciprocity where meaning is made and not an essentialised location where meaning is discovered" (Nnaemeka 2004: 361). The essence of Nnaemeka's argument is a recognition of the active role and initiative of individuals in shaping their agency through engaging with the factors at play and the contexts they find themselves. Nnaemeka's concepts of self-inscription and nego-feminism calls on women to traverse marginalisation while constituting empowering practices. Although Nnaemeka proposes these approaches to primarily reconcile feminism within African cultural contexts, I extend her approaches to the analysis of fiction's potential to empower African migrant women to claim their agency in the diasporic contexts.

2. Adichie, *Americanah* and its Critical Reception

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prominent Nigerian born novelist, essayist, and short story writer based in the United States. She is labelled an Afropolitan writer due to the blending of African experiences and global cultural influences (Pucherova 2018:410). In addition, she is defined as a post-nationalistic writer for transcending the nation-centred narratives characteristic of first- and second-generations African writing (Guarracino 2014: 8). Some of her publications include novels such as: *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of the Yellow Sun* (2006), *Americanah* (2013), and Dream Count (2025); a short story anthology, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009); essays, "We Should all be Feminist" (2014) and "Dear Ijeawele, Or A Feminist Manifesto in fifteen Suggestions" (2017); a memoir, *Notes on Grief* (2021); and a children's book, *Mama's Sleeping Scarf*. The analysis in this article is limited to her third novel *Americanah*. *Americanah* is a coming-of-age narrative of African migrants in search of self-definition and actualisation in America or Britain before returning to Nigeria. Granted the title of the novel, *Americanah,* invokes a phenomenon of cultural hybridity, with a suggestive acquisition and/or adaptation of foreign cultural practices by African migrants. However, the body of the novel is narrated primarily from Ifemelu's perspective as an African migrant woman's story. It highlights the multifaceted experiences of migrant women. These include how the hope of enjoying a good life in America turns into disillusionment, a desperate quest for belonging amid alienation in American society, as well as gendered and racial discrimination. *Americanah* is also a tale of resilience and empowerment of the migrant women through education, employment opportunities, and intimate interactions.

The above synopsis of the novel underscores the idea that Adichie's diaspora fiction is an exploration of migration experiences. This recalls Andre Kabore's and Idowu-Faith Bimbola's assertion that Adichie introduces the concept of freedom as a significant factor influencing both migration and return migration (Kabore 2016: 10, Bimbola 2011: 24). The critics conclude that *Americanah* challenges the notion that migration is due to conventional factors such as poverty and poor governance, and return migration results from unrealised migration expectations abroad. My study extends Kabore and Bimbola's discussion of characters' individual agency and decisions about their lives and experiences without being constrained by external forces. I argue that the novel portrays African migrant women's assertion of their agency in the new environment. It also shows how migrant characters can counter the conventional perceptions and victimisation that place them at the margins of society. Therefore, Adichie's characterisation and focalisation emphasise the agential roles and active participation of fictionalised African migrants in shaping their experiences.

The above argument recalls Maria Dias and Josane Pinto's (2019), and Veronica Baldomir's (2014) reading of Adichie's fiction for the adverse impacts of America's societal frameworks and stereotypes on African migrants' self-image and sense of identity. For example, Dias and Pinto argue that subtle racist tendencies compel African migrants to detest their identity and adopt white identity attributes. These tendencies include avoiding the word "black" in reference to Blacks, speaking distinctively slow, and offering superficial acts of goodness to migrants. Furthermore, overt actions like characterising African migrants with witchcraft and denying them employment opportunities exacerbate this issue. On her part, Baldomir argues that the American society's endorsement of Eurocentric beauty standards as the overarching model of all races leads to a sense of inadequacy, self-doubt, and hatred among black migrants (2014: 27).

Other critics such as Arevalo Jessica (2015) and Margaret Koskei (2014) make a feminist and gendered reading of *Americanah.* They focus on how Ifemelu's intimate relationships with Curt and Blaine contribute to her understanding of race. Arevalo suggests that Ifemelu's

relationship with Curt highlights the dynamics of white privileges and reinforces white superiority over a black woman (2015: 11). Conversely, she argues that Ifemelu's relationship with Blaine, an African American man, leads her to realise how the struggles and aspirations of African Americans differ from her own as a Nigerian migrant (2015:18). Koskei extends the gendered reading of the novel when she compares male and female African migrants' experiences in the diaspora. She argues that while both men and women are marginalised and discriminated against on the basis of their race, the former more easily overcome their victim status because they are more resilient and supportive of one another.

Critics such as Saada Deni (2016), Mahmoud Radwan (2019), and Shadan Nasser (2019) have explored *Americanah* as a defence and a propagation of the appreciation of Africa. They observe that migrant characters find white culture patronising and inadequate, and thus adapt African cultural consciousness. For example, Saada argues that Adichie counters a false glorification of the West and inferiorisation of Africa through highlighting "the hardships endured by the Africans in the West, their melancholies, and displacement" (2016: 16). He symbolically reads Ifemelu's return to Nigeria as a subversion of "the circulated image [of] Africa [as] a place that people always want to leave; and to which they never want to return" (2016: 36). On her part, Nasser interprets Ifemelu's adeptness in adopting an American accent and standards of beauty as triggers of anxiety and a deeper sense of disconnection from her African identity (2019: 15). This, he argues, prompts the birth of her blog to embrace her black identity, which ultimately lead to her decision to return to Nigeria in "quest for a coherent identity" (2019: 20).

Admittedly, the critics reviewed above offer persuasive interpretations of Adichie's *Americanah* that I intend to draw on to advance my reading of African migrant women's assertion of their agency in the United States. Granted, Arevalo (2015) and Koskei (2014) attentively offer a gender-focused reading of the text. Hidalgo analyses the dynamics of white superiority over migrant women and Chepkorir examines migrant women's diaspora experiences in relation to migrant men. I agree with the above cited critics but argue that *Americanah* also weaves a story of African migrant women's encounter with and experiences of what it means to be a Black woman in the United States. *Americanah* affirms this through Ifemelu who asserts that, "I did not think of myself as Black, and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie 2013: 135). Ifemelu's confession has referential connection with Adichie's personal encounter with the label 'Black' in America. In several of her interviews such as those with Sacha Nauta and Moussa Mchangama, Adiche characterises the essence of Blackness she encounters in America as a strangely enforced identity on all Blacks in the United States.

Adichie's fictional and non-fictional arguments above remind us of Frantz Fanon's postulation about the status of Black people in a white-dominated, colonial, and racist society. He argues that "blackness is a socially imposed uniform that determines how black people are treated, perceived, and what is expected of them (114). Showers Johnson succinctly echoes Fanon's argument as articulated in her reference to the racialised construction of Black identity in the United States as "a master status" (77). *Americanah* confirms Fanon and Johnson's arguments in two ways. First, the novel highlights the inscription of an all-encompassing identity of Blackness on all non-white migrants in the United States irrespective of their country of origin. This is underscored, for instance, in one of Ifemelu's blog post, in which she assertively states: "Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black" (Adichie 2013: 103). Second, the novel portrayals the overdetermined positioning of Black people at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, as articulated in one of Ifemelu's blog posts: "There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, […]and American Black is always on the bottom" (Adichie 2013: 87). Consequently, the novel critiques the marginalised understanding of Black identity in contrast to whiteness, but also the systematic structures of Black subordination

in the United States. I relate this deliberate construction of Blackness to African migrant women's formation and assertion of their agency. I argue that the formation and assertion of African migrant women's agency depends on their understanding and navigation of Blackness as it is perceived and constructed by white Americans, African Americans, and African migrant men within the context of United States' racial order. My central thesis is that African migrant women navigate the negative stereotypes associated with and/or inscribed Black identity in the United States to form and assert their agency. I base my analysis on the fictional portrayal of Ifemelu, Wambui, Ginika, and Uju.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu is an ambitious Nigerian migrant woman in her twenties, who moves to America as a result of university strikes. With a partial scholarship, she seeks work, enduring job rejections and sexual harassment before securing a babysitting job with Kimberly, a wealthy white woman. During this employment, Ifemelu is compelled to identify herself to Kimberly and her sister Laura. She also begins a romantic affair with Curt, her boss' cousin, who helps her to obtain formal employment and a working permit after she qualifies as a communication major. However, she eventually breaks up with him due to his indifference and blindness to her experiences of racism. Following the breakup, she opens up an anonymous blog which enables her to buy a house and earns a Princeton fellowship. She later enters another intimate relationship with Blaine, an African Yale professor, but eventually ends the relationship and returns to Nigeria. Uju, in turn, is Ifemelu's paternal aunt and a Nigerian-trained doctor. She migrates to the United States with her son, Dike, after the general, her son's father and on whom she financially depended dies in a plane crush. In America, she struggles through odd jobs and intense retraining before qualifying and being hired as a family physician. Seeking to shed the social burden of being a single migrant mother, she inters an intimate relationship with Bartholomew, a Nigerian migrant, but separates from him due to his authoritarian masculinity. She later begins a relationship with Kweku, a Ghanaian divorced doctor. Meanwhile, Ginika, Ifemelu's friend from secondary school, is perceived as beautiful due to her mixed Nigerian-American heritage. She migrates to America in her teens after her lecturer father secures teaching job in Missouri. She guides Ifemelu through her early days in America. Lastly, Wambui, a Kenyan migrant and Ifemelu's friend from college in Philadelphia, serves as president of African Students Union. She helps Ifemelu to connect with other African students and later encourages her to embrace her natural hair. This study of the aforementioned migrant women's agency begins by examining their responses to negative and superficial construction of Blackness, proceeds to analyse their strategies for countering racialised indifference, and concludes with an exploration of how they navigate exploitation by both African American men and African migrant men.

3. African Migrant Women Negotiation of Negative Perception of Blackness

In this section of the article, I explore the representation of how three African migrant women namely Ifemelu, Ginika, and Uju differently negotiate superficial and negative perception of Blackness to assert their agency. I begin by analysing Ifemelu's agency through her interactions with Kimberly and Laura. As Kimberly's babysitter, I argue that Ifemelu leverages her proximity to observe, engage with, and challenge white American misconceptions of Blackness. A case in point is the exchange where Kimberly inquires about the meaning of Ifemelu's name:

> "Hello, I'm Ifemelu."
> "What a beautiful name," Kimberly said. "Does it mean anything? I love multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures." Kimberly was smiling the kindly smile of people who thought "culture" the unfamiliar colourful reserve of colourful people, a word

> that always had to be qualified with "rich" […] "I don't know what it means," Ifemelu said" (Adichie 2013: 69).

In the extract above, the author employs an interplay of narrative techniques such as cross-purpose, dialogue, irony, characterisation, internal monologue, and juxtaposition to highlight how Ifemelu asserts her agency beyond Kimberly's limited perception of her. Adichie deploys cross-purpose to underscore Ifemelu's individuality. This is through her refusal to acquiescence to Kimberly's desire to fit her name into a predetermined and generalised perception of Africans and their names. Kimberly's question and smile when asking Ifemelu about the meaning of her name reveal her stereotypical, superficial, and patronising view of non-white cultures as exotic and homogenous. While Adichie's cross-purpose allows Ifemelu to assert her agency as an African woman, her internal monologue allows her to explain to readers Kimberly's insincerity and insensitivity towards non-white culture. It also allows her to unveil Kimberly's pretentious and derogative attitude towards non-whites. This perhaps explains why Ifemelu responds equally superficially to Kimberly, claiming not to know the meaning of her name. Yet, earlier in the novel it is disclosed, in her interaction with Obinze's mother, that her name 'Ifemelu', is short for Ifemelunamma, an Igbo name which means "Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made" (Adichie 2013:35). By withholding this information from Kimberly, Ifemelu obstructs her pretence, patronising, and attempts to suppress her individuality. I therefore read this act as assertion of Ifemelu's agency as an African migrant woman.

Through Ifemelu and Kimberly's interaction, Adichie also foregrounds Ifemelu's agency to advocate for an accurate representation and labelling of black women. This challenges the exclusive identification of Blacks on the basis of their skin colour. This point is emphasised when Ifemelu challenges Kimberly's description of the plain model as stunningly beautiful, based solely on her very dark skin. Ifemelu assertively responds, "'No, she isn't. […] You know, you can just say "black." Not every black person is beautiful'" (Adichie 2013*:* 69*)*. I argue that Kimberly's use of the word beautiful over the word black is a mechanism of, to use Nnaemeka's phrase in another context, "renaming to misname" ("If Female" 177). Therefore, the word beautiful is satirically used by Kimberly to marginalise and erase authentic African agency. Nonetheless, I read Ifemelu's blunt tone and insistence on the use of the word "black" rather than "beautiful", as an opposition to Kimberly's distortion of Blackness through uncritical admiration. Ifemelu, thus, demands that Kimberly makes realistic, individualistic, and balanced perception of Black women's identity.

Ifemelu's response brings to mind Carole Boyce's argument about the power associated with embracing the word black. Boyce asserts that "in most contexts, the term "black" resonated unabashed acceptance of African identity, located in history and culture ("blackness") as powerful or as beautiful in a world of cloying, annihilating whiteness" (2002: 6). The essence of Boyce's argument is that the pride and acknowledgement of Black identity is a quest for full representation and a form of resistance to white racist mechanisms of misnaming. Boyce's postulation supports my claim that Ifemelu's insistence on using the adjective "black" rather than "beautiful" is political, in so far as it embodies agency. I argue that Ifemelu's insistence on the word "black" is rooted in her education capital that equips her to recognise the racial subtleties implicit in Kimberly's generalised use of the phrase "beautiful woman". In refusing the word "beautiful," Ifemelu contests the superficial adoration and veiled denigration of Blackness presented through hypocritical friendliness. Conversely, by the word 'black', Ifemelu gestures towards an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity and nuanced subjectivities of Black women.

Americanah further centres an advocacy for appreciation of Black women's diversity and individuality through Ifemelu's confrontation with stereotyped identification of African women's experiences. This is underscored by the exchange between Ifemelu and Laura. While Kimberly

superficially idealises Blackness, Laura unfairly views it with negativity.[1] Laura's opinion is underscored by her attempts to place and define Ifemelu within the stereotypical framing of Africa as a continent exclusively in dire need of saving, on one hand, and African American as a frustrated category of people, on the other. This is illustrated by Laura's contemplation of the irony of African migrants being over educated and well behaved despite the severe and widespread poverty in Africa. She also relates her experiences with a Ugandan woman she studied with in graduate school. Laura is surprised that African migrants do not embody the struggles and frustrations she associates with African-American women (Adichie 2013: 79). Laura's preconceived notion of homogeneous and fixed experiences of Black people recalls Fanon's argument that Blackness is "overdetermined from without" (1952: 5). Fanon's argument is echoed by what Chinua Achebe calls, "absolute power over narratives [to] arrange stories about others pretty much where and as they like" (2003: 24). The essence of Fanon and Achebe's arguments is the point that narratives constitute an opportunistic motive used to shape and manipulate people. It is arguable that Laura's calculated narrative is a form of imposing a pre-determined Black identity on Ifemelu. For example, Laura attempts to impose on Ifemelu a temperament marked by cheerfulness and gratitude for being in America, since she considers African migrants in America privileged (Adichie 2013:79). I claim that this is designed to control Ifemelu's behaviour and to erase her individuality, unique experiences, and abilities.

However, Ifemelu challenges Laura's stereotypical homogenising and predetermination of her agency. This is implied in her response: "maybe when the African American's father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan's father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford" (Adichie 2013*:* 79). Ifemelu's response gestures to a description of some nuanced historical dynamics that differentiate Africans from African Americans. Subsequently, she compels Laura to appreciate diversity and individual experiences of marginalised groups. This brings to mind Obioma Nnaemeka's views about the margin as heterogeneous and complex. She asserts that, "the so-called margin is an immense heterogeneous space punctuated by boundaries and edges which define the limits of numerous different pockets of realities [with] extraordinary complexities" (Nnaemeka 1994: 141). Nnaemeka's postulation dovetails neatly into Audre Lorde's advocacy for the recognition of both the differences and distortions present in society as "a springboard" for genuine collective and individual identities and transformative progress (2021: 855). As Nnaemeka and Lorde insightfully suggest, Adichie's depiction of Ifemelu emphasises the multiplicity of Black experiences and circumstances. This in turn validates the individuality of African diasporic women. For example, Ifemelu castigates Laura's misconceptions about Black people as "a simplistic comparison", admonishing her that "You need to understand a bit more history" (Adichie 2013:79). Therefore, I argue that Ifemelu's responses are a site of ideological contestation through which the author critiques racist stereotypes and develops the theme of migrant women's agency.

Ifemelu's criticism and resistance to the superficial and negative perceptions and erasure of Black identity aligns with Bush's argument that "black women have confronted and re-evaluated white images of black womanhood" (1996: 421-422). In contrast, Ginika, a migrant woman who

[1] Kimberly and Laura embody two contradictory extremes which dangerously diminish Black identity. Fanon captures the essence of the danger when he refers to the two extremes as a sickness. He asserts, "the man who adores the Negro is as "sick" as the man who abominates him" (Fanon: 1995: 10).

moves to America in her teenage years, embodies internalised acceptance of American stereotype of Black identity, marking a departure from Ifemelu's resistant agency. This is highlighted by Ginika's response to Ifemelu's criticism of the boutique cashier's deliberate avoidance of racial descriptors, white and Black, to differentiate between the two sales assistants who serve them. This is portrayed by omniscient narration interspersed by Ginika's focalisation: "Ginika laughed. 'Because this is America. You're supposed to pretend that you don't notice certain things'" (Adichie 2013: 60). While the laughter highlights Ginika's understanding of racial blindness as the unspoken rule in America's racial discourse, her explanation in a resigned tone reveals uncritical acceptance of Black erasure and assimilation into America's racial politics. This is further emphasised by Ginika's opportunistic use of her light skin, underlined by her boastful remark to Ifemelu that: "There's some shit you'll get from white people in this country that I won't get" (Adichie 2013: 58-59). From the extract, Ginika's fair complexion makes her more closely related and acceptable to white Americans unlike Ifemelu's dark skin which makes her distinctively different, and thus discriminated. I argue that Ginika's strategic use of her skin colour to identity with white Americans in a way that ensures her social blending embodies a survivalist agency. The survivalist agency is further portrayed through Uju's conscious decision to assimilate white American culture. For example, she adopts an American accent and urges her son, Dike, to embrace American style of dressing, speech, and behaviour over that of the African Americans. I argue that the contrast between Ifemelu in relation to Ginika and Uju's attitude highlight the tension between resistance and accommodation in migrant women's negotiation of racialised construction of Black identity.

4. African Migrant Women's Negotiation of Racial Objectification and Indifference

I now discuss how the novel portrays African migrant women's navigation of white American protracted racial objectification of Black identity. I point to Ifemelu's intimate relationship with Curt to underscore the above-mentioned point. I start by noting that they are mismatched lovers. While Curt is a free-spirited, wealthy, and classy white man with a longstanding family history of white privileges and influence, Ifemelu is a Black migrant woman involved in ordinary work as a babysitter. Although Curt claims that "it was love at first laugh" and expresses fascination with her deep voice – remarking: "That's what got me […] If she laughs like that, I wonder how she does other things" (Adichie 2013: 90) – their relationship is marked by stark differences in nationality, race, class, and lived experiences. It is possible that Curt may have fallen in love with Ifemelu because of a unique and vibrant laughter. Nonetheless, it is arguable that even aspects that enhance Ifemelu's individuality are viewed by Curt as stereotypes of Black women. This is the idea that Black women are expected to possess negative emotional states of anger, aggression, and hostility in America (Jones and Norwood 2017: 2045) – an expectation Ifemelu's portrayal contradicts. Therefore, it is plausible to read Curt's initiation of the intimate relationship with Ifemelu from a primordial colour-racist trope of conquering the exotic Black woman. This makes Black women as bodies from which the rich white men derive their sexual pleasure and fantasies (hooks 2014: 77). This is emphasised by Curt's objectification of Ifemelu on the one hand, and Ifemelu's passive acceptance of the relationship along with Curt's adoration and validation, on the other. The omniscient narrator's report, interspersed by Ifemelu's indirect internal monologues during Curt and Ifemelu's interactions, illustrate this argument. For instance, "he was looking at her with wonder, his head slightly lowered, […] She began to like him because he liked her. 'You eat so delicately,' he told her […] There was nothing particularly delicate about her raising a fork to her mouth but she liked that he thought that there was" (Adichie 2013: 90). The omniscient narrator depicts Ifemelu's self-willed compliance with Curt's desire and admiration. The phrase

"she began to like him because he liked her" suggests both Ifemelu's emotional dependence and strategic self-positioning. Thus, it is credible to argue that Ifemelu's internal monologues disclose her scepticism towards Curt's exaggerated admiration and recast her apparent submission to his objectification as a calculated strategy for personal gain.

While it is plausible to argue that the relationship nuances some aspects of Ifemelu's individuality and complexity as a person, it simultaneously brings into focus the different negative stereotypes and perception about Black women that Ifemelu has to negotiate before she can assert her agency. In an endeavour to validate and solidify his relationship with Ifemelu, Curt introduces Ifemelu to his mother, Aunt Clare, and young female friends. However, Ifemelu's encounter with Curt's relatives and friends exemplifies negative perception about Blackness, or to use Hill Collins' term, "predicated upon derogated image of black womanhood" (2022: 94). These include perception and treatment of Black women with hatred, superficiality, resentment, and indifference. For instance, Curt's mother defines Ifemelu as an "exotic species" and finds only her eye- lashes beautiful (Adichie 2013: 93). Curt's aunt pretends to like Ifemelu by feigning to live up to the expected conduct of Africans – walking bare-foot and praising African heroes (Adichie 2013:137). Curt's young female friends perceive Ifemelu with a mixture of surprise, disbelief, and disdain for being Curt's girlfriend.

The marginalisation and discrimination of Ifemelu, based on her skin colour, is further highlighted in Curt and Ifemelu's interaction as an intimate couple in a public setting. Two incidents exemplify this point. First, "when they walked into a restaurant […], and the host looked at them and asked Curt, 'Table for one?'" Second, when the bed-and-breakfast owner "refused to acknowledge her as they checked in […] smiling and looking only at Curt"[2] (Adichie 2013: 137). The exclusive recognition of Curt in both cases, despite Ifemelu's obvious physical presence, resonates with hooks' observation that "the existence of the Black woman was often forgotten […] ignored or dismissed" (2014: 12). The rendering of Ifemelu invisible is further underscored by Curt's indifference, passivity, and unresponsive attitude towards her apparent marginalisation. For example, Curt spontaneously downplays the restaurant host's explicit unrecognition of Ifemelu when he tells her that, "the host did not mean it 'like that'" (Adichie 2013: 137). Curt's excuses for colour prejudice in a public setting are comparable to the belated corrective reassurance to Ifemelu long after his relatives and friends' hurtful comments and derogative perception of her in private settings. The dismissive tendencies obstruct necessary confrontation with and meaningful discourse on stereotypical devaluation of Black women based on their Black skin colour. This perpetuates the status quo of white dominance and Black inferiority. If Ifemelu's relationship unveils a stereotypical and marginalised exotification of Black women, how does she disavowal this treatment to regain her agency?

The above question is answered by the author's centring of Ifemelu's navigation of the discomfort of unrecognition. She adopts counter reactions and arguments to assert, distinguish,

[2] Ifemelu's experience of corporeal invisibility has autobiological links with Adichie's lived experiences. Such is poignantly captured in her essay, "We Should All Be Feminists". Adichie assertively confesses that, "Each time they ignore me, I feel invisible. I feel upset. I want to tell them that I am just as human as the man, just as worthy of acknowledgment" (2014: 7). Similarly, Audre Lorde, an African American poet and feminist critic delineates the pervasive rendering of Blacks invisible "in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the school yard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve [blacks]" (2021: 857).

and foreground a migrant woman's agency. For example, she responds to Curt's mother's perception of her as exotic with pride, symbolised by a "victorious smile" (Adichie 2013: 137). Similarly, Ifemelu sees through Clare's superficiality to conduct herself in tandem with stereotyped experiences of Black people in Africa such as walking bare-footed. Ifemelu pre-empts Clara's expectation by asserting that walking bare-footed would provoke a punishment from her mother. This response reflects Ifemelu's middle-class upbringing, which equips her with cultural capital and confidence to counter racialised degradation, illustrating her ability to reclaim dignity in instances of prejudice. In addition, I conceptualise Ifemelu's smile and counter facts as forms of subversive accommodation and dialogical engagement, respectively, in the spirit of Nnaemeka's nego-feminism. They are pragmatic and conciliatory strategies through which Ifemelu challenges the one-dimensional perception of African women and asserts their individuality and behavioural diversity.

In addition, the author challenges white racist stereotypes of Black women by centering Ifemelu's strategic negotiation of liberation and upward mobility. Ifemelu's path to legal employment, residency, and eventual economic stability is facilitated through formal structures and partly by the proximity of Curt's racial and established networks. Curt's assistance is voiced through his focalisation: "I know of some people […] they might be able to help […] for a position in public relations […] they will get you a work visa and start your green card process" (Adichie 2013: 95). Ifemelu's acquisition of formal employment through Curt's networks manifests strategic collaboration within Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, whereby women work within existing relationships and systems to achieve empowerment (2004: 378). The extract also underscores Ifemelu's use of her education capital to navigate United States' immigration and labour systems through legitimate and dignified means. This contrasts starkly with the precarious strategies available to other African migrant women. An illustrative case is Wambui, a Kenyan migrant, who is similarly educated, yet her experience as a migrant woman is marked by economic vulnerability and exploitative arrangements. For instance, she manages multiple low-paying jobs namely cleaning, nursing, and waitressing, to raise "five thousand dollars […] to pay an African American for a green-card marriage" (Adichie 2013: 95). Wambui's survivalist tactics expose the coercive underside of migrant life, where legal status must be bought through personal compromise and systematic manoeuvring. The juxtaposition of Ifemelu's relatively smooth transition with Wambui's harsh ordeal highlights the unequal distribution of opportunity along racial and gendered lines. While both women possess educational capital, Ifemelu's mobility is facilitated by Curt's racial advantage and institutional access. Wambui's experience, by contrast, reveals how African migrant women without such alliances often face racialised economic exploitation. This contrast illuminates the layered and unequal ways class, race, and gender intersect to shape the trajectories of African migrant women in the United States – not as a homogeneous group but as individuals navigating divergent and often contrary paths.

For example, Ifemelu's relationship with Curt also creates a moment of agency when it allows Ifemelu to break the silence and begin to articulate her experiences of marginalisation. The case in point is when she physically and practically challenges Curt upon dismissing the Black women magazine, *Essence*, as "racially skewed because it articulates the beauty concerns and experiences of Black women" (Adichie 2013: 137). Ifemelu notices that Curt's lack of interest and discomfort, regarding efforts at representation of Black women and their beauty concerns, is a manifestation of an ingrained racism. Instead of passively accepting this racist indifference, Ifemelu challenges Curt by taking him to a magazine shop and asking him to record the number of Black women featured in the magazines. He finds only three across more than two thousand pages of women's magazines (Adichie 2013*:* 137).

The author empowers Ifemelu to speak with statistical evidence about the reality and implication of the exclusion and non-representation of Black women in mainstream media. This is highlighted in her observation that "this article tells you to pinch your cheeks for colour because all their readers are supposed to have cheeks you can pinch for colour. This tells you about different hair products for everyone – and 'everyone' means blonds, brunettes, and redheads. I am none of those. And this tells you about the best conditioners – for straight, wavy, and curly. No kinky" (Adichie 2013: 137). This passage is important in Ifemelu's recovery of her agency to speak against the marginalisation and discrimination of Black women by white men and their racist ideology. The act of speaking up underscores Ifemelu's discernment and awareness of the injustices of marginalisation of Black women. By speaking, she refuses the perpetuated standards of beauty and advocates for inclusion and appreciation of diversity.

Ifemelu confronts the reality of racial indifference that she has silently long experienced in her interaction with Curt. She speaks up on her own and other marginalised Black women's behalf to challenge their objectification. This is scripted in her email to Wambui in which she argues that she is "digging, questioning, unearthing" white racial prejudices against Blacks (Adichie 2013: 138). Ifemelu's email recalls Nnaemeka's reference to the "the multi-vocality of the unsaid when it becomes said" (1994: 151). Nnaemeka's postulation highlights the transformation of silence into multiple viewpoints that give expression to the reality of white racial marginalisation of Black women. Accordingly, the email embodies Ifemelu's decision to open up and confront systemic silencing of Black women's experiences and to contest her dismissal and devaluation as a Black woman. Opening up about her experience as an African migrant woman in a relationship with a white man enables her to regain her agency to embrace and assert her true self as well as speak to the wider Black female diasporic society. This resonates with hooks' argument on the impact of breaking silence and speaking out. hooks asserts that speaking out is "a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech […] that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice" (2015: 9). The essence of hooks' argument is a recognition of the multifaceted transformative agency that speaking up brings to the marginalised. Ifemelu's acquired power of speaking translates into two bold decisions. She ends the relationship with Curt and opens her blog.

While the blog posts ultimately mark out Ifemelu as a speaking subject and an advocate exposing prejudices against Black women, the separation with Curt symbolises the rejection of white racist indifference to and stereotyping of Black identity. This brings to mind Boehmer's argument that "postcolonial women writers have placed women "subjectivities, sexualities, […] private stories and intimate pleasures in tension with […] traditional narratives" (2009: 6). Boehmer's argument recalls Emily Davis' claim that contemporary women writers "find in romance codes the alternative plot that might allow for new forms of subjectivity and collectivity" (2013: 2). In view of the two critics' theorisation of women's intimate relationships as a narrative devise in contemporary women's fiction, Ifemelu's termination of the relationship serves as a metaphor for the themes of rejection of racial blindness and silence to racial indifference. Relatedly, the separation is symbolic of Ifemelu's social liberty. This point is emphasised by Ifemelu's assertion that "She had not entirely believed herself while with him" (Adichie 2013: 134). The phrase "not entirely believed herself" underscores Ifemelu's experience of subjugation which ends with the dissolution of the relationship. Furthermore, the separation highlights Ifemelu's economic agency. I argue that Ifemelu chooses individual autonomy over financial opulence and privileges offered by Curt. Her friend Ginika admonishingly calls this choice "self-sabotage" (Adichie 2013: 134), believing that a migrant woman cannot afford to relinquish any opportunity for economic gain. Ginika's mentality recalls Louis Achilles' argument that: "among certain people of colour,

the fact [that] they are marrying someone of the white race seems to have overridden every other consideration" (qtd. in Koskei 2014: 82-83). In contrast with Ginika and Achilles stereotyped perception, Ifemelu's termination of her intimacy with Curt is symbolic of migrant women's rejection of self-sacrifice for the sake of economic survival.

5. African Migrant Women's Navigation of Patriarchal-Racialised Exploitations

I now turn to the discussion of how African migrant women negotiate patriarchal-racialised exploitations to assert their agency. By patriarchal-racialised exploitation, I refer to the tendency of African American men and African migrant men to exploit migrant women in a bid to offset their own racial marginalisation. The discussion is based on the representation of Ifemelu's romantic relationship with Blaine, an African American Yale University Professor, on one hand, and Uju's relationship with Bartholomew, an African migrant man, on the other. It is plausible to argue that Ifemelu – Blaine relationship illustrates African Americans and African migrant women's experiences of social injustices and aspirations for racial justice. This recalls Katherine Hallemeier's interpretation of the relationship as "an allegory for understanding the question of race in the United States" (2015: 240). Although Hallemeier reads the relationship as a reflection of America's racial conflicts and power struggles, I extend her interpretation to an interrogation of the agency of African migrant women. I argue that African Americans and African migrant women experience social injustice and aspire for racial justice differently despite their shared Blackness. *Americanah* illustrates African migrant women's agency through Ifemelu's pursuit of self-defining aspirations, resisting Blaine's imposed expectations shaped by his inherent complicated history of racial injustice.

Although the novel foregrounds Blaine's imposition of his racial justice ideology on Ifemelu, Adichie nuances the Ifemelu – Blaine relationship in such a way that Ifemelu uses it to negotiate her agency. For example, Adichie ironises Blaine's expectation that Ifemelu present herself as an African American woman in her blog post titled "Why Are the Dankest, Drabbest Parts of American Cities Full of American Blacks?" The omniscient narrator reports that Blaine advised her to include information on government policy and redistricting, reminding her that readers seek cultural analysis not entertainment. Though she revised the blog post based on his suggestions, she put down the post, insisting, "I don't want to explain, I want to observe" (Adichie 2013: 145). The omniscient narrator clearly underscores Blaine's desires to use Ifemelu for his own political agenda. However, Ifemelu refuses to become an extension of Blaine's perspective and instead upholds her creativity, intuition, and agency, or what Irving Goffman has, in another context, called "presentation of self" (qtd. in Johnson 2008: 77). I argue that Ifemelu's insistence on keeping her perspective is symbolic is as far as it allows her to disavowal conscription into complex African American historical baggage. Instead, the blog post allows her to assert her individuality.

Adichie uses Ifemelu's relationship with Blaine to emphasise African migrant women's commitment to self-determination. This is illustrated by Ifemelu's choice to attend a farewell luncheon for an African scholar rather than participate in a protest organised by Blaine on behalf of a Black American university employee wrongly accused of drug dealing by a white colleague. While for Blaine Ifemelu's preference is a blatant act of unfaithfulness to their intimacy and solidarity for the Black community, Ifemelu uses it to demonstrate her subjective agency as suggested by her explanation to Blaine: "I just didn't feel up to it" (Adichie 2013: 159). This terse and direct answer underlines Ifemelu's refusal of Blaine's imposition of an African American identity onto her. It is also her acknowledgement that Blaine's commitment to his cultural and historical reality of oppression is shaped by his personal background and beliefs that are unlike

Ifemelu's[3]. Ifemelu's resistance delivered in a genuinely assertive voice highlights her focus on her own goals and aspirations for self-determination. Ifemelu's calculated manoeuvring of African American racial legacies exemplifies Nnaemeka's nego-feminism, in which African women's agency is contingent on their ability to strategically negotiate, compromise, and subvert hindering structures (2004: 378).

Ifemelu utilises her perceived marginalised position as a foreigner-outsider to America's complex racial and patriarchal history to nurture and assert her empowered agency as a migrant woman and an advocate. This is concisely signalled by the title of her blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" (Adichie 2013: 146). The name of the blog emphasises three aspects of her agency. First, it identifies Ifemelu as Black person but distinct from African American. Second, it validates her sympathies with the African Americans through her determined engagement with their experiences from her own perspective. Third, it shows that she leverages her educational power to understand and manoeuvre through the evolving history of African Americans. The title, thus, spotlights Ifemelu's agency authentication as an African migrant woman against her marginalisation. This is what Nnaemeka describes as women's ability to self "reinscribe" (1994: 154).

I now turn to the discussion of how African migrant women navigate patriarchal-racialised exploitation in their interaction with fellow African migrant men. The discussion is based on the representation of Uju's intimate relationship with Bartholomew. I argue that through the relationship, Adichie criticises the deep-seated patriarchal mentality ingrained in single migrant women to relate their social worth and success to marriage and motherhood. This is underscored by Uju's urgent desire to initiate an intimate relationship with Bartholomew asserting that: "I'm not getting any younger. I want Dike to have a brother or a sister" (Adichie 2013: 56). In additions, the stereotyped mentality is emphasised by Uju's intentional conformity and the suppression of her own identity to secure Bartholomew's approval and validation. A case in point is when Bartholomew derogatively questions the quality of her cooking, commenting, "Let me see if this is any good" (Adichie 2013: 55). The omniscient narrator's report on Uju meek response is informative: "Aunty Uju laughed and in her laughter was a certain assent, because his words […] were about her being a good cook, and therefore a good wife. She had slipped into the rituals, smiling a smile that promised to be demure to him but not to the world, lunging to pick up his fork when it slipped from his hand, serving him more beer" (Adichie 2013: 55). Nevertheless, the author mocks Uju's self-sacrifice and desire to appease a man by portraying Bartholomew's opportunistic and exploitative treatment of her.

I argue that the relationship between Uju and Bartholomew depicts the patriarchal domination and exploitation that economically independent African migrant women experience from their male counterparts. This argument is underscored by Uju's revelation of Bartholomew's domineering character to Ifemelu: "He wants me to give him my salary. Imagine! He said that it is how marriages are since he is the head of the family, that I should not send money home to Brother without his permission, that we should make his car payments from my salary […] cook peppered gizzard for him on Saturdays while he watches European League on satellite" (Adichie

[3] This argument finds justification in Landry argument that for the African Americans the conception of Blackness and what it means are always in conversion with the legacy of slavery and the history of American racial oppression" (2018: 134).

2013: 102). The extract indicates Bartholomew's enforcement of a subservient position on Uju in forms of economic subordination, self-sacrifice and domestic servitude. Uju's tone of frustration and bitterness, deep sense of resentment and being burdened underscores patriarchal abuse and vulnerability of middle-class migrant women. If as hooks argues that "the structure of marriage in patriarchal society is based on a system of exchange, one in which men are traditionally taught to provide economically for women and children in exchange for sexual, housekeeping, and nurturing services" (2014: 108), then Bartholomew embodies a patriarchal gender role reversal by his failure to contribute to the expected exchange. Thus, Mevi Hova rightly observes that, Adichie uses intimate relationships in her narratives as lens to critique social issues and structures that impact women's lives (2015: 41).

Bartholomew's control over Uju demonstrates a deliberate sexist strategy by migrant men to counteract their racial marginalisation in American public sphere. For example, Bartholomew exploits Uju financially to compensate for the economic exclusion he faces under America's racially biased immigration bureaucracy. This is revealed in Uju's long telephone conversation with Ifemelu: "He wants me to give him my salary. Imagine! He said that it is how marriages are since he is the head of the family, […] that we should make his car payments from my salary. […] He wants to start a business but they won't give him a loan and he says he will sue them for discrimination" (102-103). The exclamatory tone in the lexical choice "imagine!" emphasises Uju's frustration and disgust about the economic deprivation that Bartholomew's financial demands impose on her. There is situational irony in Bartholomew's dependency on Uju, which undermines his patriarchal assertion of authority. His threat to sue for economic injustice is also ironic, given his own unjust financial treatment of Uju. The irony emphasises the intersection of patriarchal and racial marginalisation of migrant women by migrant men. This brings to mind hooks' argument that while Black men are subjected to racism, sexism enables them to exploit and oppress Black women in a bid to reclaim power (1984: 14-15). This dynamic reveal how racial subjugation can be rechannelled into gendered domination, allowing Black men like Bartholomew to elevate their social standing through patriarchal control.

However, Adichie portrays migrant women's transformation into speaking and resistant subject. This is illustrated through Uju's long overdue response to "a thick blob of toothpaste" left to waste in the sink by Bartholomew (103). Through internal focalisation, the narrator vividly describes Uju's tun from silent tolerance to vocal resistance. This is vividly illustrated in the narrator's focalisation of Uju: "On so many other mornings, she had cleaned off toothpaste, rinsed out the sink. But not this morning. This morning, she was done. She shouted his name, again and again. He asked her what was wrong. She told him the toothpaste in the sink was wrong. He looked at her and mumbled that he had been in a hurry, he was already late for work, and she told him that she, too, had work to go to, and she earned more than he did, in case he had forgotten. She was paying for his car, after all"(Adichie 2013: 103). I read the toothpaste blob as a symbol of Bartholomew's acknowledgement and exploitation of Uju's labour. In addition, it serves as a feminist catalyst, prompting Uju to break her prolonged silence and tolerance and challenge Bartholomew's socio-economic exploitation. In other words, the blob functions as a spark for Uju's reclamation of her silenced and exploited economic self-determination. This is emphasised by the matter-of-fact tone in the phrase "she earned more than he did […] was paying for his car". Consequently, the moment functions as Uju's transformation from survivalist agency to emergent agency. Uju's newly acquired agency is manifested in her ultimate decision to end the relationship with Bartholomew, relocate to Willow, and enter a new romantic relationship with Kweku (Adichie 2013: 103; 139). I draw on Nnaemeka's foregrounding of border-crossing as a necessity for nego-feminism to conceptualise Uju's emergent agency. According to Nnaemeka, border-crossing is a literary and ideological disruption of oppositional binaries – "traditional/modern, male/female,

agent/victim" – that erase and/or distort the complex realities of African women (1997: 2-3). The essence of Nnaemeka's argument on border-crossing is most evident in Uju's traversal of gendered power and racial hierarchies which construct African migrant women as inherently exploitable by fellow African migrant men. Therefore, I argue that Uju's new location marks her freedom from patriarchal socioeconomic exploitation and reclamation of financial autonomy. Furthermore, Uju's relationship with Kweku based on mutual respect and genuine love symbolise migrant women's capacity to overcome racialised-patriarchal exploitation. This is underscored by Ifemelu's observation that, Kweku "looked at Aunty Uju with translucent eyes, those of a man who wanted the world to know how much he loved" (Adichie 2013:139). Thus, Uju's relationship with Kweku affirms African migrant women's self-worth and relational agency beyond economic utility in their host country.

6. Conclusion

The article has examined the agency of African migrant women in the United States as depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Focusing on representations of Ifemelu, Wambui, Ginika, and Uju's response to the racialised construction of Black identity, three dynamics in the assertion of their agency have emerged. First, the tension between resistance and accommodation is illustrated through Ifemelu's confrontational stance and the conformist strategies of Ginika and Uju. Ifemelu resists white America's misnaming, homogenisation, and erasure of Black identity, thereby affirming a diverse and individualistic migrant woman's agency. In contrast Ginika's passive acceptance of America's racial blindness and Uju's deliberate assimilation through speech, dress code, and behaviour reflect a survivalist agency rooted in uncritical conformity. Second, the contrast between migrant women's subversive engagement and systematic manoeuvring is illustrated through a comparative analysis of Ifemelu and Wambui, respectively. While Ifemelu resists racialised objectification in her intimate relationship with Curt to assert her individuality and upward mobility, Wambui tactfully navigate hindering racial system by working multiple low-paying jobs to fund a green card marriage. Third, the article highlights a tension between migrant women's resistant agency against racialised-patriarchal exploitation and the narrative of their transformation from compliance to emergent agency. Ifemelu's refusal to subordinate her self-determination to Blaine's racial justice pursuits contrasts with Uju's endurance of Bartholomew's economic exploitation before asserting autonomy. Ultimately, these patterns speak to the complexity, diversity, and transformative nature of African migrant women's agency in the United States as portrayed in Adichie's *Americanah*.

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