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A SELF ADORNED WITH UNCERTAINTY: Black female identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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Tese apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários, área de concentração em Teorias da Literatura e Representações Culturais, da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora como requisito para obtenção do título de Doutora em Letras.

Orientadora: Profª. Drª. Nícea Helena de Almeida Nogueira

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Our struggles can have meaning and our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – can be justified only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts – and whose very being – continue to be thwarted and silenced (RICH, *apud* EAGLETON, 1996, p. 85).

RESUMO

O objetivo desta tese de doutorado é investigar se e como as multiplicidades presentes na construção de Ifemelu (personagem principal de *Americanah* de Chimamanda Adichie) e de outras personagens femininas do romance podem ser consideradas uma estratégia para questionar e escapar da "história única" de estereotipação e objetificação à qual diversos grupos minoritários têm sido confinados. O propósito do trabalho aqui desenvolvido é demonstrar como algumas personagens escolhem ou são levados a habitar o estereótipo criado para eles, enquanto outras conseguem encontrar uma brecha no contrato social para buscarem subjetividades diversa. Para alcançar o aqui proposto, a pesquisa é baseada em uma (re)leitura de textos teóricos e críticos que abordam os temas de identidade, crítica feminista, pós-colonialismo, raça e diáspora. Assim, é formado o aporte teórico para a análise de Ifemelu e de outras personagens importantes para sua construção identitária. São elas: a mãe de Ifemelu, Aunty Uju, a mãe de Obinze, Ginika, Kimberly, Laura, Curt, Blaine, Ranyinudo, Doris, e Kosi. A relação de Ifemelu com seu papel na sociedade, seu corpo, sua sexualidade e sua escrita também é explorada. A análise aqui proposta demonstra uma pluralidade de subjetividades femininas e a multiplicidade dos sistemas de opressão que tentam subjugar mulheres em momentos diversos da narrativa. A discussão aqui delineada corrobora a hipótese de que Ifemelu adquire fluidez diante de tantos sistemas que a oprimem, ganhando uma nova perspectiva ao ocupar, ao mesmo tempo, múltiplas posições de 'alteridade'. Desse modo, a personagem é capaz de transformar lugares de alienação em lugares de resistência e de reinvenção de seu eu.

Palavras-chave: Crítica feminista. Identidade. Literatura Africana. Chimamanda Adichie. *Americanah*.

ABSTRACT

The main aim of this doctoral dissertation is to investigate if and how the multiplicities in Chimamanda Adichie's construction of Ifemelu, the main character of *Americanah,* – as well as of other female characters in the novel – might be faced as a strategy to question and escape "the single story" of stereotyping and objectification to which several minority groups have been confined. I aim to demonstrate how some characters are willing or led to inhabit the stereotype that has been created for them but also how others manage to find a breach in this social contract to search for a more diverse subjectivity. In order to fulfill this goals, this research is based on a (re)reading of theoretical and critical texts that address identity, feminist criticism, postcolonialism, race and diaspora. Through this reading, I construct the framework for the analysis of Ifemelu's identity and of other characters that are important to her construction as a character, which are: Ifemelu's mother, Aunty Uju, Obinze's mother, Ginika, Kimberly, Laura, Curt, Blaine, Ranyinudo, Doris, and Kosi. I also explore Ifemelu's relationship with her role in society, her body, her sexuality and her writing. The analysis here proposed demonstrates a plurality of female subjectivities and the multiplicity of systems of oppressions that attempt to subject women in different moments of the narrative. Our discussions corroborate the hypothesis that Ifemelu acquires fluidity in light of the many systems that oppress her, being able to gain a new perspective by occupying several simultaneous 'elsewhere' positions, transforming places of alienation into a form of resistance and of reinventing her self.

Key words: Feminist criticism. Identity. Female African literature. Chimamanda Adichie. *Americanah*.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In her lecture *We should all be feminists*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2012) claims to have been a feminist from a very early age, even if, at the time, she had no theoretical knowledge of what the term entailed. The author explains how she had always felt there was an injustice in the way girls and women were treated in her surroundings in Nigeria and had also felt a desire to change this unfair organization of the world.

Growing up in a very religious home filled with patriarchal values, I could identify with Adichie's experience because I had been myself a rebellious child and a questioning teenager, attempting, at every opportunity, to comprehend why the rules for me and the other girls were different from the boys' around us and how I could possibly change them. When I entered university, I discovered not only feminism but also feminist literary criticism and a whole new universe of possibilities of subversion opened in front of my eyes. In becoming a researcher, the rebellious child did not fade away. My interests were always in listening to women's voices and making sure they were heard by others. For that reason, in my previously written articles, as well as in my master's dissertation, I have used feminist criticism to analyze female characters and how they were able to find their voices, their selves, and the possibility of agency in face of social and literary patriarchal constraints. In my search for female voices, I came to realize how very similar but also very different they could be from mine.

I started to discover postcolonial theory in my first year of graduation through an introductory discipline of Literatures in English. It was also when I first met Chimamanda Adichie in her lecture *The danger of a single story,* brought to us in class by an intern from the universities master's program. In this talk, Adichie (2009) describes part of her childhood in Nigeria and her difficulties, as a Black[1] Nigerian woman, to identify with and recognize herself in the media and literary representations to which she had access. The author clarifies how only one kind of culture and people figure in media spaces as well as in the so-called canonical literature. Adichie's lecture, then, brought me a realization about the necessity of searching for more previously silenced voices: a necessity to look for and at other subjected

[1] After reading the here quoted authors who discuss the issue of race (including the fictional work here analyzed), it was possible to perceive there is no consent on the exact spelling of the words black and white: some authors use the words with a capital letter in the beginning and some do not. In light of these diverse uses, I opted for the use of Black and White (with a capital) to mark that, as a noun or adjective, I am using this word to describe a socially constructed category and not simply a physical characteristic. However, both terms might appear without a capital letter in quotes of theoreticians who prefer these spellings, as well as when the terms refer merely to physical traits.

groups and their different kinds of oppression. Adichie's second lecture at TED Talks, *We should all be feminists,* was the one who showed me the possibility to identify with Adichie's experience and stand on feminism but also to understand how diverse our experiences could be. I began to comprehend both our livings and identities as multiple and as always in need of a fair representation.

It goes without saying that Adichie's tremendous impact on my life and on my way of seeing the world is not my exclusivity. Even Beyoncé, one of the biggest pop icons of the twentieth-first century, made a point to include part of the lecture *We should all be feminists* in her song *Flawless.* After such an incursion in the pop sphere, Adichie's lecture became even more famous and managed to reach a bigger part of the population. Adichie has ever since received great attention of the media: she is considered an icon of both feminism and fashion; she has featured many magazine covers (including *Marie Claire* Brazilian magazine[2]); and has a total of 697 thousand followers on her Instagram page[3]. Considering such success in the virtual world, it is safe to affirm that Adichie is one of the most influential thinkers of the twenty-first century and that the extent of her influence includes social, cultural, and political spheres, especially when it relates to Nigeria and the United States. Since I believe in a theoretical work that is always aligned with a practical view, it is very important for me to work with a subject of research that inhabits a world that goes far beyond the walls of academy, one that acts forming opinions and effectively providing tools for the change of social structures we all long for.

Chimamanda Adichie's relevance in the Brazilian and world scenery is not, however, restricted to internet users and lecture viewers. Her works have been praised by literary professional critics and she has won several awards, such as *The Commonwealth Writers' Prize* and *The Hurston/Wright Legacy Award,* for her first novel *Purple hibiscus* (2003)*,* and *The Orange Prize,* for her second novel *Half of a yellow sun* (2006). She is also the author of a collection of short stories called *The thing around your neck* (2009) and of three non-fictional books called: *We should all be feminists* (2014) (based on her Ted Talk with the same title), *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions* (2017), and *Notes on grief* (2021)[4].

[2] Chimamanda Adichie features the cover of *Marie Claire* Brazilian magazine, April 2019 issue #337.
[3] Information available at Chimamanda Adichie's official Instagram page (@chimamanda_adichie). Access on: 03 Feb. 2020.
[4] All the information about Adichie's work and awards can be found in her official website: https://www.chimamanda.com/

Americanah (2013), Adichie's most recent novel, has won *The National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction* and *The Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Fiction.* It was also chosen as one of the best books of the year 2013 by *The New York Times*. According to Yogita Goyal (2014), there is even a debate among critics considering if *Americanah* could be the great American novel that they have been searching for so long. This novel, which is the subject of analysis in this doctoral dissertation, tells the story of Ifemelu and Obinze, two young people that fall in love in their youth, but are eventually compelled to follow different paths in the post-independence dictatorial Nigeria. The narrative is not linear and, right from the beginning, Ifemelu is presented to the reader as an adult successful woman living in the USA. The character is an immigrant Black woman, coming from a turbulent postcolonial context, who establishes herself professionally and intellectually in a developed country, finding her voice in her career as a blogger who talks about race[5] – an issue that came to be very important to her after migrating to the United States. Ifemelu's journey is revealed to the reader throughout the narrative, as the story goes back and forth in time and space to construct her path, along with her multiple identity.

By bringing this character that can be considered part of different minority groups to the center of the narrative, Adichie brings light to the representation of women, postcolonial individuals, Black people, as well as diasporic individuals. In this doctoral dissertation, I propose to discuss how ruptures in her representations of the female identity take place. By means of analyzing the main character, as well as other female characters that have a relevance in Ifemelu's construction of identity, this research approaches the representation of the subjects through the lens of feminist criticism and identity questions, considering how these two theoretical frames are deeply related to issues of postcolonialism, race, and diaspora. I also mean to consider more deeply Ifemelu's relationship with her role in society, her body, her sexuality and her writing.

The female characters that are analyzed in this dissertation are all coming from diverse ethnic, racial, and social contexts that have as common factors their gender and the fact that they exert an important role either in Ifemelu's life and her construction of identity or in

[5] Even though some authors, such as Stuart Hall (1997), defend the preferred used of the word 'ethnicity' to describe what I am here calling race, I opted of the use of race becase, as explained by Ashcroft *et al*. (2004), the term as it was primarily defined continues to be relevant to understand the relations of power that take place in the postcolonial and in contemporary relationships. Ania Loomba (1998) aslo admonishes us that even though race is not a biologically legitimate concept, it is indeed real in its pernicious effects, such as discrimination and inequalities that persist until current days. Thus, in my understanting, it is of no use to simply stop using the word race if the materiality of the term and the realities created by it will not cease existing.

Adichie's narrative, as elements that help the author construct Ifemelu in specific ways. In this dissertation, these characters are analyzed on their own – in order to investigate how Adichie represents these diverse female identities – but mostly in how they relate to Ifemelu and her identity quest throughout the book.

In the case of Ifemelu, she is a clear representation of how migrants, especially female ones, occupy several positions in their movements throughout space and time. In her childhood and adolescence in Nigeria, the most evident of her identity constituents are her postcolonial condition and her gender, along with her social class. At school, she feels distant from her friends because she comes from a lower class and has both a life and a set of expectations that differ wildly from her colleagues and friends. At home, she feels distant from her mother and her religious concepts of the world, she refuses to play the roles that are established to her and feels uncomfortable with some impositions that are merely moralistic and gender related. In the United States, class remains an important aspect of her identity at first but eventually the defining factors of her experience change. Only in the diasporic space will she become aware of her own color and the intrinsic meanings race carries in the American society. She will investigate and struggle to understand the social construction of "race" and how exactly she is positioned in this pre-defined structure. When she gets involved with Curt, a white rich man, her social position changes, class seems to lose importance, and race becomes a defining factor on how she (and others) perceive herself.

In order to comprehend these shifts, I intend to conceive of Adichie's novel as a site of construction of identities for her characters. I investigate, within Adichie's narrative, how the different female characters demonstrate a plurality of female subjectivities, as well as the multiplicity of systems of oppressions to which each of these individuals is subjected differently in specific moments of the narrative. It is our main goal to analyze such moments via concepts of identity and feminist criticism as well as of the theories of postcolonialism, race, diaspora, and writing that help us investigate how these subjects negotiate their multiple positions and the power relations in which they are established. I aim to investigate if and how the multiplicities in Adichie's construction of characters might be faced as a strategy to question and escape what she has so brilliantly defined as "the single story" to which several minority groups have been confined. I expect to show how some characters are willing or led to inhabit the stereotype that has been created as the one and only possibility for their lives, but also how others manage to find a breach in the social contract that defines their roles in the search for more diverse ways of being.

I believe this analysis shows how these characters are molded by and simultaneously mold their subject positions in order to survive and, when the possibility presents itself, change their realities and re-built their own identities. What I want to explore is the fluidity of these subjects in light of the many systems that oppress them and their ability – especially Ifemelu's – to gain a new perspective by occupying several 'elsewhere' positions at one and the same time, transforming them from a place of alienation to both a form of resistance and of reinventing their selves.

In order to fulfill my goals, this research is based on a (re)reading of theoretical and critical texts that address identity, feminist criticism, postcolonialism, race and diaspora. Through this reading, I construct the framework for the analysis of the novel, the characters, and some specific issues I consider to be relevant. This dissertation, thus, is structured in four chapters that present part of the theoretical frame of this research as well as the analysis of the novel and its selected characters.

In my first chapter, titled *Feminism(s?), writing, and identity*, I develop a discussion about identity and its relations to woman and the feminist movement. Kathryn Woodward (2009), Stuart Hall (2001), and Jeffrey Weeks (1990) are in the discussion to aid our comprehension of identity in the contemporary context. Studies by Mary Eagleton (1996), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1997), Patricia Hill Collins (2017), and Kadiatu Kanneh (1998) appear here to elucidate on the connection between identity, subjectivity, and female experience, culminating in the search for a subject of feminism and of Black feminism. I also discuss the importance of Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality for the comprehension of identities (especially Black women's) and proceed to Linda McDowell's (2003) and Susan Stanford Friedman's (1998) ideas on geopolitics to further understand how geography and movement can be yet another defining factor in women's identity construction. In conclusion, I delineate the main concepts of identity that guide my analysis: nomadism and elsewhereness, by Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Teresa de Lauretis (1987), respectively; Susan Friedman's (1998) locational, relational, positional, and situational concept of identity; and Carole Boyce Davies' (1994) Black female migratory subjectivity.

Having defined the conceptions of identity that are important for this dissertation, I proceed to a brief history of women's role in the world and in literature. In this part, I intend to establish the ways in which women have been excluded from literature and literary criticism but have also found ways to question such exclusion and to insert themselves and their experiences in writing. Authors such as Mary Eagleton (1996), Elaine Showalter (2009), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000), and Lúcia Zolin (2009a, 2009b) help us trace the

beginning of women's journey into the world of fiction. Having delineated the beginning of a female literary tradition for women, I proceed to question the exclusionary features of this same tradition and the impossibility for some women to consider themselves part of it. To enlighten such discussion, the ideas of bell hooks (2015), Alice Walker (2011), Grada Kilomba (2010), and Patricia Hill Collins (2002) help us understand how Black women were unable to find themselves or insert themselves in feminist criticism that defined White women as the norm. In light of this knowledge about women, writing, and literature, I interpret Ifemelu's (and consequently Adichie's) relationship with her writing and the blog within the narrative, based on the ideas of some previously mentioned authors – such as Collins (2002), Minh-ha (1989), Goyal (2014), Showalter (2009) and Gilbert and Gubar (2000) – and the new ideas of Serena Guarracino (2014), Milayne Nascimento and Elio de Souza (2019), Fouad Mami (2017), and Eliza de Souza Silva Araújo (2017).

In the second chapter, I examine part of Ifemelu's childhood and adolescence and the two factors that interact and mainly determine her experiences at that point in life: gender and postcolonialism. Firstly, I review the concepts of postcolonialism and its implications, as defined by Ashcroft *et al.* (2004), Leela Gandhi (1998), Anne McClintock (1995), Ania Loomba (1998), Stuart Hall (2003), Homi Bhabha (1998), and Thomas Bonnici (2000). Secondly, I examine the interrelation of gender and (post)colonialism in the African context, as explored by Oyèrónké Oyewúmí (1997) and Agnes Atia Apusiagh (2006). I also discuss postcolonial literature based on the ideas of the authors already mentioned in this paragraph and proceed to explore the possibility of an African (female) literary tradition, as investigated by Florence Stratton (2002), Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (1993). Sara Mills (1996, 1998), Anne McClintock (1995), Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka (1993), Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (1997), Florence Stratton (2002), and Nkiru Nzegwu (2003) also guide us further to comprehend the exclusion experienced by women coming from postcolonial countries, especially in the African context, in face of the previously discussed 'female literary tradition'.

I proceed, then, to explore Adichie's literary work and its possible relation to the previously established tradition. The analysis of Heather Hewett (2005), Aghogho Akpome (2017), Yogita Goyal (2014), Robin Brooks (2018), Isabella Villanova (2018), Beauty Bragg (2017), and Adichie (2014c, 2014e, 2015, 2019a) herself enlighten how she responds to that African literary tradition and if and where she could be positioned within it. Returning to the ideas of some of the authors discussed in the previous and in the current chapter, Ifemelu's experience in Nigeria before migration is interpreted, along with the experiences and the

influence of four women in her formation years. The first three – Ifemelu's mother, Obinze's mother, and Aunty Uju – represent a common feature of African female tradition, exposed by Florence Stratton (2002): the exploration of mother-daughter relationships as a means of keeping tradition alive. The latter character to be analyzed – Ginika – represents one of the pairs to which Ifemelu is contrasted in the narrative, functioning as what Stratton (2002) defines as "the convention of the paired women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97).

After showing the importance of these women in Ifemelu's formation within the narrative, another aspect to be analyzed is Ifemelu's relationship with her sexuality. Using Mary Eagleton's (1996) discussions about the theme, the ideas of hooks (2000), Collins (2002), and Teresa de Lauretis (1987), I demonstrate how, through her sexuality, Ifemelu manages both to conform to and to divert from the imposition of patriarchy upon female individuals and their bodies.

As a conclusion for the chapter and a transition to the third chapter, I resume the issue of postcoloniality and how it appears as a defining feature in Ifemelu's migration to the US. I explore the ideas of Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen (2011) to comprehend a little more about the Nigerian diaspora and the ideas of Bimbola Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith (2017) to elucidate how Adichie deals with the moment of migration in her work.

In the subsequent third chapter, I look into Ifemelu's discovery of race in the diasporic space. Firstly, I investigate possible concepts of race, racism and the creation of difference in the perspective of Stuart Hall (1987, 2001), Franz Fanon (2008), and Paul Gilroy (2001). I also examine how colonialism has a major role in the creation and maintenance of race as we know today, using the ideas of Ashcroft *et al.* (2004), Grada Kilomba (2010), Ania Loomba (1998), Edward Said (1995), Anne McClintock (1995), and Susan Friedman (1998). I then proceed to scrutinize the close connections among these issues, gender and Black female experience through the perspectives of Patricia Hill Collins (2002), Alice Walker (2011), Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (1997, 2003a), Toni Morrison (1993), Barbara Christian (1989), Audre Lorde (2007), bell hooks (1992), Carole Boyce Davies (2003), Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2003).

Using this theoretical scope, I investigate Ifemelu's experiences with race in the US and her consequent relationship with her body, especially her hair, through the insights of Rosi Braidotti (1994), Chris Weedon (2004), Linda McDowell (2003), Grada Kilomba (2010), Shane White and Graham White (1995), Bankhead e Johnson (2014), Cláudio Braga (2019), and Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019). The beauty salon and the women Ifemelu meets there are taken into account as features of the narrative that contrast with Ifemelu's views and

experiences and aid our understanding of the character in the present time of the narrative. At the end of the chapter, three white characters are also analyzed to evidence how race and racism impact (or not) on Ifemelu's relationships: her boyfriend Curt, her boss Kimberly, and her sister Laura.

In chapter four, I accompany Ifemelu through her journey to the United States and back to Nigeria. For this purpose, I further examine the concept of diaspora, with a discussion including the following authors: Edward Said (2003), Édouard Glissant (2005), Jeffrey Weeks (1990), Stuart Hall (1987, 1990, 2001), Paul Gilroy (1996), Homi Bhabha (1995), Susan Friedman (2007), Avtar Brah (2005), Marianne David and Javier Muñoz-Basols (2011). I connect these concepts with gender to show how diaspora is, in fact, a gendered experience. Thus, I resume some of the ideas of the previously discussed authors and also bring forward the ideas of Linda Alcoff (2011), Linda McDowell (2003), and Eva Hoffman (1989). Bimbola Idowu-Faith (2017), Cláudio Braga (2019), Yogita Goyal (2014), and Carine Marques' (2017) thoughts on Adichie's novel are also taken into account.

In order to better comprehend Ifemelu's journey, I propose the analysis of some characters that are part of it. Aunty Uju and Ginika are analyzed one more time, now considering their experience in the diasporic space, how the change in their geographic axes affected their identities. I attempt to prove the hypothesis that they work as a kind of "paired women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97), in which each of them represents one extreme of the diasporic experience: Ginika represents successful assimilation into American culture whereas Aunty Uju stands for failure to assimilate, despite her trying very hard to do so. It is our belief that they represent two possible paths in migration that Ifemelu refuses to follow. For a time, she becomes lost between these two possibilities, looking for a way of her own.

Following the chronological order of Ifemelu's experiences, I later examine the main character's return and her new assumed position as a returnee in Nigeria. As a means to understand Ifemelu's departure from the US, I examine her relationship with her boyfriend Blaine, as well as with his sister Shan and their group of friends, in order to demonstrate how Ifemelu feels disconnected from most of the people in her life in America. Even though they share the same race or the same gender, there is always a feeling that she does not belong among them, except for the brief time when they unite around Barack Obama's presidency campaign. I also briefly discuss Dike's attempted suicide as the breaking point that makes Ifemelu sure she wants to leave for Nigeria.

At the point of her return, I evaluate if she has or not become the traditional Americanah – that is, if she has come back to Nigeria adorned with an American accent,

mannerisms, and other ways of thinking and behaving. The discussions of Stuart Hall (2003), Franz Fanon (2008), and Carol Boyce Davies (2003) about return, as well as some previously discussed ideas about migration and diasporic identity, guide our reading.

It is also our intention to investigate three Nigerian characters: Ranyinudo, Doris, and Kosi. The first one is a representative of what is left of Ifemelu's childhood and teenage years – she is the character that shows the reader and Ifemelu what she might have become if she had not left Nigeria. Doris, on the other hand, stands for what Ifemelu could still become as a returnee – a typical Americanah with whom at one and the same time Ifemelu finds some connection in their migration experience, but makes a point to mark the difference between them. They represent another pair in the "convention of the paired woman" (2002) that, once again, presents Ifemelu with two possible paths in her process of adaptation in a new space. The latter character to be analyzed is Kosi, Obinze's wife. Even though Ifemelu never actually meets her, in the narrative she works as the last representation of the "convention of the paired woman" (2002): she represents a woman who became the absolute ideal society had imposed on her and she has renounced her voice and her dignity in order to do so. In the contrast established between Ifemelu and Kosi in the narrative, the latter works as a clear opposite that allows us to see how Ifemelu stands in relation to imposed gender roles and relations at this particular point in her life.

By means of the structure here outlined, I believe it is possible to clearly delineate our analysis and to investigate our previously defined hypothesis – that is, that through the multiplicity in the construction of Adichie's characters and within Ifemelu's fluid and migrant identity, Adichie creates a means for previously silenced characters to find their voice and their identity outside the constraints of 'the single story' that was told *for* them and *to* them as being their own.

2 FEMINISM(S?), WRITING, AND IDENTITY

As previously explained in the introduction, this research is based on the reading and discussion of theoretical texts that create the basis for the proposed analysis of *Americanah*. I propose, thus, a chapter that illuminates the concepts of identity, subjectivity, female experience, female writing and the related search for a subject of feminism and/or of Black feminism.

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY WITHIN FEMINIST CRITICISM: CAN WE SPEAK OF A FEMALE SUBJECT OR OF A SUBJECT OF FEMINISM?

> *'I' is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. 'I' is, itself, infinite layers. (MINH-HA, 1989, p. 94)*

If this research conceives of Adichie's novel as a site for construction of its characters' identity, it is necessary to construe the concept of identity within our research. In order to do so, I begin by exploring the changes in the understanding of the term within the contemporary context and theory. In the following section I delineate how this concept has been modified by globalization and how these changes affect our comprehension of female identity as well as of the feminist movement.

2.1.1 An 'identity crisis'?

Discussions regarding identity have permeated the work of important authors in the field of literary criticism. Many of these texts comprehend how identity and the changes in the way we conceive it are connected to the phenomenon of globalization. Kathryn Woodward (2009), for example, explores how the extraordinary transformations generated in the world by the constant flows of information, products, and people has remolded societies and, consequently, generated identities that are destabilized and destabilizing. This author explains that the phenomena of migration and diaspora have produced identities that are molded in and by different locations, not being able to resort to a single place and source of belonging.

Also discussing identity in such a context, Stuart Hall (2001) illuminates the concept of 'identity crisis'. This so-called phenomenon is the result of a series of changes that have impacted society in several of its structures and functional processes. For most of the

twentieth century, Hall (2001) gathers some important factors in the cultural area as trustworthy sources of identification and of creation of a sense of self as a social subject, such as class, gender, sexuality, race, and nationality relations. From the end of the century on, however, profound ruptures in modern knowledge discourse and in how these concepts and individual's relations to them are faced might have unsettled the individual's previous sense of belonging, based on the stability of these social establishments. For the author, this is the displacement of the subject, the dislocation of the individual from both their social and cultural position as well as from their own understanding of themselves.

As a result of these displacement, the subject, which once thought of itself as a stable construct, is now forced to face the fragmentation of his/her identity or rather identities, considering that, for Hall (2001), there is no single, unified, and stable identity, but a multiplicity of eventually unsolved and contradictory identities in one single being. That is to say, identity becomes a mobile concept "formed and transformed continually in relation to the ways in which we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems that surround us"[6] (HALL, 2001, p. 13) and individuals are constantly confronted by different identities with which they could easily identify, given specific situations. Instead of talking about identities, the theoretician suggests, then, talking about identification, a process in motion that does not originate in an interior essence of the subject, but is actually the result of external processes. This multiplicity of identities/identifications is responsible for the positionality of the subject, as explained by the same author. In his explanation, societies continue to exist in harmony not because they are united, but because different elements and identities may partially articulate under certain circumstances, leaving the structure of the identity permanently open.

Jeffrey Weeks (1990) understanding of identity, on his turn, is one worth quoting in length because it brings a perspective that is perfectly aligned with my proposal of analysis. He affirms that

> identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your social relationships, your complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing. Each of us live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, 'British' or 'European'... The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore, 'identify' with, depends on a

[6] All the English versions of Portuguese extracts here quoted were freely translated by this dissertation's author.

> host of factors. At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others (WEEKS, 1990, p. 88).

As the quote demonstrates, several factors are in struggle when we attempt to claim an identity as our own: our needs, beliefs, and desires are in constant conflict within ourselves and also within the identity-based movements that we want to be part of.

In light of such concepts of identity and identification, Hall (2003) argues that an essentialist politics of identity can no longer sustain itself. One identity is always crisscrossed by another and the systems that create such identities are always in relation. A Black identity, for example, might be crossed by an identity of gender and, even if it is not, the creation of ethnicity in itself is already sustained by a sexual economy, by certain ideas of what is masculine. Consequently, if we seek for an essentialized racial identity in an attempt to liberate an ethical individual, there are no guarantees that the liberation will happen in the other identity dimensions. Thus, the author explains that we should not consider political identities as universal or infinite truths, but rather as a full stop that finishes a sentence: a moment of pause that ends the enunciation and establishes a meaning, even if a temporary and revisable one. Those are what he calls "unfinished closures", brief defining pauses that determine an identity for one specific moment regarding specific politics, a full stop that could never be definitive, and is always fleeting.

In light of the positions here examined on identity, is it possible to build a feminist movement that would talk to and for *all women*? In addition, how can we (re)conceive a movement based on identity politics in our current fragmented, dispersed society, marked by what is deemed by many as an 'identity-crisis'? Who is the female subject? Who is the subject of feminism? Are there, in fact, such things?

What interests us more is where feminist literary criticism stands in relation to all those questionings and how I could propose a reading of a work like *Americanah*, by a female writer who is Black, African, and coming from a postcolonial context, avoiding the traps of essentialism. This is what I intend to discuss in the following sections of this chapter whereas I outline what will be the critical lens that illuminates our subsequent analysis of the novel.

2.1.2 The female subject

Woodward (2009) considers identities as social phenomena[7]. They are related to the positions we occupy in society, considering both the idea we have of ourselves and how we experience this idea when inserted in culture. When we attempt to define these identities, however, she believes that there is a tendency to essentialism, considering that the concept is usually based on biologically or culturally established traces that define who is entitled to be part of a group and who ought to be left out. A case in point is the definition of national or ethnic identities based on a shared history and/or on physical traits. As a way of avoiding the trap of essentialist definitions, the author advises us to focus not simply on our commonalities, but also on what it is that differs us form one another, despite our similarities. If we disregard our diverse traits, Woodward (2009) is of the opinion that we can underrate some differences in the establishment of a single specific identity. These differences are often contradictory and might require a negotiation within disparate positions. This was, for a long time, the mistake feminism made by considering women as a monolithic subject and disregarding the factors that might establish differences bigger than the similarities validated in womanhood.

If we are to consider such non-essentialist perspective within feminism and feminist criticism, how can we define the subject of the feminist movement and what constitutes a feminist writing? Can simply putting women and their experience as such in the center of a narrative make a work feminist? As a matter of fact, we should also ask whose experience is that which is being centralized in a narrative (and whose experiences are being excluded in this centralizing). Considering all the differences between women which will be explored in this dissertation, is it enough to be a woman to write a feminist text? How could we consider one woman's experience or text as representative of every woman's reality?

Mary Eagleton (1996) brings forward the arguments of many feminist theoreticians and critics to demonstrate that these are not easily answerable questions. Apparently, the idea of "authentic" female experience and the revelation of a "true" female self are still a constant in large part of feminist criticism. Is it possible, however, to think of such an authenticity in light of all the questions raised in the last paragraph? Authors such as Alison Light (apud

[7] This author establishes a difference between subjectivity and identity. The first refers to one's comprehension about oneself, one's feelings and emotions related to being, whereas the latter puts the concept of subjectivity in relation to a social context.

EAGLETON, 1996) contend that there is no original female true to be revealed and that the search for a unified identity might seem attractive but reveals itself as pointless.

Eagleton (1996) also quotes Cora Kaplan (apud EAGLETON, 1996) who discloses that, in the beginning of her practice as a feminist critic, she had shared with others in her field of research the ideal of finding a "full" subjectivity that women had previously been denied. She later realized that her own position could be misleading in the sense that it assumes men write within a full and resolved subjectivity that allows them to be an unquestionable source of the meaning they produce. Such subjectivity is, however, a romantic idealization that, in reality, no writer could perform. In fact, women have been telling their experiences as inherently unstable as they actually are, which means they have earlier accepted and portrayed in their writing the fragmented character that I argue is the only possible essence of identity.

Kaplan (apud EAGLETON, 1996) does not deny that the instability in women's identity is different from that of men, taking into account women's subordinate place in society and its construction based on sexual difference. Even so, she considers relevant the way in which women's construction of identity points to the fractured and fluctuant condition of all subjectivities, allowing us to envisage the construction of subjectivity as contradictory and always in process. That way, she encourages us to think of a "politics which no longer overvalue control, rationality and individual power, and which, instead, tries to understand human desire, struggle and agency as they are mobilized through a more complicated, less finished and less heroic psychic schema" (KAPLAN, apud EAGLETON, 1996, p. 247).

As an answer to Eagleton's (1996) question of whether women can actually function as a group or if their collective identity is inevitably troubled by those enormous differences that separate us and by the changes in our perceptions of identity politics, Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (apud EAGLETON, 1996) talk about the importance of replacing a unitary notion of woman with plural conceptions of identity as a social phenomenon in which gender is one among many of its forming traits, such as class, race, and sexual orientation. The authors deliberate on how such a conception would be useful for contemporary feminist political practice, turning it into a practice based on alliances and not simply on the universal unity of a shared identity or experience. Given such identity differences, when it comes to certain issues, there will be no single solution that attends to women's diverse needs, which might generate conflicts.

Relating such new feminist critical perspective to female literary writing, Eagleton (1996) presents the ideas of Michelle Barret and Rosalind Coward (apud EAGLETON, 1996),

who consider feminist writings must be defined in their alignment with feminist political interests, instead of in the search for a female shared experience and identity. Notwithstanding, they argue that trying to utterly divorce feminist literature from women's experience would be an even greater mistake because it would mean the elimination of a shared experience of oppression in the establishment of a feminist cultural politics. Therefore, Barret (apud EAGLETON, 1996) concludes that, even though female experience is not enough to define a writing as feminist, it is a necessary condition for us to talk about a feminist cultural production, considering, thus, feminist art as a separate sphere within that of women's art.

Eagleton (1996) speaks of the idea of subjectivity in the feminist movement and warns us that, in agreement with the statements of Patricia Waugh and Kate Soper (apud EAGLETON, 1996), we must also consider that the idea of a unitary, stable subject might sound so attractive to women because it represents what they were never entitled to, especially in terms of representation. As will become clearer in the development of this dissertation, women were long denied the prerogative to write and tell their own experiences. Throughout a long part of human's history, female selves had been constructed both in stereotypical cultural representations and in the imposition of social roles woman had to adapt to, regardless of their desires. Therefore, it is not so simple to argument in favor of rethinking identity in de-constructionist terms because, according to Eagleton (1996), "one can deconstruct only what one has, not that which, historically, has been withheld" (p. 341). If women have only recently been able to struggle to construct their own selves – and there are still social impositions that keep up from doing so – how can we ask these subjects to de-constructs what they are yet to define?

Trinh T. Minh-ha (1997) also defends that when we discuss the question of identity, we are also inevitably reopening the debate around the relationship between self and other within certain frames of power relations. As she further explains it, the notion of identity has long been supported by the idea of an essential core situated out of the individual's scope of consciousness that demands the elimination of everything other than the self in order to fully realize itself. Based on this assumption of a clear dividing line between I and not-I, the other will always be faced as opposite or subjected to the self and the search for identity will be merely based on the search for this authentic, pure, and previously lost self.

In that view of identity, difference is seen as that which differs one identity from another. In Minh-ha's (1997) perspective, however, difference is faced as that which takes place within an individual and in his/her handling of life and, consequently, "undermines the

idea of identity, differing to infinity those layers of totality that form I" (MINH-HA, 1997, p. 416). In order to resist hegemony and its uniformization of difference as an essence, the author encourages us to uncover the leveling of differences, transforming the concept from the basis to segregation and domination into a creative form of questioning repression. She emphasizes that when Otherness is not simply assigned by the master, but re-signified in critical difference, it can actually empower individuals and reveals the fallacy of a clear-cut line between inside and outside, self and other.

For that reason, I agree with Patricia Waugh and Kate Soper (apud EAGLETON, 1996) in their defense that, in order for feminism to maintain itself, it must retain the idea of a collective subject, constructed in relationship, and the idea of agency, according to which women are able to act upon and change their realities.

2.1.3 Who is the subject of Black feminism?

The problem of defining the subject of feminism can also be found within several "ramifications" of the movement, including Black feminism. Patricia Hill Collins (2017) discusses how the organization of women of color around the issue of gender has allowed them to discover a new voice. However, this newly found voice has brought along with it several new concerns, the main being how to keep the unity of Black women as a group in face of the rise of differences among them, in axes such as sexuality, class, nationality, and religion.

Kadiatu Kanneh (1998) discusses some difficulties of identifying the subject of Black feminism, especially because of the movement's intrinsic relationship with cultural and national identities. According to the author, we first need to understand what we mean by Black because this term is related to different political positions, and it hardly ever refers merely to skin color or physical characteristics. Geographical, cultural, and political questions are some of the questions related to the concept of Blackness, distancing it from a mere biological conception (a point better explored in my third chapter).

In the case of women writers of color, Minh-ha (1989) explains how the question of identity might also be complicated by their positioning among identities that are seen as conflicting. Considering the dualistic reasoning of the Euro-American system and its illusory ideas of separated identities (such as an ethnic and a female one), the author argues that for these women it is practically impossible to attempt the pen without at some point questioning their material and its relation to their writing and who they are. Given the several identity

constituents of these women – writer, woman, colored – deciding which one to prioritize is often a dilemma.

Referring to the ideas of Audre Lorde, McClintock (1995) also asserts how women are constantly asked to choose one single feature of their identities as their sole constituent. Among all the aspects that form those individuals, only one has to be chosen in order to form a coherent identity. In her non-fictional book, *We should all be feminists*, Chimamanda Adichie (2015) illustrates such a dilemma with an anecdote she quotes to discuss issues of gender: she mentions a university professor that accused her of being corrupted by Western books when she calls herself a feminist. According to the mentioned professor, feminism was anti-African and not a part of their culture. Adichie (2015) jokes she began to call herself an "African feminist" after this episode.

The debate raised by Collins (2017) concerning the term which Black women use to define themselves in relation to gender issues clearly reflects such an impasse. She explains that focusing on terms such as "womanist" or "Black feminist" and attempting to categorize women within them serves the purpose of focusing on differences as separation and of obscuring the challenges African American women face as a group. Even though the author highlights advantages and disadvantages in both terms, she claims the dispute between them only serves to illustrate how the positioning of Black women in social hierarchies might promote different loyalties, depending on their point of view and their self-definition.

When considering the term "Black feminism", Collins (2017) contemplates how, contrary to "womanism", it positions Black women within the global scenario of feminism as a political movement. Considering that feminism tends to be seen as regarding only White women, the insertion of the term "Black", at one and the same time, questions the universality of the term and the assumption that feminism is the property of White women. As downsides, however, there is the need to balance their concerns with the pressure of white women's demands within the feminist movement and also the direct conflict with the African American community that might perceive an alliance with feminism as an alliance with the White enemy. For those reasons, Collins (2017) believes that no existing term can fully encompass Black women's fights and experiences in their articulation around the centrality of gender. She suggests going beyond such classifications and focusing on new political options, new possibilities of dialogue that would allow building a community by means of its heterogeneity.

Nonetheless, Adichie (2015) discusses the importance of using the word "feminist" despite all the stereotypes and misunderstandings the term might carry. In her perception, a

feminist is the name given to any person who believes in the social, cultural, and political equality of gender. Thus, she states it is of the utmost importance that we use the term to acknowledge the specificities of gender oppression. As the novelist explains, she believes it is dishonest to use other, more generic terms to discuss equality for all, because it denies what has happened and continues to happen to women in diverse parts of the world precisely because of their gender. She claims that there are several current systems of oppression and they do not always recognize the others, which means we must name specifically the problem we wish to address if we want to find its solution.

In order to maintain the term feminism, however, we must be careful not to sustain a policy of "separate development" when dealing with differences, as stated by Minh-ha, (1989). She alerts that those women who claim to be feminists but have an exclusionary view should not really be considered as such. In order to include all women, it is important to consider, then, the argument of Anne McClintock (1995) that no social category or system of oppression can exist in isolation and that they can only come into existence in relation to other social categories, even if this close relation presents itself as contradictory. That is to say that the formative categories of imperial modernity are not merely articulated. Instead, these categories "come into being in historical relation to each other and emerge only in dynamic, shifting and intimate interdependence" (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 61). The author explains that the categories are not socially equivalent; they might merge, fund and even determine one another in contradictory ways. It is necessary then, to think of the interconnection of the diverse systems of oppression and how it might create new forms of subjugation, but also of resistance and articulation.

2.1.4 Black feminism and intersectionality

In Kanneh's (1998) perception it is necessary to make an important criticism not only of the feminist movement and its conceptions of identity, but also of Black politics. The author demonstrates how simply questioning White-dominated feminism and attempting to create a separate movement for Black women might not be enough. She understands the condition of otherness as an unstable one that does not permit the creation of a community based on complete identification and belonging. That is to say that differences and specificities continue to exist between women of color in a way that many of them might not identify with a movement called Black feminism, because it would homogenize these

individuals into a universal category, just like feminism did in its first attempt to create a female subject to the movement.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues that this is in fact one of the problems with identity-based politics: even though they might bring more development and strength to minority groups in general, the ignorance of intragroup differences might pose a problem, creating tension within and among groups. Crenshaw (1989) identifies a tendency in our theoretical and political views (based on her experiences in the US justice system) "to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analyses" (p. 139). As a result, there is a theoretical erasure of Black women and of the multidimensionality of their experience.

In the case of feminist and antiracist movement, for example, Crenshaw (1989) explains that, even though these two forms of oppression intersect clearly in people's lives, such an intersection is ignored in the discourse and practices of both movements. In such scenario, Black women are confined to a dilemma of either/or because they can only choose one of the categories to claim belonging to. According to the author, feminist theory and antiracist movement are to blame for such a "single axis analysis" that contributes to the erasure of Black women's experiences. One example she gives is the voice of White women being used within feminism as an authoritative universal voice, which speaks for and as women. Because Black women's experiences cannot be fully comprehended if we consider the gender or the race dimension separately, they often remain unrepresented, marginalized in both discourses and their intersectional location is one that continues to be unexamined.

Black women, then, face a particular dilemma, considering they are

> situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront (CRENSHAW, 1991, p. 1251-1252).

Thus, it is necessary to understand that, even though Black women might share some experiences of discrimination with Black men and some with white women, they also experience broader categories of discrimination in ways that are unknown to those two other groups because of the way race and gender intersect to determine their experiences. The combination of both systems of oppression creates different experiences for Black women and prevents these livings from coming to light, even within social movements in which they were supposed to be embraced.

Considering such issues, Patricia Hill Collins (2002) bases herself on an intersectional perspective, stemming from Crenshaw's ideas. In her standpoint, race, class, gender, and sexuality appear as mutually constructive systems of oppression. Such a perspective is important because it does not reduce oppression to a single fundamental type or cause. Instead, it shows how many forms of oppression are at work in interdependent ways in order to produce social injustice in the forms we know it. Since oppression is constantly changing within social and historical contexts in the life of particular individuals, different aspects of one's self-definitions might interweave and become more prominent than others, according to context. A case in point Collins (2002) quotes is how a recent experience of motherhood might make gender a salient factor in a woman's identity.

Collins' (2002) perspective allows us to see that no group can be empowered in a situation of social injustice, which means no oppression is more prominent or important than the other and no true liberation is possible as long as there is any kind of injustice unattended. It also allows us to comprehend that "intersecting oppressions of sexuality, race, gender, and class produce neither absolute oppressors nor pure victims" (COLLINS, 2002, p. 126) and individuals might be privileged or penalized, depending on context and the current configuration of the multiple system of oppressions that governs our lives.

Two important contributions of an intersectional paradigm are outlined by Collins (2002). The first is a new interpretation of women's experiences that allows us to place them in a unique identity based on intersecting oppressions, instead of trying to homogenize their experiences considering only one or two systems of oppression working separately to mold their existence. The second is the new understanding provided by intersectionality of how domination is organized and structured, through a system the author calls the "matrix of domination" – that is, the "social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (COLLINS, 2002, p. 228).

Crenshaw (1991) also explains that the concept of intersectionality is a viable way to re-think the already discussed 'identity crisis' within group politics. It should not, however, be confused with an anti-essentialist claim. As the author understands it, such claims misread the political importance of social constructions, considering that because a category is socially constructed and we understand it as such, it does not mean the category stops existing and having meaning in our world. For her, categories have significance and consequences in the form of social hierarchies of power, how they are constructed and maintained. This is why it remains important for minority groups to organize around categories and identity.

Nevertheless, Crenshaw (1991) identifies the need to redefine the way we comprehend identities and these groups through the concept of intersectionality. The author understands that the solution is not simply to claim an anti-essentialist position and argue for the multiplicity of identities within a particular group, but rather to comprehend the multiple intricacies of individual subjectivities, to assert the diverse and important aspects of one's location that have been erased. In such reconceptualization of identity, it is possible to comprehend that identity politics should be constructed within the spaces in which different categories intersect. In this light, it is possible to criticize the very groups we are part of and negotiate new ways of expressing the differences that define us in the very construction of our group politics.

In the view of Carla Akotirene (2019), intersectionality allows us to better comprehend the fluidity of subaltern identities. This is due to the fact that intersectionality is not built in a mathematic relation that could be established by simply summing or subtracting oppressions or different identity traits. In the perspective established by this concept, there is no hierarchy of pain or oppression, but a complex network of inequalities. In the intersectional perspective,

> we analyze which structural conditions traverse bodies; which positionalities reorient the subjective meanings of these bodies; considering their experiences molded by and during the interaction of the structures, which are often colonialist, established by the matrix of oppression, under the form of identity (AKOTIRENE, 2019, p. 43-44).

In other words, the author establishes the concept as a kind of "analytic lens" (AKOTIRENE, 2019, p. 63) used to comprehend the interactions of different oppressive structures and their political and social effects.

In spite of her focus on racism and sexism, Crenshaw (1991) clarifies that those are not the only factors to be considered when discussing female experience because we need to consider multiple variables that construct both identity and the world in which we are inserted as individuals. As the author explains, an intersectional subordination can only be comprehended by unraveling the ways in which one imposed burden interacts with other preexisting vulnerabilities, creating, thus, a new dimension of disempowerment. Class, sexuality and situations of migration are also quoted by the author as critical factors in shaping women's experiences.

2.1.5 Intersectionality and the geopolitics axis

Considering the discussion I have held in this chapter, should space be one of the factors considered in the conception of female identities and, therefore, in the analysis of a diasporic character such as Ifemelu? Linda McDowell (2003) claims that migration, boundaries and space have been a center feature of the debates on contemporaneity. For the author, the profusion of movement we are now experiencing with the migration of people, products, and capital is the consequence of how increasingly global our social relations and our ties to specific places have become. These movements, be they voluntary or enforced, have irrevocably altered our conceptions of individual and group identity and the relationship between these two terms.

If we consider Hall's (2001) affirmation that time-space relationships reflect directly on how identities are constructed and represented and that identities are rooted in "imagined geographies" – that is, a sense of place and time that connects them to physical location and to a tradition –, the moving subjects of our current world configuration force us to re-conceptualize the relation of place and identity as they show us how these concepts might not be inevitably connected. According to McDowell (2003), the very notion of place as a defined, fixed, bounded piece of territory has been contested to give space to a more fluid and relational definition. As the author enlightens, places have come to be understood as a space within multiple and changing boundaries that allow them to intersect and overlap with other places. These boundaries are seen, in current geography theories, as constructed by social practices and the power relations invested in them, therefore, determining who belongs and who is excluded from a particular place.

In such a perspective, gender and place could be understood in a complex relationship in which gender (power) relations influence on how a place is constituted and places have a part on how gender is constructed, considering how "sexual differences and gender relations are constituted in different ways across space and time because of their interconnection with other axes of power" (MCDOWELL, 2003, p. 10), which also help to define a place. Therefore, McDowell (2003) affirms there is a clear relation between space and gender, in which places are sexed and gendered and sexuality and gender are defined by space. In fact, one of the very foundations of women's oppression in Western societies, pointed by the author, is the assumption that women belong to a certain place, which is the home or the private sphere. If gender and place are so intrinsically connected and gender is, thus, historically and geographically specific, it is possible to think, as suggested by this author,

that there might be multiple versions of femininity and masculinity, as well as diverse ways of being a woman.

Therefore, McDowell (2003) examines new forms of thinking about people in transit and understanding their identities as unfixed and in process. In relation to women, especially, her conception of identity is based on flux and fluidity, on the possibilities of constantly unmaking and remaking our identities and, consequently, building new ways of being a woman. In fact, she argues that, even though for so many people it is necessary to leave home to experience displacement and non-belonging, physical travel might not be a requirement for some women to endure such feelings. They might be, in fact, connected to other times and spaces by means of the pervasive Western dominance present in popular culture and the information technology that helps to spread it. This contact would, according to the author, demand a renegotiation of gender division and of their identities as they had previously known it.

What McDowell (2003) suggests for a better comprehension of identities in this context is a "politics of location": a spatial politics that focus on how identities and places (as well as the connections between these two terms) are being transformed and, consequently, creating new geometries of inclusion and exclusion for the individuals in them inserted. The authors suggest, then, that we comprehend identities in an 'in-between' dynamic in which,

> instead of the identities of 'oppositional' or 'minority' groups being constructed as different from a 'norm', it is now asserted that all identities are a fluid amalgam of memories of places and origins, constructed by and through fragments and nuances journeys and rests, of movements between. Thus, the 'in-between' is itself a process or a dynamic, not just a stage on the way to a more final identity (MCDOWELL, 2003, p. 215).

Susan Friedman (1998) also conceptualizes identities as inseparable of the idea of borders, be they literal or imagined. She believes borders "specify the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection and exchange" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 3). They are responsible, therefore, for marking the location, the positionality and situatedness of identities – that is, "the geopolitics of identity" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 3).

Friedman (1998) considers the importance of this geopolitics for the future of feminism and its analysis of identity. She explains how the idea of positionalities makes it possible for us to comprehend contradictory, dislocated, multiply constituted, and ever-changing identities. This geopolitics allows us to consider the multiple axes of difference – such as gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, national origin, and so on – that constitute each identity and enables us to visualize the possibility of a single feminism, a move back from the

problematic idea of feminisms[8] in the plural. The author believes in reinventing "a singular feminism that incorporates myriad and often conflicting cultural and political formations in a global context" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 4). For that to happen, she defends that the borders between diverse sites within feminism must be transgressed and understood as shifting in relation to diverse conditions and possibilities of alliance.

The singular feminism the author proposes is, as she puts it herself, "a locational epistemology" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 5) that considers difference in all manifestations of feminism as theory and practice, an attempt to comprehend "how different times and places produce different and changing gender systems as these intersect with other different and changing societal stratifications and movements for social justice" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 5). For the creator of the term, locational feminist criticism has as its task the constant investigation and negotiation of the contradictory and multiple axes of identity that, along with gender, constitute the female subject. What Friedman (1998) proposes as part of this "locational epistemology" is a move "beyond" the category of gender as the one prevalent organizing category of analysis in feminism. The term "beyond", as she clarifies, does not entail leaving the category of gender aside, but to analyze it and reconfigure it in a newly spatialized way, considering, therefore, a locational and positional concept of identity.

In this "new geographics of identity" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 17), Friedman (1998) urges us to consider the centrality of space in the construction of identities, how they are built in the "mappings and re-mappings of ever-changing cultural formations" (p. 17). For her, we must think of "identity as a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledge"

[8] Despite the defense of the term by some of the feminist thinkers here quoted – such as Linda Nicholson (apud EAGLETON, 1996), Oyèronké Oyewùmí (2003a), Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka (1993), and Susan Arndt (2002) – bell hooks (2000) problematizes the use of the term feminisms, in the plural. The author explains that this term gave origin to a sort of "lifestyle feminism" because it was used for those who wanted to advocate the existence of bigger freedom for women within the existing domination systems, instead of fighting for the complete transformation of those oppressing systems. This move towards reformist thinking, instead of a revolutionary one, is criticized by the author because it means a removal of the political character of the movement and creates the idea that there "could be as many versions of feminism as there were women" (HOOKS, 2000, p. 5), which gave voice to opportunistic "feminists" that would defend platforms that were utterly opposed to the very basic principle of the movement. This is the case for example of conservative and liberal women who call themselves feminists and publicly declare to be anti-choice (in relation to women reproductive rights). This is why we tend to agree with Friedman's (1998) idea of a return to one locational feminism (in the singular) that allows us to attend the diverse positions of women not by means of the creation of several branches of separate feminist movements, but through the comprehension of gender in itself as a formation dependent upon each female individual positionality.

(p. 19). Identities are, therefore, spatialized, fluid, and nomadic; built and altered in the act of moving; the result of constantly changing positionalities and of the diverse axial interactions that come with them.

Axes is a word used to "designate the different constituents of individual identity, cultural formations, and societal systems of stratification" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 109) and it is Friedman's believe that no identity axis can be considered as pure and isolated, because it is always already permeated by the others. In advocating the consideration of space as a constituent of identity, the author is, thus, inviting us to give a step further in intersectionality by considering the importance of a geopolitical/spatial axis that comprehends "the spatial organization of human societies, the cultural meanings and institutions that are historically produced in and through spatial location" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 109).

Considering the nature of Adichie's work, I believe Friedman's (1998) locational feminist perspective to be an adequate one to analyze *Americanah* and the identity of its characters in this dissertation. Other theoreticians also suggest aligning possibilities of conceiving identity within the feminist movement. In the following sections, I discuss some of these conceptions that are related to and constructive of each other and, together, offer the possibility of a deeper understanding of Adichie's novel and characters in my analysis.

2.1.5.1 Identity as nomadism and 'elsewhereness'

In Teresa de Lauretis's (1987) conception, the female subject of feminism is "constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another and inherently (historically) contradictory" (p. X). It is her understanding that each individual, following the determination of a biological sex, comes to be represented in terms of a social relation that has been already determined by the conceptual opposition of two biological sexes. These pre-determined terms of individual social representation compose what she names "the gender-sex system". To her, the sexed subject constitutes itself by means of identification with the available subject-positions, determined by the dichotomy of gender. The author defends that the feminist project of identity includes both the political, social, and historical level of subjectivity as well as its more individualized level of consciousness and personal desires.

Rosi Braidotti (1994), on her turn, advises us to consider woman as an "umbrella term" that unites diverse women, their experiences and identities. For her, identity

> is a play of multiple, fractured, aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the 'other'; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process. Last, but not least, identity is made of successive identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images that escape rational control (BRAIDOTTI, 1994, p. 166).

Identity is, therefore, related to unconscious processes and to a set of identifications, which, in the authors' view, differentiates it from political subjectivity. She considers the latter as a willful and conscious position, determined by one's choice to align with a political ideal and occupy a site of resistance, such as feminism. In this view, woman is an active and politically assumed position, a point of view assumed when one becomes a feminist.

Therefore, Braidotti (1994) recommends a light of touch when dealing with the complex political and epistemological intricacies of the feminist project. In order to respect cultural diversity and avoid the traps of both relativism and essentialism, Braidotti (1994) suggests the idea of "nomadism" to approach the female subject. Her nomadic concept is constructed in relation with "the politics of location" of Adrienne Rich (apud BRAIDOTTI, 1994), which admonished us about the non-universalist character of theoretical thought. According to Rich's concept, the theoretical process is always a partial exercise because it is situated within one's experience. Her concept evidences the importance of awareness in relation to different places from which different women speak, their place of enunciation and the partiality it might reflect.

Braidotti (1994) explains that nomadism allows for a type of critical consciousness that refuses to settle into the socially defined ways of thinking and behaving. The nomadic identity is, for her, retrospect, as if constituting a map of where an individual has already been. The map describes where we have been and, consequently, no longer are, which means cartographies must be constantly updated. Therefore, the author's conception of identity cannot be taken as permanent in any sense and clearly reflects the non-fixity of the cartographic borders. Her vision of the subject is one that entails both an individual's historical anchor and his/her multiple and split character, constituted by different layers and integrating fragments. She defines the term nomadic as "sexual difference as providing shifting location for multiple feminist embodied voices" (BRAIDOTTI, 1994, 172), which means being able to recognize and give voices to a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings in female subjectivity. These voices come, according to Eagleton (1996), from "the subject and the subjects of feminism: they are both its subject-matter and its living practitioners" (p. 349). Thus, Braidotti (1994) considers "subjectivity as an intensive, multiple, and discontinuous process of becoming" (p. 110) and these subjects in process will

be able to organize themselves not simply around the term woman, but around constantly shifting affinities, creating what she chooses to call "temporary and mobile coalitions" (p. 105).

Braidotti (1994) tells us women are united in our distance from the constructed idea of Woman[9] as representation, what we are supposed to be and what oppresses us as a group, and women as experience, real and different women that are capable of acting on behalf of change. The author states that this "bond of commonality" among women is the first step into producing a feminist consciousness and, consequently, a feminist subject position. Nevertheless, the author recognizes that the establishing of a pact of sisterhood in oppression cannot be feminism's final aim because women are not the same. For her, there is a "need to detach the female feminist subject (real-life women as agents and empirical subjects) from the representation of Woman as the fantasy of a male imagination" (BRAIDOTTI, 1994, p. 72). Real women are, for the philosopher, repeatedly split and fractured; they are multiplicities in themselves, marked by several levels of experience, by axes of differentiation, and by a living memory of embodied genealogies.

In light of such a system, Lauretis (1987) advocates that the subject of feminism has a double vision, one that is concurrently inside and outside gender as ideological representation. In such a constant and contradictory movement between the (male) centered representations (that is, Braidotti's Woman) and the (female) unrepresentable, the subject of feminism is able to inhabit the "blind spots of representation" (p. 25) and, in them, to envision the possibility of a new construction of gender. That is to say, even though we continue to become Woman in this social system of representation that continually constitutes gender, it is a vital part of feminism to create new spaces of discourse in order to rewrite the narratives that are posed on us as Woman and establish a new perspective, which she names "a view form 'elsewhere'. This "elsewhere" is a place in the margins of the hegemonic discourse, "in the cracks of the power-knowledge apparati" (LAURETIS, 1987, p. 25) in which we can create new ways of being women and becoming Woman.

[9] The author chooses to use the word Woman (with a capital letter) to describe an ideal in representation to which women (in lower case), the real individuals inserted in society, are often subjected.

2.1.5.2 Identity as positional, location, relational, and situational

Analogously to the idea of identity as nomadic, built within the non-fixity of the cartographic borders, Susan Friedman's (1998) suggests adopting a locational perspective, in which she outlines a few possible perceptions of identity that might connect and intersect with each other. By explaining such perspective, the author clarifies how feminist theory has conceptualized the subject in terms of its multiple oppressions, its multiple and often contradictory subject positions, in terms of relationality, situationality, and hybridity. What interests me for the purpose of this dissertation is how, from the construction of these perceptions, the subject came to be understood as multiply located within a position that is defined by the intersection of different cultural and power formations and that is the product of "interdependent systems of alterity" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 21).

From the perception of multiple locations, contradiction began to be seen as a constituent of the subject: if power and powerlessness cross these different alterity systems, it is possible, as previously stated by Collins (2000), for the subject to act as both the oppressor and the oppressed, depending on his/her situational position. If the subject was once thought as multiple and contradictory, Friedman (1998) argues it also began to be thought of as relational, in the sense that every axis of identity can only be comprehended in its relation to the others. This perspective states that "identity depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity, particularly as they relate to the structure of power" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 22). As Friedman (1998) explains, all axes of difference function in relation to one another, creating sites of both privilege and exclusion.

In addition to being positional, Friedman (1998) argues that identities are also situational in the sense that, in their fluidity, they shift form one setting to another. The author explains that "while the person's identity is the product of multiple subject positions, these axes of identity are not equally foregrounded in every situation. Change the scene, and the most relevant constituents of identity come into play" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 23). These axes become more or less relevant depending on the particular situation, that is, on the location of the subject, which means specific aspects of one's subjectivity might appear more or less evident, depending on one's location. This situational character of identity is particularly visible in the journey of Ifemelu that will be explored in the following chapters. In her move to the United States, race becomes a deeply relevant constituent of Ifemelu's identity, acquiring a whole new meaning and changing her ways of understanding herself and her surroundings.

2.1.5.3 Black women's migratory subjectivities and writing

In relation to race, Avtar Brah (2005) affirms that even though theory has extensively demonstrated the emptiness of the concept, race remains an unquestionable marker of social difference. Similarly to what is proposed in the already explained theory of intersectionality, the author believes that the different kinds of racism that are present in our society articulate with class and patriarchal structures according to specific circumstances, only to create new sites of oppression. This articulation is conceived in her work not as a mere addition, but as a transformation, across time and space, on the varying positionality of the affected subject.

That is why Kanneh (1998) and Carole Boyce Davies (2003) criticize the tendency to homogenize Blackness and Black womanhood as one particular type of experience, without taking cultural and local experience into consideration. As an example, Davies (2003) discusses Black women (im-)migrants and their constant need to re-negotiate identities when moving between different places and countries. Considering this, the author insists that Black feminism cannot be fixed on one particular identity and its derived set of issues, having a responsibility to name, place and historicize its subjects, as well as identify where they speak from and whom they speak to.

Consequently, Davies (2003) also suggests thinking of Black women's identities in terms of locations or positionalities. Locations, for her, as for the authors previously discussed, are not simply a matter of geography (and its inherent link to culture and language), but mostly a subject position in terms of race, gender, class, education, sexuality, access, and etc. The author believes that Black women's identities can be defined as "the convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates the terms of Black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 2). That means Black women have migratory subjectivities, based on and composed of multiple locations and, therefore, their writing should not be read as a fixed category, based solely on geographical, national, or ethnical boundaries, but rather as the crossing of these same established frontiers.

Another important aspect of a migratory subjectivity pointed by Davies (2003) is that its multiple constituents are not always harmonious. Therefore, Black female subjectivity is not only a matter of movement, but also of how negotiation and migration take place and, as borders are crossed, agency is re-claimed. For the author, then, a migratory subjectivity is not simply about physical movement, but mainly the ways in which various subject positions are negotiated.

> It is about positionality in geographic, historical, social, economic, educational terms. It is about positionality in society based on class, gender, sexuality, age, income. It is also about relationality and the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself, or pass, into other spaces given certain circumstances (DAVIES, 2003, p. 113).

Positionality, in this sense, is not fixed, but the very representation of movement and negotiation of such locations, which determine where we speak from, whether or not we are heard and also validated.

It is one of Alice Walker's (2011) arguments that Black and white writers are all writing the same, immense story from innumerous and diverse perspectives. Therefore, the construction of Black women's identities as individuals and of their political subjectivities within the feminist movement has a direct impact on their writing. It is also Susan Friedman' (1998) argument that

> identity is literally unthinkable without narrative. People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others. As ever-changing phenomena, identities are themselves narratives of formation, sequences moving through space and time as they undergo development, evolution, and revolution (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 8).

Therefore, it becomes easier to comprehend why Black women's writings are also constituted of a multiplicity of places and times in which the subject can only be found in terms of "slipperiness" or "elsewhereness" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 26), always in movement to the outside of dominant discourses.

In light of such an argument, I conceive of Adichie's novel as a site of construction of identities for her characters and consider Ifemelu's writings within the narrative as a form of constructing and conceiving the character's own identity. It is my reading that, within Adichie's narrative, the different female characters demonstrate the plurality of female subjectivities, as well as the multiplicity of systems of oppressions to which each of these individuals is subjected differently in specific moments of the narrative. It is my main goal to analyze such moments by means of the concepts of identity which have been explored in the previous sections in order to investigate how these subjects negotiate their nomadic, migrant, and multiple positions and positionalities, as well as the power relations in which they are established.

I believe this analysis evidences how the subjects are molded by and, at the same time, mold their migrant subject positions in order to survive. What I want to explore is the fluidity and migrancy of these subjects in light of the many systems that oppress them and their ability – especially Ifemelu's – to gain a new perspective by occupying several

'elsewhere' positions at one and the same time, transforming them from a place of alienation to both a form of resistance and of reinventing their selves.

2.2 SOME PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S WRITING STUDIES

> *We are in danger of forgetting that history is not gendered, only the telling. (TODD, Janet, apud EAGLETON, 1996, p. 56)*

Given the connection between female writing and identity outlined in the previous section, Adichie's writing is here conceived as a site of identity (re)formulation. Consequently, I also comprehend Ifemelu's writing in the narrative as a location for her own identity elaboration. In this section, it is my proposal to discuss the possibility of a female writing tradition as a space of elaboration and discussion of female experience, knowledge, and subjectivity. Since Ifemelu is a writer character, I speculate on how her writing could relate to such a tradition and how this directly affects the construction of her identity.

In the overall analysis of the novel, I also speculate on the possibility of multiple dialogues with diverse literary traditions in Adichie's literature. I consider in the following sub-sections – as well as in the following chapters when I analyze the previously oulined characters – how Adichie dialogues with and responds not only to a female writing tradition, but also and simultaneously to a postcolonial one, a Black one, and an African one. The recurrence of themes and strategies to be explored will evidence that the multiplicity found in Adichie's characters is one to be found in the construction of her literature as a whole. In order to establish such a relationship, we must first attempt to comprehend women's journey throughout the history of literature.

2.2.1 What is the place of women in the literary world?

The history and tradition of literature writing, theory, and criticism is bluntly exclusionary when it comes to minorities, which obviously includes women. For centuries, only men were considered worthy of writing and, most importantly, of judging the literary and aesthetic value of texts. In this scenario, women were relegated to the role of readers or mere characters produced by men.

Mary Eagleton (1996) finds reason for female writers' under-representation in many material and ideological factors such as the lack of access to the educational system, domestic and children-related obligation, and lack of privacy. Many of the factors pointed by this

author were previously outlined in Virginia Woolf's seminal text *A room of one's own* (1929). This book is one of the first to reflect on how women had been excluded from the possibility of writing, especially for not having a space of their own – both in the domestic and in the academic sphere – and for having been denied the conditions to economically support themselves. In additional to these more practical factors, both authors analyze how social expectations pose several restrictions on women. In the Victorian age, for instance, women's condition was established by the most severe forms of discrimination, justified by the scientific discourse of the time, which declared the intellectual inferiority of female individuals based on their smaller brain size. Accordingly, women should dedicate themselves only to simple domestic chores instead of demonstrating other ambitions, especially the ones related to the intellect, such as writing.

It is in this very restrictive context, however, that the novel finds its Golden Age and women begin to establish themselves as professional writers. Nancy Armstrong (1987) clarifies that this genre had a decisive importance in the establishment of social female roles. She states that, initially, women were mostly surrounded by books of conduct that would teach female virtues and keep them away from improper books that might lead them to undesired behavior. Being a female writer was, in such a social context, extremely contradictory, because, as explained by Elaine Showalter (2009), if women readers were supposed to be reminded of their roles as domestic, subservient, non-opinionated beings, how could the writer behind these texts expose such ideas when she herself was already transcending her expected role in thinking, expressing her thoughts, and publishing her writings? Eagleton (1996) states that even if women manage to deal with and surpass such social restrictions, they still have to face a constant male presence that hinders their work. In that presence women find an anxiety because, on the one hand, they are crossing the line and leaving behind what is considered appropriate for them (which would be not writing at all); on the other hand, by venturing to write, they are constantly approaching what is still considered to be male territory.

In their pioneer work, *The mad woman in the attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century writer,* published in 1979, Sandra Gilbert e Susan Gubar (2000) question whether the pen is a metaphorical penis, representative of the creative gift as an exclusively male characteristic and of the literary power and the poetic aesthetic as based on male sexuality and pleasure. In the patriarchal literary tradition, the author is defined by an image of paternity, by his ability to be "God", the almighty creator and governor of his text. As the authors's put it, in Western culture "the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an

aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 2000, p. 6). By generating a text, an author creates, then, a posterity to which he has a right: an ownership of his text and the subjects in it contained.

This male literary tradition places women on the outside because, as Gilbert and Gubar (2000) brilliantly ask, if the pen is a metaphorical penis, which organ would women use to write? Is there power that differs from this male generative one? Since the penis/pen is seen as alien to women and women's sexuality is based on the absence of the phallus/power, where might the generative female power come from? Because these questions had no answer for a long time, writing was seen as unnatural to women which caused them to be what the authors called mere properties of the male father/author, subjects of the male authority, reduced to characters, images, ideas, and expectations that reinforced the patriarchal mythological tradition of women being created *by* men, *from* men and *for* men. Women are, thus, silenced by this lack of autonomy and, for them, writing is a place of monstrosity that should not be occupied. In fact, in the tradition outlined by the authors, if a woman escapes her expected angelic role, she will be deemed a monster. Those are the only alternatives for her, with no possible positioning in the middle and no chance to define herself in her own terms.

This impossibility of defining themselves and their place in relation to writing and to the available literary tradition influences on what Gilbert and Gubar (2000) called the "anxiety of authorship", which would be a dread of being destroyed by attempting to write, a fear of not being able to create and a questioning of if and how she could ever become a precursor if she does not have any.

2.2.2 The possibility of a female voice and a women's literary tradition

As a consequence of this process of exclusion, inferiorization and silencing that generates the "anxiety of authorship" and the struggle for self-discovery as an artist, Gilbert and Gubar (2000) also suggest the existence of a female "subculture", a tradition based on a sisterhood and permeated by its own images and characteristics as a response to situations of literal and metaphorical confinement imposed on women writers when they first attempted the pen. In such a tradition, the authors believe it would be possible to spot the submerged meanings of female writings, women's fears and concerns related to their ability to write, their uneasiness when facing the pre-determined roles available for them in society, feelings of self-doubt and inferiority, the attempt to make themselves whole as artists and exorcise previous shattered identities.

Also discussing the possibility of a female literary tradition, Mary Eagleton (1996) clarifies the ways in which the founding texts of feminist criticism were largely concerned with women's silence and their exclusion from the History of Literature. These texts, published in the seventies and mostly originated in the United States and England, focused on finding a female voice that would be representative of women's experience and vision of the world. Such voice could be found in a yet to be discovered female tradition.

Despite the fact that women virtually started writing in the XIX century and that their first novels already revealed a first consciousness towards the subjugation of women and female writers, feminist criticism only appeared as a formal organization in the seventies, as a reflection of the Women's Emancipation Movement. According to Lúcia Zolin (2009b), feminist criticism deals with the way in which female experiences of reading and writing are expressed differently (than male) in literature. To fulfill such a purpose, this type of criticism attempts to rescue and reinterpret the female literary production formerly relegated to a minor place in patriarchal literary tradition. This retrospective movement represents, in the author's vision, a process of deconstructing institutionalized paradigms of the literary field, revealing falsity and patriarchal implications in the allegedly neutral evaluation criteria. It reveals the ways in which the canon "has always been built by Western, white, upper/middle class men; therefore, regulated by an ideology that excludes the writings of women, of non-white ethnicities, of the so-called sexual minorities, of the less favored segments, etc." (ZOLIN, 2009b, p. 326). Hence, feminist criticism aims to introduce an alterity in this logocentric and phallocentric view.

Many are the names given to this female alterity, view and experience, such as the idea of a subculture, defined by Elaine Showalter (2009) as a "habit of living" (p. 12), stemming from the evolving relationship between women writers and their society. According to her, when talking about a female tradition, we should be in search of the forms in which women's self-awareness "has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and timespan, how this self-awareness has changed and developed, and where it might lead (SHOWALTER, 2009, p. 10). Whereas discussing this subculture and the possibility of a female tradition, the author claims that there is no consensus on what it is that unites these writers as women and sets an investigation, just as Gilbert and Gubar (2000), of the existence of such female literary tradition.

Showalter (2009) contends that, for a long time, there were no accurate investigations in the field of female literature or not even of the female experience that would be connected to it. According to her, only in the 1960's with the Women's Liberation Movement, an

enthusiasm for the idea that a female self-awareness may have emerged through literature re-appeared and, consequently, a search for 'lost female works' that brought light to the daily lives and issues of ordinary women. In that way, not only was a literary female tradition discovered but also the female experience was reinterpreted and revised through these texts, creating a new female self-awareness.

Even though Showalter (2009) acknowledges the impossibility of stating the exact moment in which women began to write, she points the year of 1750 as the entrance of women as writers in the marketplace. However, the author chooses the stage in which novelist was becoming a recognizable profession to initiate her analysis of a female tradition. She points out these different stages of evolution in three main phases of this tradition: feminine (1840-1880), which was a moment of imitation of the male prevailing models; feminist (1880-1920), a moment of protest against these very same standards; and female (1920-present), a moment of searching for an identity and of female self-discovery. Only in the 1960's, however, does the female novel enter what the author calls a "new and dynamic phase" (SHOWALTER, 2009, p. 28) of courageous self-exploration; the moment in which women's writing really starts bringing female experience and women's view of life to its center.

Considering the ways in which this female tradition was delineated, it is important to raise some question about belonging: if its first definitions were coined under such exclusionary principles, who belongs to such a tradition? Who could claim ownership over it? Could a Black African writer, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, or even her blogger character, Ifemelu, name this writing tradition as their own? Could Black female African writers identify themselves with Showalter's (2009) phases and dates? Considering the history of colonization and slavery of Black people across the globe, what was the situation of Black women in the nineteenth and in the twentieth century?

2.2.3 Whose tradition and whose identity?

In raising some of the previously discussed questions, Eagleton (1996) points out the controversy in early feminist criticism in alleging that there is a plurality of female voices to be discovered in women's writing and yet proceeding to reveal mainly the white, middle class, heterosexual, American and British ones. As the author sates, many Black and lesbian women identified the same inconsistency inside this type of criticism, denouncing its failure to acknowledge differences and accusing it of being just as exclusionary as the male tradition.

This excluding stand of feminist theory has been severely criticized by Black women. bell hooks (2015) explains how the reasons for this exclusionary stand are in the rise of feminism in the USA, which did not happen in the most oppressed layers of women. She exemplifies this point with the text *The feminine mystique* by Betty Friedman, published in 1963 and pointed by many as the opening book of the modern feminist movement. hooks (2015) contends that Friedman's work was written as if the majority of women (that is, poor, working, and Black women) did not exist and, consequently, the work does not contemplate the necessities and demands of these individuals.

"The problem that has no name", a famous phrase of Friedman's text used to describe women's condition in society, represents, according to hooks (2015), only a small parcel of women, the married and graduated ones that belonged to the upper middle class, who were bored with domesticity and in search of something else. This something else is pointed by Friedman (1963 apud HOOKS, 2015) as a profession, but her discussion does not address who would assume their domestic chores so that these women could enter the job market, ignoring, thus, another class of women. In that way, Friedman is accused by hooks (2015) of ignoring women's backgrounds and life experiences other than her own and equating the condition of all American women.

Still according to hooks (2015), as this is a groundbreaking work of contemporary feminist thought, much of its one-dimensional perspective on women's realities reflects that same way of thinking. The author maintains that White women dominate the feminist discourse and neither do they question themselves about the difference between their experience and others', nor do they reflect about their own prejudices when it comes to race and class. In this way, the intrinsic relation between gender, race, and class remains suppressed and its connections are not outlined. For her, these white women have "little or no comprehension of white supremacy as a strategy, of the psychological impact of class, and of their own political condition inside a racist, sexist, and capitalist State" (HOOKS, 2015, p. 196).

Alice Walker (2011) is another well-known author among those that criticize the fact that Black women have been invizibilized in Western feminist theorizing. As an example, she goes further back in time and quotes the already mentioned work of Virginia Woolf (1929), when the author describes the problem of a woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century being thwarted by "contrary instincts". Walker (2011) reflects insightfully on the fact that this problem remained a reality for Black women in the eighteenth century, even more so for enslaved women, who were thwarted not just by contrary instincts, but also physically

punished with chains, guns, and lashes, as well as psychologically tortured by submission to another's religion and to someone else possessing their bodies entirely.

Walker (2011) also shows the absence of Black women writers from syllabuses and critical literary anthologies as evidence for her criticism of mainstream feminist theory. In fact, Black women writers were, in the author's academic experience, so absent from literary subjects that she began to question if they had existed at all. She finds reason for such exclusion in the inability of literary critics to properly read and analyze Black female work, considering the fact that Black literature or female literature readings are not enough to comprehend Black women's unique position in the world and the work that stems from such a position.

On this theme, Flemming Brahms (1997) adds to this discussion by disclosing how much of the standards used to evaluate literature are in itself contaminated by colonial (and therefore, racist and patriarchal) discourse. The author claims there is an insistence of the absolute value of the universal, in opposition of what is considered too local to be part of world literature or the literary cannon. Using quotes of some literary critics, he unveils how their so-called universal values are actually much closer to those who are familiar and comfortable for Western readers. The author goes further into his argument, by showing how critics believe that focusing merely on race or color problems could never produce good literature, since they are not universal themes that do not appeal to many kinds of man. We must ask ourselves if what Western criticism has named 'universal' might actually represent the reality of all kinds of men (not to mention women who are clearly not considered as part of such a 'universe').

Kilomba (2010) calls attention to the fact that Black women's silence is often a reality in academic centers, where Black individuals have been made objects of study, but have rarely been allowed to become subjects. The author states that, even though academic knowledge is portrayed as neutral, it remains inherently white and, consequently, it can be seen as a space of violence and silencing. She explains that a Black perspective on knowledge is often read as deviating or unscientific knowledge, making sure the hierarchies of what is valid (white knowledge) and what is not (non-white knowledge) remains intact. She claims that "science is, in this sense, not a simple apolitical study of truth, but the reproduction of racial power relations that defines what counts as true and in whom to believe" (KILOMBA, 2010, p. 29).

Even with feminist and Black movements' struggle to dismantle the canon's misleading principles, Smith (apud EAGLETON, 1996) also considers there is a lack of theoretical tools

available to evaluate Black women's art. The author remarks that theory, when approaching Black women's works of art, usually reads them as being either Black or female, not considering, thus, the important and intricate relation of the politics of sex, of race, and of class that ultimately have an impact on these women's experience and artistic expressions. Her argument is that only by considering these identities and the factors that form them as co-existents can we have an appropriate theory to approach and fully understand such texts.

Grada Kilomba (2010) also believes that Black women have occupied a complex position within theory, a sort of empty or "third space" (MIRZA apud KILOMBA, 2010, p. 56) that invizibilized them in academic discourses. Caught between Western feminist discourses (and its identification of the word women with whiteness) and the politics of race (identifying Black people as male), Black women have been relegated to discourses that fail to properly represent their realities. In order to challenge such misrepresentations, Kilomba (2010), much like Smith (apud EAGLETON, 1996), calls attention to the need to comprehend gender and race as inseparable, not cumulative, but rather intersecting forms of oppression.

2.2.3.1 Black women's silence and the possibility of a writing tradition of their own

These same divisions between Black female alliances and Black women's imposed silence can be found in the literary representations. In her analysis and search of Black women writers, Walker (2011) realizes how many of them must have been repressed by slavery, a law that forbade them to read and write, as well as by the fact that they were historically and socially designated as "the mules of the world" for carrying the burdens that no one else accepted to. It is the writer's opinion that these facts might have stifled too many gifts and that literature has to be reclaimed by Black women.

Like Walker (2011), Toni Morrison (1993) denounces a scholarly indifference to the writings of African American writers, but she goes further into literary silencing and evasion. In the particular case of American national literature, she questions the assumption of the literary "knowledge" involved in its establishment and criticism. She defends that this so-called "knowledge" is assumed to be uninformed and unshaped by the four-century presence of Africans, their descendants, and African American. She argues that this national literature creates a notion of Americanness that is related to the White male views. Nonetheless, it is Morrison's (1993) understanding that such a notion can only be defined by a fabricated Africanness that permeates literary imagination. This "American Africanism" is explained by the author as "the range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreading that accompany

Eurocentric learning about these people" (MORRISON, 1993, n.p.), which means it configures in imagination an invented Blackness and an invented Africa.

For Morrison (1993), the ways in which Blacks are represented and inscribed in white authors' texts is not analyzed by literary criticism in the same way women's writing and representation in male writings were long ignored before the advent of feminist criticism. She explains how a deeper analysis of certain works will evidence the use of the Africanist images as the representation of the rawness and savagery that would allow the elaboration of the (inherently other) American identity. She explains that American is a term associated with whiteness and Africanist people create hyphenated terms – such as African American – in a struggle to find some sort of belonging. The consequence of such exclusion is, as the author testifies, the creation of a master narrative that spoke for and of Africans and their descendants and that remained untouched by the African's own narrative.

Barbara Christian (1989) contends that, until the 1940s, the images of Black women in Anglo- and Afro-American literature were mainly based on stereotypes, like the "mammy", the "concubine", or the "tragic mulatto". The author points to the literature of Black women of the 1940s (with the pioneer being Zora Neale Hurston in the 1920s and 30s) as a move of the image of Black women away from previously established stereotypes. In such literature, Black women realized the importance of illuminating their own situation and showing the diversity of their experiences from their own perspective. This means Afro-American women formed a literary tradition permeated by attempts to define themselves in their own complex realities lest they remain being defined by others.

In Christian's (1389) view, "the tradition of Afro-American novelists as an entirety is a stunning expression of various configurations of social definitions that have been inflicted on the black woman" (CHRISTIAN, 1989, p. 71). Such a tradition evidences the societal and psychological restrictions imposed on their lives by the interaction of racism and sexism as systems of oppression. As the author explains, the definition of woman was a distant White middle-class ideal, which led Black women to attack these notions of femaleness in order to create different standards of womanhood and assert that they are also women. This leads to the exploration of a range of experiences as well as of the issues and identity axes that contribute to mold their lives.

Thus, Black women have managed to question a history of imposed silence characterized by "tortured voices, disrupted languages, imposed idioms, interrupted speeches" (KILOMBA, 2010, p. 12) of the cruel regimes established by the colonial enterprise through their writing. In this scenario, Grada Kilomba (2010) considers writing as a political act in

which one learns to reinvent one's self and name one's reality in one's own terms. For her, the process of writing could be a rite of passage: from objecthood to subjecthood.

Patricia Hill Collins (2002) also affirms that the literature of US Black women traces a search for positive images of Black womanhood. According to the author, these writings show the gradual personal growth of characters in rejecting any pre-determined images of Black womanhood and aiming to self-define themselves in unique ways. She claims that, as Barbara Christian (1989) maintains, the struggle of Black women writers to find and use their own voice to express their beings fully is part of their literary tradition. This search for self-definitions is, for Collins (2002), essential to survival because it is fundamental to understand Black women's place in the world and free their mind from a possible victimization. The ultimate goals pointed by the author are self-validation, respect, and independence.

Thus, I have described the search for an exclusively Black female tradition. Nevertheless, Eagleton (1996) believes that the establishment of this tradition could be just as problematic as the establishment of a female tradition, both in terms of exclusion and in terms of definition. Not to be exclusionary, it would have to consider non-heterosexuality, class, ethnicity, as well as other forms of difference that are determinant in a woman's experience and writing. In terms of definition, the author explains, based on the ideas of Chris Weedon (1987 apud EAGLETON, 1996) that, in order to escape the trap of trying to define what a Black woman is and risk being exclusionary once more, the best option is to consider Black women's literary tradition as a political category which criticizes racism as well as sexism.

Mary Jacobus is another author cited by Eagleton (1996) that opposes to the idea of a female tradition and talks, instead, about textual relations between texts written by women that could be called a "feminist intertextuality". According to her, thinking about intertextuality eliminates the assumption of a chronologically organized line where grandmothers and mothers position themselves in a linear way that can only be conceived by the reader/daughter. Therefore, from this point onwards, when I use "female tradition" (be it Black, postcolonial or African), the term will not be merely describing a line of succession of female or feminist writers, but it will actually be referring to a set of texts which question racism, sexism, and/or colonialism and that share some sort of intertextuality: the common themes and strategies these writings present and the possibility of a dialogue between these works.

2.2.4 Ifemelu as a Black female writer

Until the nineties, Collins (2002) asserts that the search for Black female identity happened within close geographical boundaries because there was a physical limitation for Black women's movement, which gave their journey for self-definition a distinctive character: self was found in the context of family and community. In the case of Ifemelu, the close boundaries are no longer a reality, causing her to proceed on a journey that surpasses geographical frontiers and allows how to widen her knowledge of the world, of her own home, and of her self. I will later analyze how Ifemelu's crossing of borders has affected several points of her identity, how her defining axes change as she moves through space, illustrating Friedman's (1998) previously mentioned perspective that identity is dependent on a point of reference and when that point changes, so thus the identity anchored to it.

This section, however, focuses mainly on Ifemelu's writing in order to comprehend how it dialogues with a tradition of (Black) female writers in its characteristics, strategies, and purposes and also how it relates to her own identity construction within the narrative. In this chapter, it is not our objective to analyze the blog's content because this analysis is part of the third chapter, which discusses issues related to race and racism. Nevertheless, some parts of the blog might appear if only to illustrate the analysis here proposed. My interest here is in the process of Ifemelu's writing and its intricacies. Needless to say, I also evaluate, even if indirectly, Adichie's writing, since Ifemelu's production is nothing but her own.

2.2.4.1 Ifemelu's relationship with her own writing and the female writing tradition

Patricia Hill Collins (2002) uses the line of a participant in a study to establish the difference of work for White and Black people in the way they are socially separated, leading Black people to objectification. Whereas for the White/subject work is an area to search for self-satisfaction and to develop an identity, for the latter it is a necessity, something that has to be done as part of survival and not necessarily something one does for one's self. In Ifemelu's case, I perceive that, at the beginning of her journey in the US, she is willing to do whatever it takes to survive – as discussed in the fourth chapter – even if it costs her mental health. Nonetheless, as the narrative goes along, class and money become less and less an issue in her life and the subjecting of Ifemelu within US society takes place. Simultaneously, she becomes more and more concerned in finding satisfaction in her work. This is, in fact, the reason why she starts her first blog and the reason why she leaves her job in a frustrating magazine in

Nigeria to start her second blog. That is to say, writing, for Ifemelu, is not merely a means of earning money, but an activity in which she searches for satisfaction and for her self.

Minh-ha (1989) explains how, for women, attempting to write is intrinsically connected to a questioning of not only their production but also their identity. Concerning Ifemelu's writing in the narrative, these elements are clearly present and the themes of her blogs already give an idea of how they are related to her identity construction. In the course of *Americanah*, Ifemelu writes two different blogs: '*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*' and '*The Small Redemptions of Lagos'*. The first one is written during Ifemelu's stay in the United States (where she claims to have discovered race) and has race as its main theme. The second one is written upon Ifemelu's return to Nigeria and approaches a variety of themes related to life in her new home, Lagos – it ranges from beauty tips to political, health, and social questionings.

Therefore, in her blog posts, some of which appear fully on the book, Ifemelu talks about important issues that escape the realms of private and domestic life in which women's writings were once confined and she speaks her mind plainly, using a bold language to do so. Her language and her style give the reader the impression that she is a very confident writer, but when she reflects on her writing, it is possible to point how she suffers from an "anxiety of authorship", as defined by Gilbert and Gubar (2000): "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 2000, p. 49).

This anxiety shows itself when she first publishes in her blog and, after realizing nine people had read her text, decides to delete the post before reading it again. The belief in feminine literary sterility pointed by Gilbert and Gubar (2000) as a result of feelings of inferiority, inadequacy and self-doubt that are induced in women's socialization can be clearly identified when Ifemelu confesses to herself that some readers made her feel nervous and eager to impress and that sometimes she did not believe in herself when writing, stating that "the more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 6). The latter quote can also be seen as an illustration of Minh-ha's (1989) point about women writers of color. She states that these women are also often affected by a sense of guilt. To her, the selfishness, or else the abandonment of family and house chores, implied in dedicating to the activity of writing, along with the self-doubt and lack of confidence are a constant battle in these women's minds

once they decide to write. Even though the guilt does not seem to apply in Ifemelu's case – she does not have a family to attend – self-doubt seems to be prevalent in her reflections.

In order to beat these feelings of disbelief in ones' writing, Minh-ha (1989) believes publication is a very important part of the job as it represents "the breaking of the first seal" (MINH-HA, 1989, p. 8) – that is, the moment in which they first leave the private sphere and attempt to occupy the public one. It is also the moment of sharing with a reader, which the author considers as an opportunity of collaboration in the establishment of meaning that allows the work to come to life. If they do not go through such a defining moment, women writers are, according to the author, stuck in their search for validation, for permission to join the conversation. Even though Ifemelu manages to "break the seal" and join the conversation, her fear of not being validated makes her exclude the first blog post, before deciding to re-post it and re-start her blog.

When the blog becomes more successful, we could assume Ifemelu has become part of the conversation and thus has achieved validation. Nonetheless, when Ifemelu starts to give interviews over the phone, the narrative shows how she was always apprehensive, afraid the interviewer would realize she was simply playing a professional role and accuse her of being a fraud. The following quote describes how her feelings of self-doubt do not vanish even in the face of public recognition:

> to receive phone calls, she wore her most serious pair of trousers, her most muted shade of lipstick, and she spoke sitting upright at her desk, legs crossed, her voice measured and sure. Yet a part of her always stiffened with apprehension, expecting the person on the other end to realize that she was play-acting this professional, this negotiator of terms, to see that she was, in fact, an unemployed person who wore a rumpled nightshirt all day, to call her "Fraud!" and hang up (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 376).

Another aspect to be analyzed in Ifemelu's writing is how, even in the 21st century, Ifemelu still hides behind the anonymity of the blog as many of her female precursors attempting to establish a literary tradition did in the 18th and 19th centuries (SHOWALTER, 2009). Her identification as simply 'The Blogger' allows her to express her opinions freely, but that does not come without a cost. Since she attempts to detach her identity/identification from her writing, her relationship with her profession as a writer is one of uneasiness, as were the ones from the early female writers pointed by Showalter (2009). Ifemelu contends that,

> sometimes she wrote some posts expecting ugly responses, her stomach tight with dread and excitement, but they would draw only tepid comments. Now

> that she was asked to speak at roundtables and panels, on public radio and community radio always identified simply as The Blogger, she felt subsumed by her blog. She had become her blog. There were times, lying awake at night, when her growing discomforts crawled out from the crevices, and the blog's many readers became, in her mind, a judgmental angry mob waiting for her, biding their time until they could attack her, unmask her (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 379).

In this quote, we can see how she became The Blogger and the blog, but, being separated from Ifemelu and her identity beyond the writer, she does not feel comfortable and believes to be rather subsumed by this other persona. Based on this part of the book, it is also possible to reflect on how this relation of uneasiness might be connected to issues of race. The reference to "a judgmental angry mob" waiting to attack Ifemelu cannot be disregarded if we consider that Ifemelu is in the United States, a country with a history of Black people's lynching.

Another aspect in Ifemelu's writings that presents a relation with the problematic of the first women writers is the aspect of conflict between personal relationships and aesthetic integrity. This was a serious issue represented by Showalter (2009) concerning women writers in the Victorian Age. To the critic, this was a problem faced by female writers and expressed itself in a difficulty to write about what they wanted to, without taking into account their loved ones' opinions, therefore, isolating themselves from their social associations in the act of writing. The exposure of families and friends' affairs, the public display of a friend's suffering, even if completely transformed by the process of fictionalization, have always been a source of worrying and hampering for women writers. For men, Showalter (2009) explains, the situation is quite different as the public exposure of their close acquaintances is faced as a rite of passage into the artistic life and a sign of their true dedication to their art and profession.

This might be one of the reasons Ifemelu writes simply as "The Blogger", since in her blog she exposes several situations from her day-to-day life, varying from stories of people she meets on the train or the street to more intimate stories of her friends and even her romantic partners. Despite the fact that she is centuries pass the age of male pseudonyms used by women to protect themselves from such criticism, she decides to write anonymously as to avoid the repercussions of her writing, which she knows to be controversial. She cannot escape the judgmental commentaries of her readers online, but at least she manages to escape the judgments of her close relations.

This preoccupation is visible in an episode with Ranyinudo, a close friend she has in her home country. After going back to Nigeria and starting her second blog, Ifemelu seems to be more confident with her writing. She gives up her job to dedicate herself to the blog before

even starting it (which she does not do in the creation of her first blog). As a result of that confidence, the idea of anonymity is no longer a defining trait of her writing. Her blog has other contributors, such as Zemaye and there are even sections that are called Ifem & Ceiling[10]. When Ifemelu writes a piece about the expensive lifestyle of some women in Nigeria and their situation of economic dependence on men (sometimes married ones), Ranyinudo takes personal offense and has an argument with Ifemelu about how she betrayed her friendship by exposing her life publicly. Even though Ifemelu tries to argue with her friend and explain how the post is not really about her but about a situation that is common for women in Nigeria, her friend accuses her of being judgmental of her actions and of actually having done something very similar while taking advantage of a rich boyfriend in America.

Given the situation, Ifemelu decides to exclude her post in order to preserve her relationship with her friend. In this conflict between personal relationships and aesthetic integrity, Ifemelu ends up prioritizing her relationship and realizes she will no longer be able to write exactly the same way she did in her first blog – that is, taking inspiration from people around her and their lived experience – if she wants to maintain her personal relationships.

2.2.4.2 The blog as a possibility of Black feminist creative theorizing for Ifemelu and Adichie

Yogita Goyal (2014) argues that writing appears as a valuable part of *Americanah* in the contrast between blog and novel inside the narrative. For her, the blog offers internet prose in a more didactic and humorous way, providing a way to think about race in America. The novel, on the other hand, is more layered and ambiguous, offering more profound considerations and, by contrast, a critique of the blog's fleeting and banal discussions. In my understanding, however, the discussions in the blog are anything but that. If anything, I believe the blog posts bring an opportunity of reflecting more profoundly about experiences reported in the narrative, bringing a new perspective on many aspects the novel does not address clearly, especially on the issue of racism in America. If the writing tone is light, humorous, and sarcastic – a consequence of the kind of platform in which these texts circulate and the public to which they are directed – it is my understanding that it does not diminish

[10] Ifemelu's second blog was given an actual online page. It is constituted of posts that do not appear fully in the novel, but are a clear continuation of the story, giving the reader hints of the new life of Ifemelu and Ceiling (Obinze's nickname), as well as of the direction of the blog and Ifemelu's writing in the future of the narrative time. The blog can be seen in the following link: https://www.chimamanda.com/ifemelus-blog/ Access on: 20th Apr. 2021.

neither the importance nor the depth of the issues discussed for the comprehension of both the narrative and the reality of racism in America.

Chimamanda Adichie (2019a) herself defines the blog in her narrative as a way to subvert certain literary expectations, a form of being blunter and more honest about race and showing how it affects people's lives on a daily basis. Adichie (2014c) also explains how she used the blog because she wanted her novel to bring a kind of social commentary that was unusual in literary writing. She said it was a strategy that allowed some things to be said in a certain way and also allowed Ifemelu to acquire a new voice and a new self within the narrative. It is my argument that the blog is not mere social commentary, but actually a kind of Black feminist theorizing that contributes in Ifemelu's process of comprehending and elaborating her surroundings and, consequently, elaborating the new voice and the new self explained by the character's creator.

In order to explain our argument, I consider Patricia Hill Collins (2002) definition of "Black feminist thought". For the author, this expression describes a critical social theory with its own epistemology and, as it is the case for every theory of knowledge, it reflects the interest of their creators. In her view, this is necessary because, as we have previously explored, the epistemologies of traditional scholarship also reflect the interests of those in control: elite White men. Because Black women experiences have been largely excluded in the construction of knowledge as we know it, Collins (2002) professes Black feminist thought as an alternative way of creating and validating knowledge, in opposition to the previous interpretations of the world. Thus, against academic positivism as the only form of knowledge validation, Black women's standpoint appears as the experiential, material basis of a Black feminist epistemology. The major difference in this perspective is the union of emotion and intellect in the belief that the emotions indicate that the speaker believes their argument and its validity. Unlike positivism, then, this perspective does not require a separation between logic and feelings, a distancing form subject and object of knowledge, and the invisibility of the researcher's personality because in this view truth can only emerge when we care. Personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are valuable parts of this alternative epistemology.

According to Collins (2002), it is possible to find similarities between other alternative epistemologies created by different oppressed groups. These epistemologies are important because they are a way to challenge not only mainstream knowledge, but also its form of production and the justifications used to legitimate it as so. That is to say, they challenge what is made to appear true and the very processes in which 'truth' seems to be created. For the

sociologist, these points of connection among multiple epistemologies might reveal the most "objective" truths because they bring a multiplicity of perspectives, rather than a single unique standpoint. She argues that every standpoint is the consequence of a partially situated knowledge and only the comprehension of diverse standpoints can generate a larger perspective and, thus, a wider and less biased sense of knowledge.

Barbara Christian (1988) also maintains the argument that people of color have theorized in ways that differ from Western's abstract logic. She writes: "our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" (CHRISTIAN, 1988, p. 68). The author defends that they write in some sort of hieroglyph that unmasks how power relations are organized in our society. Literature represents, in this sense, a place in which feeling and knowledge are allowed to integrate.

Audre Lorde (2007) adds to these authors' arguments stating that all women have a dark place within, which represents our true spirit and, consequently, a place of possibility. Within this place, she believes women can find creativity and power, as well as previously unexamined experiences that could turn into the source of true knowledge. The author states that in our society "feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men" (LORDE, 2007, n.p.). Therefore, the writer also opposes the separation and hierarchization of knowledge/feeling, arguing that feeling, when well processed and acknowledged might also be a way of knowing. This can be clearly seen in her theoretical essays, in which she uses daily experiences and feelings from her own life in order to further develop her thoughts and ideas.

Still on the subject of Black feminism, Carole Boyce Davies (2003) discusses how it has been accused by academics in general of not doing theory. She considers that, in order to change that conception, we need to re-evaluate what we believe theory to be. She states that theory is usually defined in terms of a language loaded with male European references, specific and previously defined centers of canonization, with ideas that rarely get to the population as a whole, usually circulating only among the learned and initiated in a certain academic field. According to the author, we must change that conception by criticizing the audience and that kind of theory and start thinking of theory in terms of "'frames (or modes) of intelligibility' through which we see and interpret the world" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 28). In that light, it is possible to amplify the audience of theoretical discourses and also to deconstruct theories, by analyzing their origin, intent, and possibility. We should, in other

words, be always critical in the face of theory, especially to its claim of being the one complete and valid knowledge among all others. Thus, Davies (2003) also defends that the split between the fictional writer and the theoretical one is of no use to understand the work of Black women writers, since they can do fiction and theory simultaneously and/or sequentially in what Davies (2003) calls "creative theorizing".

For Kilomba (2010), we must take into account the fact that Black people question, interpret, and evaluate reality in a way that is not less valid than White, but simply different. In this sense, she agrees with Collins (2002) on the importance of attending to the personal and the subjective as part of academic discourse, considering every single person speaks from a specific location in time and space, which locates this person as part of a particular history and reality. Disregarding this information is participating in the fallacy of white knowledge portrayed as universal/neutral and refusing to admit the ultimate reality that there is no such thing as a neutral discourse.

Considering, then, the arguments of Collins (2002), Christian (1988), Lorde (2007), Davies (2003), and Kilomba (2010), I draw an important conclusion that allows me to argue that Ifemelu's blog is a type of "creative theorizing" (DAVIES, 2003): in Black women's writing, feeling and knowledge, as well as fiction and theory, work closely together in order to produce a new kind of epistemology, broadening our previously defined ways to comprehend what we call theory and the ways in which it is produced. In light of such a comprehension, I can now enlighten the traces in Ifemelu's blog which allow me to claim it as a space for 'creative theorizing' within Adichie's narrative.

Adichie (2014e) herself explains how she envisioned her novel as "a challenge to the notion of the novel as repository of uncertainties" (ADICHIE, 2014e, verbal information[11]). She clarifies that, in her point of view, race, which she also claims as one of the main topics of the book, can hardly be seen as an uncertain topic. This is why she decides to create the blog: a place within the narrative in which we can meet a different and contrasting Ifemelu, using a completely new voice, and, consequently, expressing a diverse self. Cláudio Braga (2019) also sees Ifemelu's blog as a space in which Adichie's voice is inserted, along with the possibility of commentary about racial questions in the US. Serena Guarracino (2014) as well evaluates the blog as a narrative space that, at one and the same time, takes place inside and

[11] THE GUARDIAN'S BOOK PODCAST: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Americanah. [Voiceover by]: John Mullan; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The Guardian's book club, 1 Aug. 2014e. *Podcast*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2014/aug/01/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-americanah-podcast. Access on: 11 Jan. 2021.

outside the book's narrative. For her, Ifemelu's blog entrances could be read separately from the main story but are also the direct result of Ifemelu's experience in the narrative, as well as a place dedicated to reflection upon such events, leading to her self- knowledge development. In this author's view, the blog also functions as an extension of Adichie's public persona and her style of making social commentary through Internet media.

Both Braga (2019) and Guarracino (2014), thus, believe the blog is a space within the narrative in which the author's voice appears more clearly, dealing mostly with social issues she already has a habit of addressing in her public life. It is a space in which her voice and her experience mix with Ifemelu's when she discusses public issues, such as Barack Obama's run for presidency; the role Michelle Obama and her hair play on her husband's candidacy; US society and its organization in tribes; racism and its diverse intricacies in the American context; in addition to other social and cultural issues that appear along the blog posts. As these issues are discussed in these texts, it is possible to argue there is an encounter of the author's and the character's feeling/experience and knowledge and in Adichie/Ifemelu's process of fictionalizing in the blog, theorizing about American society and racism takes place.

In the blog posts entitled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black" – such as "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 227); "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire to?" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 253); "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: A Few Explanations of What Things Really Mean" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 435) – it is clear that, whereas telling stories about Ifemelu's experiences in America, Ifemelu makes an evaluation of American society, explaining how it works and structures itself, and even creating or re-elaborating concepts to explain its functioning. "American tribalism", the "oppression Olympics", and the "race card" are just some examples of the concepts brought forward in Adichie's discussions in the *Raceteenth Or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black.* The following quote shows one example of how Ifemelu theorizes on the structure of American society and on how it affects its functioning:

> In America, tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds – class, ideology, region, and race. First, class. Pretty easy. Rich folk and poor folk. Second, ideology. Liberals and conservatives. They don't merely disagree on political issues, each side believes the other is evil. Intermarriage is discouraged and on the rare occasion that it happens, is considered remarkable. Third, region. The North and the South. The two sides fought a

> civil war and tough stains from that war remain. The North looks down on the South while the South resents the North. Finally, race. There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 227).

It is clear how the blog offers not a simple opinion, but instead a frame or mode of comprehending a reality, as the theorizing defended by Davies (2002): the ways in which American society is structured according to Ifemelu's perception and experiences.

Other than these types of post, which evaluate the structure and functioning of American society, especially in relation to racism as a structuring system, other posts offer, as pointed by Fouad Mami (2017), criticism on heavy media and its treatment of African and Black people in general – that is to say, its role in generating prejudice and reifying consciousness, in both Nigerian and American societies. In blog posts such as "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 367), "Why Dark Skinned Black Women – Both American and Non-American – Love Barack Obama" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 264), and "Traveling While Black" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 410), Adichie/Ifemelu make a clear criticism of how Black women are treated and portrayed in the media – the way their hair is seen as bad and unnatural, the stereotypes reserved for Black women in fiction, and the place these women are relegated to in society as a consequence of such poor representation. The quote below exemplifies this kind of criticism:

> You see, in American pop culture, beautiful dark women are invisible. (The other group just as invisible is Asian men. But at least they get to be super smart.) In movies, dark black women get to be the fat nice mammy or the strong, sassy, sometimes scary sidekick standing by supportively. They get to dish out wisdom and attitude while the white woman finds love. But they never get to be the hot woman, beautiful and desired and all. So dark black women hope Obama will change that (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 265-266).

In this context, Mami (2017) believes that Ifemelu's blog appears as a contrast to such a media and "Adichie demonstrates how social media can be mobilized in the task of resisting the inhibitive force of racialized cultural modernity" (MAMI, 2017, p. 182). He classifies Ifemelu's desire and necessity to express herself as being urgent and unpretentious, which only speak in favor of her attempt to bring this new voice to the social media scenario. Ifemelu's writings are also in accordance with Collins' (2002) previously discussed proposal that a Black female tradition is set on a struggle to question and reject derogated images of female Blackness and attempt to re-define one's self in positive and unique ways.

It is not only the stereotypes in media that are criticized in Adichie's narrative, though. There is also criticism of the previously discussed mainstream notion of theory. One of the moments in which this criticism appears is, when telling us about Ifemelu's experience with the blog, the narrator explains how "readers like Sapphic Derrida, who reeled off statistics and used word like 'reify' in their comments, made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 5-6). In this quote Davies' (2003) characteristics of theory appear in the form of references. The complicated terms and language the author points out are exemplified in this quote in the use of the word 'reify'. The male European references, specific and previously defined by means of canonization appear mostly in the users' name reference to "Derrida", one of the most prestigious academic thinkers of our times and also one of the most inaccessible and difficult to comprehend for the untrained non-academic reader. This is a reference to the scenario described by Davies (2003) in which the production of a certain kind of knowledge will hardly ever be accessible to the population as a whole and will remain in the limited and privileged circle of the already learned and academic initiated. The presence of these academic readers, though, makes Ifemelu eager to impress, as if somehow she had to prove her simpler and non-academic way of discussing racial issues is equally valid to the reader's academic style and knowledge.

This brings us to another important feature of the blog to be considered: not only is it accessible in format and language to a larger part of the population but it also presents a collective character and, along with it, the possibility of producing a shared knowledge. Guarracino (2014) talks about blogs as part of a network in which individual and collective engagement work together, since readers and users function as consumers but also as producers in the blogsphere. The author argues that blogs are part of the interactive landscape in which (cultural) power is (re)elaborated and shared in contemporary society. She conceptualizes the blog as a mixture of personal experiences, opinions, "storytelling, reportage, and emotional value" (p.14).

Araújo (2017) also talks about the collective character of the blog. As the author clarifies, Ifemelu as The Blogger makes constant use of the pronouns 'you', inviting her readers to share their opinions and testimonies in her blogsphere. The blog, thus, voices not only Ifemelu's concerns as an individual, but also as part of a larger group. This reminds us of Collins' (2002) affirmation that her writing of *Black feminist thought* is part of the struggle to regain not simply her voice and her own perspective, but also the collective and political voice of Black women as a whole. Collins (2002) speculates on how many silenced Black women might have existed in the past, how many have had their creativity suppressed, and

how many have remained unknown, never recuperated by contemporary Black women studies. In the author's understanding, these suppressions serve to a very specific purpose: that of maintaining social inequalities by silencing an oppressed group in order to make it seem like they are resigned and cooperative with the oppressors. Thus, the author defends this voice is one that needs to be regained and not solely on the individual or personal level.

In the blog, as Ifemelu tells her stories and makes reflections about the reality around her, readers respond by asking questions – sometimes causing Ifemelu to modify and update her posts (as can be seen in ADICHIE, 2013, p. 368) – but also adding their own stories and reflections. In a very interesting post, Ifemelu invites her Black readers to "unzip themselves" in a safe space. The post titled "Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes" goes as follows:

> This is for the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 380).

The blog, thus, offers the possibility of collectively re-gaining a voice for Black people, a safe space where they can put together their stories and their voices in order to build a contesting epistemology and, as pointed by Araújo (2017), to re-conceptualize hegemonic discourses about African and previously colonized people, bringing forward an alternative perspective and a different story from the one being majorly told in the last few centuries. Alice Walker (2011) believes that, with a literary tradition that is based on the slave narrative, it is part of the Black writer's struggle for more freedom to add to this excluding narrative. Ifemelu and Adichie's writings in the blog, thus, goes hand in hand with Walker's (2011) proposal, adding a new and necessary perspective to the larger story the author posits is being written by both White and Black writers around the world.

The analysis of the blog posts also shows how they are in accordance with Davies's (2003) arguments that Black women's writing are always formed of a multiplicity of places and times in which the subject can only be found in terms of "slipperiness" or "elsewhereness" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 26), always in movement to the outside of dominant discourses. Through the previously discussed strategies of using a light and accessible language and support, using experience and its fictionalization to convey meaning and knowledge, and using a platform that allows for the creation of a collective text and voice, Ifemelu's blog moves outside of the academic ways of producing knowledge and discourse

and theorizing, if we understand theory as defined by Davies (2003): a mode of intelligibility and interpretation of the world. In fictionalizing her theory and theorizing her fiction, her experiences and her feelings, Adichie/Ifemelu contribute to Black feminist thought and its creation and maintenance of an epistemology that escapes the previously explained hegemonic forms of defining knowledge. As Ifemelu regains her voice and inaugurates a site of knowledge production within the space of the blog, she also regains a new form of belonging and a new consciousness about her identity, which is explored in the following section.

2.2.4.3 Ifemelu's writing as a site of identity negotiation

In her work about *Americanah*, Eliza de Souza Silva Araújo (2017) analyzes the novel as a literary reconstruction of the diasporic experience of an African woman in a metropolis. In Araújo's (2017) understanding, the fragmented narrative, using Ifemelu's blog entries and the chronological interruptions, evidences the divided mind of the diasporic subject. This happens because the blog presents a different voice in the narrative, other than the one that narrates the story. Along with that voice a new consciousness and perception is presented to the reader. In this context, the author argues that the blog functions as a space in which Ifemelu discovers and identifies with the process of writing, simultaneously writing and founding her self. Consequently, Araújo (2017) considers the blog (and the act of writing as a whole) as that which allows Ifemelu to belong to the spaces she occupies. For this critic, Adichie's work is about searching for one's own place in the world and (re)building one's self through the act of writing.

In Ifemelu's relationship with her writing we can also comprehend the previously discussed idea put forward by Kaplan (apud EAGLETON, 1996) of how women have acknowledged the split character of their subjectivities and have performed accordingly in their writing. Formerly, I have discussed how the main character negotiated with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, with her own identity/anonymity in writing, and with the feelings of her loved ones and readers. Rather than being a negotiation of only these factors, her writing also represents the multiplicity of places and times, caused by the crossing of previously established borders, as it is characteristic of the writing of Black female migrant subjects. As previously quoted, Davies (2003) believes Black women's identities can be defined as an encounter of diverse places and cultures, a (re)negotiation of their experiences and identities. In the case of *Americanah*, it is clear how both blogs become a space to not

only discuss Ifemelu's experiences, but also to re-signify them and consequently re-signify her own identity.

When analyzing Black women writers' work, Maia Butler (2017) considers how they explore the shifts in the meanings of race, identity, space, and gender in the diaspora and how these aspects can contribute to create communities and a sense of belonging for Black migratory subjects. In her opinion, the blogs in *Americanah* can be considered transnational communities or, rather, online textual homelands. She explains that the blogs work as a dialogical literature tool that allows for the creation of a new (textual) space in which home can be enacted within the diaspora and, consequently, for a broadening of Ifemelu's boundaries of home and belonging. The space of the blogs works, thus, as a "new diaspora location" (BUTLER, 2017, p. 132), one in which Ifemelu can constantly construct and reconstruct a home for herself.

Akinrinade and Ogen (2011) add to the discussion by deliberating on the impact of information and telecommunication technology – especially the internet – in the construction of new diasporic communities and, consequently, of new identities for Nigerian diasporic individuals. David and Muñoz-Basols (2011) talk more specifically about blogs as a part of this flow of information and communication that have appeared online, presenting themselves as opportunities for the diasporic individuals to bring closer three important parts of their identity: their home, their host country, and their diasporic group. The blog, which they consider as complex expressive language, consisting of personal and collective narratives, brings the possibility for creating new meanings, new relationships, and, consequently, new senses of self.

Then, in the process of constructing and reconstructing her home within the diasporic space, Ifemelu also reconstructs her self. As stated by Kathryn Woodward (2009), identity is a relational phenomenon, in the sense that it depends on what is outside, what it is not and what it is different from in order to establish itself. In the process of writing the blog, Ifemelu elaborates on her own experiences, but also on the experiences of those that surround her. When reflecting on people, culture, and the systems of oppression that envelop her, she is also reflecting and elaborating on her own self.

It is through the blog that Ifemelu achieves Audre Lorde's (2007) transformation of silence into language and, later, into action. By means of her writing, she starts to voice her new life in the US and many phenomena that she does not manage to comprehend or process on her own. The blog is the space in which she elaborates her consciousness about US society and one of its main structural pillars – racism (which is further discussed in the third chapter).

As pointed by Carina Marques (2017), the blog is initiated through Ifemelu's necessity of giving voice to her experience as a Black (and we add African) woman in the United States and, being anonymous, it becomes a safe space to share these experiences and reflect upon them collaboratively. Still according to the author, the blog is the space in the narrative in which it is possible to observe the construction of Ifemelu's character in a clearer way and perceive how she positions herself in this new place and within its newly found configurations of race. It becomes, also, a narrative space of contestation.

Milayne Nascimento and Elio de Souza (2019) also discuss how Ifemelu's identity development and her creation of the blog are connected. Analyzing chapter 31 of the novel – the one in which the creation of the blog is described to the reader –, the authors consider as crucial the moment in which Ifemelu argues at a dinner party and defends the point that race matters in every relationship between Black and White people. For them, this is a point in the narrative in which Ifemelu marks the strengthening of her identity and her determination to speak her truth. Other than this moment, Nascimento and Souza (2019) also consider as fundamental the moment in which Ifemelu has a discussion with Curt about a magazine. After her didactic and clear explanation about how magazines are racist and not representative of Black people as a whole, he simply dismisses her arguments claiming he did not want to make a big deal out of it. This episode (which is better explored in chapter three) shows Curt as the White American man in the positioning of deciding what is worth discussing and, once more, silencing and invizibilizing Ifemelu as a Black woman.

According to Guarracino (2014), the blog also offers a double take on the characters's experiences and the possibility of coming in contact with younger Ifemelu's perspectives, which contrast with the more elaborated perceptions of the character throughout the rest of the narrative. Even though such a difference in perspective is clear, the author claims the entrances of the blog in the narrative are deeply connected to the events told outside the blogosphere, even if such a connection does not seem clear at first. In the case of Ifemelu's breakup with Curt, for example, Guarracino (2014) believes the blog is the elaboration of this event in the life of the character and the previous racial experiences that were brought up by a romantic relationship with a White man.

Thus, it is possible to say that, in addition to constituting a home inside the diaspora, Ifemelu's first blog is also an attempt to define her experiences and herself for herself, considering Lorde's affirmation that if Black women do not define themselves, they will certainly be defined by others in a detrimental way. Ifemelu's need to redefine her

experiences, to share with others, and to learn about her own experiences through her perspective can be clearly seen in the following passage:

> […] blogs were new, unfamiliar to her. But telling Wambui what happened was not satisfying enough; she longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze? She broke up with Curt a few weeks after that, and she signed on to WordPress, and her blog was born. She would later change the name, but at first she called it Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a NonAmerican Black on the Subject of Blackness in America. Her first post was a better-punctuated version of the e-mail she had sent to Wambui. She referred to Curt as "The Hot White Ex." A few hours later, she checked her blog stats. Nine people had read it. Panicked, she took down the post. The next day, she put it up again, modified and edited, ending with words she still so easily remembered (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 366).

Thus, even after panicking and deciding to exclude the post for the reasons already discussed, her need to be in contact with others and to read their stories is stronger. She remembers the words so easily because she is telling her self and her stories and this is exactly what she wants to make sense of, whereas reading others' replies to them.

That being said, I agree with Isabella Villanova's (2018) analyses of the blog as a tool the helps Ifemelu come into her voice and express her opinions through storytelling. Nonetheless, I move further to contend that as Ifemelu tells her stories and finds her voice in her writing, she does not merely find a self but also (re)constructs new selves anchored in her positionality as a subject: as she moves through space and so do the points of reference of her identity, she moves within her writing to comprehend, negotiate, and establish her possibilities of being within her new identity locations.

These changes become clear in Guarracino's (2004) analyses of her second blog. In relation to *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, Guarracino (2014) believes Ifemelu creates another writing persona for this blog, as she perceives blogging in the US to be different from blogging in Nigeria. In the latter country, the separation between Ifemelu and the blogger becomes less clear because the relational aspects of her writing become more prominent. The previously mentioned moment when Ranyinudo complains about one of Ifemelu's post is, for the author, an example of "how the character's detachment from the things she writes is just a fiction created by blogging" (GUARRACINO, 2014, p. 20).

In my perception, however, what happens is not so much the creation of a new 'persona' for a new blog but a transformation in Ifemelu's sense of self in direct relation to the change in her geopolitical axis of her identity. As previously explained through the ideas

of Friedman (1998), no identity axis can exist alone, and each one of our axis is mediated through the others. If we consider that the geopolitical/spatial axis, defined by the same author, comprehends "the spatial organization of human societies, the cultural meanings and institutions that are historically produced in and through spatial location" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 109), we can assume a change in one's physical location is bound to change many of the points of reference in which an identity is built upon and, consequently, cause a change in many of its axes. In the case of Ifemelu, these changes are better explored throughout the analysis of her identity in this dissertation but it is safe to say her writing does not remain immune to all these identity changes.

In the United States, her point of reference for writing is race/racism – a system to which she was inherently an outsider even after being suddenly pulled into it upon her arrival in the US. Thus, the distance between blogger and self is already big in her first blog and it is made bigger by her fears and anxieties, both the previously discussed ones about her writings and also the ones about her safety, briefly expressed in the moment she mentions her anxieties of being attacked by a mob. Thus, when Ifemelu starts to write her blog, she is not really creating a new identity as much as she is negotiating her position within a complicated and previously unknown identity configuration – being Black in America (which is better explained in chapter three).

In Ifemelu's second blog – written when she goes back to Nigeria –, in spite of the negotiating element (trying to make sense of the home country she remembers and the one she now meets through the fresh perspective she has acquired in America), it is a blog that is much more about regaining her roots: through the blog the learns how to be an insider within Nigeria again and how to re-discover her self in the face of a new geographical axis and, consequently, of the new points of reference it brings to her identity. Therefore, we tend to agree more with Guarracino's (2014) intake that mentions Ifemelu's second blog as "finally and acknowledgeably Ifemelu's, one of the backbones of a new identity emerging out of homecoming discovery, and blogging" (p. 21).

Leoné Barzotto and Rafael Souza (2016) argue that Ifemelu multiplies herself in the narrative, becoming several people with different faces and personalities in order to survive in a foreign country. They also believe, however, that she does not forget who she truly is and where she belongs to. In this dissertation, I argue instead that it is not possible to define what Ifemelu 'truly' is or a single place to which she belongs. What characterizes her identity is, in fact, her multiplicity, her ability of being many at the same time and of finding ways to experience belonging, regardless of the physical place she occupies. She does not waver from

one face or identity to the next: she is built from several identity axes – woman, Black, Nigerian, migrant, blogger/writer, academic – and, even though some of this axes might have a stronger influence in certain circumstances, their co-existence and their intersection is at the core of who she is.

I tend to agree with Mary Margaret Bonvillain's (2016) statement that "Adichie provides readers with characters who demand to be examined in multiple ways and refuse examination through only one lens of Othering" (p. 66). As she explains, Adichie's work refuses to homogenize experience or to depict a cohesive identity, which leads to her suggestion of analyzing the novel by means of an intersectional perspective. In Adichie's characters, it is necessary to consider both oppressions and privileges as interconnected variables that mold these paper individuals and their experiences. The author also considers that, in the narrative

> identity develops as conflicting sets of ideas interact because of the variations in the ways individuals treat one another depending on their gender, location, race, among other intersections. Identity is ever-changing as individuals adapt their personal selves to the feedback and responses they receive during the socialization process (BONVILLAIN, 2016, p. 6).

In this perspective, Adichie's writing can be considered as a "process of undoing the illusory stability of fixes identities" (BRAIDOTTI, 1994, p. 15) and destabilizing commonsensical meanings. Adichie's writing is, thus, an act of constant translation that requires one to navigate among diverse realities and cultures. The author seems to adopt some kind of nomadism – Braidotti's (1994) previously explained concept – as an aesthetic position, one which allows the writer to be able to recreate a home anywhere.

In order to perform my analysis of the novel, I will adopt a nomadic position myself, also taking into account the affirmation of Homi Bhabha (1998) that the theoretical endeavor happens in a liminal space of negotiation or what he names "iteration": the articulation of oppositional and antagonistic elements in one doubly inscribed gesture of both subversion and substitution. In the interval between One and the Other, Bhabha (1998) argues that the frontiers are remodeled and the impossibility of any sign working as the single autonomous representative of difference is clearly exposed. This means that, in the meeting of gender and postcoloniality as defining social factors in a process of identification, one should not overthrow the other. In fact, he claims neither One nor the Other must be taken into account. Instead, a third space of articulation between the two must be created in order for this subjectivity to be effectively comprehended and even voiced. Therefore, I intend to perform

an analysis of the character of Ifemelu, considering the different axes (and the different systems of oppression that determine them) that constitute this character and those which become particularly relevant according to certain points in the narrative, considering how these axes interact to produce new ways of oppression but also new ways of being.

In the following chapter, I begin the exploration of this identity. According to the research purposes here presented, I have divided the chapters in order to consider the moments in which some of Ifemelu's identity axes become more prominent than others. I start to analyze the main character's journey in order to comprehend how the multiplicities of the character take place according to her positionality (FRIEDMAN, 1998) as a subject. Thus, the following chapters bring both a theoretical reflection on the axis or axes to be discussed along with the analysis of the events of Ifemelu's life and of the characters that I believe to have relevance for the specific identity constituents separated for analysis.

It is important to understand, however, that in spite of being divided for didactical purposes in this dissertation, these identity axes cannot be clearly separated and are clearly influenced by one another – as I hope the theoretical discussion in this chapter has shown. It is also relevant to comprehend why gender is a part of every single chapter: in my reading, feminist criticism is the point of departure of analysis and is also an element which seems to be defining in every single positionality of Ifemelu's identity even though it is always connected to and constantly modified by the axes to be discussed in the following chapters – that is to say postcoloniality, diaspora, and race. The following chapter brings a discussion on postcolonialism. I chose it to be the point of departure because it is, chronologically, one of the first axes to stand out in Ifemelu's life and also an axis that determines some of the most important meanings on the others.

3 POSTCOLONIALISM AND IFEMELU'S FIRST DISCOVERIES OF SELF

> *Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in the undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. (MINH-HA, 1989, p. 74)*

In order to achieve my main goal in this dissertation – that is, comprehending Ifemelu's identity in its nomadism and elsewhereness (BRAIDOTTI, 1994), positionality (FRIEDMAN, 1998), and migrancy (DAVIES, 2003) – I start with Ifemelu's childhood and adolescence in Nigeria, a moment of the character's life in which mostly gender and postcoloniality have an influence in her life. These two axes interact to create a third-space that determines her possibilities of choice and of being and in which, consequently, her experience takes place and her self emerges. In this process of Ifemelu's identity formation, I discuss her discovery of and relationship with her own sexuality. I also analyze, in this chapter, four different female characters who not only share a similar positionality (in terms of gender and postcoloniality) but who also have a resonant importance in the establishment of Ifemelu's identity at this stage of the narrative: Ginika, Aunty Uju, Ifemelu's mother, and Obinze's mother. In order to do so, we must first attempt to comprehend how these two axes of identity interact in the geographical axis represented by Nigeria.

3.1 POSTCOLONIALISM

Ashcroft *et al.* (2004) discusses the post-colonial experience as one that has molded three quarters of the world we know today. The authors define the post-colonial as a term used to describe "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (p. 2). Despite being considered one of the launching texts of postcolonial theory, this definition of postcolonialism has received critiques from different postcolonial theoreticians since it first appeared.

Anne McClintock (1995), for one, criticizes the idea of contradiction present in the term postcolonial: at the same time it names a theory that has as a mission the questioning of the imperial idea of a linear time, it brings in itself the very same idea of linearity. The prefix 'post', in her view, reflects the very concepts of development and "progress" it purports to challenge. This re-imposed linearity, in the author's opinion, also reduces the culture of the colonized peoples to a pre-colonial time, setting the colonial encounter as the determining marker in the history of each of these societies, by keeping countries that were colonized in a

subordinate relationship in regard to European time and the event of colonialism as the one and only marker in this countries's histories.

Another problem raised by the author is the homogenization present in terms such as "the post-colonial Other" or "the post-colonial condition", which invisibilizes important geo-political distinctions. In relation to women, for example, naming an individual as "the post-colonial Other" obscures the ways in which women experience the imperial relations of power in different ways: how they are denied equal access to a nation's rights and resources, how their citizenship is mediated through their relationships with men, and how the resistance to the empire has contributed to the institutionalization of gender power.

In addition, McClintock (1995) complicates the discussion by highlighting how the word postcolonial organizes the theory around yet another questionable binary (colonial/postcolonial) organized around the concept of time instead of a more broad definition based on power relations, followed by other problematic ones (such as colonizer/colonized).The maintenance of the binary colonial *versus* postcolonial as a guide in the theoretical frame of postcolonialism contradicts directly the claim of dismantling previously fixed binaries that organized the imperial world. For her, this binary division makes the postcolonial category as problematic as the category of "woman", a universalizing term that cannot account for the differences in the histories and power relations of different individuals. McClintock (1992) defends such groups need to be defined in terms of a multiplicity that could be better understood in relation to a context that apprehends the continuities of imperial power imbalances in the current world: its diverse forms of global domination, as well as the many forms of resistance and de-colonization. The author affirms that considering the global situation, there is a multiplicity in power relations and experiences that cannot be subsumed under a single theoretical term.

In agreement, Ania Loomba (1998) advises us to be wary of the generalizations in the term postcolonialism. Even though she describes postcolonialism as a global force of reaction, resistance and contestation of colonial dominance, she highlights that the process of forming a "new community" in the colonies is also one of unforming and re-forming previously given communities, which makes it a very complex and traumatic process. This means that, in spite of being used to describe a process that has some characteristics in common, the term colonization cannot be considered homogeneously but should rather be thought of in relation to the particularities it presents in every location it took place. The author explains that the postcolonial as resistance is created in the tension between local and global forces, articulated

to social, economic, cultural, and historical practices that make its forms different in each part of the world.

Despite considering these postcolonial theoreticians' arguments as valid, I chose to maintain the term postcolonial in this dissertation because it is the main concept and theory that allows us to further comprehend the reality of the societies that have somehow been affected by the process of colonization. In addition, I agree with Homi Bhabha (1998) in his affirmation that we should understand the prefix post, present in so many of our current theoretical terms, as more than a merely representative of a temporal chronology or an opposition. Rather, it represents the boundaries of the present in which we live. The post is, according to him, representative of the disturbance of difference, a "beyond" the epistemological limits, a revisionary time that elapses enunciative borders and allows for dissonant voices to appear. This "beyond" is, therefore, a revisionary and expanded present time working as a space of intervention here and now. It disrupts limits and creates a new kind of border, an "in-between" that represents the process of articulating differences in which new strategies of individual and collective subjectivities can be created whereas the previous idea of an original identity can be deconstructed. For the author, this articulation of social difference is a complex negotiation that confers authority to hybrid discourses that emerge in the interstices of time and space, the other temporalities that emerge from reenacting the past in the discontinuity of the present. In this configuration defined by Bhabha (1998), the liminal and the contingent become the times and spaces of the historical representation of rebellious subjectivities; times and spaces in which the voices and experiences of the subjects of cultural difference might emerge. Their identities, be it individual or collective, cannot be thought as fixed or monolithic, especially in the case of minorities that are already characteristically fragmented, divided in themselves.

3.1.1 Independence and imperialism

As defended by several theoreticians that discuss postcolonialism, even when the colonial regime comes to an end, the power relationships it has established do not. Said (1995) illuminates these two different moments by making a distinction between the processes of colonization and imperialism. Colonization for him would be the most basic form of imperialism, in which one dominates an actual territory and, ultimately, establishes a colony in it. Imperialism, nonetheless, exists without the actual physical presence in a territory; it is formed by the political, ideological, economic, social, and cultural practices that

ensure the dominance of a metropolis over a foreign people or land. Under this premise, the idea of a full independence is, for Said (1995), nothing but a nationalist fiction, considering that newly declared independent nations continue to actually be dependent of the metropolis in several ways. The metropolis, by its turn, continues to exert is economic, moral, and intellectual domain in the foreign land.

Thomas Bonnici (2000) also believes that postcolonial societies are still subject to diverse forms of neocolonial domination, especially because of capitalist and globalized world structures. The author observes that the Eurocentric discourse that was fundamental in the establishing and maintenance of the colonies has left powerful and tenacious residues in the colonized mentality. According to him, the roots of imperialism are deeply entrenched as the result of a complex net of ideological establishment of otherness and difference. This establishment is explained by Sara Mills (1998) as the production of Eastern cultures as Other in many ways, such as through the discourse of Western History, Culture, and even Science. This Other, as she further elaborates, was negatively produced in difference, as the lazy, barbaric, and uncivilized colonized in contrast with the organized, hard-working, civilized colonizer.

Postcolonial studies can, thus, be considered an approach not only to understand colonialism and independence but to go further into imperialism and its functioning as world and local phenomenon. In Bonnici's (2000) opinion, this approach can be especially useful to investigate the relation between culture, politics, and imperialism in the process of decolonization. In such an enterprise, Mill's (1998) view is that postcolonial theory is also to analyze the long-lasting impact of such constructions and the consequent economic and politic relations established between these countries in the world scenario. She also advocates the importance of analyzing and understanding the ensuing thought and behavior structures.

Cláudio Braga (2019) contributes to this discussion by defending that postcolonial studies require an approach that considers certain specific traits of postcolonial cultures, such as hybridism and cultural difference, the issue of territory versus mobility, race and ethnicity, politics of representation, language, and any type of domination and oppression that might figure as part of their history and their present. Defining the postcolonial as a "condition of being" (p. 40), permeated by constant negotiations, displacements and relocations, both physical and symbolical, Braga (2019) defends that the process of decolonization is far from over, especially in terms of decolonizing thought and culture. For the author, independence is merely the first step in such a process.

If we consider independence, thus, as the first step of a long way to decolonization, what would be the place of women in such a process? In fact, can they be part of the same struggle of decolonization if their own process of colonization is marked to be an entirely different one?

3.1.2 Colonialism/imperialism and the construction of gender

In her book *The invention of women: making an African sense of Western gender discourses*, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (1997) sets on to demonstrate, in fact, how "woman" as a category, a social group or position did not exist in some African societies before the colonial contact with the West[12]. Her work is worth quoting because it enlightens Western feminist researchers and theoreticians in the importance of analyzing gender as a category within its specific conditions of production. When one attempts to analyze such a society using Western gender concepts, "Western theories become tools of hegemony as they are applied universally, on the assumption that Western experiences define the human" (OYEWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 16). This is a reality pointed by the author that stems from the pervasiveness of Western modes of thought even in African knowledge-production. In her opinion, it is necessary to investigate Western categories deeply, to question the terms of discourse, the concepts and theories because they are part of a dominating tradition that continually creates and projects Africans as Other.

Oyewùmí (1997) explains how Western thought is based on "bio-logic", a reasoning that has the body as basis and biological determinism underneath its organization. She argues that in such organization physical bodies are inherently social, which means social categories are embodied and consequently essentialized, in the sense that one cannot escape one's anatomy. Difference and social hierarchy are, thus, biologically determined. In the case of Yorùbá society, however, she states the body was not the base for the definition of social roles or of people's identities – that is to say gender was not a fundamental organizing principle in society. Anatomic distinctions were recognized, mainly in terms of reproduction, but difference was not created in a hierarchical way. Instead, Oyewùmí (1997) shows how society

[12] Even though the author speaks more specifically about Yorùbá society, which is not the main focus of this dissertation, I consider that, since Yorùbá is one of the largest ethnicities that came from what we know today as Nigeria, it is important to understand how gender might not have been present as we know it today in this country's pre-colonial context. More importantly, the author's work can bring perspective on how the colonial contact might have impacted social organizations and gender relations in other indigenous communities.

was organized in terms of seniority (people's chronological age) and also according to their roles in the community. These identities were, in contrast with the essential character of Western ones, situational, multiple, and shifting, in relation to those with which one was interacting.

In the nineteenth century, however, with the prolonged contact with the West, established by colonization and religious missions, Yorùbá society experienced immense changes. Oyewùmí (1997) explores how indigenous traditions were reinvented to reflect imperial interests, figuring especially male actors and attempting to justify the presence of female leaders as exceptions. In the social changes orchestrated by the colonial enterprise, African institutions became gendered and patriarchalized. In this light, colonizers started the process of differentiating male and female bodies socially and acted according to their conception of women as inferior. Even though, the creation of the category of "woman" was successfully completed in the process of colonization, Oyewùmí (1997) warns us to be aware of the ways in which hierarchies operate differently in the African context and the Western one. In her understanding, the indigenous cultures were resistant to change and its impact remains in the ways gender works in different African societies. These differences are one of the justifications given by the author to the difficulties of conceiving 'women' as a global sociopolitical category.

Another important point discussed by Oyewùmí (2003b) is that, if we think of feminism as a movement for the liberation of women, it is necessary to understand that "womanhood" is not considered a social role or identity in many of the African communities. If we think of gender as social construct, we must understand how it might be differently constructed in each society. As the author explains, in many African societies, "gender is not viewed as a source of political identity, and where it may appear to play a role, such politics are related to social location, recognizing that identities are situational and that they emanate from multiple social positionings" (OYEWÙMI, 2003b, p. 19). It is the author's understanding that simply applying the concepts of feminism in such a reality without further analysis constitutes a form of Europology, which consists of applying specific European modes of observation and imposing it on all cultures as universal and without a deeper understanding of differences in reality.

Bringing a somewhat different point of view with which I tend to agree more, Agnes Atia Apusigah (2006) proposes a critique of Oyewùmí's theory. Even though she recognizes the importance of Oyewùmí's work in criticizing White/Eurocentric feminist's perspective and its claim to universality, the author also makes assumptions that Apusigah (2006) does

not deem possible, if we take into account the evidences and arguments presented in her work. One of the problems Apusigah (2006) identifies in Oyewùmí's work is the fact that, even though she addresses the need to consider gender as a contextual category, she thinks of it as a static category and fails to acknowledge how female subjectivity and experience are fluid and how, consequently, the positioning of African women is complex, shifting and multilayered.

Another issue discussed by Apusigah (2006) is the assumption of cross-cultural contacts as inherently colonizing and the attempt to salvage a gender-free past preceding colonization. For the author, African cultures have come to be what they are nowadays based on both what they used to be before the colonial contact and what they have become ever since. The same goes for the functioning of gender in Africa: even though it is possible to criticize the colonial imposition of gender, it is also important to acknowledge that some of the gendered practices might have its origins in traditional societies. The author says we currently have evidence that gender as a factor of discrimination has been and will continue to be present in African social systems for a long time. Whatever the past might have been like, the fact of women's subjugation in the world today is very real and it is not possible to blame it all on colonialism. In her words, African "patriarchal social systems have provided and continue to serve as fertile grounds for the sowing and nurturing of seeds of Western paternalism and its imperialistic and patriarchal manifestations" (APUSIGAH, 2006, p. 43). In light of such a fact, Apusigah (2006) admonishes us not to adopt a relativist position that, in defense of culture and tradition, ends up by perpetuating dominance over women. In the author's understanding, the world of technology, globalization, and developmentalism we live in has changed the way we conceive difference, turning it into a complex and ever-changing phenomenon, whose comprehension requires elaborate tools.

3.2 POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

As it pertains to literature, Bonnici (2000) contends that the process of decolonization is also a long way from being complete, as the canonical status of European literature has yet to be questioned both worldwide and in postcolonial nations. The author implies that the hybridization of cultures from the colonized and the colonizer in a hierarchical way led to the establishment of the colonizer's social, cultural, and religious values as norm. This is also true in relation to literary criteria, which led to the development of literatures that tended to imitate the European standards, based on an essentialist and universalist literary theory.

Nonetheless, with the emergence of postcolonial studies of literature, and in accordance with feminist literary criticism, assumptions of the Western canon and its notion of aesthetics and "good" literature began to be questioned. For Bonnici (2005), postcolonial writing questions the canonical structure by introducing previously silenced voices and perspectives into the literary space. The author restates that this point of view is privileged in terms of perception, in the sense that it is located inside and between two worlds, interrogating, thus, the European perspective and the strategies from within its range of domination.

Salman Rushdie (1991) talks about this same different perspective and calls it a "translation of self", in a sense that one has no possibility of rejecting one's new language and the assumptions it carries in it. The author expresses a positive view of this translation: to inhabit the intermediate location of the translated individual – a state which Braga (2019) names the hybrid condition of postcolonial cultures – gives one a unique and differentiated perspective of the world. This perspective is interpreted by Braga (2019) as a form of power, as it grants these individuals an advantage in the understanding of the new world configuration.

Edward Said (2009), by his turn, envisions postcolonial literature as the appearance of newly assumed voices, willing to occupy space and fight to be heard. Postcolonial writings carry, for Said (1995), the past as an experience to be reinterpreted and re-signified in a new scenario in which the natives act and speak in a territory that was previously denied to them in the universalizing and silencing discourse of the colonizer. Narrative could, therefore, be used by postcolonial writers with the same intent the empire once used it: to try to establish their own narrative as a people and claim their own identity.

Given the search for a new voice and identity already identified in this paper in both female and postcolonial writings, is it possible to define such an identity through the examination of an African literary tradition? If such a tradition has been established and new voices and subjectivities found and affirmed in it, do African women figure in these writings?

3.2.1 What is the place of women in the African literary tradition?

Even though the African literary tradition was more than willing to criticize power relations with the empire and affirm a new identity for its postcolonial subjects, it was far less prone to accept the questioning of male dominance and to recognize women as subjects also in need of a new identity. Kirsten Hoist Petersen (1997) explains how the majority of

postcolonial African writings that emerged in the sixties were a quest for an honorable and dignified African past, which included the role of women in society, but disregarded their claims and voices.

The complete exclusion of gender as a socio-political category or its assimilations into other categories (such as post-colonialism, Africanism, classicism, etc.) has the consequence of not taking into consideration the importance of gender, patriarchy, and male domination in the molding of African women experiences. As argued by Florence Stratton (2002), the interlocking forms of oppression generated in the encounter of colonial with indigenous structures of male domination created a different set of problems for women than those it created for men. A case in point explained by the author was that girls were denied access to education in the colonial system, whereas boys were allowed and encouraged to go to school.

As a consequence, the problems discussed in male and female literature diverge deeply. As Stratton (2002) explains, male tradition is more concerned with nationalism and in building a new (implicitly male) national subject. Not only does it not address the question of gender explicitly but it also reinforces exclusionary gender relations in its narratives. In the male tradition analyzed by Stratton (2002) – which includes the works of canonical authors, such as Chinua Achebe and Leopold Sédar Senghor –, the gendered African reader can only find herself in images of women as objects, traded for properties, and "systematically excluded from the political, the economic, the judicial, and even the discoursal life of the community" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 25). When women are allowed to exercise some kind of power, it is only as a cautionary tale to show how they are unable of doing it with responsibility, being destructive because of their irrational character. In addition, women are constantly represented in degrading stereotypical roles: they are either a virgin land or a prostitute, and, in any case, they are subject to being raped, beaten and imprisoned by men.

Stratton (2002) explains that, according to Abena Busia, this "voicelessness of the black women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 35) is a constant trope in such colonial fiction, which contributes to women's alienation from history and to the erasure of women's fight and important role in the anti-colonial struggle. Along with the also degrading trope of "the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 39), the African male literary tradition reproduces patriarchal gender relations and "elaborates a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, one that excludes women from creative production of the national polity or identity and of literary texts (STRATTON, 2002, p. 51). A woman's place is, consequently, that of otherness, silence, assent. She is the national aesthetic object, defined by

men as simply their bodies or their sexualities. Once again, in the construction of a literary tradition, women are conscripted by men and are allowed to be neither subjects, nor authors.

3.2.2 What is the place of the postcolonial subject in feminist literature and theory?

If the postcolonial literature produced by male subjects was not keen on unveiling the situation of female postcolonial subjects, feminist theory and literature was also not very concerned in exploring the situation of postcolonial women. In light of the previously discussed exclusionary tradition of feminist theory, we can remember how feminism's definition of woman was a rather universalizing one that left no space for difference. Within the differences that need to be accounted for, Sara Mills (1998) considers precisely the exclusion of women coming from postcolonial contexts in mainstream feminism, women who were, as mentioned in the latter section, also excluded from early postcolonial discourses and their readings of the (male) experience of colonization.

Anne McClintock (1995) also contends that the relationships between gender and imperialism had been disregarded in both postcolonial and feminist scholarships until recently. In her opinion, it took a long time to achieve the comprehension of the fact that the colonized women were already in disadvantage in their societies before the invasion of the colonizers, having to reorganize their labor in a completely different way and having to negotiate a balance in her relations with the colonized men, as well as the colonizer men and the colonizer women. Her arguments corroborate Stratton's (2002) ideas that women and men do not share the one singular postcolonial experience, but rather experience coloniality in different ways.

Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka (1993) is another author who highlights how colonialism, especially for women, appears as a foreign power that adds and modifies the (patriarchal) experiences they knew previously to the colonization process. Based on these arguments, the author coined the term "double patriarchy", which means "a system under which sexism, the weapon of patriarchal power and its various manifestations, politically, socially and economically oppress women twice over" (p. 162), a system which continued to exist and helped restrain and oppress women even after independence.

Oyèrónké Oyewùmí (1997), on the other hand, believes "double colonization" to be a misleading term. In the author's perspective (which I share), colonization, race, and gender worked together, (and not in a simple operation of addition) to shape women's position as the ultimate Other in the colony. She stresses the existence of two vital, inseparable, and

intertwined processes of European colonization: the racializing and inferiorization of Africans as colonized and the inferiorization of females as women. For this author, the process of gender formation could not be separated from the institutionalizing of race and the creation of a new class hierarchy, in which women were also disadvantaged because of the reduced possibilities of female work in the colony. In her words, "for African women, the tragedy [of colonization] deepened in that the colonial experience threw them to the very bottom of a history that was not theirs" (OYEWÙMÍ, 1997, p. 153).

Despite such evident complexity in African postcolonial female subjectivity, Western feminist readings continue to treat African women as a unitary and monolithic subject. As explained by Oyewùmí (2003b), this complicates the relationship of African women with the feminist movement, considering that, within feminism, Africa continues to be seen and portrayed as a mere recipient of ideas, rather than looked at as a site of multiple forms of oppression along history, derived from political, economic, and cultural dependence from Western Europe and North America.

According to Stratton (2002), most of Western feminist readings of Africa and its texts tend to overlook the cultural and historical specificities of them. In such readings, the author identifies an erasure of female anti-colonial discourse in "the privileging of the concerns of western feminism, the denial of social and historical agency to women of other cultures, and the obliteration of cultural and historical difference" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 109). Stratton (2002) also accuses Western feminist readings of creating a dichotomy between feminism and African culture (inherently sexist), considering the feminist self and the African self as "mutually exclusive categories of subjectivity" (p. 110). In this perspective, the author verifies a vilification of African culture, which is considered as the one cause of African women's oppression whereas Western values are seen as liberating ones.

As a matter of fact, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1998) defends that the way Black women and Third World woman are sometimes defined and appropriated in white Western feminist discourse is yet another form of colonization. According to her, the creation of this singular subject implies the idea of woman as an already-built subject with the same interests and demands, which, by its turn, implies a notion of gender difference that could be applied universally, regardless of cultural specificities. She establishes a difference between woman, the Other that is culturally and ideologically built by representational discourses, and women, real and material beings that are part of collective stories. Her differentiation criticizes the notion of woman as a universal and homogeneous concept and shows how the construction of

a unitary subject in feminist discourse might colonize the fundamental complexities of these subjects' material existence and experience.

Nkiru Nzegwu (2003) also evaluates some practices present in Western feminist discourses as a form of "gender imperialism". This conception comes from her understanding of imperialism, which, in her words must be thought as

> implicit in the very structure of western academia and encoded in its processes, in the very production of knowledge. It stipulates a definite logic of being, a certain mode of thought and behavior, and covertly sanctions a definite style of speech, of being, of acceptability, and of propriety. Voice, gender identity, and most especially skin color are discursively dispersed and subsequently marshaled to determine whether one is worthy of speech, of respect, and of even admission (NZEGWU, 2003, p. 104).

Such "racialization of knowledge" normalizes white power, privileges, and worldview and, in contrast, establishes others as deviant or abnormal in relation to the norm. In this way, Western scholarship manages to exclude ideas that are disruptive to power, as well as African scholars' interests that are not shared by Euro-American ones.

In this same knowledge frame, Nzegwu (2003) argues that Africa's categories of thought are obliterated when Black individuals are considered ignorant in relation to their own issues and White intellectuals project themselves as the single interpreters of African societies, as if they had been gifted with a neutral and objective point of view. In that way, the author contends that imperialism establishes itself in the voice of the Eurocentric narrator that silences and purports to substitute the Africans's voice in the telling of their own history.

Nzegwu's (2003) point is perfectly illustrated in a moment of *Americanah.* When Ifemelu is at a braiding salon, reading a book, and a white woman named Kelsey attempts to start a conversation with her saying she is about to travel to Africa. The woman tells Ifemelu that she has been reading books in order to get ready for her trip. She says that *A Bend in The River* helped her understand modern Africa and that it was the most honest book about the continent. To which Ifemelu reacted:

> she did not think the novel was about Africa at all. It was about Europe, or the longing for Europe, about the battered self-image of an Indian man born in Africa, who felt so wounded, so diminished, by not having been born European, a member of a race which he had elevated for their ability to create, that he turned his imagined personal insufficiencies into an impatient contempt for Africa; in his knowing haughty attitude to the African, he could become, even if only fleetingly, a European. She leaned back on her seat and said this in measured tones. Kelsey looked startled; she had not expected a

> mini-lecture. Then, she said kindly, "Oh, well, I see why you would read the novel like that" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 234).

Kelsey's final remark shows perfectly how this woman believes she has a neutral and universal point of view while Ifemelu's is biased. In this way, it shows Kelsey's attempt to silence and replace Ifemelu's knowledge about her own country and her own lived experiences with her pretense objectivity about Africa. She diminishes the credibility of her words not only because she believes them to be biased but also because she believes Ifemelu to be ignorant, considering where she came from. This does not go unnoticed by Ifemelu who evaluates how Kelsey assumes her point of view was magically neutral and others's was tainted by their perspective and emotions. Thus, the main character responds to Kelsey: "And I see why *you* would read it like you did" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 234), clearly stating that Kelsey, too, had a partial point of view.

Hence, in order to discuss feminism in Africa, Oyewùmí (2003c) says we must investigate gender constructions in African societies, considering Western impact as a primary factor, due to the European rule that was established in the nineteenth century and especially to Western's continued dominance of the production of knowledge. In such a production of knowledge, what Oyewùmí (2003c) defines as an Africanist discourse has created Africa through several myths of savagery, sub-humanity, primitivism, and hyper-sexuality. What the author argues is that Western feminist discourses have inherited such appropriations and codifications of knowledge and have, therefore, replicated such mythical constructions of Africa. For her, these Western writings have a direct effect in African subjects and in their discursive domination.

Oyewùmí (2003c) also disputes that Western academic discourses about women creates their own reality. This means that, considering patriarchy as a general non-specific phenomenon and sexual asymmetry as a universal fact, Western feminism is recreating women to fit into the Western notion of woman, ethnocentrically establishing White as the norm. The author identifies in such discourses the establishment of what she names "the white women's burden". For her, much as the nineteenth century men who carried the burden of saving and rescuing the African people of barbarism and primitivism, Western feminists have assumed the mission of rescuing what they deem to be "the exploited, helpless, brutalized, and downtrodden African woman from the savagery of the African male and from a primitive culture symbolized by barbaric customs" (OYEWÙMI, 2003c, p. 28). In this mission, none or little attention is paid to the feelings and thoughts of those who actually live in Africa and

experience its sets of diverse customs, creating the image of a weak, helpless, and voiceless African woman who is in desperate need of Western saving.

This means not only was mainstream feminist excluding difference from the movement (along with the experiences of several women which were built in such a difference), it was also ignoring how gender was, in fact, a category built in relation to other systems of oppression, such as the imperial/colonizing enterprise. In order to avoid this trap, it is Mohanty's (1998) opinion that we must not construct woman as a group before a thorough analysis. She argues we must be attentive to women as subjects of their own story, which must be theorized and interpreted in light of the social, religious, political, and economic context, along with any other particularities that may become evident through the analysis in place. If this advice is not properly taken into consideration in our politics, the author warns us we would be making the mistake of placing social and historical conditions as posterior to gender definition, whereas those very conditions are part of what produces women as gendered subjects in society. Only by paying careful attention to the contradictions inherent in women's different realities, can we construct women as a discursive group of an effective politics that unveils those diverse intricacies of gender oppression.

In order to think of a feminism that could encompass African and Western women's realities, Stratton (2002) also emphasizes the importance of comprehending the "heterogeneous character of subject constitution" (p. 14). She explains that, even though we can assert that all contemporary societies are patriarchal in some level, we must recognize that each society operates a different system in which male dominance takes place in different ways and in which gender is constructed within such specificities.

Thus, according to what I have described in this section and the preceding one, women coming from postcolonial contexts were caught between the readings and writings of either Western feminists or postcolonial male authors. Consequently, these women's realities and experiences remained unrepresented whereas their voice and their specific demands continued unheard. In light of such exclusion, these women occupied something similar to the already mentioned 'third space' (MIRZA apud KILOMBA, 2010, p. 56) of Black woman not only within theory but also in literature. This situation gave them no choice other than to found a literary tradition of their own in order to respond to their previous misrepresentations and to learn to define themselves for themselves within the literary field.

3.2.3 A female African literary tradition?

In her book, *Contemporary African literature and the politics of gender,* Florence Stratton (2002) sets out to establish a new definition of African literary tradition, one that would include women's writing. The author claims that, for an extended period, it was difficult to talk about a female African tradition because there were many gaps in time due to the small number of women writers. The author justifies this absence because of the male bias in the educational system in the colonies and the consequent exclusion of women from the written world.

Another justification outlined by Stratton (2002) is the critical devaluation of women's writing when they did manage to get a written education and attempt the pen. According to the author's explanation, African male criticism had, until the date of her publishing, fairly succeeded in ignoring gender as an important socio-political category of analysis and had used such diminishing in their criticism in relation to women's writing. Literary criticism was, thus, either too critical and biased by patriarchal ideology or, most of the times, simply non-existing. Due to such practices, African women writers were rendered invisible in literary criticism and, therefore, systematically excluded from the literary canon. Some of the common criticism dedicated to African women writers appointed by Stratton (2002) is the argument that there are inconsistencies and improbabilities in the plot and that the narrative lacks force or objective, both of which reveal a lack of understanding of a narrative that does not conform to the conventional male narrative.

For those reasons, Stratton (2002) elects the sixties as the advent of a contemporary female African tradition in literature, one which establishes a dialogical relationship between women writers in which "the authorial roles of precursor and successor are not fixed but are interchangeable" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 119). As we can see, the inequalities between Western and African female production become obvious when we consider that a female tradition in Africa only begins to emerge when a Western female tradition has not only already been established but is also, according to Showalter (2009), at the beginning of its last and most prolific phase.

In this newly established tradition, Stratton (2002) identifies women's attempt to respond to the male African tradition in their writings, by showing how their experience in gender has been one of exclusion from nationalism, its conceptions and politics. In an act of subversion, the author claims they reject male nationalism and its demeaning tropes as accomplices in the perpetuation of male domination. By analyzing the work of some

important writers, such as Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Bâ, Stratton (2002) outlines part of this tradition and the strategies used to erase the male as norm and insert female experience and authorship in African tradition.

One of the strategies highlighted by Stratton (2002) is the creation of a female national subject, re-inscribing women's fight and resistance against the colonial domination and granting women with historical agency. In parallel, the male subject is discredited by being described as being an accomplice to those who perpetrated colonial power. This strategy is identifiable with the idea of revision as part of the female process of writing, discussed by Gilbert e Gubar (2000). For them, female writing has always had a revising characteristic, in the sense that it is a battle against the feeling of alienation from (male) literary tradition. This battle is an attempt to question the previous readings and writings done of women and for women and the terms of socialization that generated such productions. For the authors, this is a way of getting rid of the sentence established by men that defines and restricts women's identity, in search of their own artistic self-definition. Hence the importance of revising, deconstructing, and reconstructing female inherited images, if only to reject them and the values and visions that allowed them to be generated.

Stratton (2002) also highlights that African women tend to write novels of development – female bildungsroman – which privileges the female voice, subjectivity, and agency in the narratives to indicate how they had been previously suppressed. According to the author, this writing form allows women to be self-defining and put their female subjectivity in process.

Migration is another feature examined by Stratton (2002) in the narratives of this African female tradition, especially the empowerment of women through urban migration in order to show that, contrary to colonial beliefs, cities can be good for women. Some other common motifs exposed as recurrent in African women's fiction are: the juxtaposition of female characters (which I explore later), "marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic independence, women's education, their political and economic marginalization, their resistance to oppression and role in the nation-state" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 175).

Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (1993), by their turn, unfold the ways in which African women writers dispose of several different discourses to express their diverse realities. In spite of such diversity, the authors also manage to find some common themes and concerns in African female writing. First, they point to an awareness of neocolonialism and the need to fight for real independence, but they also see the importance of negotiating

positions between traditional African cultures and Western ones, exploring what is useful and what is dangerous for women in each of them.

Another strategy pointed by Davies and Fido (1993) is the "insider-outsider dichotomy", in which women perceive themselves as part of society, but also as politically and socially excluded from several spheres. The authors argue that

> African women's writing consistently portrays women in various struggles for self-definition. A character's ability to define herself is shaped both by her understanding of the boundaries by which society circumscribes her and by her ability to transcend those boundaries and attain self-actualization while remaining nonetheless within her society (DAVIES; FIDO, 1993, p. 336).

In relation to more specific themes of such a literature, Davies and Fido (1993) also point to motherhood and its contradictions; struggle for success and economic independence; the role of women in relation to tradition and modernity; colonialism and neocolonialism and their effects on society, especially on women; and the dynamic of power relations in society. For the authors, African women writings discuss the condition of women within society, adding another perspective to the portrayals of Africa and its political reality. In their understanding, many of these works envisage a new kind of woman that questions social order and expectations. I believe this to be the case of Adichie's work.

3.2.4 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the female African literary tradition

When discussing the figure of the author, Edward Said (1995) believes he/she is molded by his/her experience and history, but cannot help but belong to a world tradition, which places him/her in both time and place, along with other authors, hindering his/her work to signify without reference to what is simultaneously inside and outside of it. As a matter of fact, by analyzing the work of Adichie, it becomes quite clear how her experience and her history position her and her work, at one and the same time, within the contemporary canon and outside of the previously established boundaries. As I discuss in the next section and along this dissertation as a whole, her work carries several features that can easily be connected to the Nigerian literary tradition, as well as to a broader postcolonial tradition. In addition, her work brings a transnational perspective that links her with female tradition in general and especially with Black women's tradition all over the world.

Heather Hewett (2005) discusses the work of Chimamanda Adichie specifically in relation to what she calls the Nigerian literary tradition. The author explains that many authors consider Adichie to be part of a third generation of writers. According to the author's division, the first generation of writers would be composed of those who published both before and immediately after the process of independence whereas the second generation would be the one publishing after the Nigerian civil war. Adichie belongs with those who published after the mid-1980s, a moment of particular difficulty for Nigerian writers because of the political and economic situation of the country[13]. Those who did manage to write and publish attempted to bring new directions and possibilities based on the previous generations and the Nigerian literary tradition they had built. Hewett (2005) believes Adichie responds directly to such a tradition, especially in her references to Chinua Achebe and in re-reading his pioneering work *Things fall apart* (1958) by including gender in his criticism of religion and colonialism.

Other than simply responding to the existent African literary tradition, Hewett (2005) shares my beliefs that Adichie belongs and relates to multiple literary traditions. For her, the novelist is the constructor of a "transnational intertextuality" (p. 75) that inserts "a heterogeneous, diasporic dimension within contemporary Nigerian literature" (HEWETT, 2005, p. 75). In the more specific case of *Americanah* (the novel which is my subject of analysis), Robin Brooks (2018) analyzes the narrative through the lens of 'the single story', proposed by Adichie in her TED talk in 2009. The critic, basing herself on Adichie's ideas, examines how negative stereotypes about Africa have been frequent in the media and in Western literature and focuses on how African writers have struggled against such demeaning stereotypes in their own literature. For the author, the generation of Adichie is one of women writers willing to fight for their establishment in a largely male African canon, as well as against the stereotypes about their continent and its peoples.

Using the ideas of Binyavanga Nainaina, Brooks (2018) lists some of the common stereotypes about Africa in Western society. Africa – which is sometimes treated as a country and not a continent – is imagined through the idea of constant political corruption; of people starving or eating strange food, with no clothes or with a certain kind of traditional clothes; of a lack of modern technology and houses made of mud, in the middle of a jungle filled with wild animals. In the author's opinion, such representation leads to African people's self-

[13] Hewett (2005) points to the decades of the 1980s and the 1990s as a moment of economic collapse in which many publishers closed and the book market became scarce. In addition, the political situation is also quoted as a complication, since many writers were imprisoned and/or tortured within the military political regime.

hatred and self-rejection and this is why women writers have been taking possession of such constructions in order to question them and, consequently, inaugurate an attempt of self-liberation and self-definition. In this challenging of previous views, these writers are taking the chance to give their own version of the story and, by doing so, are creating the possibility of expanding others's views about Africa and African people.

In compliance, Isabella Villanova (2018) defends that Adichie deconstructs the 'single stories' told about Africa, women, and Black people by telling new stories from a postcolonial perspective and an anti-patriarchy one. By analyzing Ifemelu's journey, the author explains how her identity is constructed in the narrative and how previously determined gender roles, along with the Eurocentric written tradition and the stereotypical plot of romance, are questioned and deconstructed. Beauty Bragg (2017) explains how the very structure of *Americanah*, with its temporal and spatial shifts, deals with diverse concepts of mobility and with the consequent complications of dealing with and negotiating diverse identities and identifications.

When discussing the question of identity in an interview with Sacha Nauta, Adichie (2019a) says "I find identity to be such a fluid thing, and I don't mean that I become different people in different places. I mean that I am many things at the same time, but depending on where I am, one thing is highlighted more" (ADICHIE, 2019a, verbal information[14]). The novelist exemplifies this by talking about her own situation: when in the US, race seems to be the feature of her self that is most prominent, whereas in Nigeria, her ethnicity and her gender seem to occupy a more relevant position. The author concludes stating that identity is something people are constantly negotiating, something that comes from the inside and the outside at the same time. The temporal and special shifts in the narrative, thus, have a direct impact on Ifemelu's identity, on the axes that become more relevant at particular points of her journey.

The time and space in which the book has been read have also had an impact in the interpretation of *Americanah*'s main character. While evaluating the reception of Ifemelu by readers, especially in America, Adichie (2014a) talks about how Ifemelu is seen as scary and aggressive by many and how this limits their perceptions of her. She states that, because the character does not conform to social expectations of femaleness, she is deprived of her humanity and of her right to vulnerability and uncertainty. This inability of seeing

[14] CHIMAMANDA Ngozi Adichie: identity, feminism and honest conversations. Interview with Sacha Nauta. The Economist, 2019a. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_hsWRVR8_M. Access on: 05 Dec. 2020.

vulnerability is connected to the myth of strong Black women and their 'unshakability', which is very pervasive in American society.

In Nigeria, on the other hand, Adichie (2014c) states that, because of the importance of the institution of marriage for women in the country (as furtherexplored in my analysis of Ranyinudo in chapter four), Ifemelu is usually seen as a "husband-snatcher", a term used to describe a woman who would not only go after another woman's husband and be his girlfriend while he remains married (which she claims to be largely acceptable in Nigerian society), but would, in fact, "destroy" the marriage by requiring him to leave his wife and family. Because of the gender configurations in Nigeria, however, the husband in this case is not hold accountable and even the term 'snatcher' suggests that he is a passive participant in this matter.

When telling about her own experiences in Nigeria, Adichie (2015) mentions not being allowed to enter certain places alone, being ignored by waiters in restaurants, and being treated as the one who does not have the money when in the company of men. As part of an Igbo family, she is yet to be allowed to participate in decision-making meetings because she is a woman and is, therefore, not allowed to have a say in such matters. Growing up in such an environment, the author believes she was a feminist from a very early age, even if she did not know how to name her position at this time. For that reason, Adichie (2014e) defends how important it is for her that her female characters have agency and are able to express their own desires, even though she also expresses that they are flawed beings and might fail the expectations of those who imagine them to be "the perfect feminist" (if there is such a thing). For Braga (2019), however, the strength of Adichie's character "is not in their perfection or in their invincibility, but rather in the way they fight their limitations and their misfortunes, in the way they survive through the adversities" (p. 155).

3.3 IFEMELU'S IN HER TEENAGE YEARS

As previously stated, Ifemelu is depicted in the narrative in diverse moments of her life. Chronologically speaking, the first moments of her life the reader has access to are the flashbacks of her childhood and adolescence in Nigeria. Since then, it is perfectly clear that the character is far from the conventional role of the angel that was socially and literarily established as desirable for women. As has already been mentioned in this dissertation, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) have established in their work how the literary scenario was, for a long time, dominated by male authors that produced extreme stereotyped

versions of female characters. That is to say, women had to either fit into the category of angels, in which they had to be fragile, docile, selfless, and submissive, or else they would be considered monsters, aberrations that had to be contained and punished. The Angel in the House[15] and the attempt to escape this stereotype are, thus, a constant both in white female literary texts and in critics readings of them.

Many theoreticians of Black feminism defend that this stereotype cannot be applied to the reality of Black woman, who are usually rather seen or portrayed as strong, angry, and sexualized beings. Nonetheless, when thinking about Adichie's narrative, we must take into account Oyewùmí's (1997) formerly mentioned argument of how the extensive contact with Western societies in the process of colonization caused indigenous traditions to be reinvented to reflect imperial interests and African institutions to become gendered and patriarchalized. Within the new conception of woman created by colonialism in African societies, thus, female bodies and their sexuality were a property to be controlled and the imposition of stereotypes of pureness and docility becomes a tool to exert such a control.

In postcolonial Nigeria, portrayed in *Americanah*, it is possible to see how the Western and Christian assumptions about gender and many of the female roles these assumptions have created and perpetuated were expected from girls and women. In the case of Ifemelu, her family and a large part of her community seems to expect a more "adequate" behavior on her part. It is also important to consider, as I have established in the beginning of this chapter, that this is a moment in Ifemelu's life in which race, as the character herself declares in the book, does not play a major role in her life. In the next chapter, however, I approach how female stereotypes related to Blackness will come to affect her life in America.

In Adichie's work, it is possible to see the process, also pointed by Gilbert and Gubar (2000), of deconstructing and reconstructing these images of women, inherited from male literature in general and from the exclusionary African literature. In contrast to the women previously created for men and by men, Ifemelu's most strikingly feature in her youth years seems to be her questioning character. She does not refrain from asking questions and speaking her mind, even though some male characters around her try to silence her and put her back into the submissive women's role. That becomes evident in her dialogue with her father when he tells her:

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[15] The expression 'the Angel in the House' originally appeared in a poem (1854) by Coventry Patmore. The poem described the female ideal in the Victorian Age: sympathetic, pure and selfless. The term was later appropriated by Virginia Woolf in her lecture *Professions for Women* (1931), in which the angel becomes a disturbing phantom that needs to be eliminated in order for women to be able to attempt the pen.

> You must refrain from your natural proclivity towards provocation, Ifemelu. You have singled yourself out at school where you are known for insubordination and I have told you that it has already sullied your singular academic record. There is no need to create a similar pattern in church (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 63).

Contrary to what was expected of her, after this episode she does not change her behavior and go on to not only continue questioning things, but also to speak what comes to mind, even though people advise her to know when to be silent.

In fact, later in the narrative, she expresses that the image her colleagues and her family have of her is one with which she is quite pleased. The narrator says that "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" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 73). Her autonomy and the way she uses her voice to take political stand are clear examples of the ways in which she does not conform to what is expected of women in both the Nigerian and the American society. According to Villanova (2018), Ifemelu "has never lowered herself to comply with the female behavioral patterns demanded by the Nigerian and American societies" (2018, p. 91). Nevertheless, as my analysis on this dissertation shows, 'never' is a very strong word and Ifemelu has, at some points, complied with the patriarchal structure that dictates female behavior and lowered herself in order to survive.

If we also consider Gandhi's (1998) argument about the eurocentrism of feminism in its attempts to represent third-world women[16], it is possible to argue that Ifemelu also rewrites the stereotype of "the third world woman". As Gandhi (1998) explains, using Mohanty's (1998) arguments, "third world women" are often described as victimized, ignorant, poor, uneducated, bound by national and family traditions. In contrast, Western women are portrayed as free, educated, modern women, with abilities to make choices and control their bodies and sexualities. Ifemelu is in direct contrast with this "third world" description. Even though her family's financial situation is complicated, she still manages to get a good education because her father makes a point that she does so. She is intelligent, witty, and exerts her freedom of choice by not being bounded to patriarchal-family relations, having power over herself and her sexuality, as explored in the section about sexuality and desire.

[16] Despite the fact that the term "Third World" is no longer used to describe the current world configuration, the stereotype described by Gandhi (1998) is still imposed upon women coming from African and some of the now called "developing countries". For that reason, the author's ideas are here exposed with its original terms.

Nonetheless, even at this early stage of her life, Ifemelu already experiences a sense of non-belonging. In her school she is amazed at how her colleagues live completely different lives from hers: they have big houses, some have cars, most of them have gone abroad on their vacation, while she lives in a flat that does not even have a phone and claims never to have seen a passport or even to have an idea of what it means 'to be on someone's passport'. This is clearly expressed after she spends some time listening to her friends talk and when she and Obinze – her boyfriend at the time – leave the group, Ifemelu reflects on how

> He fit here, in this school, much more than she did. She was popular, always on every party list, and always announced, during assembly, as one of the "first three" in her class, yet she felt sheathed in a translucent haze of difference. She would not be here if she had not done so well on the entrance examination, if her father had not been determined that she would go to "a school that builds both character and career" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 80).

In this first part of the narrative, thus, the reader has a sense that even if Ifemelu is quite clear about what she wants and how to express herself, she is not yet able to determine her place in the world. The closest thing she finds to belonging at this point is her relationship with Obinze. As stated by the character, "she rested her head against his and felt, for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was her right size" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 73). Her notion of belonging is already disconnected from the idea of place, territory, or nation and is, in fact, rooted in her proximity to a person.

For Ashcroft *et al.* (2004), these issues of place and displacement are a constant in postcolonial literature. The authors claim that the postcolonial search and comprehension of the concept of identity is deeply founded in the relation and belonging of the self and the place, especially considering the physical and cultural displacements caused in and by the process of colonization. Notwithstanding, Edward Said (1995) argues that in the global scenario the identity binary option of 'We' *versus* 'Them' that served national and imperial purposes is no longer possible. For him, the notion of identity as a static phenomenon, defined by the nation and its tradition has been replaced by a much more moving notion of an identity as a temporary state, a permanent construction in relation (not simply opposition) with the others.

This relation with others plays, in fact, a remarkable role on the way Ifemelu sees and constructs her self and also on how she is constructed within the narrative. As the character keeps a close relationship with other people, the narrator shows us how she manages to

distance herself from the characteristics she does not identify with and connect with the ones with which she does. In this process, she constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs her identity and the multiple self that figures in the book. In order to explore the significance of these relationships, in the next section I analyze some characters that represent not only a plurality of female subjectivities and possibilities of identification in Ifemelu's childhood and adolescence but also a clear influence on how Ifemelu comes to construct and conceive her own identity.

3.3.1 Nigerian women and their role in the formation of Ifemelu

The importance of analyzing these other characters has also roots in connecting Adichie's work with the already mentioned African female literary tradition. As discussed earlier, Florence Stratton (2002) defines the female bildungsroman as a common genre in African female tradition. The author observes a set of themes and conventions already mentioned that have been adopted for successive generations of African women in literature. One of the most important features outlined is the juxtaposition of two female characters, in which one woman functions as the antithesis of the other in response to male domination: one functions as active resistance whilst the other represents passive submittance. In the course of the narrative, the one who challenges patriarchal authority is rewarded and the other is usually punished. She calls this device "the convention of the paired women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97) and claims they are a complementary pair of a positive *versus* a negative model for women. As the female African tradition updates itself, the author points to the expansion of this model to encompass multiple pairings, in which other characters function as cautionary tales for one specific character or even as a form of revealing this character's fears and weaknesses.

Another feature Stratton (2002) exposes in this literary tradition is the importance of mother-daughter relationships as a means of keeping a certain set of traditions alive. She identifies these relationships as a line of succession of female power and of a matriarchal tradition passed on from generation to generation.

In this section I analyze these two features. First, I discuss three characters who work as mother-figures for Ifemelu – her own mother, Aunty Uju, and Obinze's mother – as she seeks for a female knowledge and tradition that is different from the patriarchal one her biological mother wants to impose on her. Then, I investigate "the convention of the paired

women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97) through the character of Ginika, who is the first of the defining multiple pairings I believe to be present in Adichie's narrative.

3.3.1.1 Ifemelu's mother

The first motherly relationship to be examined is that of Ifemelu with her biological mother. In the narrative her name is not mentioned, so I refer to her in relation to the major role she plays – that of mother. What we know about Ifemelu's mother from the narrative is little: she drives a car, she has a job, and she supports her house financially for a long period of time when Ifemelu's father loses his job. In relation to her husband, he does not seem to be interested in controlling and subsuming her and she does not seem to stop doing what she wants to please or reaffirm him. In fact, her opinion, especially concerning Ifemelu's education, seems to be taken into account in every major family decision. However, this is a description based on a careful observation of the novel, since none of these traits are actually emphasized in the narrative's description of her. In the book sections devoted to Ifemelu's mother, the focus is mostly on her religious obsession, probably because this is the feature which has the most severe consequences to her life as well as to Ifemelu's. As stated by Araújo (2017), Ifemelu's mother strikes the reader as a character that defines her entire life in order to fulfill religious's and other people's expectations.

Another important part of the mother is her hair, which works as a metaphor for identity and also for the consequences religious discourses can have in one's subjectivity. When growing up, Ifemelu feels constantly in the shadow of her mother's hair. She says that her hair was full and free, being constantly complemented by others and called by her father 'a crown of glory'. The narrator says people asked her all the time if her hair was really hers and what was her ethnicity in the attempt to understand such a bounteous hair. What we might interpret is that her hair – full and seen as a celebration, something which people seem to envy and that Ifemelu herself desires for a large part of her life – is actually a crucial constituent of her mother's identity and functions, in the narrative, as a metaphor for the mother's subjectivity.

This metaphor becomes even clearer when, after converting to a new religion, the mother cuts all of her hair, which Ifemelu observes as a loss of her essence and her identity. She observes in the day her mother decides to join the church of Revival Saints that, "the woman standing by the fire […], the woman who was bald and blank, was not her mother, could not be her mother" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 50). She also observed that, after that day, "her

mother's words were not hers. She spoke them too rigidly, with a demeanor that belonged to someone else. Even her voice, usually high-pitched and feminine, had deepened and curdled. That afternoon, Ifemelu watched her mother's essence take flight" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 50). After this process, Ifemelu's mother became a stranger to her: someone who was severe in a way she did not recognize. After this episode, her mother changes from church to church, and in each new religion she would change herself again: she would grow or cut her hair; she would stop wearing jewelry; she would fast or change what she ate, what she wore, and the way she behaved. All of these changes were meant to follow the church and the pastor's discourses such as the one from the Miracle Spring church who defended that jewelry was "ungodly, unbefitting of a woman of virtue" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 52).

The many Christian churches Ifemelu's mother attends function as a clear illustration of Oyewùmí's (1997) already mentioned point of how colonization and its religious missions caused immense changes in what came to be known as Nigeria today. Christian churches became another gendered and patriarchalized institution among the African ones that changed to reflect Western's interest and ideals. In the figure of Ifemelu's mother, it becomes clear how Oyewùmí's (1997) creation of the category of "woman" in African was successfully completed in the process of colonization. With the creation of such a category, female individuals and their subjectivities were now subjugated by ideal roles of submissiveness and pureness that actually deranged their possibilities of individuality and agency.

After so many changes in her faith and, consequently, in her self, Ifemelu's mother finally settles in the church of Guiding Assembly. In a way, Ifemelu and her father seem to be relieved with this last change because, according to the narrator, "her new church absorbed her, but did not destroy her" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 53-54). That is to say, Ifemelu's mother was still unable to be herself in her absorption with her new church but at least the roles she had to play in order to comply with these religious discourses were not so strict and non-negotiable that she had to actually destroy her body with insane fasting or erase her individualities completely.

Even though her mother holds such a fanatic position in relation to religion, Ifemelu's father seems to be skeptical of faith in general and especially of her mother's kind. Ifemelu, growing up with these two different views of faith, became indifferent and uninterested in church matters. She saw church as something that made her mother easier to predict and to fool, which gave her freedom for doing things she would have no liberty to do otherwise. Despite her own lack of faith, at an early age Ifemelu says that her mother's faith brought her

comfort, “it was, in her mind, a white cloud that moved benignly above her as she moved. Until The General came into their lives” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 54).

After the appearance of the General, Ifemelu first begins to notice her mother’s ability to deny reality in order to sustain her beliefs. At first, Ifemelu has difficulty understanding her mother’s attitude, her creation of stories that appear to be a denial of her reality. The longer The General remains in their lives, the more she begins to notice the hypocrisy in such a posture. The General was a military man, married and with a family, who had an affair with Aunty Uju. He supported her financially: the marvelous house in which she lived was his; the car she drove was a present from him; her clothes, her money, and her trips to beauty salons were all paid by him. Even though it is perfectly clear to all the people who the General really was, Ifemelu’s mother insists on calling him a Mentor and claiming all the gifts he gives Uju as well as the ones Uju gives to their family as blessings and miracles of God. At this point, it became clear to Ifemelu that certain previously drew ‘moral lines’ could be transposed if only the transposition was in accordance with her mother’s interests.

Ifemelu’s mother’s denial of reality and her need to conform to moral expectations becomes clearer when Aunty Uju appears pregnant. In light of a baby, there is no more possibility of denying her sexual involvement with her ‘mentor’. Ifemelu observes that, after the baby was born, her mother “faced The General with a cold officiousness. She answered him in monosyllables, as though he had betrayed her by breaking the rules of her pretense. A relationship with Aunty Uju was acceptable, but such flagrant proof of the relationship was not” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 103).

Ifemelu does not question her mother openly about her observations, but at a particular episode she eventually takes out her frustrations with her mother’s posture on her mother’s church. In this episode, Ifemelu confronts Sister Ibinabo, an authority in the church in question, because she is unable to accept an attitude that is very similar to her mother’s. Ifemelu refuses to do what she is asked – to help make decorations for a church donator which is known to be a thief – even though she had done it many times before. The narrator tells us that something was different that day,

> when Sister Ibinabo was talking to Christie, with that poisonous spite she claimed was religious guidance, Ifemelu had looked at her and suddenly seen something of her own mother. Her mother was a kinder and simpler person, but like Sister Ibinabo, she was a person who denied that things were as they were. A person who had to spread the cloak of religion over her own petty desires (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 62-63).

After she refuses to do the task claiming the men to whom it is destined is a “419”, Sister Ibinabo asks her to leave church claiming that the work she refuses is actually the work of God. Once again, the discourse (and its hypocrisy) is the same as her mother’s: a corrupt man’s money is God’s work as long as it benefits the church.

It is after this episode that her father tells her she must not spoil her record on church and her mother goes further into reprobation and asks: “Why must this girl be a troublemaker? I have been saying it since, that it would be better if she was a boy, behaving like this.” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 64). In her speech, we see clearly how “both the church and her mother teach Ifemelu, a young teenager, that a female must subsume her voice and personal will in order to be the ideal female – quiet and domestic” (BONVILLAIN, 2016, p. 12-13).

Because Ifemelu’s biological mother is one of the strongest voices of patriarchy in the character’s life and such a voice is not in accordance with Ifemelu’s self and what she wants for her life, their relationship is not able to sustain Stratton’s (2002) succession of female power. In fact, since her mother is pretty much powerless in the face of religious and patriarchal discourses, there is no power or tradition of female knowledge from which Ifemelu can draw continuity. The influence her mother has on her identity is only one of opposition: Ifemelu strives throughout the narrative to be anything other than similar to her mother.

When it comes to identity formation, however, we cannot be only what we want or admire and Ifemelu cannot simply ignore the way she was raised and some of the ideas that were ingrained in her way of thinking during her child and teenage years. That being said, despite Ifemelu’s resistance to follow in her mother’s religious footsteps and her ability to ignore the attempts of subjection of her will and her voice, I explore later how these religious restrictions and their attempt to control women’s bodies, appearance, and behavior will, according to Braga (2019), affect her problematic relationship with her hair, her body, and her sexuality in adult life.

Attempting to divert such problems, thus, and in order to find a way of being the woman she wants to be, Ifemelu seeks for other mother figures, which will give her knowledge and advice about her body, relationships, sexuality and, thus, establish a matriarchal tradition of resistance.

3.3.1.2 Aunty Uju

Aunty Uju is one of the two women in the narrative who function as mother figures for Ifemelu. In fact, after the confrontation with sister Ibinabo, in which both Ifemelu's father and her mother attempt to silence and domesticate her, Aunty Uju is the one who is called to talk to Ifemelu because her mother says that she is the one person Ifemelu listens to. In front of Ifemelu's mother, Aunty Uju acts as a "pacifier" and agrees that Ifemelu does not know the right times to express her opinion. When talking to Ifemelu, however, even though she also says Ifemelu does not need to say everything, she discusses the matter in a completely different tone and gives way for Ifemelu to talk about her real frustration: her mother's inability to acknowledge the General gifts without claiming them to be God's.

In fact, according to the novel, Ifemelu and Aunty Uju's relationship began when Ifemelu was still a toddler.

> According to the family legend, Ifemelu had been a surly three year-old who screamed if a stranger came close, but the first time she saw Aunty Uju, thirteen and pimply faced, Ifemelu walked over and climbed into her lap and stayed there. She did not know if this had happened, or had merely become true from being told over and over again, a charmed tale of the beginning of their closeness. It was Aunty Uju who sewed Ifemelu's little-girl dresses and, as Ifemelu got older, they would pore over fashion magazines, choosing styles together (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 65).

As this quotation evidences, Ifemelu managed to build a relation of proximity with Aunty Uju that is not at all apparent in the way she relates to her mother. As a matter of fact, her father was very fond of their relationship and would think of Uju as the one person who could assuage Ifemelu's strong personality and also the girl's relationship with her own mother.

Regarding the matriarchal tradition referenced by Stratton (2002), Ifemelu and Aunty Uju's is the first female relationship in the novel in which it is possible to see day-to-day knowledge of female reality being passed from one generation to another, which helps Ifemelu take care of herself, understand herself, her body and her sexuality. The passing on of female abilities and wisdom is quite clearly summarized in the paragraph below:

> Aunty Uju taught her to mash an avocado and spread it on her face, to dissolve Robb in hot water and place her face over the steam, to dry a pimple with toothpaste. Aunty Uju brought her James Hadley Chase novels wrapped in newspaper to hide the near-naked women on the cover, hot-stretched her hair when she got lice from the neighbors, 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. When Ifemelu met Obinze, she told Aunty Uju that she had met the love of her life, and Aunty Uju told her to let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 65).

In spite of being presented as a motherly figure and an influence in Ifemelu's early years, Aunty Uju also functions as what Stratton (2002) calls a "cautionary tale" in other moments of the narrative. The first one is in her relationship with the general. The second is discussed in chapter four – the one in which Uju appears in the diasporic space. Those are the two main moments in which Uju becomes a source of disappointment to Ifemelu and in which she feels the need to follow a different path than the one chose by her aunt.

In the first of these moments, when Aunty Uju begins her affair with the general, Ifemelu perceives a series of changes in her way of being as she is consumed by a relationship with a man that devalues her and takes her for granted. In fact, there comes a point in which Ifemelu wonders if the girl Uju used to be before the relationship with the General is still there.

In the beginning, Ifemelu herself is amazed by the wealthy life Aunty Uju is able to live because of the general, perceivable in the amount of money she spends in clothes and in hair salons, as well as in the kind of treatment she receives in these places. However, when Ifemelu asks for money to help her family and she discovers that Uju has to ask the General because she does not have any, Ifemelu begins to deeply worry about her Aunty. At this point, the previously established maternal relationship starts to reverse and Ifemelu tries to offer advice and knowledge, based on what Uju has, in fact, taught her in the past. Ifemelu tells Aunty Uju that if someone else had been living the way she is, she would tell this person is stupid, to which Uju responds that she would not even advise Ifemelu to live like that. Despite the recognition of the recklessness in her attitudes, the aunt finishes the conversation claiming she will make the General change if she moves patiently.

It is clear that, despite having a completely different position before, Uju succumbs to the same kind of denial of reality that Ifemelu's mother had presented earlier. In Uju's case, however, the reason to such a denial is not faith, but rather a blind love and a patriarchal discourse that makes women believe they are in charge of making heterosexual relationships work and of changing men and turning them into the kind of partners they want them to be. As Ifemelu perceives, she lies to herself wishfully thinking the General would change and come to cherish her and their relationship if only Uju had patience and made an effort. Deep down, however, both Uju and Ifemelu know that this is not how their story is going to end.

As their relationship goes on, Uju – much like Ifemelu's mother had done for religious reasons – loses her self giving up things that are important for her only to be at the General's disposal. In her need to keep herself in denial and keep hoping her relationship is well, she is even willing to jeopardize her rapport with the people she loves the most, including Ifemelu. After the cancelation of a holiday which the General had promised to pass with Uju, she lashes out her anger at Ifemelu, to which she responds by saying she should be mad at the General and not at her. After this response,

> Aunty Uju charged at her. Ifemelu had not expected Aunty Uju to hit her, yet when the slap landed on the side of her face, making a sound that seemed to her to come from far away, finger-shaped welts rising on her cheek, she was not surprised. They stared at each other. Aunty Uju opened her mouth as though to say something and then she closed it and turned and walked upstairs, both of them aware that something between them was now different (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 98-99).

After this moment, Ifemelu is not angry *at* Aunty Uju, but at a situation she considers to be extremely unfair. She is sympathetic with her position and, in fact, this is the moment her motherly relationship – based on the passing on of female knowledge as defined by Stratton (2002) – has to come to an end because the apprentice had surpassed the master. This happens because

> for the first time, Ifemelu felt older than Aunty Uju, wiser and stronger than Aunty Uju, and she wished that she could wrest Aunty Uju away, shake her into a clear-eyed self, who would not lay her hopes on The General, slaving and shaving for him, always eager to fade his flaws. It was not as it should be (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 100).

At this point, with her youth subjectivity still in formation and after losing in Uju her motherly-figure and her one reference of what she wanted to be as a woman, Ifemelu turns to Obinze's mother as a new possibility of a role model in her life.

3.3.1.3 Obinze's mother

Obinze's mother[17], on the other hand, is considered by Bonvillain (2016) as a questioning of traditional and expected feminine behavior. She represents, for Ifemelu, a

[17] I refer to her simply as Obinze's mother because she receives no name in the novel and this is how she is presented to the reader.

model of a strong woman and wills her to "express her own personality without altering it to be socially acceptable for a woman" (BONVILLAIN, 2016, p. 13).

Before Ifemelu even met Obinze, she had already heard the rumors about his mother. In the space of days after Obinze had been transferred to her school from Nsukka, people began to talk about how she had physically fought (and won) a male professor and, then, been suspended for two years, which was supposed to be the reason she moved to Lagos. However, after meeting her son, Ifemelu takes the opportunity to clarify what had actually happened and he explains that there was no actual physical fight. Obinze tells Ifemelu that his mother was actually slapped by the professor in question because she had publicly accused him of misusing university funds. After the aggression, she closed the conference room and hid the door's key in her bra, claiming she would not hit him because he was physically stronger, but that he would have to apologize to her in front of all the people.

After he apologized unwillingly, Obinze's mother remained enraged by the way she had been treated publicly and by how the men seemed to have shown no regret whatsoever. Once again, she decides to take action, writing circulars and articles about what had happened and students began to get involved to defend her. In her defense,

> people were saying, Oh, why did he slap her when she's a widow, and that annoyed her even more. She said she should not have been slapped because she is a full human being, not because she doesn't have a husband to speak for her. So some of her female students went and printed Full Human Being on T-shirts (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 71).

We can see how this episode has a positive influence on Ifemelu and is related to how she later decides to begin a blog about race in America. It is the moment when Ifemelu perceives that, contrary to her mother's and Aunty Uju's position in life, a woman can actually stand up for herself in a situation of injustice. Even though she may not adopt this attitude consciously, writing and engaging others in a situation also becomes Ifemelu's way of dealing with the injustices she herself was bound to experience in her own adult life.

There are other ways in which Obinze's mother escapes social expectations for women in Nigeria. In Adichie's (2013) description of life in the country, it is possible to perceive how many women are dependent on men in terms of money and social status. This appears clearly in the figure of the General and the way he "takes care" of Aunty Uju like other men take care of their mistresses in the narrative. In the long run, however, women should have marriage as a main aim, a guarantee of succeeding and being accepted in Nigerian society. In such a

scenario, Obinze's mother seems to be different, focused on her career and her son and not willing to believe in the narrative that she needed a male partner to be complete.

When Obinze's mother invites Ifemelu to lunch because she wants to meet her, the first impression Ifemelu has is that "she was pleasant and direct, even warm, but there was a privacy about her, a reluctance to bare herself completely to the world, the same quality as Obinze. She had taught her son the ability to be, even in the middle of a crowd, somehow comfortably inside himself" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 84). She first realizes, then, how the mother had succeeded in teaching her child the ability she wished she had learned from her own mother but was not able to, an ability which she declares was only hers when she was with Obinze: the ability to feel comfortable within her own skin.

As far as mothers are concerned, Ifemelu states that her beauty and sophistication made her different from every other mother she had met. In fact, this becomes even clearer after a scene in which the mother arrives at home and realizes Ifemelu and Obinze had paused a movie they were watching while she went to the pharmacy. She is suspicious of what they were doing during this time and, contrary to what was expected of her, she does not call her own son to "lecture" him, but she invites Ifemelu into a conversation and says: "If anything happens between you and Obinze, you are 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. Do you understand me?" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 87).

She does not demonstrate the moral concern Ifemelu would expect, for example, of her own mother. Her choice to speak with Ifemelu is not an attempt to control her body or her sexuality based on the formerly mentioned Christian and Western patriarchal values of morale or an attempt to confine her to the already mentioned role of 'The Angel in the House'. Obinze's mother shows genuine concern about Ifemelu's and her son's wellbeing. She explains how she can understand youthful desire but gives a sound and reasonable advice that makes Ifemelu reflect on the importance of "owning herself" before actually having a sexual encounter. Her advice goes as follows:

> "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 in the university, wait until you own yourself a little more. Do you understand?"
> "Yes," Ifemelu said. She did not know what "own yourself a little more" meant (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 87).

As pointed by Bonvillain (2016), this advice in relation to Ifemelu's sexual life shows how she worries about her physical and psychological safety much more than whether or not she acts in accordance with the moralistic view of sex outside marriage.

Later, as the couple begins to have sex, she talks to both of them and states:

> Obinze, you should take your pocket money and buy condoms. Ifemelu, you too. It is not my concern if you are embarrassed. You should go into the pharmacy and buy them. You should never ever 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, p. 118).

Thus, when the mother talks to both Obinze and Ifemelu about protection, instead of presenting a patriarchal view in which women are either the ones who have to be solely in charge of protection or the ones who have to be subject to male desire in regard to the use of protection, she differently defends that both of them must be responsible and in charge of their own protection, looking out for both possibilities of pregnancy and sexual transmitted diseases. Again, she urges Ifemelu to take possession of her own sexuality and her protection: she is the first one who tells her she should not be embarrassed of having a sex life and also that she should not be in a sexual or romantic relationship in which she is not valued or protected. These teachings, as we will see in the section about her sexuality, become permanently present in Ifemelu's life and determine her decisions and her relationships in adulthood.

In fact, much later in her life, when she receives the news that Obinze's mother has passed away, she feels devastated and reveals explicitly how she was a dear and defining mother figure and role-model in her life. These are the actual words she responds in an e-mail to Obinze:

> *I am crying as I write this. Do you know how often I wished that she was my mother? She was the only adult— except for Aunty Uju —who treated me like a person with an opinion that mattered. You were so fortunate to be raised by her. She was everything I wanted to be (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 459).*

The way Ifemelu describes Obinze's mother after so many years is a clear indicative of her relevance in the main character's formation: she was the one who valued her and her opinions, showing her the importance of voicing her own thoughts and fighting for what she

believed. As we have seen, Ifemelu finds her path of self-expression in blogging and writing, which, as the previous quote shows, brings her closer to the person she wanted to be.

3.3.1.4 Ginika

The last character to be examined in this chapter is Ginika. Unlike the characters examined so far, she does not work so much as an influence on Ifemelu's identity in the development of the plot of the novel but as a narrative strategy to make the reader see Ifemelu in a different light. As the first example of the device Stratton (2002) calls "the convention of the paired women" (p. 97) in the narrative, Ginika functions as Ifemelu's complementary pair in their adolescence.

At first, Ginika seems to be the traditional model of angelic female behavior. In her first description, she appears as the second most popular girl in school with "caramel skin and wavy hair that, when unbraided, fell down to her neck instead of standing Afro-like. Each year, she was voted Prettiest Girl in their form" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 67). She represents, then, the patriarchal ideal of beauty and also of modesty, quietness and assent and the narrator tells us that, considering these factors, it was only natural the Gods should match her with Obinze.

Despite the natural order of things and also of other's attempt to match them as a couple, their encounter is actually disturbed by a third element. When Kayode – Obinze's friend and Ifemelu's colleague from school – introduces them, he also presents Ifemelu as "Ginika's right-hand man" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 68) and warns that if he somehow misbehaves, she will be the one to beat him. After Kayode leaves them to converse with each other, Ginika – clearly learned in the arts of being 'The Angel in the House' – performs the role of the shy, silenced girl and keeps waiting for Obinze to take initiative and talk to her. Ifemelu, bothered by the silence installed, asks Obinze if he was not hot in the large jacket he was wearing. "The question came out before she could restrain herself, so used was she to sharpening her words, to watching for terror in the eyes of boys. But he was smiling. He looked amused. He was not afraid of her" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 69). Ifemelu clearly says what comes to her mind with no especial purpose of pleasing or entertaining, while Ginika, immediately after he reveals his discomfort with the jacket and the need to carry it, presents the eagerness to not simply please but also to serve as she offers to hold the jacket, even though she suggests it is fine.

Prior to the above described meeting, Obinze had already taken an interest in Ifemelu and had asked Kayode about her. He responds by telling Obinze that Ifemelu "is a fine babe

but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees. But Ginika is just a sweet girl' (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 73). He suggests, then, that Ifemelu will not submit and accept the desires of her partner without questioning and that, because of this, Ginika and her sweet conformity would be a better fit for him. Thus, even in the perception of their colleagues, the contrast of character between Ginika and Ifemelu is evident.

Contrary to what was expected in the "natural order of things" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 69) and in the already mentioned (African) male literary tradition, Obinze proceeds with his interest in Ifemelu and tells her that Kayode "didn't know that was exactly what I hoped to hear. I'm not interested in girls that are too nice" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 73). He makes it clear, then, that her personality is exactly what made him like her, suggesting that, contrary to what used to be portrayed in the excluding and stereotypical male literary tradition, this non-angelic woman can not only live perfectly in a society without punishment, but also be loved and desired by one of the most popular boys at school.

Ifemelu appears, thus, as the positive model to be rewarded defined by Stratton (2002). Ginika, on the other hand, functions as the negative female model that is punished by society: even though she is still considered a nice and beautiful girl by most of her school colleagues, she ends up losing the possibility of a romantic involvement because of her tendency to agree and be too nice.

3.4 IFEMELU'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HER SEXUALITY AND DESIRE

Considering the years of Ifemelu's formation and the characters related to them discussed in the previous section, it becomes clear how the relationship of Ifemelu with her sexuality is pervasive in all three of her motherly relationships. In her mother's point of view sexuality is mediated by Christian morality and sex outside marriage does not seem like a possibility. In the case of Uju, even though her own behavior escapes any possibility of morale and she attempts to educate Ifemelu on sex and body issues, in her words of advice, desire can and should be enjoyed as long as there is a limit (penetration or, in the case of Ifemelu, the loss of her virginity). In Obinze's mother perception, however, sexuality must be about one's ownership, which we understand as the possibility of subjectivity beyond sexuality – a possibility of self-care and of recognition of one's value –, but also as the ability to know and control one's own body and desire.

In relation to such different teachings in her early life, I believe the ownership of Ifemelu's own sexuality is, thus, an interesting characteristic to be examined. In fact, the way

Chimamanda Adichie explores women's physical experiences and female sexuality is an important feature in the author's fiction, as highlighted by Hewett (2005). Like many other Nigerian women writers, Adichie "writes about the embodied experiences of female characters in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora" (HEWETT, 2005, p. 81). Adichie (2015) herself talks about how Nigerian women are raised to hide the fact that they are sexual beings, unable to express their true desires and condemned to the art of faking for a living. Men, on the other hand, are seeing as savages with no self-control, which, in her opinion, contributes to women being ashamed of their female condition and being always inherently guilty for whatever happens to them in society.

For this reason, Ifemelu's body and sexuality can be considered one of the ways in which Adichie's narrative unsettles previously determined boundaries. As the main character moves through different spaces and relationships, Leetsch (2017) states that Ifemelu undoes limits and "instead of shrinking herself, Ifemelu expands herself and the rooms she moves in through negotiating her body, sexuality, and her desires" (LEETSCH, 2017, p. 9). In order to better comprehend such 'undoing of limits', we must first comprehend how some of those limits were created, restricting the space for women to both experience and voice their desires and sexuality, both in the scope of society and of literary representations.

3.4.1 Female sexuality and its representations

Teresa de Lauretis (1987) explains that sexuality is not an inherent quality of the body, but it is also a social construct and a representation. In such a construction, the author affirms that the female body is sexualized, but even when sexuality is clearly located at the woman's body, it is always "perceived as an attribute or a property of the male" (LAURETIS, 1987, p. 14). For her, female sexuality has been inherently defined in relation to or in contrast with the male one. Quoting Lucy Bland, Lauretis (1987) explains how, in the "common-sense", male sexuality is conceived as spontaneous, active, genitally centered, and aroused by fantasies and 'objects' whereas female sexuality is perceived as a mere expression or response to the male. According to the author, only in contemporary feminist theory a discussion of an autonomous sexuality of women has begun to arise. This new conversation calls attention to the possibility of envisioning a female non-male related sexual identity, outside the heterosexual social construct – that is, a possibility of constructing one's own sexuality, subjectivity and self-representation and, consequently, establishing a local level of resistance from the margins of the hegemonic discourse.

When approaching the issue of sexuality in the feminist movement, hooks (2000) also defends that, before the movement of sexual liberation, it was hardly possible for women to assert a healthy sexual agency. In her description, women were separated between madonnas or whores and had their desires intercepted by fear. Despite the new possibilities of agency fostered by the movement of liberation, the author asserts that we still live among a large number of women who have not found sexual satisfaction and for whom sex is synonym of fear, danger, loss, and even annihilation. In order to change that, the author establishes the importance of a sexual education that fosters a liberatory sexuality, which teaches us to respect our bodies and to rethink sexual practices in terms of mutual respect, choice and consent. In this model of healthy female sexuality, hooks (2000) highlights the centrality of female sexual agency, in which women divert from the mere role of objects of desire and take control of their own bodies.

Rosalind Coward (apud EAGLETON, 1996) discusses more specifically the way in which women's sexuality is dealt with in female literature. She states that the idea of liberating the libido was considered a first important step in women's writing, in a way that books which portrayed women who enjoyed sex as central characters were big sellers in the seventies. Nevertheless, she defends it is important to understand that

> speaking about sexuality, and a preoccupation with sexuality, is not in and of itself progressive. Feminists have been involved for too long now in the analysis of images and ideologies to be conned into thinking that accounts of sexuality are progressive just because they take women's sexuality as their first concern (COWARD, apud EAGLETON, 1996, p. 223).

As the journalist elucidates on some of Foucault's ideas about sexuality, she explains how this centrality of sex might actually be related to power and how subject's identity is built through discourses that bring pleasure to their centers, only in order to better control and subject individuals and their desires.

In an attempt to disrupt power and control, one of the constants in women's fiction pointed by Elizabeth Cowie *et al*. (apud EAGLETON, 1996) is the theme of women's emotion and sexuality: the rejection of woman as sexual object and her turn into the subject of her own sexuality. The authors alert, however, that this turn often ignores the problematic of women as subjects of their own discourse. Simply taking control of one's sexuality does not necessarily mean that one has taken control of one's voice and subjectivity. The fact that the heroine of the novel gets what she desires (that is, a man or an orgasm) does not exclude the social, political, historical, and sexual intricacies that go beyond her individual choices and

demands. It is the author's perception that both women's writing and sexuality need to be treated in relation to their social and political meanings.

When it comes to Black women's sexuality, there are differences and similarities in how it is treated in society and in literature. As previously stated, Black women have been unable to talk about their experience in relation to many important issues. Patricia Hill Collins (2002) explains how Black women's sexuality is usually described in metaphors related to an empty space, exposed and yet silenced, in which these women's bodies are already colonized. Much of this silence is kept because speech would violate the norms of racial solidarity, putting Black men and their misogyny on the spot. Another possible cause for this silence, pointed by the author, is the constraining image of the "super-strong" Black woman, who is not supposed to discuss her vulnerabilities.

hooks (1992) is another author who discusses Black female sexuality. She highlights how images of Black sexuality from the nineteenth century still shape our perception today. This means that the Black body, especially the female one, is seen as representative of a deviant sexuality. This body has no real presence because only certain parts are meant to be noticed, by an erotic gaze, in its representations. In such context, hooks (1992) claims that Black women sexual agency is represented in misogynist terms in which pleasure is seeing as commodity to be exchanged for power or money, which is simply another form of prostitution. Therefore, Black women are confined in conventional notions of sexuality and desire that treat them merely as expendable bodies.

One example of a representation that needs to be countered is one of the stereotypes of Black women described by Collins (2002). Called "the jezebel, whore, or hoochie", this stereotype represents the image of a sexually aggressive, unbelievably fertile woman. It is built in direct opposition to White women's passive sexuality. In this scenario, Black women's sexuality is considered deviant, outside and determining the boundaries of normality. Thus, echoing the colonial discourse, the insatiable sexual appetites of the Black woman are judged as inappropriate and abnormal in relation to the "normal" White pure and submissive ladies. Those are all forms of controlling Black women's sexuality because their sexual autonomy and agency are regarded as threatening to diverse social institutions. Not surprisingly, Black women who do not respond to such pressures and take public control of their sexuality are usually condemned, rejected or abandoned.

Nevertheless, hooks (1992) defends it is necessary to question this determination and try to root Black female sexual agency in a pleasure-based eroticism – that is, focusing on their desire and possibilities of pleasure when taking action related to sexuality. Even if there

is danger in transgressing traditional boundaries and asserting one's sexual desire outside the spheres of domination and exploitation, the author believes it is the only way women can assert power in the sexual sphere. This means to "place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 76), creating, therefore, an oppositional space to name and represent Black women's sexuality and their unbound sexual subjectivity.

3.4.2 Ifemelu's relationship with her sexuality and desire

As previously mentioned, the first of Ifemelu's boyfriend presented to the reader in *Americanah* is Obinze. The precise moment in which they meet and how Ifemelu does not play the expected role of submission since then has already been explored in the section about Ginika. After that moment, they start to get to know each other better and develop a relationship. In one of the first moments they get physically intimate, Ifemelu tells him in an internal joke that she would always see the ceiling when she was intimate with other boys, but not with him, to which he remarks that "other girls would have pretended that they had never let another boy touch them, but not her, never her. There was a vivid honesty about her" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 24). This shows that not only does she do what she pleases with her body but she has also no intention of hiding it and pretending to be the pure girl society would want her to be. This shows that, contrary to social expectation of chasteness and as defended by Bonvillain (2016), Ifemelu is unapologetically open about her sexuality.

Thus, since the narrative's first chronological episode related to Ifemelu's desire and sexuality, it is possible to identify some elements of hooks' (2000) centrality of female sexual agency. Despite her mother's religious and patriarchal discourses against all kinds of physical relations outside a marital arrangement, Ifemelu follows Uju's advice and is willing to experiment and take possession of her desires. Thus, it is possible to conclude that Ifemelu is not part of the group of women described by hooks (2000) that experience desire in terms of fear, danger, loss, or annihilation. Adichie's main character brings, thus, from this early age, the possibility of a liberatory sexuality, with female subjectivity and desire being brought to the center of her relationships.

Being so open about her desires, however, as warned by Cowie *et al.* (apud EAGLETON, 1996), does not come without larger consequences in the social, political, historical, and sexual spheres that are directly affected by her choices. Later in her relationship with Obinze, Ifemelu meets a guy named Odein and becomes friends with him.

Because there is a strike at their university at this point, Ifemelu and Obinze are in different cities and she starts to spend more time with her new friend. As this happens, their friends in common begin to notice this proximity and tell Obinze about it. At this point, he decides to confront his girlfriend and to ask her what is actually happening, a moment in which the following dialogue takes place:

> "Ceiling, it's nothing. I'm just curious about him. Nothing is ever going to happen. But I am curious. You get curious about other girls, don't you?"
> He was looking at her, his eyes fearful.
> "No," he said coldly. "I don't."
> "Be honest."
> "I am being honest. The problem is you think everyone is like you. You think you're the norm but you're not."
> "What do you mean?"
> "Nothing. Just forget it" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 112).

Once more, she is not afraid to divulge her feelings and desires, even if they might seem unusual or be judged by Obinze. Nonetheless, it is also possible to realize in her boyfriend's discourse a slight tone of accusation, a hint that somehow her sexuality and desires escape "the norm". After this episode, the narrative tells us how things became strange between them and the relationship went to a tentative period. Even for Obinze, thus, a boy who claimed to like Ifemelu precisely because of her honesty, her assertiveness, and all the other things that made her different form the stereotypical sweet girl, her openness about her desires is a problem when it is not related to him – that is to say, when her sexuality is not simply the accepted response to his male desire, as already explained by Lauretis (1987).

Until this point in their relationship, Ifemelu has followed Uju's advice of "fooling around" but never actually getting to the point of sexual intercourse. She had also taken into account Obinze's mother advice about owning herself a little more before beginning her sexual life, even if she was not certain at this point what it really meant. When the strangeness among the couple, caused by the Odein argument, has faded away, the narrative presents an episode in which Ifemelu is giving Obinze a massage. After their usual ritual of physical intimacy, Obinze decides not to stop where he usually did, to which she calls his attention and says they should stop. They talk a little about the risks of what they are about to do and the narrative makes clear that, even though she did not want him to stop, she was uncertain about the way things were happening and they did not match her desires or expectations. The loss of her virginity is described as follows:

> 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 […] She knew she could not possibly tell Obinze's mother what had happened, even though she had promised to, and had believed then that she would (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 114).

In the description above it is possible to perceive that despite Ifemelu's previous demonstrations of owning her desires and her sexuality, none of it seems to appear at this scene. Her discomforts with the arrangement are not clearly voiced, her desire is not taken into account, and she has no possibility of agency or of action throughout this first sexual encounter. At this point, her sexuality falls back into the trap stated by Lauretis (1987) of being defined and performed only in relation to a male desire. It is also possible to see how social expectations appear to haunt her (in the form of Obinze's mother) and keep her from even the attempt to relax and enjoy what was happening. If she did not experience desire in terms of fear, it is clear that the realization of it brings an uneasiness, to say the least.

Even though the narrative's description of Ifemelu's first sexual encounter does not differ from the male-centered sexuality that usually appears in literary representation, this is not something that appears to be normalized within the narrative. Ifemelu remains uncomfortable after it all and shaken by a feeling that what had happened had not been worth in the end. The feeling of unworthiness and disappointment is a consequence of how much she had risked – because Obinze's mother had already explained how much bigger the consequences would be for her as a woman – and how little satisfaction she had felt. After the description of that moment and the discomfort and fear of pregnancy that followed, not very much is told about her sexual life with Obinze in her adolescence.

Later, in her adult life and in her relationships with Curt, Blaine, and Obinze (when they get re-united after years), we can see how Ifemelu finally comprehends Obinze's mother advice of 'owning herself a little more' and takes back the ownership of her desires, bringing her voice, her demands, and her subjectivity into her sexual activities. One example is how her sexual re-encounter with Obinze comes to be very differently described in the narrative. In the course of their second relationship, Obinze reflects on how she expected to be pleased in their relations: how she moved at her own pace, giving instructions and demanding things of him until she felt satisfied. Thus, it is possible to see her sexuality as rooted in what hooks (1992) defines as a necessary pleasure-based eroticism, one that focuses on Black women's desire and possibilities of pleasure and allows the possibility of constructing a sexuality that

escapes stereotypes because it allows for Black women's pleasure and satisfaction to take place in a way that fosters new opportunities for their agency and subjectivity.

Despite the creation of these new possibilities, Ifemelu does not manage to escape the consequences of owning one's sexuality outside the sexual sphere already outlined by Cowie *et al.* (apud EAGLETON, 1996). As an adult living in America, she cheats on her first American boyfriend, Curt (who is analyzed in the following chapter), with her neighbor. After she tells him about what had happened and how it meant nothing, the couple has a serious argument and Curt accuses Ifemelu of playing with him and of giving the man what he wanted. She gets angry at his position and immediately thinks

> It was an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say. In a sudden giddy fit of recklessness, she corrected Curt. 'I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental' (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 357).

In this passage, we can perceive how Curt and Aunty Uju's view relates perfectly to Lauretis (1987) description of sexuality in "common-sense": male sexuality is seen as spontaneous and active whereas female individuals are seen only as objects to respond and satisfy male desire. When Curt states that Ifemelu gave the men what he wanted, he completely disregards the possibility of her having had both desire and satisfaction. Ifemelu is seen by Curt as only having a responsive sexuality. In Ifemelu's response to Curt, however, it is possible to see clearly her own position about sex and the questioning of the role women play in it. In her speech, women are not passive beings that engage in sexual activity solely by an obligation to please men, as in the male-dependent sexuality defined by Lauretis (1987). Therefore, in this field of life Ifemelu is also not conforming to the patriarchal imposed roles of passivity I have discussed throughout this dissertation.

As stated by Cowie *et al.* (apud EAGLETON, 1996), however, the fact that the heroine gets what she desires does not exclude the repercussions of her act within other spheres of her life. In relation to Black women, especially, Collins (2002) and hooks (1992) warn us about how women that publicly take control of their sexuality are censured and sometimes rejected or abandoned. For one thing, Ifemelu is abandoned by Curt since he ends the relationship, completely disregarding the fact that he, too, had cheated on Ifemelu even if not through sexual intercourse.

Furthermore, at the end of their argument, Curt decides to confine her to a role that is exclusively female in society:

> "Bitch," he said.
> He wielded the word like a knife; it came out of his mouth sharp with loathing. To hear Curt say "bitch" so coldly felt surreal, and tears gathered in her eyes, knowing that she had turned him into a man who could say "bitch" so coldly, and wishing he was a man who would not have said "bitch" no matter what (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 357).

According to Gilbert and Gubar (2000), in the defined roles male authors attributed to women – such as witch, mad, vampire and bitch – they demonstrated "the author's power to allay 'his' anxieties by calling their source bad names" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 2000, p. 28). When Curt, after their discussion, calls Ifemelu a "bitch" he is trying to exercise his White male authority over her independent body and desire, which was the source of her betrayal as well as the source of his anxieties. Unable to deal with the fact that she had a desire unrelated to him and decided to act on it, he calls her a name in an attempt to confine her to a monstrous identity: the cheating bitch. It might also be a confinement into what hook's (2000) and Collins (2002) define as the stereotype of the Black female 'whore'. Nonetheless, Ifemelu is not innocent to his attempt as she immediately recognizes what he is trying to do and reveals surprise that he would assume that part.

Despite the fact that Ifemelu is aware of his exercising of White male authority to manipulate her into assuming a villain position in their confront, she cannot escape the image that he built for her because he is not the only one to build it. Their friends and their family all fail to understand her action, causing her to lose sight of her own motives and believe she was either stupid, mad, or simply evil – either way, a bitch. Even though she is not afraid of speaking her mind and being who she is, at this moment in her adult life, Ifemelu comes to question herself and her 'normality' exactly for not being what is expected of her. At this point in the narrative, she goes to a bar and observes a female bartender that, according to her description, could be the angelic woman prescribed in male texts. She observes:

> The bartender, the one who knew them, gave her a gentle smile, a sympathy smile. She smiled back and ordered another mojito, thinking that perhaps the bartender was better suited for Curt, with her brown hair blow-dried to satin, her thin arms and tight black clothes and her ability always to be seamlessly, harmlessly chatty. She would also be seamlessly, harmlessly faithful; if she had a man like Curt, she would not be interested in a curiosity copulation with a stranger who played unharmonious music. Ifemelu stared into her glass. There was something wrong with her. She did not know what it was, but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself. The sense of something farther away, beyond her reach (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 358).

In this quote, then, we can see how Ifemelu feels her attitude was an error and allows herself to be confined in the role of the abnormal. Contrasting with the figure of the bartender – a very fleeting 'paired women' in the narrative –, Ifemelu illustrates Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) affirmation that, if a woman does not behave like the expected angel, she must be a monster.

Another aspect that could be analyzed through Ifemelu's sexuality is the acceptance of the female identity as fragmented. In Ifemelu's words we do not see the conception of women's identity that I – with the help of many theoreticians – have here criticized and problematized. On her remark, it is possible to interpret a longing for something else, an incompletion, and the doubts and inconstancies of a woman who is, at times, confident, but also allows space for self-doubt. The construction of Ifemelu's identity, thus, exemplifies Hall's (2001) formerly discussed idea that every subject is constituted by a multiplicity of eventually unsolved and contradictory identities. In the case of Ifemelu, we can see how some of her identity contradictions come from having very diverse role-models and the way she was brought up. In spite of her attempt to follow Obinze's mother kind of advice, it is possible to see that the restrictions taught by her mother with her religious and patriarchal conceptions of female sexuality are somehow still with her and, even though she manages to listen to her desire and fulfill it, she cannot help but feel guilty about it and question herself in comparison to the bartender, whom she believes to be closer to the stereotype of the "nice woman".

In order to comprehend the changes and contradictions in Ifemelu's relationship with her sexuality, Braidotti's (1994) idea of nomadism is an interesting one. When she describes nomadic identity as a kind of map that shows where the subject has been and no longer is, explaining that cartographies must be constantly updated, we can look at Ifemelu's journey through her sexuality with the lens of her journey through life. In each of the episodes here described, we face Ifemelu in a different cartography or, at least, in a different position of the map that represents her identity in terms of movement and possible identifications. According to Friedman's (1998) geopolitics, Ifemelu's positionalities (within her own cartography and in relation to the diverse identity axes that determine her position) allow us to comprehend her identity, as well as her sexuality, as contradictory, dislocated, multiply constituted, and ever-changing.

Departing from this nomadic and locational perspective, we can evaluate each of the episodes in relation to her positionality and the axes of identity that seem to be most determinant to her at each point. In her first relationship with Obinze, his mother's, her

mother's and Aunty Uju's conceptions of sexuality are still very present in her actions because she is mostly influenced with the conceptions of female sexuality in a postcolonial country – that is, Western ideas of purity and selflessness. Despite her attempt to confront such a conception, she has not followed Obinze's mother advice of "owning herself a little more" – that is to say, she does not have the maturity or the self-knowledge that comes with it to demand her own satisfaction and to experience her sexuality without discomfort or guilt.

In the episode in which she cheats on Curt, she has managed the ownership of her own body and self but the power balance is not at her favor. It is the moment in which she confronts a White American man and her identity axes of gender, color, and foreignness (which are more closely examined in the two following chapters) become defining in how she reacts to his imposition of the word "bitch" upon herself. Even though she has the possibility of reacting or not taking the insult into consideration, in this geographic axis the amount of power his identity axes exert over her is undeniable and the way he shuts her out of his life after this episode leaves her only with the questioning about her own self. This shows a direct contrast with the moment Obinze questions her curious behavior about Odein, insinuating it was not "normal": since there was no comparable power or aggression in his words, they do not have the effect of making her re-think herself or feel guilty about the way she had acted.

Finally, in the moment when she demands pleasure from Obinze in their re-encounter, she has gone through all those situations and the power balance is tilted on her favor again: she is no longer a foreign Black woman in a White man's land and she has further distanced herself of the conceptions of gender and female sexuality imposed upon her teenage self. As I explore in the chapter about diaspora, the conceptions of gender that are unveiled in the Nigeria of Ifemelu's return are not quite the same as the ones purported in her childhood and adolescence and with her insight into Western gender expectations, she is able to criticize them both and find a way to explore her sexuality on her own terms. Before reaching such a point, however, Ifemelu begins her journey in to 'owning herself a little more', a journey of movement in search for a higher possibility of education and formation. These first movements and their intricacies are explored in the following section.

3.5 POSTCOLONIALITY AS A REASON FOR MIGRATION

Ashcroft *et al.* (2004) defend that the postcolonial continues to be an important issue nowadays. According to the authors, considering the complexity of the operations of imperial discourses and its prevailing manifestations as well as the radical transformation of the world

caused by colonization and independence processes, it is impossible to determine the beginning and the end of colonial experience. For them, colonization shaped the whole 20th century and the neocolonial dominances that have founded them and continue to shape our understanding and the functioning of the world.

The experience shared by the individuals inserted in such realities reflects what Leela Gandhi (1998) calls postcoloniality. For the author, whereas postcolonialism refers to the theory that deals with the intricacies related to the colonial encounter and its aftermath, postcoloniality defines the experience of the individuals that were involved in the colonial encounter or that are subject to its consequences. In relation to postcoloniality, Apusigah (2006) adds that it is "a never-ending endeavor that is characterized by constant struggles" (p. 42).

Considering what I have already established in this chapter, it is possible to see that Ifemelu's condition of postcoloniality has a strong impact in her life sets. I have analyzed how the colonial encounter helped to create a new version of gender (based on Western ideas) and how this configuration affected her life directly, especially in her mother severe Christianity and her patriarchal morals. Not only does postcoloniality have an effect on the conditions of her life but also in the establishment of her identity: an identity that is not prone to belonging to a place or to a national tradition as it is to construct itself in relation to others and create different forms of belonging and home.

That being said, we can begin to comprehend that, even without physical movement Ifemelu's identity can already be interpreted through the lens of the previously defined migratory subjectivity of Carol Boyce Davies (2003). Her self is in fact composed of multiple locations and of the crossing of previously established frontiers. The multiple and inharmonic identities that inhabit her self make her an unpredictable character, sometimes even to herself. This multiplicity is also one of the reasons why she has a large difficult belonging to specific places and territories. In fact, the one time in this phase of her life that she feels a sense of attachment to a physical place is when she goes to the university in Nsukka, when the narrator lets us know that "university was bigger and baggier, there was room to hide, so much room; she did not feel as though she did not belong because there were many options for belonging." (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 110). In this context, her various subject positions can be negotiated to fit in at least some of the multiple possibilities offered. When the character does find some sense of rootedness, however, her roots began to be shaken by her postcolonial condition once more.

3.5.1 Postcoloniality and the African diaspora

When talking about the African diaspora and its relation to colonialism, what first comes to mind is the imposed migration of Africans in the slave trade. However, Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen (2011) clarify that the Nigerian diaspora began as early as the pre-colonial era but was severely impacted by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its consequent forced movement of a large number of Nigerians into the New World. Still in the era of colonial power, the authors describe a number of migrations, especially to the United Kingdom and the United States, in the interest of procuring opportunities for higher education.

The modern Black diaspora, on its turn, can be considered as an element of the postcolonial experience. As Braga (2019) explains, quoting the ideas of Albert Memmi (2006), the process of independence is one which leaves people with frustrated expectations of improving their lives. The lack of opportunities and sometimes the silence and censorship imposed by dictatorial regimes are, according to Memmi (2006 apud BRAGA, 2019) one of the reasons why individuals tend to go abroad. Ashcroft *et al.* (2004) also consider that the dispersal of a great number of individuals across the globe is a result of imperialism and the consequent economic gap between the West and the rest of the world, especially the countries that went through a process of colonization.

Writing specifically about the Nigerian diaspora, Akinrinade and Ogen (2011) demonstrate how it has usually been subsumed under the broader categories of African diaspora or Black diaspora. For the authors, the country has its own specificities that need to be taken into consideration because the Nigerian diaspora reflects the ethnic divisions that make the country so diverse but also so fissiparous. In this context, the very notion of a homeland is problematized because, as explained by Braga (2019), the national state as it is today is a European imposition that disregarded the previous configurations of that land and the affinities of the people who inhabited it, which causes these individuals to experience identity conflicts, such as between a national identity and an ethnic one.

After Nigerian independence in 1960, Akinrinade and Ogen (2011) identify that migrations from the country continue as a quest for opportunities of education and later, in the 1980s, they increase as a consequence of political repression, violence, and economic difficulties. In modern migration, some of the factors listed by the authors as common appointed causes are violence, poverty, unemployment, lack of social structure and political repression.

3.5.2 Ifemelu's migration and the burden of 'choicelessness'

Bimbola Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith (2017) analyses the work of Adichie in *Americanah* as a 'fictionalization of theory', especially in regard to the subject of migration – an argument that might be related to the process of "creative theorizing" I have discussed in the previous chapter. According to the author, the way Adichie presents several entities in a person's life and subjectivity through the window of migration ends up questioning and shaking what is usually stated in migration theory. This becomes clear when I analyze Ifemelu's departure to the US.

Even before Ifemelu starts university, there is talk among her friends about the possibility of leaving Nigeria. Even though the book does not offer specific details about the political situation of the country, the reader perceives in the figure of the General and the mention of (possible) coups that the country is in a military dictatorship. It is, in fact, one of many in postcolonial Nigeria. Being a country with a very recent process of independence – the official independence from the United Kingdom was only declared in 1960 –, Nigeria has had few years of democratic rule: the civil war of Biafra followed independence almost immediately and, between coups and attempted coups, Nigerian people were under the rule of military government for more than 20 years.

The consequences of this instability in government and of the absence of a democratic process of election at this point appear clearly in Adichie's narrative, as can be seen in the following paragraph:

> Only weeks before, she had been a new graduate and all her classmates were talking about going abroad to take the American medical exams or the British exams, because the other choice was to tumble into a parched wasteland of joblessness. The country was starved of hope, cars stuck for days in long, sweaty petrol lines, pensioners raising wilting placards demanding their pay, lecturers gathering to announce yet one more strike (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 55).

Ginika is the first of Ifemelu's friends to leave for America, but when she announces to her colleagues that she will do so, they show a profound envy of her, talking about not only the poor conditions of job and education, but also about the wonderful life they expect her to find in America. In fact, migration had been so common at this point, they already had a word for people who went to the US and came back to Nigeria: Americanah. This is the first moment the word that gives title to the novel appears in the narrative. Ifemelu and some of

her friends are teasing Ginika about the possibility of becoming an Americanah like Bisi, a girl they know that went back from America slurring the 'r' in English words and pretending she did not speak Yorubá.

The word, thus, is used to describe Nigerian people who, traveling to the US, acquire American mannerisms: their accent, their different vocabularies and expressions, as well as forms of behavior and thought. Despite the fact that, as Beauty Bragg (2017) observes, Americanah is a derogatory word in the Nigerian context – indicating a loss of "authenticity" in the process of mobility – it is still a mobility they all seem to desire. Obinze, especially, was obsessed with America[18]. Even though he had only been there when he was eight months old and had no recollection of the place, its films, its books, its TV programs – everything that came from America – exerted a fascination on him that Ifemelu could not understand at first.

When she enters university, however, Ifemelu comes to comprehend not necessarily the fascination with America but the desire to escape the lack of option in terms of her own education. In fact, this is one of the innovative theorizations Idowu-Faith (2017) identifies in Adichie's novel: adding 'choicelessness' as the main reason for several migratory movements. After some time studying in Nsukka and finding pleasure in the place, in her relationship with Obinze, and even in the friendships she manages to establish, the university students and teachers start to protest the poor conditions for the first's education and the latter's work. Eventually, the useless protests become frequent strikes, emptying campuses and classrooms. In light of such a situation, the narrator tells us people began to leave the country to study abroad or at least to discuss the possibility of doing so.

In light of her country's situation, Ifemelu as well as her colleagues, began to feel uneasy, and without much possibility of choice or action. The novel tells us that Ifemelu's

> life had become a turgid and suspended film. Her mother asked if she wanted to join the sewing class at church, to keep her occupied, and her father said that this, the unending university strike, was why young people became armed robbers. The strike was nationwide (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 111).

At this point, Ifemelu is presented by Aunty Uju – who is already living in America with her son – with the opportunity to move there in order to finish her studies. Even though she is uncertain when she first hears this proposal, Obinze's insistence, as well as the

[18] Despite the fact that Nigeria was not colonized by the United States, it is possible to see in this analysys – especially in the figure of Obinze – how the imperialist relations previously described by Said (1995) take place. In our current world configuration, the actual physical presence of the USA in a territory is dispensable, considering the political, ideological, economic, social, and cultural practices that ensure this country's neoimperialistic dominance.

possibility of choosing something different than the acceptance of lethargy, encourages her to go. Her migration to the US is a physical one, but also, as discussed in the following chapters, a journey which Braga (2019) points as common for postcolonial individuals: the process of re-signifying one's self.

In Villanova's (2018) analysis, Ifemelu's learning begins when she arrives in the USA. At this moment, she feels hesitant and alienated from America, conflicted between the desire to resist and the need to adapt to the norms of her host country. As the author points out, it is the support of a network of women that leads her to a path of growth, self-awareness, and independence. These aspects of her learning and of the discovery of an identity that is even more multiple and fragmented than Ifemelu could ever have supposed are explored in the two following chapters.

4 THE DISCOVERY OF RACE

> *We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. (GATES, apud EAGLETON, p. 46)*

As I have discussed in the first chapter and along this dissertation, identities are formed of many axes and all of them have an influence over the others. When Ifemelu's geographical axis changes as she moves into the United States, the change in her other axes becomes evident. Before I explain all of the changes involved, though, we must first comprehend how race – an axis that is not mentioned before Ifemelu's arrival in the United States – becomes one of (if not) the most relevant part of her identity in this new country.

In the narrative, Ifemelu declares that she became Black upon her arrival at the US. Nascimento and Souza (2019) believe this declaration to be a demonstration of the mutating character of identity in our globalized world. In this chapter, I attempt to investigate what is the meaning of Ifemelu's discovery and what are the consequences of it in her practical life, in her experiences, and her relationship with her body – especially her hair – and herself. I also examine her relationship with three White characters – Curt, Kimberly, and Laura – with which the tensions of race relations become more obvious.

4.1 WHAT IS RACE?

As a start of my investigation into Ifemelu's racial axis, I first demonstrate what I understand by race, how it functions in America, and how it relates to the other identity axes I have already established as part of Ifemelu's self and reality. In the following section, I begin by exploring the relationship between race and colonialism that originated the concept of race present in this work and in most of our current society.

4.1.1 Colonialism and the creation of race

In *Black skins, white masks*, Franz Fanon (2008) admonishes the reader to be weary of the fact that "what is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact" (p. 6). This means that what we have come to know as "the Negro" is actually a social myth constructed in opposition to a White mythical norm. In this construction the White is synonym for richness, beauty, and intelligence while the Black is synonym for evil, ugliness, and sin. This myth is

responsible for what the author calls a complex of inferiority: an internalization of postulates and propositions – present in social, cultural and scientific discourses – that eventually come to shape the Black individuals's view of themselves and of the group to which they belong.

Thus, in order to comprehend what race means in the world today, it is fundamental to comprehend how it was created. In the considerations of Ashcroft *et al.* (2004), race studies walk hand-in-hand with the postcolonial theories that have already been discussed in chapter two. For the authors, the relationship among theories of race and postcolonial studies aided scholars's perception of how the creation of race was a fundamental process in the maintenance of the colonial empire.

Edward Said (1995) adds to these arguments showing how colonialism is not merely about conquering a land because there is an idea behind this process that justifies the domination of a people and their territory. The construction of a "foreign spirit" – such as the "African spirit" – creates, according to him, the principle that a people should be dominated because they are not like us. In that perspective, culture plays a major role in the establishment of the empire and its ideals. Fictional narratives, for instance, were used for explorers and novelists to reaffirm their identity and history as a sovereign nation. The author claims that this power of narrating was not equally divided, in a way that the empire narrated its own story as well as the story of other people and, in addition, used its power to prevent other dissident narratives from forming.

With this powerful imperial narrative, Said (1995) argues that the notion of an inferior race was formed and wildly accepted, even by scientists, artists, and intellectuals of the time. The native was defined as a stable and unitary identity formed by an immutable essence. In the case of Africa, the author points to the foundation of "Africanism" – a specific language to study and describe the continent, from the perspective of the Western and based on ideas such as primitivism and tribalism. This perception condescendingly justified the "rescue" of the African people as in need of the civilized European saving domain. Thus, it is the concept of race that gives that process of colonization its reason to exist.

Ania Loomba's (1998) argument is that the relationship between race and colonial exploitation is a dialectic one, considering how racial assumptions and stereotypes both helped give rise to and were nurtured by economic exploitation. The author tells us that the establishment of stereotypical images goes back to the Greek and Roman periods. Since these periods, different peoples were associated with barbarism, usually because of their different religious beliefs. With the European expansion, the idea of barbarians from a different origin and with a different creed also evolved. Talking more specifically about the images of the

Other created by the colonial discourse, Loomba (1998) highlights how they were molded and remolded throughout the contacts between different people, especially in colonialism. She explains how the creation of a stereotype was a colonizing strategy, in the sense that it allowed the colonizers to simply reduce a people and its many images to a single, simple, and manageable idea. With this monolithic idea, the stereotype fulfills its function: it generates and perpetuates the distinction and the distance between self and other, White and Black, civilization and barbarism.

Loomba (1998) places a great responsibility in the scientific discourse when it comes to the spreading of such stereotypes. Even though (and especially because) it presented its ideas as objective truths and neutral facts, it was a discourse profoundly biased in terms of race and gender. By means of the eighteenth-century science, the author claims, race was constructed as a biological and natural difference, justified by smaller brains and skulls, as well as by specific physical traits. The biggest problem in such a discourse is that race was not merely used to describe physical traits, but actually to explain certain cultural and civilizational characteristics. In these missrepresentations of different colonized people, Lommba (1998) points out that, in some specific cases, such as the Africans's, the colour of the skin was the most decisive signifier of cultural and racial difference – stereotypes of African peoples showed an obsession with their skin colour and the idea of nakedness, using the lack of clothes as a symbol for their lack of civilization and, consequently, a justification for the colonial mission.

In a scientific distinction of races quoted by Loomba (1998), Africans appear defined as "black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Hair black, frizzled; skin silky; nose flat, lips tumid; crafty, indolent, negligent. Annoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice." (BURKE, 1758 apud LOOMBA, 1988), p. 115). Europeans, of course, figure in the same distinction as gentle and inventive, as well as governed by law. Some of the characteristics the author points as attributed by the colonizers to the colonized peoples include: irrationality, primitivism, barbarism, bestiality, violence, laziness, and sexual promiscuity.

As far as scientific racism goes, McClintock (1995) adds that the theory of evolutionism increased the tendency to determine racial worth based on the geometry of the body. The character and worth of a race were determined by physical characteristics, such as

> the length and shape of the head, protrusion of the jaw, the distance between the peak of the head and brow, flatheadedness, a "snouty" profile, a long forearm (the characteristic of apes), underdeveloped calves (also apelike), a simplified and lobeless ear (considered a stigma of sexual excess notable in

> prostitutes), the placing of the hole at the base of the skull, the straightness of the hair, the length of the nasal cartilage, the flatness of the nose, prehensile feet, low foreheads, excessive wrinkles and facial hair (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 50).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of photography along with what McClintock (1995) names commodity spectacle, there is a turn from scientific racism to commodity racism. The author believes this turn made it much easier to divulge racial stereotypes to the public, consonant with the idea of an evolutionary racism that put all individual in a hierarchical relation to White man. According to her explanation, stemming from previous scientific racism and following the ideas of Darwin, a "tree of evolution" was created in order to disseminate the idea of racial progress. In this idea of evolution, time was not merely secularized, but spatialized, in a way that the spaces occupied by different races were seen as pertaining to a different time. In this logic, women, the colonized, and even the industrial working class were "projected onto an anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic, irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity" (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 40). Women, in this context, were seen by scientists as primitive and archaic. In a comparison between a female brain with that of a gorilla, a scientist of the time quoted by the author identifies a lapse in women's development, considering them as "the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man" (BON, apud MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 54). Black women, on their turn, were associated with lascivious sexuality but, other than that, they were virtually invisible.

McClintock (1995) also explains that distinctions of class and gender were represented as primitive and irrational, which were, by their turn, synonyms to racial difference. The degeneration was everything outside of what was defined as "normal". Therefore, the more "degenerate" an individual or social class was considered, the closer it would be to inhabiting complete historical anachronism and, as a consequence, be subject to vigilant and violent policing. Considering such discourses, Africa came to become the colonial paradigm of the anachronistic space: permanently historically abandoned and outside of modern time. With this hierarchy, came the spreading of the justification for the colonial mission, that is, the expressed needs to domesticate, civilize, and control in order to help other peoples to climb the racial/civilization ladder.

At this same historical moment, there was a confusing use of the word race. As explained by McClintock (1995), race was sometimes used as synonym to species, sometimes used to designate culture or even nation, and eventually used to describe a biological ethnicity

within a particular nation. In order to avoid confusion and in light of what I have discussed about the creation of race, we should consider race, then, as defined by Hall (2001): a discursive category. Since there is no biological evidence capable of uniting the amount of differences dispersed within a particular race, we can see race as a form of organizing particular speeches, social practices, and representational systems that are used to differentiate one group from another.

Loomba (1998) also advises us to think of race as an "imagined community" (such as the nation), "which binds fellow human beings and demarcate them from others" (p. 118). This means race is not a biological reality but rather a socially imagined group based on common factors related to experience and cultural constructs and not at all on biological factors. It also receives its meaning according to context, in relation to the social order in which it is inserted and in relation to other groups and hierarchies to which an individual might belong.

4.2 RACE IN IFEMLU'S DIASPORIC SPACE: THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

> *I have known I am an African all my life, I did not know I was Black until I started living in the United States a decade and a half ago, and the difference can mean all the difference in the world (BUSIA, 2003, p. 260).*

After establishing race as a social construct, the idea that Black means different things in different contexts becomes easier to comprehend. This category is, contrary to what is common sense about it, unstable, constructed and fictionalized, be it physically, culturally, or politically. Hall (1987) explains that being Black is not an already established identity ready to be assumed by those individuals who feel belonging towards it. As it happens with all identities, he explains Blackness is constructed across difference, by means of a politics of articulation that allows the category to be riddled with difference and at the same time build one hegemonic political project. This articulation is necessary because

> all the social movements which have tried to transform society and have required the constitution of new subjectivities, have had to accept the necessarily fictional, but also the fictional necessity, of the arbitrary closure which is not the end, but which makes both politics and identity possible (HALL, 1987, p. 45).

The term Black is, thus, used by Hall (2001) as a possibility of identification that can have different meanings in different contexts. In the author's view, Blacks come together not

because of an absolute commonality, but their social position unities them as the non-white, the other who is treated in the same way, despite being diverse in innumerous forms. As I explain in the following sections, this is clearly the case of Ifemelu and how being Black gains a new sense as she is inserted in a new social context by moving to the USA.

4.2.1 The difference between being Black in America and in Nigeria

As I have clarified before, Ifemelu claims to have discovered herself Black in America. Franz Fanon's (2008) ideas about the Black myth might enlighten her experience. This author clarifies that, when a Black person is among their own, they will hardly ever have the chance to experience being (inferior) through others, except for occasional minor internal conflicts. However, when entering the White world – as Ifemelu does by coming to the USA – the person of color discovers the Black myth by coming in touch with the previously outlined and solidly established assumptions about "the Negro". Fanon (2008) describes this experience as similar to having one's body taken away and afterwards receiving it distorted and recolored. According to him, the colored person might be immune to the myth while remaining among their own environment, but "the first encounter with a white man oppressed him with the whole weight of his blackness" (FANON, 2008, p. 116).

Chimamanda Adichie (2018) herself claims not only to have discovered herself Black in the USA but also to have rapidly absorbed the pervasive stereotypes about Black people in American society. She states that "the problem is not Blackness because Blackness is beautiful. The problem is that American society has imposed on Blackness the burden of many negative stereotypes" (ADICHIE, 2018, verbal information[19]). Still according to the author, along with a stereotype, a new identity is imposed on a person, like the one of "the angry Black woman" that she says has so many times being imposed on her.

In the context of discovering oneself Black in America, however, the particularities of race in this context must also be taken into account. Oyewùmí (1997) states that race is one of the fundamental organizing principles of society in the US – "it is institutionalized, and it functions irrespective of the action of individual actors" (p. 5). Oyewùmí (2003a) explains how, in North America, the concept of race is related to self-dispossession, to a displacement and a rejection that is not the reality for Black people in Africa. She clarifies that, in the US,

[19] CHIMAMANDA Ngozi Adichie INBOUND 2018 Spotlight. INBOUND, 2018. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qq27Ha07RHw. Access on: 13 Jan. 2021.

White is constructed as the norm and Black as its Other, whereas in Africa, a place with a population that is Black in its majority, Blackness is seen as norm and Whiteness as the mark of difference. Therefore, the author states that

> 'Blackness' whatever the complexity of its history and meaning in the United States, is certainly not what being black means in Nigeria or many other African countries, for that matter; if anything, it has little meaning in terms of situating people in social hierarchies, and it has no predictive value whatsoever as to who goes to school or prisons, who gets a job or who doesn't, who lives where and who marries whom or who gets rejected (OYEWÙMI, 2003a, p. 178).

As the quote clarifies, in the US, being Black is determinant in terms of social status and in relation to which spaces one might occupy within the country. In such a configuration, Blacks remain "racial others, perpetually marginalized, legally segregated, and not fully 'American'" (FRIEDMAN, 2009, p. 17).

4.2.2 Black women in the United States

As I attempt to comprehend the concept of race and how it functions differently according to how it is historically, geographically, culturally, and socially situated, I must them investigate how it is positioned in relation to gender. I have discussed in the previous chapter how postcolonial discourses can be exclusionary when it comes to women, invizibilizing their experience in the process of colonization, independence, and in their postcoloniality. I have also mentioned in the first chapter the exclusion of Black women from racial discourses and will now analyze how gender and race interconnect in order to invisibilize Black women in American society.

The connection between gender and race goes back to their creation as social categories. As I have mentioned in the previous sections, the scientific discourse that degraded non-European individuals was similarly degrading to women in asserting their intelectual incapacity and their lack of reasoning that gave place to excessive emotionalism. Ania Loomba (1998) is one of the authors who clarify how racial and sexual representations in the sixteenth century are analogous: the conquered/rescued land is a female body. She specifies that the terms used to talk about gender and racial difference often coincided and female and non-white brains were described as infeiror in comparison to the Europen male one. In Freud's psychoanalysis, for example, both femininity and Africa "defy rational

understanding and signify a lack" (LOOMBA, 1998, p. 161). If science was both racially and gendered biased, women and Black people were defined in opposition to the civilized White man. African women, consequently, represented "the lowest rung of racial ladder" (LOOMBA, 1998, p. 64).

In fact, in the current field of Psychology, in which Kumea Shorter-Gooden works as a professor and a therapist, little is known about Black women psyche and how their lived experiences are processed. In the book *Shifting: the double lives of Black women in America*, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2003) illustrate how Black female experience is seldom contemplated in the US by interviewing and collecting testimonies from a large amount of Black women. Their research discloses a profound dissatisfaction from Black women in how they are disrespected or unacknowledged and governed by unfair, oppressive, reductive, and inaccurate assumptions, myths and stereotypes.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) explain how the general message in America (be in the media, the culture, or society as a whole) "is that there is something very wrong with Black women" (p. 13), which causes them to constantly respond to a demand of trying to exceed these bad expectations. Society expects them to fulfill one or more of a series of five central sets of stereotypes: the inferior being; the unshakable/strong Black woman; the unfeminine and domineering female; the criminal; or the sexually promiscuous female. Thus, the authors show through the interviews and the testimonies that, more often than not, Black women strive to show that they are talented, well-educated, and competent; they are not allowed to be anything less than a superwoman, unable to show their vulnerabilities and ask for help; they experience a constant struggle between their strength and the need to be feminine; they are constantly looked up with suspicion; and, on top of that, are constantly seen as oversexed beings. Even though some women attempt to fit in the stereotypes and others attempt to dispute them, what the authors defend is that, for them, there is always a price to pay, either for reproducing the oppressive myth or for trying to defy it.

In such a context, the authors point to "shifting" as a strategy of coping and surviving the hostile environment that society offers Black female individuals. Shifting is defined by the authors as the way Black women are constantly changing according to their environments in order to adapt: they shift their hair and their appearances; their tones of voice, accents or dialects, as well as the subjects they talk about; they alter their way of being to accommodate the expectations of a White crowd, of an employer, of a Black or White husband who is not able to cope with her success or her personality, and even to comply with certain codes of behavior within the Black community.

Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) show us how Black women shift regularly to accommodate differences in gender, class, and ethnicity and all this constant shifting takes a toll on their emotional and physical well-being because, on the long term, there is a disconnection between who they are and who they sometimes have to pretend to be. As the authors explain it, consciously or not, they tend to adjust the way they act according to their context, they constantly compromise to please or ease others, to counter stereotypical views of themselves and to divert the effects of the many systems of oppression in their lives. This way, it is often the case when a Black woman develops several personas, shifting in so many levels that she ends up "being all things to all people and nothing to herself" (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2003, p. 64), suppressing her own voice and personality.

Such a suppression of self often leads to physical and psychological problems. For Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), the silencing of these women ushers a loss of their sense of self, a difficult in finding the center of their identity, causing them to experience several types and levels of depression. Unfortunately, the authors also enlighten on how this disease tends to be underdiagnosed in the case of Black women. Firstly, there is the myth of the unshakable woman, which makes them suffer silently and alone, unlikely to seek help. Then, there is the Black communities, in which, according to studies developed by Daudi Azibo and Patricia Dixon and presented by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003), depression is "perceived as being incompatible with African American culture" (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2003, p. 128). Besides dealing with depression, thus, Black women have to deal with a sense of shame and guilt for developing a disease that is seen as a weakness they were not supposed to have.

When they do overcome such obstacles and ask for help, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) defend that many professionals are not able to diagnose depression in the different ways it may present itself in Black women's behavior. If, contrary to all the odds, a Black woman manages to find professionals who are able to diagnose her disease, the authors believe she is unlikely to seek treatment because of the prejudice she would probably face in her community.

4.2.3 Conflicting identities and identifications

The explicated phenomenon of shifting is a direct consequence of conflicting identities and identifications. Because Black women are composed of so many identity axes, they are part of different groups with different experiences and demands. Thus, in the attempt to

belong to all the environments in which they circulate at the same time, they might feel their alliances are divided.

In order to understand any specific social formation, Hall (2003) advises us that it is fundamental to analyze how variables such as gender, race, and class are always articulated and overdetermined in the making of one condensed individual position. This position is socially established and is, according to the author, a "double articulation". In this fusion, differences are articulated differently in specific ideological formations. The "I" that harbors all these contradictions is defined by Hall (2003) as a non-unified, contradictory, and social construct. For him,

> we are at constant negotiation, not with a single set of oppositions that situate us, always in relation to others, but in a series of different positions. Each of them has, to us, a point of profound subject identification. This is the hardest question of proliferation in the field of identities and antagonisms: they frequently dislocate one another (HALL, 2003, p. 346).

Stuart Hall (2003) explains how this division of self and alliances might become even more prominent in the diasporic experience. The ways in which individuals were inserted in the Black diaspora, he says, led to complex structures of subordination and a plurality of differences and contradictory positions that must be taken into consideration when discussing racism. For the author, just as for Friedman (1998), subjectivity is positionality, thus, in a new space, a new multiplicity of identities/identifications becomes available to the subject. In the interest of identification, Hall (2003) highlights that identities may partially articulate under certain circumstances and yet be unable to do so in a different context or subject positionality, in a way that the structure of the identity remains open and unfinished.

Hall's (2003) point is clearly visible in the presidency elections described in *Americanah.* At a certain point, Ifemelu is supporting Hilary Clinton's candidature because her identity as a woman is in direct conflict with her identity as a Black person. She has only recently discovered herself as Black, but she has been a woman her whole life and has experienced how women are often denied positions and possibilities of power. She identifies with Clinton's search for power and the difficulties she finds in this journey. She evaluates that

> Hillary Clinton was sturdier. Ifemelu liked to watch Clinton on television, in her square trouser suits, her face a mask of resolve, her prettiness disguised, because that was the only way to convince the world that she was able. Ifemelu liked her. She wished her victory, willed good fortune her way, until the morning she picked up Barack Obama's book, Dreams from My Father,

> which Blaine had just finished and left lying on the bookshelf (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 437-438).

As the narrative goes on and she starts to know Barack Obama and his projects better, the character is able to further identify with him. The fact that she reads Obama's book and gets to know his story in a new level makes it possible for her to feel close to him and to deepen their identification, which makes her Black identity prevail in her choice for the presidency in a situation in which there is no possibility of conciliation.

At one point when Ifemelu is discussing with her friends about the reports of the media on the support of both candidates, one of Ifemelu's colleagues points to how the media divulges the information that women support Hillary and Blacks support Obama, completely disregarding the opinion of Black women: "when they say 'women,' they automatically mean 'white women,' of course" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 441). In this description, we can see perfectly how Black women are invizibilized: when they say Black they mean men and when they say women they mean only 'white women'. What about Black women? Their allegiance is divided: they have to choose to align with their gender or their race, facing an impossibility to unite these two important constituents of their identities. In this process, their voice is silenced in the reports of the election (we do not have a report on who Black women are voting for) and a part of themselves is forced to be silent in their choice for representation.

4.2.4 Is the idea of sisterhood possible?

Considering the altercations discussed above, what is the possibility of identification between Black and White women and, consequently, of a feminist movement that attends to these groups diverse demands? In Oyewùmí's (2003c) argument, a biological similarity – that is our biological sex – cannot be assumed as basis for solidarity among different women and it is necessary to consider situational and contextual differences, even among Black women. For the author there is falsity in the belief that because individuals share a biological trait –be it their skin color or certain body parts – they must have a common interest. In her understanding, common biology does not necessarily mean common interests because we are cultural beings that cannot be homogenized into categories that do not account for the specificities of different histories and locations.

Oyewùmí (2003a) argues that even categories such as "Black women" and "sisterhood" run the risk of erasing specificities and mask hierarchies and privileges defined

by class and region, for example. She contends that the idea of sisterhood – which is perpetrated in Western discourses and is supposed to mean a relationship of shared oppression, solidarity, and communion of interests – often becomes a "sisterarchy", in which there is no equality considering how Western "sisters" continue to exert power over their African "sisters". Even the term "sisterhood" is problematic in the author's view because it comes from a specifically Euro-American conception of family, in which sisterly relations are a site of identification, equality, and solidarity. She explains these meanings are not quite applicable to the African contexts, in which the notion of motherhood could be considered more of a bonding/equalizer term than that of sisterhood.

hooks (1997) is another thinker who warns us against the dangers of a sisterhood based merely on the idea of common oppression. On the perspective of the author, this idea cannot encompass every woman in a movement because it disguises the varied and complex nature of women's experiences and realities. In fact, she argues that the lack of identification of many strong, decisive, opinionated women with the role of a victim of oppression has pushed many women, especially non-white ones, away from the feminist movement. More than being distant from their realities of daily fight against oppression, for these women, this feminism and its common oppression grounds are viewed as an attempt to masquerade the fact that women also oppress and exploit other women in certain circumstances. In the author's understanding, we must address our own sexist thinking and practices and divest of any power of domination and exploitation in relation to other groups of women. In this way, feminism can accomplish its fundamental task of creating a political platform that addresses difference in its every form and make solidarity among all women possible.

hooks (1997) also posits our common strength and resources as an alternative point from which to build sisterhood. For her, the first step towards bonding and sisterhood is to confront the enemy within, that is, to make an honest critique of one's values, beliefs, social position and privileges in order to search for self-awareness before claiming to know other women and their realities. According to the author, this movement is very important because so far not much action has been taken in altering female consciousness to unlearn sexism, especially when it comes to women's attitudes towards one another.

Another basis for coalitions and solidarity between minority groups is what hooks (1990b) calls "yearning" – "a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice" (HOOKS, 1990b, n.p.). This "yearning" is the desire of those in a state of alienation to find a critical voice and the subjectivity that is possible by means of it.

In order to change our society and undermine patriarchal oppression, hooks (1997) admonishes us to learn the value and meaning of sisterhood in order to create a real, unified, and effective feminist movement. For the author, feminism is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. 1), which means not simply focusing on gender equality (as in the mainstream media representations of feminism) but mainly being concerned with sexist thinking and action and the way they take form in our society. Feminism should, thus, according to hooks's (1997) ideas, focus on the relationship between feminism and racism, their similar philosophical foundations in the West and their immutable connection. For her, solidarity does not mean the same as support: it means, sometimes, to confront one another in order to achieve social and individual transformation. Difference and disagreement are, thus, part of this collective growth in political solidarity.

As Audre Lorde (2007) confirms, the history of White women who have been unable to listen and establish a dialogue with Black women is discouraging, but, even so we must attempt to establish a conversation because, for the author, we can only come together in our fight against patriarchy if we understand its diverse tools and ways of oppressing, which will lead us to recognize each other as we are, in our differences. Not considering these differences is, in Lorde's (2007) understanding, a weakening point in every feminist discussion. For her, "the strength of women lies in recognizing differences between us as creative, and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter" (LORDE, 2007, n.p.).

We must also be careful not to lose sight of the fact that, as outlined by Friedman (1998), the binary White/Black (just as the male/female, masculine/feminine) tends to erase other categories of oppression and might end up invizibilizing the possibilities of connection between women who occupy the opposite sites of the binary. She explains that the recognition of the differences among women must be mediated by our commonalties, whatever they may be. The author urges us to focus on "the desire for mutual understanding, for connections based on need, for coalition or affiliation, however provisional" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 73).

This perspective is in accordance with Avtar Brah (2005) arguments that Black feminism and White feminism, should be conceived as "non-essentialist, historically contingent, relational discursive practices, rather than as fixed sets of positionalities" (BRAH, 2005, p. 13). She believes that "they are both inside and outside each other's field of articulation" (BRAH, 2005, p. 13) and I believe Friedman's (1998) already discussed locational perspective elucidates these complicated articulations as part of one feminist movement.

4.3 RACISM

If we face race as a category constructed in difference, how are we to define racism? For Hall (2003), race must be faced as a political and social construction, "a discursive category around which a system of socioeconomic power, exploration and exclusion organizes itself" (p. 69). This system, which we know as racism, is defined by him as a discursive practice that justifies social and cultural difference and exclusion in the basis of biological and genetic traits and characteristics. He claims these differences are especially identified in visible body traits, such as skin color, hair, and face features, which allow the exclusionary discourse to work in day-to-day situations. For the author, this appeal to difference as a natural, rather than a social, construct and gives an idea of immutability, of a fixed structure that cannot be changed or subverted.

Friedman (1998), by her turn, considers racism as "as unfixed set of figural and narrative formations that emerge from, respond to, and help construct changing historical conditions" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 39). For her, racism is perceived as one axis in a multiple system of domination in which power does not always flow in a unidirectional way. As a result, privilege and oppression shift within context, according to the point of reference of a determinate location. In order to interrogate racism, the author argues, we must interrogate cultural narratives about race.

Using the theory of Paul Mecheril, Grada Kilomba (2010) also gives her account on racism. She considers subjectivity as experienced in three different levels: political, social, and individual. In this theoretical perspective, one can only be considered a subject if one is acknowledged as such by oneself and also by others in those three levels. Racism, thus, operates in all three spheres, keeping individuals from having their individual and collective interests recognized, represented, and validated in our society. In the author's understanding racism is composed of three simultaneous steps: first, the construction of difference, in reference to a norm (White); second, the articulation of such differences with hierarchical values that articulate difference as natural inferiority and, thus, creates prejudice; last but not least, power, in its historical, political, social, and economical form, enters this scenery and, aligning with prejudice, creates White supremacy and racism.

4.3.1 Everyday racism

Since there are different types of power, racism also takes on different forms, such as institutional, structural, and everyday racism. The latter, which characterizes the episodes I intend to analyze, is identified by Kilomba (2010) as the use of specific vocabulary, images, gestures, actions, and the gaze that place Black individuals as the Other, by means of infantilization, primitivization, decivilization, animalization, and eroticization[20].

One common experience of racism reported in the interviews analyzed by Kilomba (2010) is the status of having to represent Blackness in, otherwise, white environments. Since other Black individuals are not there because they are denied access, the one Black person in the space has the 'bonus' of being included and the 'onus' of representing those excluded. This description is clearly connected to Ifemelu's feeling when she first enters the university and people expect her to position herself in discussions related to race to give the "Black" or the "African perspective". This type of representation is, in Kilomba's (2010) perception, an essentialist way to deny subjectivity: one cannot be oneself in one's individuality but rather one has to be a group, a 'body', an entire 'race', and its 'history'. This reduction of many subjectivities into one single 'body' is also perceptible when Ifemelu is supposed to work with another woman's documents and she tells Aunty Uju that she does not look like the woman in the photo at all, to which her aunt responds: "all of us look alike to white people" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 148).

Another episode in which Ifemelu experiences everyday racism in the narrative is when she starts working for a rich white family and receives the visit of a carpet cleaner in their house. In the narrative, the cleaner acts in a strange way, treating her with impatience and hostility. However, when Ifemelu reveals she is only an employee, the narrative tells us "it was like a conjurer's trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 205). As Ifemelu deduces, he had imagined she was the owner of that grand white-pillared house and, as a Black woman, she was not the person he expected to be

[20] Even though I chose the word "episodes" to describe events of racism, it is important to highlight Kilomba's (2010) concern in talking about racism as something that occurs in isolated episodes because, in her words, racism is "a constellation of life experiences" (p. 45) that repeat themselves incessantly. Therefore, I am here referring to these as episodes for the simple purpose of analysis, separating some specific moments in which racism takes place in the narrative to better comprehend them, without losing sight of the bigger constellation that these moments constitute.

in that social position. When she starts her first blog, she reflects about this experience in it, as can be seen in the following extract from the novel:

> She would begin the blog post "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class" with the story of his dramatic change, and end with: It didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites." Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 205).

This everyday racism, as explained by Kilomba (2010), is one of a triad: structural and institutional racism are very pervasive and impact directly on how everyday racism takes place. For the author, the term structural racism speaks of the ways racism is ingrained in the sctructure of our society, causing Black people to be excluded from the majority of political and social structures. It is directly related to what Kilomba (2010) defines as institutional racism: the unequal treatment that is directed to People of Color in the educational system, the job market, the justice system, and others that put White people in a position of privilege in realtion to racialized groups. Thus, in order to better comprehend the racist phenomena that appear in Adichie's novel, I must also analyze the complications posited by the situation of race relations in America.

4.3.2 American tribalism: the complication of race relations

Despite the establishment of the previously defined binaries (colonizer versus colonized, White versus Black) and their pervasiveness in the current world, the racial situation cannot simple be defined in black and white terms, especially in contexts such as the American one. With regard to the racial situation of the United States, Friedman (1998) explains how the White *versus* Black/Other binary has been complicated along history and reconfigured in multiracial and multicultural terms. Thus, simply considering White and Black as fixed opposing categories is not enough to comprehend the complex racial relations that take place in the US.

Friedman (1998) lists a number of other problems with approaching racism with the fixed binary of White/Other: first, in this configuration White remains at the center as a monolithic category, which at the same time re-inscribes the patterns being questioned and erases cultural and historical violence committed with racial motives towards white and Western communities (such as Jews). The author also argues that the binary does not

accomplish the global perspective that the current world configuration requires, clinging to false notions of racial and ethnic purity and failing to take into account the relationship between one kind of other to another. These relationships are clearly explained in Ifemelu's experiences and blog reflections.

Ifemelu meets a woman named Alma and the narrative tells us that

> if Ifemelu had met Alma in Lagos, she would have thought of her as white, but she would learn that Alma was Hispanic, an American category that was, confusingly, both an ethnicity and a race, and she would remember Alma when, years later, she wrote a blog post titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Hispanic Means" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 128-129).

In the previously mentioned post, Ifemelu discusses how the United States is divided into different 'tribes' by means of four categories: class, ideology, region, and race – explaining, thus, how simply the color of one's skin is not enough to define one's place in this social ladder. Even when it comes to race, Ifemelu writes that "there's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 207). Ifemelu's explanation of American society and her affirmation that there are only two 'poles' which are fixed (WASPs and Black Americans) is a recognition of race as positionality and its relations as contextual, as previously defined in my discussions in this dissertation.

Nonetheless, Ifemelu claims American Black is always on the bottom of the racial ladder in America because her experiences in the country reinforce the argument. As an example, right after she moves to the US, her neighbor who is Black and also a migrant tells her that Marlon, her husband, says that their family will move to the suburbs so that their daughter will go to a better school so that she does not start behaving like "black Americans".

Despite Kanneh's (1998) argument that, contrary to other contexts, the word Black in the United States is only used to describe African Americans, this does not seem to relate to Ifemelu's experience in the same country as she and many of the Black immigrants she knows are socially identified as Black. Her neighbors's use of the expression "black Americans" clearly shows that there are non-American Blacks. In perceiving the difference in the history and in the way these individuals are seen in American society, Ifemelu notices and emphasizes the importance of differentiating them, as becomes evident when she changes the title of her blog. This happens when Ifemelu decides to have a romantic relationship with an

African American man and tells her family about it and her father asks why she would choose to relate to an American Negro instead of being with a Nigerian man.

It is a moment that makes her think about her difference in status as a Black migrant in the USA in relation to the Black people who were born in America and, thus, carried the burden of the country's history with slavery. We can observe, thus, how she identifies with the word Black and its meanings in the American society, but she does not identify with the word Negro and the history of Black people's suffering in America the term carries. In fact, "after Ifemelu hung up, still amused, she decided to change the title of her blog to "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 389).

The ways in which Ifemelu's comprehension of race is in alignment with the perspectives here outlined also become clear in the following passage from Ifemelu's blog:

> so lots of folk – mostly non-black – say Obama's not black, he's biracial, multiracial, black-and-white, anything but just black. Because his mother was white. But race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it's about how you look. Not about the blood you have. It's about the shade of your skin and the shape of your nose and the kink of your hair (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 419).

As we can see, Ifemelu sees race as a social construction determined by the way one looks that has to be taken into account not as a biological phenomenon, but as a sociological one that has concrete consequences in the lives of those who are considered Black in American society.

In an interview, Adichie (2014e) argues that race is America's original sin, in the sense that it is the most compelling factor in the organization of American society and it is also the most uncomfortable subject for Americans, the one they either avoid talking about or talk about only by means of saying something different than what they actually mean. One of the ways in which her argument becomes clear in the narrative is through Ifemelu's reflection after being invited to give a lecture on diversity. The narrative explains that, after the lecture, she received and e-mail in capital letters, calling her a racist and saying she should be grateful to have been allowed in the US. That e-mail

> was a revelation. The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves. They did not want the content of her ideas; they merely wanted the gesture of her presence. They had not read her blog but they had heard

> that she was a "leading blogger" about race. And so, in the following weeks, as she gave more talks at companies and schools, she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops. During her talks, she said: "America has made great progress for which we should be very proud." In her blog she wrote: Racism should never have happened and so you don't get a cookie for reducing it (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 377-378).

In this part of the narrative, it becomes clear how racism is a topic to be avoided in the American society and how the country is bound to deny their history of racism by focusing on progresses that should not even have to be made in the first place. The way Ifemelu manages to adapt for these lectures but keeps her blog as a space where she can voice what she actually believes might be an illustration of how Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) "double shifting" takes place. In order to win money and be successful in the market of lecturing, Ifemelu has to change her discourse to assuage the conscience of the Americans that listen to her. In this context, her beliefs regarding race have to be set aside and revealed only in the safer space of her blog.

4.3.3 Ifemelu's hair and her journey through self-reflection, self-knowledge, and self-love

As already explored, Ifemelu's blog is, thus, an example of how "racialized forms of subjectivity and identity, constructed within Western societies, produce resistances" (WEEDON, 2004, p. 17). Another form of resistance that is produced through the imposition of a racialized identity upon Ifemelu – and her consequent need to re-discover herself – is in her relationship with her hair, which is explored in this section.

4.3.3.1 The body and its signifiers in the construction of Black female identity

The body is one of the places that draws the boundaries of our identities. According to Linda McDowell (2003), the body is the most immediate place we experience, the site or location of the individual as such. Its boundaries are, in the author's view, more or less impermeable in relation to other bodies and the ways it is presented or seen varies across places and spaces. Bodies, as other places, have a geography and a history that determines how they are constructed. In the case of women, body's boundaries have become a kind of prison, since one of the bases of women's oppression is that fact that they are confined to their

body and its physicality (in opposition to men's mind and bodilessness). This confinement is, in the author's opinion, exacerbated by the construction of an idealized female body that, being unachievable, register women's regular bodies as inadequate. Not only are our female bodies constantly seen as inappropriate because we are doomed to fail to achieve such an ideal, but also because our bodies are seen as out of place when they attempt to inhabit spaces that are destined to the "minds", the rational and the logic, rather than to our mere physicality. As McDowell (2003) puts it, we are "brought up to occupy space in gender-specific ways" (p. 56) and have, thus, different bodily experiences. That is why Weedon (2004) argues that both White women and people of color cannot help but perceive themselves as embodied subjects. In such cases, the discursive meanings of bodies are produced as a fixed set, rather than a non-static constantly changing set of meanings a body is actually constituted of.

In the specific case of Black bodies, Grada Kilomba (2010) asserts they are also constructed as improper, that is, non-belonging. She explains that racial difference is constructed in terms of spatial identity, in the sense that certain spaces can be occupied by Black bodies and certain spaces cannot. For this reason, the author considers that writing about one's body and its signifiers (such as hair) is an important strategy for African diasporic women to deconstruct their positions in these central spaces that refuse their bodies (the academic space being one of them). In Kilomba's (2010) view, understanding this marginality brings the possibility of using this space of exclusion and oppression as a source of creativity and resistance to create new subjectivities and to challenge this hegemonic construct. In the case of Ifemelu, the emphasis on her body appears in the signifier of hair and it is visible in the narrative how the changes in her hair are directly related with her possibilities of becoming a new subject.

4.3.3.2 Black female hair and its intricacies

If we consider the specific case of hair as a body signifier, Adichie (2019a) states that female hair is always political because it needs to meet certain social standards. She says this is especially true for Black women, since they are the one group who is demanded to change their hair in order for it to look different from its natural form. According to the novelist, having to change your hair in order to fit into an ideal is energy draining, but wearing your natural hair also comes to be exhaustive because it is never seen as simply a desire to not change your hair. Rather, people assume you are making a stand, which causes tiring conversations, explanations, and justifications for something as simple as wearing one's own

hair the way it actually grows. This political (and exhausting) character of female Black hair is intensified in the US because of the previously discussed racial relations and the pervasive racism in the country.

Nevertheless, the reasons for this exhausting politicizing of Black hair in the US have their roots in the history of slavery in the country. Grada Kilomba (2010) explains how, historically, Black hair was devalued as the most visible stigma of Blackness and used to justify African's subordination in the imperial project. She claims hair was the most potent mark of servitude and it was the one feature that was not tolerated by slave masters because it symbolized "'primitivity', disorder, inferiority and un-civilization" (KILOMBA, 2010, p. 73) – what later came to be classified as simply "bad hair". Since it was the most potent mark of servitude, hair also became, according to Kilomba (2010), the most important instrument for political consciousness.

This is in alignment with Shane White and Graham White's (1995) discussion about slave hair in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. They explain how the enslaved body was a surface on which authority was displayed whereas several marks of violence and other signs of inferiority were inscribed. Nonetheless, hair sometimes escaped the slave owner's control (especially in the eighteenth century) and was styled by many enslaved people. Such hair styling is analyzed by the authors as an act of taking a stand, considering that Black people were not supposed to be proud of their hair. They also observe how this styling often made references to ancient and important social rituals in African cultures, which the process of slavery attempted to erase in Black people's memories. White and White (1995) explain, thus, how this styling of enslaved people was important both in an individual and in a community level, considering that hair care was an important communal aspect, which survived in the twentieth century, but was later transformed by attempts to make Black people's hair similar to the hair of white people.

When approaching more specifically the experiences of Black women in relation to their hair, Teiahsha Bankhead and Tabora Johnson (2014) also point to the undeniable link between identity and hair presentation. In fact, they defend that we cannot disregard "the emotive role hair plays in Black women's self-concept, identity development, and life experience" (BANKHEAD; JOHNSON, 2017, p. 89). In order to understand such a relationship, the authors elucidate on the complex and multi-faceted nature of Black hair and explain how, along history, hair has been extremely symbolic in African societies, playing an important socio-cultural role – that is, being used to state messages related to individuals's religion, age, marital status, and social rank – and acting as a means of self-expression. As

stated by Bankhead and Johnson (2014), colonizers used their knowledge of the importance of African hair in order to break the spirit of the enslaved, be it by shaving their head or making them hide it, removing, thus, an important part of their culture and their identity. African natural hair was considered, in this context, as offensive and unappealing.

Consequently, Bankhead and Johnson (2014) discuss how, in the colonial enterprise, African beauty, body, and hair were racialized, becoming symbols of bad features, always considered in relation to European features – which came to be considered as good and established as the beauty standards that are still present at our society nowadays. From their very birth, then, Black women are taught that there is something wrong with what they are and that, in order to be beautiful and desirable, they have to change their appearance. In fact, the authors show how lighter skin and straighter hair became desirable in the search for male attention and also came to be seen as a possibility of social and economic mobility. They argue that there is a belief, among Black women, that hair status affects their likelihood of both attracting male attention and of obtaining social and cultural capital. These beliefs, the authors explain, are passed from generation to generation, as they are based both on lived experiences and on the social and cultural messages that these women receive throughout their lives.

This need to change one's hair in order to be more professional or more lovable reflects beauty standards in the US, which function as yet another feature in the ideological dimension that contributes to the oppression of Black women. Adichie (2014c) explains how society's general message is that there is something fundamentally wrong with Black people's natural hair. In contrast to the American ideal of beauty (white, skinny, blond hair, and blue eyes), Collins (2002) points to "dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (p. 89) as the mark of ugliness, that is, as the boundaries of beauty. Considering the fact that women's self-worth in society is deeply rooted in the way they look, Collins (2002) explains that Black women are never capable of living up to such standards of beauty, which foster their social devaluation and consequent objectification. Whiteness is pointed by the author as the norm, which causes Black women to attempt to look "whiter" in order to achieve some social validation. This case in point is exemplified by Black women's deposition on the necessity of straightening hair in order to get jobs.

As a matter of fact, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) explore in their analysis how "for many Black women, hair, more than anything else, is a symbol of how they must shift to be accepted" (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2003, p. 187). According to the women's testimonies that the authors present and scrutinize, Black female hair always has meaning in

the eye of the beholder. Braid and dreadlocks, for example, are quoted by some of the women as seen as inappropriate for professional environments. In the case of job interviews, for example, the women who gave their testimonies said it is never a good idea to wear natural hair, braids, or dreadlocks, because you run the risk of being pre-judged and not getting the job for the wrong reason.

The authors explain that, even though some Black women acquire the courage to wear their hair the way they want after they have spent some time working in a company – and some of them have even sued their companies for the right to wear their hair in the way they choose –, "many Black women continue to feel that they must shift their hairdos to fit into a professional setting and to avoid being unduly scrutinized" (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2003, p. 188). For Kilomba (2010), these changes in hair are a form of controlling and erasing the signs of Blackness and this process of trying to change one's hair in order to fabricate a sign of Whiteness and hide one's signs of Blackness can be considered part of a violence against one's self in the attempt to meet impossible white beauty standards.

In addition to this discussion, Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) addresses the issue of how natural Black hair is treated nowadays in mainstream media and in society as a whole. In these contexts, the white beauty standards are maintained and natural Black hair is seen as something abnormal and that needs to be normalized. In opposition, straight hair is seen as a symbol of (Western) beauty. The known dichotomy 'good' versus 'bad' hair is pervasive in our societies and, according to the author, it has a severe impact in our perceiving of Western beauty as a symbol of delicacy, pureness, sensuality (that is, femininity), and of Black features as occupying an "otherized position" (CRUZ-GUTIÉRREZ, 2019, p. 66) – that is, not beautiful and not feminine. Other than being a beauty standard, thus, straight hair is also a matter of performing a certain gender role, since it is a feature that symbolizes an adequate "feminine appearance". Thus, people adhere to an unnatural hairstyle in order to adhere to (also unnatural and culturally generated) gender expectations.

The meanings of natural Black hair I have discussed so far appear clearly visible in some passages of Ifemelu's blog. The following one touches on several of the aspects our theoretical review has covered. The blog post goes as follows:

> White Girlfriend and I are Michelle Obama groupies. So the other day I say to her – I wonder if Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it. And she says – you mean her hair doesn't grow like that? So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair. Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly

> "before" picture, and in the pretty "after" picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight? Some black women, AB and NAB[21], would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it's not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it's just not damn normal (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 367).

In this passage, it is possible to note the belief that there is something abnormal with Black natural hair and how it somehow reflects on the perception of women's professionalism; we can also see the conception of Black hair as "bad" in relation to a white beauty standard and the lack of knowledge of people in general about what Black natural hair actually looks like. These same themes also appear in the following passage of the blog:

> When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you "did" something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven't "done" anything to their hair. You should be asking Beyoncé what she's done. (We all love Bey but how about she show us, just once, what her hair looks like when it grows from her scalp?) I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair – there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 367-368).

In this passage, we can also realize how Ifemelu – much like the author who has created her as a character – believes that wearing one's natural hair should not have to be a political statement because sometimes it is a decision that might regard other aspects of one's life.

However, it is my argument that, even though it shouldn't, wearing one's natural Black hair always becomes political because of the historical, cultural, and social meanings that have been constructed around this type of hair. Considering, how Black hair has been politicized in terms of both race and gender and how it has been deemed as untamed and wild in its natural form, I agree with Bankhead and Johnson (2014) in their consideration that choosing to wear one's natural Black hair cannot help but be a political act in itself. In fact, although she argues otherwise in the previously quoted passage of the blog, my analysis shows how Ifemelu's choice of wearing her natural hair comes to be a very political one.

[21]According to context, in Ifemelu's blog, the initials AB and NAB are used, respectively, for 'American Black' and 'Non-American Black'.

4.3.3.3 Ifemelu's hair and her journey to self-acceptance and self-love

In one of her articles, Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) provides us with a very thorough analysis of hair in *Americanah*. She considers how Adichie's work brings hair as a key element both in the narrative and in identity construction. For her, "transitioning becomes a trope for identify-shifting, exerting an impact upon self-perception and agency development" (CRUZ-GUTIÉRREZ, 2017 apud CRUZ-GUTIÉRREZ, 2019, p. 68). Cláudio Braga (2019) also interprets the ways in which Black woman's afro hair appear in *Americanah* as a "political expression of identity, race and gender" (p. 52), being directly related to the self-esteem and power of these women. The author highlights Ifemelu's difficult experiences in American soil and how her hair is directly connected to some of them, as explored below.

At her arrival at the US, Ifemelu is judgmental of Aunty Uju's decision of relaxing her hair for a job interview. However, as the narrative goes on, the assumptions about Black natural hair that have been outlined in the previous section begin to have a direct effect on Ifemelu's life. After experiencing a traumatic event (which is further investigated in the following chapter) of giving up a lot of herself in order to make money and survive in America, she knows better than to question or make fun when her friend Ruth gives her advice about a job interview. Ruth tells her: "Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job." Aunty Uju had said something similar in the past, and she had laughed then. Now, she knew enough not to laugh (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 250). Therefore, it is possible to perceive the seriousness with which Ifemelu treats this decision: changing her hair is not a mere question of style or well-being but rather something she believes she has to do in order to secure a job and, consequently, her permanence in the US. This is a clear example of the previously established assumptions about Black female hair and professionalism being passed from woman to woman and also of the functioning of White supremacy explained by hooks (1992). For this author, White supremacy seduces Black people into thinking that the way to succeed is to abandon and deny the value of Blackness in order to gain economic self-sufficiency or even to limb the social ladder. At first, Ifemelu judges her aunt for thinking and acting this way, but after facing a period of extreme economic difficulties that led her to make more demeaning choices, she prefers to accept the White supremacist norm if that is the price she has to pay to make a living in the US.

In Ifemelu's reflection about her decision it is possible to see the beauty standard and the definition of White/straight as professional while natural Black hair – especially kinky

one, which is further from the white possibilities of curly – is seen as unprofessional or inappropriate for some kinds of workplace. Exemplifying Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) previously discussed argument about hair and professionalism, Ifemelu explains to her boyfriend that

> my full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 252).

Thus, she decides to relax her own hair to improve her chances of getting a job. Nonetheless, Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) argues that "since Ifemelu's action is the result of hard experiences and succumbing to social pressure, it cannot be completely considered a decision but rather a reaction caused by traumatic events, which leads her to conform to certain social expectations" (p. 73). As the author explains, this is not a regular case of self-hatred or lack of self-acceptance, but actually the result of combining and institutionalized pressures of gender and race. Ifemelu's decision is an illustration of Stratton's (2002) argument that conformity to some of societies's values appears recurrently as a strategy for survival.

Even so, the devastating effects of this change in her self-perception are not less pervasive. In spite of the fact that this could, in fact, be the only available way for Ifemelu and so many other individuals to enter the job market and support themselves financially in a White supremacist society, hooks (1992) admonishes us that these concessions come with the consequence of low self-esteem and of an identity crisis related to the refusal of historical and cultural elements of Black identity. As argued by Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019), for Ifemelu "relaxing her hair can be equated with not being in control of her body. A lessening of her capacity of self-definition, a token of the authority to shape her identity being deluded" (p. 73). This becomes clear in the passage that described the exact moment in which Ifemelu relaxes her hair

> Ifemelu felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu's head bent backwards against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head. "Just a little burn," the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!" Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of

> something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 251).

The sense of loss and of something organic dying indicate, along with the inability to recognize herself in the woman with "the white-girl swing" in the mirror, a loss of herself and of her sense of identity – represented by her natural hair – as a Black woman.

The physical effects of the change are also very negative: in addition to the burn described in the quote above, Ifemelu's hair begins to fall and her scalp is severely bruised, leading her to cut off all of her hair. At this point the issues of hair as synonymous with femininity and gender expectations pointed by Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) also appear. After Ifemelu's friend, Wambui, convinces her that relaxing one's hair is a type of prison in which your hair rules your life in your attempts to make it behave in a way it is not supposed to, she allows her friend to cut her hair, leaving only the two inches that had grown naturally since the relaxation process. Then, "Ifemelu looked in the mirror. She was all big eyes and big head. At best, she looked like a boy; at worst, like an insect" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 257). It is a moment in which Ifemelu compares her appearance with a boy's simply because she no longer has long straight hair.

The expectations related to hair and femininity also appear in the figure of Miss Margaret, the only other Black person in Ifemelu's entire company. She is and African American that worked at the cafeteria and promptly asked, upon seeing Ifemelu's new haircut: "Why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 262). For Miss Margaret, then, Ifemelu's hair is directly connected to her gender role and her sexuality – Ifemelu's decision to cut off her hair is faced by this woman as a statement that she no longer conforms to the rules of femininity. As an African American, however, Margaret is also aware of the intricacies between natural Black hair and professionalism and when Ifemelu resigns from her job, Margaret asks her if she believes her departure from the company is related to her hair. This question about Ifemelu's hair change being connected to her leaving the job exemplifies once more the relations stated by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) and Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) between Black female hair and professionalism.

We can see how Ifemelu – like many of the women interviewed by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) – has to straighten her hair in order to get the job and, even after being employed for a while, people in her workplace still judge her for her choice. Previously, when she complains to Wambui about her new hair, her exact words are: "I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 259). Not by coincidence, the first thing she mentions related to her hair is her inability to go to work. By analyzing the character, we can see how

this is not simply a matter of not liking her hair – she has managed to go to the drugstore, even if wearing a baseball cap –, but also a fear of the consequences such hair change might have in her professional environment.

Despite the feelings of hate for her hair, her questionings about her appearance being seen as male or lesbian like, and the fears related to her professional life, Ifemelu decides to maintain her natural hair and, thus, begins one of her journeys through self-knowledge and self-love. One important feature of this journey is the website indicated by Wambui. After being unable to look at herself in the mirror with her new hair and refusing to go to work and continue her normal routine, Ifemelu's friend, Wambui, suggests she visits the website 'HappilyKinkyNappy.com'. This is how the narrative described this page:

> HappilyKinkyNappy.com had a bright yellow background, message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They called relaxers "creamy crack." They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They complimented each other's photos and ended comments with "hugs." They complained about black magazines never having natural-haired women in their pages, about drugstore products so poisoned by mineral oil that they could not moisturize natural hair. They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 262-263).

Following her visit to the web space, Ifemelu learns techniques to take care of her natural hair and she also comes to see beauty in other people's natural hair and, eventually, in her own. In this online space, Ifemelu experiences a new moment in her life and a new awareness of herself and her surroundings. As she spends time on the website, seeing other people's photos and testimonies, she learns a lot about her hair, but also about her identity as a Black woman in the US.

The narrative tells us that, "on an unremarkable day in early spring […] she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 264). For Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019), this experience shows how online communities and other alternative media can create a common space that allows women to gain autonomy, visibility, and voice, both individually and collectively. For her, that is what eventually leads Ifemelu to her decision of writing a blog and attempting to help others have a new perception of themselves through social networking.

In Mami's (2017) opinion, hair in *Americanah* marks Ifemelu's relationship with nature and her own self "beautifully made", as stated by her name 'Ifemelunamma'. In fact, it is perceivable in the narrative that the closer she gets to accepting and embracing her natural hair, the closer she gets from accepting her self, as well as her desires and impulses that are not completely overwhelmed by social constraints. A case in point is that, when she has already learned to love her hair, she allows herself to cheat on Curt with her neighbor, giving voice and action to a desire that was not socially acceptable.

It is important to highlight, however, that the fact that Ifemelu falls in love with her hair and is able to fully accept it is not, as pointed by Braga (2019), "a romantic decision, based on a simple choice, but it is rather strictly connected to Ifemelu's acquired autonomy in relation to the traditional job market" (p. 71). Only when Ifemelu is well established as a blogger can she really decide to ignore the social constricts in relation to her hair, demonstrating that Black women's hair issue is not merely an individual problem or a matter of choice but it is rather deeply related to the public sphere. Even though Braga (2019) warns us about the dangers of romanticizing Ifemelu's ability to wear and love her natural hair, the author also interprets Ifemelu's rejection of modification of her natural hair as an act of power, a metaphorical rejection of faking, submitting, and being oppressed. When she decides to braid her hair before going back to Nigeria, the critic interprets it as an attempt to recapture her African-ness by reconstructing one of her identity elements.

4.3.3.4 The hair salon

Although we are yet to discuss Ifemelu's journey through the diasporic space and her decision to return to Nigeria, the moment in which Ifemelu decides to braid her hair in a US salon before returning is one that interests us. It is when the hair salon appears in the narrative as a Black female community or, as put by Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019), "a cultural institution for Black women" (p. 68).

Adichie (2014e) herself defines African braiding salons in America as "a wonderful cultural institution" (verbal information[22]), as well as a great place for learning about the behavior of African immigrants and about gender relations. Adichie (2014b) contends the

[22] THE GUARDIAN'S BOOK PODCAST: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Americanah. [Voiceover by]: John Mullan; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The Guardian's book club, 1 Aug. 2014e. *Podcast*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2014/aug/01/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-americanah-podcast. Access on: 11 Jan. 2021.

salon is also a sort of subculture and, at the same time, a multicultural community. She says that writing about this kind of salon is writing about more than hair. It is talking about women who left their homes and are making choices to survive in a host land they are yet to fully comprehend. The novelist narrates that, when she first began to go to such places, she used to be so curious she would observe and take notes on how individuals behave and how the women working in the salon would actually change completely according to the customer they were attending. These shifts in behavior to adapt to one's customers might be a case in point of how African women in America adhere to Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) already discussed strategy of "shifting" to accommodate differences in relation to color, gender, or class and, consequently, to deal with a difficult environment.

Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) states, based on the ideas of authors like Patricia Collins (2000) and hooks (1998), that beauty salons work as a 'safe space', especially within the diasporic context, in which the issues of changing hair for acceptance are reinforced. However, Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) contends that, for Ifemelu, the salon is a place of uneasiness, which contrasts heavily with the character's previous experience of feeling safer in an online community about hair. In my analysis, it could be possible to think of the salon as a 'safe space' in terms of it being a space of a shared Africa within the diasporic space, as the following quote exemplifies: ""It's so hot," she [Ifemelu] said. At least, these women would not say to her "You're hot? But you're from Africa!"" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 13). In this quote, we perceive Ifemelu's relieve in being around people who know Africa and do not expect it to be some tropical land where hotness is the worst possible.

After she spends a little time in the salon, however, the possibility of a shared Africanness begins to make her nervous because she starts to realize there is virtually no sharing among her and those women – they come from very different contexts and they occupy a very different space within diaspora. Their shared Africanness was not enough to hide the enormous difference in their positionality and their consequent way of seeing the world. In fact, Braga (2017) believes Ifemelu feels a sense of both repel and comfort in relation to the African women she meets there. She is divided between her dislike for these women and the feeling of their shared Africanness. As explained by Araújo (2017), the salon works as a representative of Africa, in the margins of Princeton, a place of identification and tensions between Ifemelu and the other African women. This is perceivable in the citation below in which Aisha – one of the women who work at the beauty salon – asks Ifemelu how she got her visa and

> suddenly, Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamered sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would not have asked if she were not an African, and in this new bond, she saw yet another augury of her return home.
> "I got mine from work," she said. "The company I worked for sponsored my green card."
> "Oh," Aisha said, as though she had just realized that Ifemelu belonged to a group of people whose green cards simply fell from the sky. People like her could not, of course, get theirs from an employer (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 450-451).

In this moment it is also possible to evaluate how, much like in the salon in Nigeria visited by Ifemelu in her youth, "the different ranks of imperial femaleness" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 93) become clearly visible. It confirms Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) ideas that the salon is a place where class differences become evident in Adichie's narrative and that, as shown in the previous quote, Ifemelu is considered superior and arrogant because of her position in Princeton and her consequent upper-class lifestyle. This perception is also corroborated when the narrator tells us that Ifemelu was sure that, because she refused to agree with their comments in an expected shared 'Africanness', the women in the salon would talk about her after she left, saying: "that Nigerian girl, she feels very important because of Princeton. Look at her food bar, she does not eat real food anymore. They would laugh with derision, but only a mild derision, because she was still their African sister, even if she had briefly lost her way" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 126).

In fact, when analyzing the moments Ifemelu passes in this beauty salon, Butler (2017) observes that the cultural capital Ifemelu has gained throughout her stay in the US, especially by means of her blog and her fellowship, "has created a distance between Ifemelu and working class African immigrants and this is reflected in her interaction with her hair dressers, which reveals her resistance to identification with them (BUTLER, 2017, p. 157). For the author, the scene shows a clear class divide that makes Ifemelu feel not only different but also superior to the workers of the salon.

It is a moment in which it is possible to verify Collins (2002) previously quoted statements that "intersecting oppressions of sexuality, race, gender, and class produce neither absolute oppressors nor pure victims" (COLLINS, 2002, p. 126) and that the individual's possibility of exerting power over others – as well as of being subjected to it – are directly dependent on the current configuration and interaction of the multiple systems of oppression that determine our lives. Ifemelu, who is used to be at the oppressed side of the equation, is actually the privileged one in this context, mainly because of her class and her academic status, as the quotes above and the one below demonstrates:

> "I've just finished a fellowship," she said, knowing that Aisha would not understand what a fellowship was, and in the rare moment that Aisha looked intimidated, Ifemelu felt a perverse pleasure. Yes, Princeton. Yes, the sort of place that Aisha could only imagine, the sort of place that would never have signs that said QUICK TAX REFUND; people in Princeton did not need quick tax refunds (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 20).

Ifemelu, thus, works here as the oppressor party: the one with the power, the knowledge, and the opportunities Aisha could never get or even understand. As the quote demonstrates, Ifemelu feels pleasure, even if fleetingly, in occupying such a position, in distancing herself from a woman she considers to be at the bottom of America's social ladder, like Ifemelu herself had once been.

Aisha is the one responsible for doing Ifemelu's hair, but she is very rude to Ifemelu in their arguments and in doing her hair. In fact, she violently arranges Ifemelu's braids, despite her protests of feeling pain. Braga (2019) envisions some possibilities that justify this behavior. First, he attributes her behavior to her simplicity, her lack of formation that does not give her the opportunity of being familiar with the standard of customer service in the United States. Secondly, the author believes her attitude could be related to the culturally constructed rivalry between women and a certain level of meanness present in women's encounter with one another, especially in beauty salons. Some other possible explanations presented are the spread idea that female beauty requires sacrifice and also Aisha's frustration in the face of Ifemelu's determination to do things her own way and to resist taking Aisha's opinions into consideration.

As a matter of fact, Ifemelu clearly states that she does not like Aisha. In the narrative it is possible to notice how not only does Aisha demonstrate an inability to take proper care of and acknowledge the beauty of Ifemelu's natural hair, but she also makes her uncomfortable with her personal questions and her controversial opinions. Aisha starts disagreeing with Ifemelu on the color of her hair. She thinks Ifemelu's preferred color, which is closer to her natural shade, gives the hair an appearance of dirtiness. Aisha's depreciation of natural afro hair (seen as dirty or not taken care of) is also shown in her suggestion that Ifemelu should straighten or relax her hair. Aisha's behavior, thus, might also be seen as the indicator of her agreement with the culturally established beauty pattern that I have already discussed. Braga (2019) evaluates this repetition of the white beauty pattern as a result of her lack of resources to develop self-consciousness, considering her low educational level and immersion in the notions of beauty presented by the American magazines scattered in the salon and filled with white models. This illustrates Cruz-Gutiérrez's (2019) that Western and patriarchal beauty

standards can manifest themselves within the environment of the beauty salon. The following scene demonstrates Aisha's perspective and her behavior towards Ifemelu and her hair:

> She touched Ifemelu's hair. "Why you don't have relaxer?"
> "I like my hair the way God made it."
> "But how you comb it? Hard to comb," Aisha said.
> Ifemelu had brought her own comb. She gently combed her hair, dense, soft, and tightly coiled, until it framed her head like a halo. "It's not hard to comb if you moisturize it properly," she said, slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural. Aisha snorted; she clearly could not understand why anybody would choose to suffer through combing natural hair, instead of simply relaxing it (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 15).

This scene also shows how, when discussing with Aisha and trying to prove her point about her hair, Ifemelu uses the argument of faith and religion – things that are usually not part of her appeals –, saying she prefers her hair the way God made it because she believes she knows how braiders think. The narrator tells us that she uses a proselytizing tone when talking about her hair, which gives the impression of her using a condescending tone towards Aisha. First, she stereotypes her as a religious person who would better respond to the argument of faith – with no evidence for such – and later she preaches to her as if she is in a superior place, as if she is the one reasonable person within the room. Again, this scene shows how Ifemelu exerts power over Aisha: by stereotyping her or adopting a condescending tone with her, she deprives her of the possibility of logical reasoning and of being something different than what is expected by Ifemelu.

Other Western systems of oppression and thought also appear in the salon in the figure of Aisha. Using the ideas of Binyavanga Nainaina, Brooks (2018) lists some of the common stereotypes – which I have discussed in the sections related to postcolonialism and to racism – about Africa in Western society. In light of the list, Brooks (2018) believes Aisha has internalized of several of these stereotypes. This becomes clear when Ifemelu asks her:

> "Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?" Ifemelu asked. Aisha clucked. "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, your country in Latin America?" Aisha resumed twisting, a sly smile on her face, and then asked, as if Ifemelu could not possibly understand how things were done here (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 18).

In the previous quote it is possible to see the internalization of the stereotype in which Africa is treated as a country and not a continent. In Brooks's (2018) perception this internalization becomes even clearer in the way Aisha rejects things associated with Africa, such as voodoo

and natural hair, as well as African people, which includes herself. For the author, Aisha works as a cautionary tale for what happens when we do not manage to question and subvert the stereotypes. This is exemplified when Ifemelu says she would write about Aisha in her blog with the title: "A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 22).

In the above demonstrated pleasure and need of Ifemelu to distance herself from Aisha, I could substantiate Leetsch's (2017) point that the hair salon works as a place where Ifemelu goes to braid her hair, but also as a place where "a more pervasive braiding process of weaving her story" (p. 5) takes place. For her, the salon works as a linking device in the narrative that connects Ifemelu's reminiscences to the present of the narrative and also as "a meeting point for various female genealogies" (LEETSCH, 2017, p. 10). As Ifemelu looks at the women in the salon, especially through the mirror, we can see how she is actually thinking about herself and remembering her story. The following quote is an illustration of how this process takes place: "Ifemelu watched Mariama in the mirror, thinking of her own new American selves. It was with Curt that she had first looked in the mirror and, with a flush of accomplishment, seen someone else" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 235). In her evaluation of how she had once been "someone else", Ifemelu reveals her story to the reader and, along with it, the construction of her identity and the map of where and who she has been along this journey.

Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) also examines how the salon works as "a container of Ifemelu's life journey" (p. 68), the space in which she will be triggered to remember several events of her life and her journey to that moment. Thus, the hair salon in Adichie's narrative – much like hair itself – does not work as simply an aesthetic space, but as a narrative strategy for the development of several other issues within the narrative: Africa within the diasporic space; female relationship; Black female natural hair; and, what mainly interests us, the construction of an individual's identity in their journey through time and space.

After examining the relationship of Ifemelu with elements of her African identity – that is, her hair and the salon – I turn now to explore, in the following sections, Ifemelu's relationship with three White characters and the ways in which race and racism play a role in them. These relationships bring a clear example of how the previously discussed refusal to deal with race issues in the US appears in the form of several types of racism. This analysis also reinforces my argument of identities as positional, locational, relational, and situational phenomena (FRIEDMAN, 1989) and helps us to further comprehend Ifemelu's Black female migratory subjectivity (DAVIES, 1994).

4.3.4 The outsider-within: Ifemelu in a White family's house

One of the concepts brought forward by Patricia Hill Collins (2002) in her discussions about race is the notion of the outsider-within. She coins the term based on the experience of Black domestic servants in White houses: the servants are inside the White's most private spaces with a deep view of their lives and yet completely excluded and invizibilized from these same lives. Although the term was based on this specific experience, it can be used to describe a range of Black women's experiences (such as their places in the academy and social movements) and their standpoint at "a peculiar marginality that stimulated a distinctive Black women's perspective on a variety of themes" (COLLINS, 2002, p. 11). The author defends that this "unique standpoint" gives these women new angles of possibilities of seeing and comprehending oppression. Ifemelu presents this position clearly when she is working as a nanny and as an academic. As an employee at a White family's house, this angle of vision is exactly what allows her to have a deeper understanding of the character's here analyzed and of their relationship within their family.

Collins (2002) points out to the fundamental contradiction underlying US society: on paper, there are democratic promises of freedom, equality, and social justice, but, in reality, Black women experience daily the differential treatments based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status. This contradiction is illustrated by the author with the image of the traditional American family ideal. First and foremost, it has to be heterosexual, and racially homogeneous. It also needs to have a father and a stay-at-home mother, with their own biological children and a proper wage. This is precisely what African families are not and cannot be. What my analysis shows, however, is how Ifemelu deconstructs this narrative of the ideal family with her insight into Kimberly's family. She describes how even a family that checks out in every "American" criterion is bound to be dysfunctional under the constrictions and the forms of oppression the US systems allows and fosters. In this family's case, gender inequality is the one that most stands out since race, class, and sexuality are not at stake in the relationship of this family's members.

4.3.4.1 Kimberly

Kimberly is the white woman who hires Ifemelu to work in her house as a nanny. When discussing the relationship between White and Black women, hooks (1997) establishes racism and classism as causes of women's estrangement with each other. If part of the women's movement still shares racist and classist perspectives, it is, she states, impossible for women to have common interests and concerns and to form a movement that approaches them altogether. For the author "white feminists discriminate against and exploit black women while simultaneously being envious and competitive in their interactions with them" (hooks, 1997, p. 401), which makes reciprocal relationships impossible to develop between them.

Nonetheless, in the case of Ifemelu and Kimberly, racism and their different class were not impediments for them to create a bond of affection. In the first day they meet, Ifemelu's sympathy for her is clear and unrelated to the fact that she is looking for a job. When she greets Ifemelu and they shake hands, Ifemelu feels "her hand small, bony-fingered, fragile. In her gold sweater belted at an impossibly tiny waist, with her gold hair, in gold flats, she looked improbable, like sunlight" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 179). In fact, when describing this woman to Obinze Ifemelu says she reminds her of a tiny bird with easily crushable bones. Ifemelu, thus, has an impression of Kimberly as someone who is fragile and easy to break but, at the same time, she compares her with sunlight visualizing light and good heartedness in her, as when the narrator states that "on that first day, she liked Kimberly, her breakable beauty, her purplish eyes full of the expression Obinze often used to describe the people he liked: obi ocha. A clean heart" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 181).

What Adichie's narrative shows us, however, is that simply having good intentions and forming a bond of affection does not prevent racism from happening, since as I have previously explained, racism is ingrained in the structure of the American society. In the figure of Kimberly, racism usually happens in a way described by Kilomba (2010) as a form of passion for the 'exotic' or the 'primitive'. She states that this type of racism is based on a fantasy of nature and authenticity, in which the Black person would be close to a natural non-socialized state of humanity and would, therefore, have access to something that Whites have long lost. The author explains that this passion is based on the desire for these attributes of the Other and this desire could easily turn into a need of destruction of the Other because he/she has what the Self lacks and desires.

When Kimberly first meets Ifemelu and expresses her appreciation for multicultural names coming from rich countries, Ifemelu observes how Kimberly was one of the "people

who thought “culture” the unfamiliar colorful reserve of colorful people, a word that always had to be qualified with “rich.” She would not think Norway had a “rich culture” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 180). Thus, she places Nigeria and Black people like Ifemelu in a distant land of ‘rich culture’, something she imagines to be distant from her civilized country – the “primitive” described by Kilomba (2010).

When Ifemelu is hired and they start to spend more time together,

> Ifemelu would come to realize later that Kimberly used “beautiful” in a peculiar way. “I’m meeting my beautiful friend from graduate school,” Kimberly would say, or “We’re working with this beautiful woman on the inner-city project,” and always, the women she referred to would turn out to be quite ordinary-looking, but always black. One day, late that winter, when she was with Kimberly at the huge kitchen table, drinking tea and waiting for the children to be brought back from an outing with their grandmother, Kimberly said, “Oh, look at this beautiful woman,” and pointed at a plain model in a magazine whose only distinguishing feature was her very dark skin. “Isn’t she just stunning?”
> “No, she isn’t.” Ifemelu paused. “You know, you can just say ‘black.’ Not every black person is beautiful” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 180-181).

In this scene, we can also see the attempt to reduce all Black people into one category: the ‘beautiful’. Even though it appears to be a positive category, showing Kimberly’s ‘good intentions’, it also reveals her lack of knowledge and how racism is ingrained in her way of seeing and describing the word. With time, these kind of comments and attitudes start to annoy Ifemelu, but they do not undermine how she feels about Kimberly. Whenever possible, however, she makes a point of intervening, like in the passage above, to show Kimberly how she could act differently. In Ifemelu’s decisions to confront Kimberly and in Kimberly’s ability to listen and change her actions lies a possibility of solidarity between female individuals as defined by hooks (1997) – that is, confronting one another in order to achieve social and individual transformation and to achieve a collective growth in political solidarity. It is also possible to see Friedman’s (1998) desire for connection and understanding between women, even if it is just provisional.

Despite the underlying racism in some of Kimberly’s attitudes, when deeply observing the relationship between Ifemelu and her boss, we can see that, at some points, there is a disturbance of the expected power structure. Ifemelu is the observer, occupying the position of knowledge, typical of the masculine White colonizer. She is the one able to identify Kimberly’s dependence in relation to her husband and even how she subjects to her sister’s judgment. Strangely, the Nigerian nanny is the one that gets to feel sorry for the rich White American woman. This happens because, from her ‘outsider-within’ position (COLLINS,

2002), Ifemelu can see clearly how Kimberly deludes herself in her attempt to construct the perfect American family and becomes dependent and subordinate to both her husband Don and her sister Laura.

As stated by Braga (2019), Kimberly and her portraits of a perfect life fall apart when Ifemelu starts getting to know the family better. In fact, Ifemelu notices that she has no true purpose, no authority with her own daughter, and no possibility of happiness in her frustrated relationship with her husband. The freedom promised by America does not arrive at Kimberly because she has been socially educated to perform the gender role of the quiet and domestic wife and mother – the previously outlined stereotype of "the Angel in the House". In her attempt to perform such a role, she is unable to face her husband and her sister in their controlling behaviors and she is even incapable of disciplining her own children.

Ifemelu evaluates how Kimberly needs to feel and show the presence of her husband as a way of validating her in society. At any moment, she observes how even Kimberly's voice changed with her husband's appearance, assuming a high-pitched tone, as if she was self-consciously attempting to be feminine. At a party the family throws in their house, when Kimberly's husband goes outside the house to make a phone call, Ifemelu watches how her boss was "standing in the middle of the den, slightly apart from her circle of friends; she had been looking around for Don and when she saw him, her eyes rested on him, and her face became soft, and shorn of worry" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 210).

In Ifemelu's accounts of Don, she observes how, whereas his wife is completely dedicated and absorbed by him and the family, his energies are somewhere else. The narrator tells us "there was, in his storytelling, an expectation of successful seduction. Ifemelu stared at him, saying little, refusing to be ensnared, and feeling strangely sorry for Kimberly. To be saddled with a sister like Laura and a husband like this" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 184-185). She later remarks that Kimberly should leave her husband but never will, despite the fact he only adores himself.

As I have mentioned, Kimberly's adoration of Don goes as far as to prevent her from actually educating her children. In her protectiveness of her husband, along with her passivity and her inability to speak up, she simply does not discipline their children and when they do not act according to Don's expectations, she blames the children for the disappointment. For example, in a situation in which Morgan, one of her kids, does not want to open a gift Don brought to her, Kimberly defends her husband, saying how hard her daughter is on her father. Ifemelu consoles her because she is protective of Kimberly, but she actually thinks "Don needed to remember that Morgan, and not he, was the child" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 200).

Kimberly is, thus, a depiction of what Adichie (2015) described in an interview as a surprising behavior of American women. She says that, even though there are several constraints of gender in Nigeria, she is amazed by the way American women were raised to be liked, which includes not being aggressive, angry, or disagreeing. As we can see in the case of Kimberly these ideals are taken seriously: her existence is meant to please – her husband, her kids, and her sister. She is incapable of confronting Laura even when she is horrified at her attitudes. She is so afraid of being aggressive that she is unable to be assertive with her own kids. At a moment of intimacy between Ifemelu and Kimberly, the narrator describes that

> Kimberly giggled and for a moment it felt as though they were high school girlfriends gossiping about boys. Ifemelu sometimes sensed, underneath the well-oiled sequences of Kimberly's life, a flash of regret not only for things she longed for in the present but for things she had longed for in the past (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 238).

As the quote shows, such effort to fulfill a pre-determined role has its costs. Kimberly longs for unlived things in the past and in the present because she does not have the ability to live her own life: she is obliged by her sister and her husband to be the previously mentioned 'Angel in the House', but she does not manage to perform the role and, even when she does, it does not bring her any rewards. That is precisely why Ifemelu pities her: she is constrained in a role that has always been confining to women but has never imposed itself on Ifemelu with such strength as to prevent her from being herself and following her own path. In Ifemelu and Kimberly's relationship, thus, it is possible to see how comprehension of gendered experiences and the commonality of hooks' (1990b) "yearning" for a voice and subjectivity enables a good relationship between these very diverse women, alienated from their own selves in different ways.

As I analyze in the following section, however, because of her submission to her husband and especially her sister, Kimberly also incurs in a different kind of racist attitude towards Ifemelu. It is Grada Kilomba's (2010) argument that racism happens within a triangular constellation, composed of the following elements: the actor (or the one who insults), the subject turned into object of racial oppression (or the insulted), and the "silent" audience observing the performance. Needless to say, Kimberly plays the silenced part.

4.3.4.2 Laura

If we are considering Adichie's use of multiple pairs of women as a narrative strategy that responds directly to the African female tradition of 'paired women' defined by Stratton (2002), Laura would definitely be Kimberly's opposing match, her complementary pair. In Ifemelu's description of them when she first sees them, she defines them in comparison to birds: Kimberly, as previously mentioned, would be a "tiny bird with fine bones, easily crushed while Laura brought to mind a hawk, sharp-beaked and dark-minded" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 180). In addition to realizing how different they were, in this first contact "Ifemelu sensed, between them, the presence of spiky thorns floating in the air" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 182).

In a dialogue with both of them, Ifemelu tells the story of how, when she first went to get cornflakes in the US, she was "confronted by a hundred different cereal boxes, in a swirl of colors and images, she had fought dizziness. She told this story because she thought it was funny; it appealed harmlessly to the American ego. Laura laughed. 'I can see how you'd be dizzy!'" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 181). Even in this harmless story about adapting to America, Laura feels the need to mark the difference between I *versus* you, distancing Ifemelu's experience, which she seems to regard as a little stupid, from her own. It is an attitude that confirms Trinh Minh-a's (1989) argument that the ones in power usually seek to erase difference by remaining within the borders from which they "came from" and avoiding direct contact with what is outside. Minh-a's (1989) explanation of this policy depicts how it is based on a meritocratic idea in which those in position of power blame the others for the others's poverties and "lack of development" and only mind the others's business if it affects them somehow. In fact, Laura is so determined to keep difference away that she is the one who advises Kimberly not to hire Ifemelu after their first contact, a piece of advice her sister follows until there is no other option for hiring.

As a matter of fact, Laura seems to be the ruler of Kimberly's life. Their relationship is one of tension and competition and she makes a point of explaining how much better she is in performing the roles of wife and mother whenever she has the opportunity, as in the passage below when she tells Ifemelu: "'I don't have a babysitter,' Laura said, her 'I' glowing with righteous emphasis. 'I'm a full-time, hands-on mom.'" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 182). Her necessity to emphasize her difference from her sister, whom she judges for not having the same amount of dedication to the kids, is also a mechanism to expel the different: in her mind,

only the gender role imposed of full-time motherhood is a valid and acceptable one and everything that escapes these determinations is flawed and less acceptable.

Laura is also in need to mark her difference in matters of intelligence. When Kimberly makes a reference to how Ifemelu probably ate more natural food back in Nigeria (keeping her racist remarks of the Other as the exotic and closer to nature), her sister immediately corrects her in a way that bothers Ifemelu and makes her think that "as children, Laura must have played the role of the big sister who exposed the stupidity of the little sister, always with kindness and good cheer, and preferably in the company of adult relatives" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 182).

In a different occasion, when Ifemelu tells the story of how an instructor helped her entire class cheat to get their driver's license, we can see that Laura's need to distance herself from the other continues, even when this Other is not necessarily African.

> Ifemelu told the story with a false openness, as though it was merely a curiosity for her, and not something she had chosen to goad Laura.
> "It was a strange moment for me, because until then I thought nobody in America cheated," Ifemelu said.
> Kimberly said, "Oh my goodness."
> "This happened in Brooklyn?" Laura asked.
> "Yes."
> Laura shrugged, as though to say that it would, of course, happen in Brooklyn but not in the America in which she lived (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 203).

Not only does she distance herself for the dishonest, uncivilized, primitive other that cheats, but she also incurs in what Kilomba (2010) calls spatial racism. The author explains how (spatial) racism can be constructed in terms of territoriality: race is imagined within one specific nationality and nationality is seen in terms of race. In the case of the United States, for example, nationality is constructed in terms of Whiteness, if you are not White, you do not belong to the nation. Therefore, you cannot be Black and American: those are constructed as two mutually exclusive categories, which cause an inner splitting in African American individuals who are actually part of both categories. The author states that non-white people are seen as disturbing for the nation and, consequently, are urged to "go back to where they came from". In Laura's case, the non-white people who are seen as disturbing for her notion of nation cannot be urged to where they came from, so she relegates them to a separate space within (and at the same time outside) the nation: the Brooklyn neighborhood.

In her acquaintanceship with Ifemelu and Kimberly, Laura continues to make unpleasant remarks (disguised as innocent comments because she also cannot escape some

constructions of the role of "the Angel in the House") in order to diminish both of them. On one occasion, the narrator tells us that Laura laughs at one of Ifemelu's remarks and calls her sassy, but "Kimberly did not laugh. Later, alone with Ifemelu, she said, "I'm sorry Laura said that. I've never liked that word 'sassy.' It's the kind of word that's used for certain people and not for others" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 200). As we can see, Kimberly's bubble of sunlight and good intentions does not keep her from perceiving her sister's racist and inadequate attitudes towards Ifemelu and even of apologizing for these attitudes later. Nonetheless, in the moment, she is complicit with the situation, playing the silent audience in the triangular constellation of racism defined by Kilomba (2010): Laura is clearly the actor; Ifemelu is the subject turned into object of racial oppression; and Kimberly is the "silent" audience, simply observing the performance without taking action.

As we can see in other moments of the narrative, this is a fixed dynamic: Laura makes racist or inappropriate comments, Ifemelu pretends not to notice or be offended, and Kimberly apologizes for her sister's actions. After the previously described encounter of Ifemelu with the carpet cleaner, we can see how Kimberly is always in the habit of apologizing for her sister. She is so eager to please and do the right thing that she is willing to apologize for those she does not even know. This becomes clear when Ifemelu decides not to tell her about the episode with the carpet cleaner because she thought "Kimberly might become flustered and apologize for what was not her fault as she often, too often, apologized for Laura. It was discomfiting to observe how Kimberly lurched, keen to do the right thing and not knowing what the right thing was (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 205).

At some point, Ifemelu even begins to wonder if Laura's attacks are actually a way of affecting Kimberly, making her feel bad about herself. She wondered if

> perhaps it was really about Kimberly, and Laura was in some distorted way aiming at her sister by saying things that would make Kimberly launch into apologies. It seemed too much work for too little gain, though. At first, Ifemelu thought Kimberly's apologizing sweet, even if unnecessary, but she had begun to feel a flash of impatience, because Kimberly's repeated apologies were tinged with self-indulgence, as though she believed that she could, with apologies, smooth all the scalloped surfaces of the world (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 201).

Tired of Kimberly's excessive apologies, Ifemelu interferes once. This is the only moment, described in the narrative, in which this fixed dynamic changes. It is an occasion in which Laura is talking about a Black foreign woman she knew in graduate school. She says

that she was a wonderful woman that did not get along with the African American in their class because she did not have "all those issues". This time Ifemelu immediately responds:

> "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," Ifemelu said.
> Laura stared at her, made a mocking confused face. "Wait, did I miss something?"
> "I just think it's a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history," Ifemelu said.
> Laura's lips sagged. She staggered, collected herself.
> "Well, I'll get my daughter and then go find some history books from the library, if I can figure out what they look like!" Laura said, and marched out (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 207-208).

In this episode, Ifemelu decides to put Laura in the place of ignorance she so determinately avoids. However, she almost immediately apologizes, not in concern for her job, as should be expected, but because she was sorry for Kimberly and the way she had expressed her feeling by simply mixing the salad as if to reduce it to a shapeless mass. Thus, despite Kimberly's own racist attitudes and Ifemelu's annoyance with her apologetic and self-indulgent behavior, Ifemelu cannot help but feel empathy for Kimberly and for that she is willing to apologize to Laura, even if she is undeserving of her remorse.

Such a difference in Ifemelu's treatment in perception of the two women becomes clearer in the following passage of the book, when

> Ifemelu watched them [Kimberly and Laura], so alike in their looks, and both unhappy people. But Kimberly's unhappiness was inward, unacknowledged, shielded by her desire for things to be as they should, and also by hope: she believed in other people's happiness because it meant that she, too, might one day have it. Laura's unhappiness was different, spiky, she wished that everyone around her were unhappy because she had convinced herself that she would always be (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 202).

As can be seen, both women are prisoners of the patriarchal ideology and the gender roles they have to play in order to obey its determinations. The result is that they are both miserable and, in the case of Laura, she makes other people's lives equally unhappy with her behavior. It is a pair of women (like others that are explored in the following chapter) who work as a cautionary tale for Ifemelu about the consequences of attempting to fulfill a previously defined gender role.

Because of such an attitude and because she does not seem to have the good and well-intentioned heart of her sister, Laura does not conquer Ifemelu's sympathy or empathy: she is

able to comprehend her reality, but it does not make her care any more about this woman. Actually, Ifemelu's relationship with Laura falls perfectly into hooks (1997) description of how, sometimes, racism and classism create a hostility and an estrangement that prevents White and Black women from being in a harmonious relationship. This relationship, thus, unlike the one between Ifemelu and Kimberly, is one in which the commonalities of gendered experiences are not enough to suppress the differences imposed by their diverse identity axes.

4.3.4.3 Curt

As I further explore in the following chapter, female dependence shows itself in different ways in the USA and Ifemelu observes this phenomenon. Even though many of the women have jobs that allow them to be financially independent, they create several other types of dependences. Kimberly illustrates a dependence that seems to be both financial and emotional, as it is clear she lives to please her family, especially her husband. Ifemelu herself, who is so judgmental in relation to the way men 'take care' of their lovers in Nigeria, builds a relationship with Curt that creates many opportunities she was very unlikely to have otherwise, considering her circumstances as an African immigrant in the USA. In fact, Braga (2019) analyzes Ifemelu's relationship with Curt as a truce after a sequence of tensions and problems – which are better explored in the following chapter – that presented themselves from the moment she arrived at the USA.

Curt is Kimberly's cousin who visits the family's house when Ifemelu is working there and with whom she develops a romantic relationship. According to Bragg (2017), it is precisely in her relationship with Curt that Ifemelu acquires "an awareness of the body politics of racial hierarchy that are encoded in the themes of looking, physical attraction, and attractiveness that structure their relationship" (BRAGG, 2017, p. 135). It is a relationship that brings her a lot of awareness about how race and class work in America and certainly becomes crucial in the ideas developed and put forth in her blog about race.

Having had an interest in other white men in America and acknowledged how they failed to notice her as a potential partner, she does not pay attention to Curt initially, but decides to give him a chance when he asks her to go on a date with him. The narrative explains how "she began to like him because he liked her" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 237). For the reader, however, it is a relationship that does not seem to make much sense for Ifemelu: Curt seems to be very different from the other men with whom she is involved in the narrative and not simply because of class or race, but mainly because of his constantly happy, shiny, and

also egocentric personality. He shows himself do be quite self-centered at the beginning, in his way of talking excessively and with pleasure about himself from their very first date. She observes how “there was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 257).

However, just as it had happened to Kimberly, Ifemelu seems to have seen a naivety and a feeling of hope that was quite a comfort after the moment of profound hopelessness she had recently experienced. It is as if somehow she could be someone else while with him, leaving behind the difficulty experiences she had had as an immigrant before the moment he entered her life. The narrative illustrates how “with Curt, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 241) and how she slipped into the role of Curt’s Girlfriend as if she was slipping into a favorite dress. The narrative tells us

> that was what Curt had given her, this gift of contentment, of ease. How quickly she had become used to their life, her passport filled with visa stamps, the solicitousness of flight attendants in first-class cabins, the feathery bed linen in the hotels they stayed in and the little things she hoarded: jars of preserves from the breakfast tray, little vials of conditioner, woven slippers, even face towels if they were especially soft. She had slipped out of her old skin (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 246-247).

Curt functions, thus, as a possibility of escaping her own life and the things she used to have to endure in it. In terms of Friedman’s (1998) positionality, with Curt’s arrival in Ifemelu’s life, her context and, consequently, her highlighting axes of identification change in order to accommodate the new reality of class and of the whitely-charged racial environment she is now a part of. As Ifemelu comes to experience Curt’s world and the facilities it brings to her, it is as if the axes related to her class and her immigration could fall dormant for a while.

With him, she has the chance to feel privileged once more in her life. In the episode of when she gets a job interview after she graduated and her migration documents are about to expire, Ifemelu realizes how he could solve her whole life with a simple phone call and she reflects on this fact as follows:

> it was good news, and yet a soberness wrapped itself around her. Wambui was working three jobs under the table to raise the five thousand dollars she would need to pay an African-American man for a green-card marriage, Mwombeki was desperately trying to find a company that would hire him on his temporary visa, and here she was, a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top, propelled by things outside of herself. She felt, in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the

> world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 250).

What was initially the attraction – that is, his privilege and the way he believed and could 'rearrange the world' at his will – begins to have a taint of resentment for those who could never do the same and have to, much like herself has had to, do what it takes in order to survive.

One day when a girl tells Ifemelu that her boyfriend is very charming, "the thought occurred to Ifemelu that she did not like charm. Not Curt's kind, with its need to dazzle, to perform. She wished Curt were quieter and more inward" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 268). Thus, with time and the development of their relationship, they start to see each other every day and several of his features start to annoy Ifemelu, such as his difficulty to be still and live in the present. In addition, "his ebullience became a temptation to Ifemelu, an unrelieved sunniness that made her want to strike at it, to crush it" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 242). It is a moment when her illusions about entering Curt's world become to fade: she starts to comprehend that, even though she has entered that world for being with him, she can never actually be a part of it because her dormant identity axes cannot cease to exist.

As a complicating factor for their relationship, cheating becomes part of the equation. One day, when asking for his laptop in order to check a website, Ifemelu accidentally discovers he is exchanging romantic e-mails with another woman. The exchange had been going on for quite some time after he met the woman in one of his trips. Ifemelu has a fight with him and he answers saying he will ask the woman not to contact him again and that the e-mail exchange will end, but she is annoyed at how "he sounded as though it was somehow the woman's responsibility, rather than his" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 261). Ifemelu forgives him, but, as I have shown in the previous chapter, when she is the one who cheats there is no reciprocity and the relationship ends.

Of course, it is not only the privileges of class and the personality traits that come with it that annoy Ifemelu. Much later when she is already in another relationship, she reflects on how race was a fundamental issue in her relationship with Curt. At a social gathering, when a Black woman says that race was never an issue in her relationship with a White man, Ifemelu cannot control herself

> and even though she should have left it alone, she did not. She could not. The words had, once again, overtaken her; they overpowered her throat, and tumbled out.
> "The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie. 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. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will say we're overreacting, or we're being too sensitive. And we don't want them to say, Look how far we've come, just forty years ago it would have been illegal for us to even be a couple blah blah blah, because you know what we're thinking when they say that? We're thinking why the fuck should it ever have been illegal anyway? But we don't say any of this stuff. We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It's true. I speak from experience" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 359-360).

As this passage makes clear, it was not a mere irritation with Curt's behavior that led to her impatience with him and the eventual cheating. The issue of race was underneath several layers of their relationship and because they did not talk about it in a way that was satisfying to her, it piled up inside her and affected the couple as a whole. The narrative clarifies that Ifemelu and Curt only discussed race in slippery ways that left her uncomfortable in a way she had never admitted to him.

Another aspect that bothered Ifemelu deeply was how Curt could be completely supportive in some racist situations she experienced, but how he also could play the silent part at some circumstances, unable to understand or to acknowledge that racism was actually at stake in certain configurations. Ifemelu reflects on how being with Curt has changed the way people reacted to her and she notices this as a result of what she has called 'American tribalisms'. At a party they attend together, Ifemelu observes how, when Curt introduced her as his girlfriend, people began to look at her with different levels of surprise as if they were wondering why Curt – a White, rich, athletic man – would choose a Black woman who was not even light-skinned. At this moment, she is bothered by people's looks and she is sure she was unable to notice them, until he draws a observation that makes her realize he was actually paying attention. He says "that one, the one with the bad spray tan? She can't even see her fucking boyfriend's been checking you out since we walked in here." So he had noticed, and understood, the "Why her?" looks." (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 362).

There were other moments, however, when he was not merely unable to notice things on his own but also refused to see what she was pointing out to him. She explains, for example, how when they entered restaurants together people asked him if he wanted a table for one and he insists that they do not mean it "like that", insinuating she was tired and/or overreacting. The narrator states that "there were, simply, times that he saw and times that he

was unable to see. She knew that she should tell him these thoughts, that not telling him cast a shadow over them both. Still, she chose silence. Until the day they argued about her magazine (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 364).

The argument about a magazine is an important one in the development of the narrative. It happens when he picks up a magazine called *Essence* in Ifemelu's apartment and claims that it is "racially skewed" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 364) because it only features Black women. At first, Ifemelu refuses to believe that he is serious, but after realizing he actually meant it, she decides to take him to a store in order to explain her argument. After separating several magazines and laying them in front of him, she urges him to look at their covers and see how all the women featured in them are white (there is one who is supposed to be Hispanic, but the only clue is a word in Spanish next to her photo). She then opens the magazines and urges him to count how many Black women he sees, which he does coming to a total of three. She, then responds

> so three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women's magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can't get clues for makeup from these magazines. Look, this article tells you to pinch your cheeks for color because all their readers are supposed to have cheeks you can pinch for color. 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. See what they mean by curly? My hair could never do that. This tells you about matching your eye color and eye shadow – blue, green, and hazel eyes. But my eyes are black so I can't know what shadow works for me. This says that this pink lipstick is universal, but they mean universal if you are white because I would look like a golliwog if I tried that shade of pink. Oh, look, here is some progress. An advertisement for foundation. There are seven different shades for white skin and one generic chocolate shade, but that is progress. Now, let's talk about what is racially skewed. Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* even exists? (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 365-366).

After Ifemelu goes to all that trouble to explain her argument to him, all he responds is "Okay, babe, okay, I didn't mean for it to be such a big deal" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 366).

Ifemelu is trying to discuss a serious issue, one that has featured in many of the theoretical texts here quoted as important for Black women and Curt refuses to listen and to engage in debate. In fact, in their text about Black female hair, Bankhead and Johnson (2017) make a point which is very similar to Ifemelu's. They state that hair

> offers the opportunity to examine the politics of women of African ancestry's body. One simply has to examine advertisements in popular media. They are typically void of Black women and if featured the Black

> women represented are usually those with Caucasian features (i.e. straight hair, less developed lips, and small straight noses) as opposed to those with what is commonly thought of as distinct African features (i.e., tightly coiled/kinky hair, full lips, broad noses, etc.). Misrepresented, distorted or missing images send direct and indirect messages about what it means to be beautiful, and have beautiful hair and a beautiful body, as well as who has the power to define these beauty standards. It becomes evident that women of African descent must resist powerful oppressive and unfavorable forces that would have them believe that their hair, skin, and physiques are naturally inferior (BANKHEAD; JOHNSON, 2017, p. 90).

What for Curt is not "a big deal" is also discussed by bell hooks (1992) as an important part of decolonizing several aspects of our realities, such as the linguistic and discursive ones. The author discusses the importance of the representation of Black people (especially in mass media) and how it has evolved very little in terms of decolonization and the creation of images that are more revealing of Black people's reality and experience. According to the author, the colonizing gaze – that is "the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize" (HOOKS, 1992, p. 7 – is characteristic of a patriarchal White supremacist society that still dominates such representations and helps maintain systems of domination at work. In fact, it is her understanding that the institutionalization of specific representations of race in mass media supports the oppression and exploitation of Black people.

For Black people, hooks (1992) envisions the results of such representation as a painful and paralyzing despair of not being able to represent themselves and, at times, learning to see themselves through this same dehumanizing and colonizing gaze. In several cases, she identifies the desire of Black people to be white and a self-hatred developed because of such images. In this context of White supremacy, the author explains that loving Blackness might be considered dangerous, but also a subversive and revolutionary intervention of reclaiming, at least, individual representations of Black life. In hook's (1992) opinion, it is important to analyze these images and, in order to change perspectives, face the challenge of subverting them by creating alternatives that can go beyond good or bad imagery and get closer to real images of real Black people. This is the answer to Ifemelu's rhetorical question to Curt of why magazines like *Essence* exist: to provide Black women with a possibility of representation and, consequently, with the possibility of self-love and of regaining one's subjectivity.

Still according to hooks (1992), Ifemelu and Curt's relationship was deemed to fail, to be kept only on the realm of fantasy because of his refusal to actually listen and understand her. In the author's opinion mutual recognition of racism is "the only standpoint that makes

possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy" (p. 28). hooks's (1992) argument looks even more poignant when we consider Ifemelu's reaction after they break up. The narrative tells us how,

> for weeks, Ifemelu stumbled around, trying to remember the person she was before Curt. Their life together had happened to her, she would not have been able to imagine it if she had tried, and so, surely, she could return to what was before. But before was a slate-toned blur and she no longer knew who she had been then, what she had enjoyed, disliked, wanted (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 370).

As we can see in this passage, Ifemelu had lost herself in a fleeting phantasy, had let herself be carried away by the feeling of being somehow protected from the world by Curt's privilege. As it happens with illusions, however, it could not last and with the end, she was bound to face reality and re-start her search for a subjectivity of her won.

Since this dissertation is not organized according to the narrative's chronological order and I have already established the immense role the racial axis plays in Ifemelu's experiences in the US, I now move on to the analysis of the moment of her arrival in the US and of her experiences in both this country and in Nigeria through the lens of a diasporic perspective.

5 IFEMELU AND THE DIASPORIC STATE

> *We don't know what women's vision is. What do women's eyes see? How do they carve, invent, decipher the world? I don't know. I know my own vision, the vision of one woman, but the world seen through the eyes of others? I only know what men's eyes see. (FORRESTER apud EAGLETON, 1996, p. 56)*

Since I am following a didactic division of events in Ifemelu's life based on the different identity axes these events bring to light, I have now reached the point of discussing the character's migration to the United States and the consequeces this migration encompasses. In the second chapter, I discussed the moments experienced in her life and in her country that might be considered cause for her migration. In the third, I outlined the discovery of race that helps us understand the moments she experiences in the US. In this chapter, I start to follow her journey to the United States and then back to Nigeria, a journey which proves to be also taken within Ifemelu – a path of search for self-knowledge and also an attempt to find a place in the world.

As I have thoroughly discussed in the first chapter, the concept of identity considered in this paper is a situational one, as proposed in the positional, locational, relational, and situational perspective of Susan Friedman (1998). In this perspective, a change in place and location, or in what could be considered the 'geographic axis' of identity, changes how an identity is conceived, not simply because the individual crosses certain territorial lines but because, as my analysis clarifies, a physical dislocation will often mean a disturbance and a change of perspective in the other axes of one's identity – a case in point being the previously outlined change in Ifemelu's relationship with race. In order to verify these changes in Ifemelu's identity axes, I first elaborate the concept of diaspora in order to demonstrate how it is to be understood in this dissertation; what the term means for the individuals who experience it; and especially how it connects to matters of gender and identity as a whole.

5.1 THE CONCEPT OF DIASPORA

Marianne David and Javier Muñoz-Basols (2011) discuss the concept of diaspora and its multidimensional nature. Going back to one of diaspora's first meanings – the Greek "dispersion of seed" used to describe the situation of settlers and colonizers – the authors outline how the concept of diaspora, in its dynamicity, has been defined and re-defined over time to accommodate diverse meanings. Sola Akinrinade and Olukoya Ogen (2011) also

discuss the rapid multiplication of the meanings of the term diaspora and its relation to the rapid increase in current international migrations. Some possible meanings of diaspora and their relations to our contemporary and globalized society as well as with new concepts of identity and gender are discussed in the following sections.

5.1.1 Diaspora and globalization

Susan Stanford Friedman (2009) cites migration as one of the most – if not the most – important characteristic of the human species. In her discussion, Friedman (2007) explores how movement has had a foundational role in human history from the very beginning of our existence. Thus, the author explains that the intercultural exchanges among different cultures is not a new phenomenon and that globalization – understood as "the dispersion of peoples, the formation of vast trade routes and interconnecting metropolis, and the conquest and inequities that accompanied the rise and fall of numerous empires worldwide" (FRIEDMAN, 2007, p. 261) – is also not a novelty.

Still according to Friedman (2007), globalization has taken a particular form at the end of the twentieth century, particularly due to new technology, to the information, and to the consequent changes in our patterns of interconnectedness. Such a phenomenon has reshaped the way we conceive national and individual identities and our relation to the local and the global. In this context, movement is also intensified and, "blurring the boundaries between home and elsewhere, migration increasingly involves multiple moves from place to place and continual travel back and forth instead of journeys from one location to another" (FRIEDMAN, 2007, p. 261).

Stuart Hall (2001) adds to the discussion on the phenomenon of migration by explaining that the outer movement of goods, styles and consumerism is being matched by a correspondent flux of people towards big centers. Motivated by poverty, drought, hunger, lack of opportunities, political conflicts, political regimes, these people are moving in the direction of bigger chances of survival, believing the message of global consumerism, buying, for example, different versions of "the American dream[23]".

[23]This expression is a kind of American motto used to defend a variety of liberty ideals for the United States' citizens. The idea comes back to the "Declaration of Independence" and is still used to defend a liberal policy and the belief that individuals can thrive with effort and hard work in a free market, as can be seen in: https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-the-american-dream-quotes-and-history-3306009. Toni Morrison (1993) also talks about the American Dream and defines it as a tradition of "universal

Cláudio Braga (2019) discusses more especifically the relationship between globalization and diaspora. Although the author explicitly argues that there is an absence of cause and consequence relation between the two phenomena, he strongly believes they are intertwined in the sense that one nourishes the other and vice-versa. Therefore, he outlines globalization, as well as the independence of ex-colonies, as one of the reasons for the increase in the migratory flux around the world.

In relation to the term diaspora, however, Braga (2019) clarifies that this term does not convey a mere idea of dispersion or movement, but that it has also been associated with the idea of exile, suffering, and the possibility of redemption through mobility. Some other typical elements of diasporas, listed firstly by Robin Cohen (1999 apud BRAGA, 2019), are: the trauma that originates the mobility; the union of a diasporic community based on a common – often idealized – homeland; the consciousness of an ethnic group, based on a common history and a shared fate; and a problematic relationship with the host land, suggesting a lack of belonging. For the author, the traumas responsible for generating a diaspora are in conjunction with contemporary changes in world configuration forming, thus, a broader scope of causes that ranges from countries at war and persecution to lack of jobs and study opportunities.

Nevertheless, Akinrade and Ogen (2011) advise us to be careful when claiming trauma and hardship as the main origins of diaspora in modern times. They explain that recent studies show that the people with higher incomes, education, and access to technology are the ones with more condition and aspirations to migrate from their countries. Taking Nigeria as an example, the authors point out that the majority of the country's migrants are indeed part of its elite.

In agreement, David and Muñoz-Basols (2011) explain that, in the case of modern diasporas, a greater diversity is a differentiating trait, considering the increasingly heterogeneous characteristics of the many populations spread around the globe. In the authors's view, these diasporas have created a demographic and ethnic shift in the world we had previously known. They believe

> the diaspora narrative continues relentless and unremitting, generating a multitude of sub-narratives, each one unstable and specific to place and moment, each a distinct and idiosyncratic language system of pain and

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yearnings", based on a unique opportunity to start a completely new life in a previously unknown land, which was once known as the New World.

> hardship with its own history and tradition, its own socioeconomic and political underpinnings (DAVID; MUÑOZ-BASOLS, 2011, p. XVI).

In this perspective, Edward Said (2003) conceives of the exiled as bound to be a discontinuous being, always displaced in his/her attempt to rebuild an identity based on fragments and discontinuities. As a silver lining, such a displacement, although painful for those who experience it, can create a counterpoint consciousness, that is, an originality in vision generated by the breaking of knowledge barriers that can only be achieved by the state of non-belonging and understanding the world as, first and foremost, a foreign territory.

5.1.2 The diasporic identity

Stuart Hall (1990) writes that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (p. 235). In contemporary times, however, this definition is hardly an exclusivity of those who migrate from their nation of origin to a different one. The direct and immediate confrontation of different global cultures is highlighted by Hall (2001) as a major cause for questioning the idea of historicity and continuity in an identity and evidence the impossibility of an integral and coherent sense of identification. In this sense, migration acts directly on the production of what the author calls new identities, based on one point of identification alongside a wide range of differences. This is what the author calls the pluralizing, more political and positional concept of identity.

When talking specifically about the identity of the migrant, Weeks (1990) acknowledges that much of the experiences that characterize it have become a cultural experience for virtually every human being in the modern world: conflicting needs, desires, and identities in the face of a constant feeling of dislocation. Such dislocated identities can be considered a cause of the contention of Susan Friedman (2007) that "the displacements produced by migration, diaspora, and borders create a poetics of their own" (p. 283), in which identity has become more deterritorialized, favoring what the author calls a "diasporic consciousness".

Also discussing the migrating individual, Hall (2001) talks about the concept of "translation", which describes the formation of identity of those who have permanently crossed physical boundaries. For him, those people have definitively lost the illusion of a return to the past but retain their bonds to their tradition, having to constantly balance the

cultures in which they live and the one from which they come from. Therefore, he defends that these people can never belong to one single place, they are "cultural hybrids" (HALL, 2001, p. 89) as they are the product of different and intertwined cultures and are always, in a sense, translated. For him, migration can only be a one-way trip, in the sense that there is no possible return home.

The migrant is also envisioned by Said (1995) as the individual who exists between the old and the new world, the empire and the newly formed states and, consequently, expresses the tensions present in the cultural map formed by imperialism. According to Salman Rushdie (1991) as well, the migrant's identity is "at once plural and partial" (p. 15) and those who move across the world are "translated men" in whom – as in every other translation – something is always lost in the process, but something could also be gained. One of the things gained, he argues, is a double perspective, a "stereoscopic vision" (RUSHDIE, 1991, p. 19), pertaining to those who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in the society in which they live. These individuals can be considered international writers, providing they do not fall into the trap of considering their community their whole world and open up for the possibilities of what is beyond.

5.1.3 Gender and diaspora

When the authors above discuss migration in its diverse forms and the identities generated by the poetics of movement of our contemporary time, both Said (1995) and Rushdie (1991) call migratory individuals "translated men". Where does their definition leave women, especially Black ones? Are we supposed to assume they are not part of the movements of our time and continue to be confined in domestic spaces, despite the changes in our society? Or are we supposed to comprehend the term as 'universal' and, thus, conceive of one diasporic experience that encompasses both men and women's reality when moving across the globe? This section offers some possible answers for these questions.

First and foremost, Susan Friedman (2009) explains that, when discussing diasporas, we must be careful not to homogenize and mute the differences within diasporic communities. The author urges us to consider that no diaspora or diasporic community is homogeneous. She highlights the importance of focusing on the "multi-axial" dimensions of a diaspora in order to understand the importance of identity axes like gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, etc. and how these factors often intersect, mediate and articulate with one another and with one's nationality and diasporic state. In that aspect, Friedman (2009) believes "women's diasporic

writing can illuminate what has often been suppressed in the discussions of the 'new migration'" (p. 8). For her, gender is "the flashpoint of complexity" (p. 23) in the diasporic experience and violence against the female body and spirit is a constant feature in women's experience of movement.

Another important aspect highlighted by Friedman (2009) is the way that displacement begins before leaving home – within their homeland they learn ways of living that they have to negotiate inside their own home as well as in a possible host land with its own ways of living. Women, she argues, often experience the displacement of a nation in terms of conflicting loyalties, dealing with "competing patriarchies and internal conflicts between loyalty to their cultural traditions and desire to change the ones that imprison" (FRIEDMAN, 2007, p. 277).

This movement between different physical places and the traversing of geographical boundaries illuminates one of the issues of female identity I have discussed in chapter one – that is, the establishment of a definition for the female subject. When basing a female common identity in patriarchal oppression, we should also consider the "contradictory, fragmentary nature of patriarchal ideology" (MOI, 1989. p. 64). When women move and experience this contradiction between the patriarchal rules of their own country and the ones established in their newly inhabited land, it becomes clear how patriarchal ideology does not function in the same way at all times and contexts: not only it has nuances that affect different women in different ways but it backfires on itself, it contradicts its own principles, allowing women to take advantage of such loopholes to question and subvert such principles – which also causes female subjectivities and their textualities to be produced in the most diverse (and unaccountable) forms. Those shifts also corroborate Friedman's (1998) perception that identity is both positional and relational and, therefore, "depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity, particularly as they relate to the structures of power" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 22).

Carol Boyce Davies (2003) also illuminates an important point related to women's migration. If, for men, a nation can be a place of belonging and identification, the previous discussions about postcolonialism show that the construction of national discourses has not been so inclusive when it comes to women. The author explains how we must conceive the nation as a male formulation that excluded women, both in its Western construction and in its postcolonial/racial ones. In this sense, Davies (2003) considers diaspora as an alternative to such essential exclusionary ideas. She explains that, in most of Black women's autobiographical accounts, home does not figure as a comforting place, but as a site of

alienation and displacement for these subjects. Family also appears as a site of oppression for Black female subjects, as a place of closing and enforcement of domesticity and silence from early childhood. Therefore, "home is often a place of exile for the woman, as are, sometimes, community and nation" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 16). This is in agreement with Friedman's (1998) argument that leaving home, for women, might be considered leaving a place of oppression and marginalization, as well as a site of resistance. This conflict with the notion of home makes it necessary to re-think home as multiple locations: sometimes home is nowhere because every place offers only estrangement and alienation; at others, it is more than one place at the same time, different locations. Consequently, diaspora appears also, as a way to dismantle the received geography and the limits established by the home place. Home, on its turn, becomes a transcultural place, "which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 36).

Maia Butler (2017) writes about how studies of female African subjects have thoroughly examined the question of home and diaspora. In order to analyze such questions, she proposes the concept of "floating homeland", which she defines as a space in which women writers can articulate a sense of self and a diasporic identity. In order to understand Butler's (2017) concept, we must acknowledge how she differentiates the ideas of nation and home, especially when it concerns women of the African diaspora which are marginalized in diverse ways both within the postcolonial patriarchal construction of nation and in their movement throughout transnational communities. Such experiences, the author argues, causes these women to broaden the concept of home and create new notions of it. Based on the ideas of Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, Butler (2017) defends that

> the fabrication of a diaspora identity is undertaken in light of experiences, living, and feeling. The here and there are the nation of origin and the host nation, but the points in between are as important to consider. It is in those liminal spaces that identity is reconstituted in relation to home, as migratory subjectivity is continually constructed from a multiplicity of positionalities (p. 6).

Therefore, for the author, African subjects are always negotiating belongings, their home is grounded in diaspora and their sense of identity, as well as of home, is always fluctuating.

In light of this theoretical discussion, I believe Ifemelu's identity construction rewrites previous discourses about fixed identities and demonstrates the possibilities of being a "translated woman". As my analysis shows, through the experience of migration, the

character acquires a new perception about her ancestry and her territory of origin; she understands how they do not necessarily define her and allows herself to change and construct a new identity in contact with others. This does not imply that her identity as Nigerian diminishes. In fact, she becomes even more perceptive of her own culture and self because she had the chance to see others (North American, African American, etc.) and change in her contact with them. This has been exemplified in the previous chapter and the analysis of Ifemelu's newly found relationship with her race and her hair – which are both part of her nationality and ethnicity but only acquired a new meaning for her within the diasporic space and through the contact with the American society.

In the following sections, I explore other features that changed in Ifemelu's identity throughout her journey of migration and investigate, as advised by Friedman (1998), her position within diaspora in relation to the other axes of her identity. I attempt to demonstrate how Adichie's characters "who move through narrative space and time occupy multiple and shifting positions in relation to each other and to different systems of power relations" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 28).

5.2 THE DIASPORIC SPACE IN *AMERICANAH*: A PLACE OF IDENTITY (DE/RE)CONSTRUCTION

As previously discussed in chapter two, Bimbola Oluwafunlola Idowu-Faith (2017) conceives the work of Adichie in *Americanah* as a 'fictionalization of theory', especially in relation to the theme of migration. I have already analyzed how her arguments have proved to be valid in the moment of Ifemelu's departure from Nigeria but will now consider her point in light of Ifemelu's arrival and permanence in the United States of America. In this section, I evaluate the character's experiences and identities in these particular moments in order to comprehend how diaspora appears in the narrative and how Ifemelu, as well as Aunty Uju and Ginika, are conceived as diasporic subjects throughout their movements in the plot.

5.2.1 The moment of arrival

Avtar Brah (2005) thinks of diasporas as related to the image of a journey but also as essentially rooted in the process of settling down and establishing one's roots 'elsewhere'. Thus, she believes not only the conditions of leaving, but also the conditions of arrival must be accounted for in the study of diasporas. For her, we should attempt to understand how

diasporic groups and subjects are "inserted within social relations of class, gender, racism or other axes of differentiation in the countries to which they migrate" (BRAH, 2005, p. 179).

In the particular case of Ifemelu, Patrycja Austin (2015) considers the moment of the character's arrival in the USA as a critical one. Particularly in the characters's first weeks in the US, the author explains how Ifemelu experiences disorientation in the face of an America that was very different from what she had expected and seen through her Nigerian perspective. Cláudio Braga (2019) also acknowledges that Ifemelu's experience is one of internal conflict and disappointment in the USA, especially in the beginning of her journey. These first moments also show how, along with Ifemelu's discovery of race, her postcolonial condition takes on a new form. In her first experiences, this is the identity axis that shows itself as more evident and more problematic.

The first shock experienced by the character that might illustrate such an experience is what she first remembers about her arrival in the US: the weather, or rather, her expectations about it. The narrator tells us about Ifemelu's memories of her arrival by explaining how

> it was summer in America, she knew this, but all her life she had thought of "overseas" as a cold place of wool coats and snow, and because America was "overseas," and her illusions so strong they could not be fended off by reason, she bought the thickest sweater she could find in Tejuosho market for her trip (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 127).

In her arrival in the country, however, Ifemelu is surprised by a heat wave that was easily comparable to hot weather in her own country. In her vision of the USA, we can perceive that the already discussed "American dream" ingrained in her mind is not simply related to ideals of freedom and of opportunities to start a new life, as defined by Morrison (1993). In an issue as simple as weather, there might be a strong connection to a sense of neoimperialism, as discussed in the second chapter, and the creation of an image of the empire in the mind of postcolonial subjects.

If we consider, for example, Loomba's (1998) definition of imperialism as formed by the political, ideological, economic, social, and cultural practices that ensure the dominance of a metropolis over a foreign people or land through the establishment of otherness and difference, we can see how Ifemelu's view of America is deeply entrenched in the imperial discourse. Of course, the image of oversees as a cold and snowy place is mostly constructed through her contact with films, books, and other fictional productions that show the USA. Firstly, we must consider that this image is constructed through imperial power: there is, as I have established in the second chapter, a profusion of American productions in Nigeria with

which she can only have contact because of the social and cultural dominance of the US in the world scenario. Secondly, if we consider the postcolonial arguments that imperial relations are intrinsically connected to individual and cultural identity, we can see how the USA/"overseas" is constructed as in direct opposition to the hot weather of the colonies, in accordance with the ideology of difference and opposition between center and periphery.

In her journey from the airport to Aunty Uju's house, Ifemelu is amazed at everything she sees, looking for the glow and the glory that she had seen in the American movies, but already failing to find it if not failing to project it yet. The narrative tells us that

> she stared at buildings and cars and signboards, all of them matte, disappointingly matte; in the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shine gloss. She was startled, most of all, by the teenage boy in a baseball cap standing near a brick wall, face down, body leaning forward, hands between his legs. She turned to look again. "See that boy!" she said. "I didn't know people do things like this in America" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 127).

The boy in question is actually urinating on the street and Aunty Uju makes fun of her surprise that people have the same physical needs in the USA than in Nigeria. Ifemelu, of course, is referring to the fact that the boy is doing it in a public space, which, at this particular moment, she does not see as coherent with her view of the country. Again, the dichotomy of metropolis *versus* colony appears: in Ifemelu's conception America is not simply the land of the free but mostly the land of the civilized, contrary to the savage colonized for whom it would be acceptable to perform physical necessities in public.

When seeing Aunty Uju's old car, the precarious dwelling in which she lives, and her neighborhood in Brooklyn, Ifemelu is at a loss to understand how these realities could be part of the glamorous America she had previously known in the fictional productions seen in her youth. In fact, in her first night in Aunty Uju's place, she is offered simply a mat to sleep in, next to a bed in which Uju and Dike would spend the night. Despite the fact she had slept on mats many times upon her visits to her grandmother's village, her disappointment with the arrangement is evident because "this was America at last, glorious America at last, and she had not expected to bed on the floor" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 130). Again, the dichotomy between center and margin becomes clear: it was acceptable for one to have to sleep in a mat in a shared room in a village in Nigeria, a land seen as one of poverty and confusion, but not in America, the land of richness and glory.

Even in light of such disappointment, Ifemelu refuses to believe her images of America were misled or misconstrued. Instead, she clings to the new illusions she finds in

American TV shows and especially in the commercials, expecting that the America showed on television was yet to be discovered in her future journey. This feeling is clearly expressed in the following part of the narrative:

> it was the commercials that captivated her. She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions in shampoos and cars and packaged foods, and in her mind they became the real America, the America she would only see when she moved to school in the autumn (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 139).

In Ifemelu's disappointments and illusions in the beginning of her journey, we can see a perfect example of the postcolonial phenomenon described by Leela Gandhi (1993). In the author's argument, the metropolis as presented to the colonized/postcolonial subject is one that is always in deferral. She speaks of Europe, but the logic could easily be applied to Ifemelu's experience described above. Gandhi (1998) explains how "the Europe they [the colonized/postcolonial individuals] know and value so intimately is always elsewhere. Its reality is indefinitely deferred, always withheld from them" (GANDHI, 1998, p. 12). Thus, the America cherished in Ifemelu's and in so much of her compatriots's imaginations never actually arrives, despite her determination to keep looking for it.

Later in the narrative, when she has already graduated and is ready to admit that the glamorous America of films and commercials is a creation or, at least, a very narrow part of the country as a whole, she decides to protect the image her parents still have of the country. When she gets a job only because she is appointed to an interview by her rich and influential American boyfriend, envisioning the chance of remaining in America after finishing graduation, she knows perfectly well she is the exception. As previously mentioned, she sees her friends struggling to find themselves jobs or marriages that would allow them to stay legally in the country and attempting at all costs to avoid the return. However, when she called home, she did not contradict her father when he affirmed "I have no doubt that you will excel. America creates opportunities for people to thrive. Nigeria can indeed learn a lot from them" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 253). She did not dispute his claims that America is a place to be looked up to as a source of inspiration for Nigerian civilization, despite her experience of being denied opportunities, especially professional ones, in several moments of the narrative. Apparently, the character decides to spare her parents of the same painful disappointment she had once experienced in relation to the US.

In addition to the forceful realization that America is not what she imagined it to be, Albert Memmi (2006 apud BRAGA, 2019) points to how, in the foreign country, migrant's

expectations also tend to be thwarted by the animosity of a strange culture and people, as well as the lack of opportunity for foreign people. The disappointment leads to a feeling of failing both in the homeland and in the host land, defined by the author as “double failure”. As explored in the following sections, Ifemelu faces this feeling of failure and disappointment in several ways in her time of permanence in the USA.

5.2.2 Failed or successful assimilation: the two possible paths presented to Ifemelu

As previously explained, this dissertation considers identity to be a relational phenomenon not only in the sense that it is fluid and changes in relation to certain circumstances but also in Rosi Braidotti’s (1994) sense that identity requires bonds with others and that it “is made of successive identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images that escape rational control (BRAIDOTTI, 1994, p. 166).

Consequently, in order to have a clearer understanding of the changes in Ifemelu’s identity in her first moments in the United States, I examine two important bonds she transfers from home to the diasporic space and which work as possible images of subjectivity in the diaspora. Aunty Uju and Ginika, who were examined in the second chapter in relation to the role they played in Ifemelu’s identity constitution throughout her early years in life, are now examined in relation to their experience in the diasporic space to evaluate how the change in their geographic axis affected their identities. Following Brah’s (2005) suggestions, I attempt to understand how these diasporic subjects are inserted in new social configurations that affect several of their axes of differentiation.

It is important to remember that both Ginika and Aunty Uju have been in the diasporic space years before the arrival of Ifemelu and have, therefore, settled down in America, even if each one does it in a different way. These different ways are exactly what I propose to analyze as part of the already explained narrative strategy of the multiple “paired women” (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97). In this particular pair, each of the women represents a possibility for Ifemelu to follow after arriving in the US.

5.2.2.1 Aunty Uju

The first path presented to Ifemelu in the diaspora is through the image of Aunty Uju. As already mentioned, Uju goes to pick Ifemelu up at the airport in the moment of her arrival and Ifemelu becomes surprised with the conditions in which her relative has been living: her car, her apartment, and her neighborhood are all very far away from the expectations Ifemelu had created. However, it was not only these conditions that startled her.

When Ifemelu first meets her aunt in the Unites States, she immediately notices that there is something wrong with her. She has a perception of Uju that is very different from the memories she had kept from her adolescence. In both appearance and in manners, her aunt does not seem to be the same person she used to know back in Nigeria. She notices how Aunty Uju has lost her vanity and is now a colder, impatient, and rushed person. Ifemelu observes immediately there is something different in her, "her roughly braided hair, her ears bereft of earrings, her quick casual hug, as if it had been weeks rather than years since they had last seen each other" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 128).

Later, Ifemelu started to notice how her aunt became an even newer person in the presence of White Americans. In an episode in which Dike picks up a product he was not supposed to at the supermarket, Ifemelu observes how Aunty Uju changes her way of speaking and immediately become someone else, even if temporarily. The character observed how her aunt called Dike's attention in front of the cashier, adopting a different accent that "she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. [...] And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. She was overeager with the cashier" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 133). In this description of Uju's trip to the supermarket it is possible to see how the mechanism of "shifting", discussed in the previous chapter and defined by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) as a strategy mainly used by African American women to adapt to American society, is already ingrained in Uju's way of being in America. In front of White people, she adopts a new persona: one that could be nice, avoid conflict, and show some level of gratitude for being in America.

At home, however, Uju is quite a different person. When Ifemelu shares her experiences in her new environment, in the face of a culture and a people she does not know, Aunty Uju is impatient and unhelpful. When Ifemelu tells a story about how she had fried hot dogs because she imagined they would be prepared like sausages, she expected the story to be funny, but her aunt does not show amusement and simply states that hot dogs are not

sausages. In light of the way her aunt treats her, Ifemelu begins to feel a discomfort in their relationship and acquires a sense that she is somehow failing her aunt's expectations. She explains how

> she felt singed by Aunty Uju's reproach. It was as if, between them, an old intimacy had quite suddenly lapsed. Aunty Uju's impatience, that new prickliness in her, made Ifemelu feel that there were things she should already know but, through some personal failing of hers, did not know (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 131).

As time passes, Ifemelu continues to feel discomfort around her aunt, but she also begins to notice her aunt's personal situation, which illustrates the economic difficulties of migrants, especially Black women. As explained by Loomba (1998) the formation of social classes in the way they work in the world nowadays is deeply connected to the formation of race and to the colonial process. She explains that race relations are not explicitly determined by economic factors, but that many economic disparities are sustained by ideologies of race. For the author, the formation of classes was molded by the formation of races and capitalism and it is dependent of and intensifies racial hierarchies. This is especially true if we think about the Black population of the world. She states that

> the race relations that are put into place during colonialism survive long after many of the economic structures underlying them have changed. The devaluation of African slaves still haunts their descendants in metropolitan societies, the inequities of colonial rule still structure wages and opportunities for migrants from once colonised countries or communities, the racial stereotypes that we identified earlier still circulate, and contemporary global imbalances are built upon those inequities that were consolidated during the colonial era. A complex amalgam of economic and racial factors operates in anchoring the present to the colonial past (LOOMBA, 1998, p. 129).

Considering the postcolonial theoretician's argument, it is easier to understand Uju's financial situation. Despite working two or three jobs at all times, she has a terrible economic condition, barely being able to afford a person to look after Dike. Other than that, she also finds very little time and energy to study and keeps failing her medical exams, which are the main chance of improvement in her finances.

There is a moment when Ifemelu observes her aunt and thinks about how she "would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. She would never have tolerated the ingrown hair that grew like raisins on her chin, or worn trousers that gathered bulkily between her legs. America had subdued her" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 135). This last sentence is a statement about

the consequences of migration in Aunty Uju's life. Ifemelu recognizes how this new land had succeed in conquering her aunt's personality and extinguishing almost completely what she knew and valued most about her beloved relative. Uju represents, then, for Ifemelu a path of failure and defeat: the more she tries to adapt to this new land and its rule in order to succeed, the more she seems to fail to do so and the more she deteriorates herself in the process.

Chimamanda Adichie (2014e) herself explains how the character of Aunty Uju was meant to show some hardships that Ifemelu could not endure in the same way. While Ifemelu struggles with being in a new country and negotiates the new demands with her true self all the time, Aunty Uju is seen by her creator as the one who has her previous Nigerian self reduced by the US. The author claims Aunty Uju is so determined to succeed in America that she begins to over-conform to the country's rules, becoming "the dutiful immigrant" (ADICHIE, 2014e, verbal information[24]). She also clarifies that this behavior of the character might actually be seen as a form of self-preservation. These conclusions become clear in the narrative when, after passing her medical exams and being given the chance to get a new job, Uju says:

> "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."
> "So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" Ifemelu asked.
> "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed."
> There it was again, the strange naïveté with which Aunty Uju had covered herself like a blanket. Sometimes, while having a conversation, it would occur to Ifemelu that Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place. Obinze said it was the exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 146).

As the passage above shows, at the first glimpse of an opportunity, Uju is ready to feel hopeful and grateful, a symptom of what Obinze so wisely defines as "immigrant insecurity".

Uju's insecurity presents itself in yet another sphere of her life, related to a different identity axis. As I have previously examined, Aunty Uju had once been subjected to gender relations in Nigeria. In her relationship with Dike's father, The General, she was put in a position of financial and emotional dependence, subjecting herself to The General's whims

[24] THE GUARDIAN'S BOOK PODCAST: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Americanah. [Voiceover by]: John Mullan; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The Guardian's book club, 1 Aug. 2014e. *Podcast*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2014/aug/01/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-americanah-podcast. Access on: 11 Jan. 2021.

and being assigned only to the place of the mistress, left with nothing when the man passes away. In order to escape the stigma of her previous position and the threats of the General's official family, she had to move to the USA with very little resources and found herself with a son to raise in an inhospitable foreign land. As my previous analysis has shown, Aunty Uju functions, in this particular situation, as a cautionary tale for Ifemelu, one that shows how letting yourself be absorbed by a relationship with a man and forgetting to live your own life in the process might have serious and undesirable consequences.

Even in this complicated relationship, however, Uju would still value herself and her family: she would make demands to the General and she was still able to speak her mind and impose herself in some ways. In the diasporic space, gender relations show themselves in quite different ways: in a new land there is not only more insecurity and more will to belong at all costs, but also a new imposed gender role or stereotype. As previously explained by Brah (2005), when individuals migrate, they are inserted in new social configurations of class, gender, race and other identity axes. In the special case of gender, women become, as outlined by Friedman (2007), divided between the old and the new conceptions of gender, confused between what to adhere to and what to reject within these two configurations. In the case of Uju, Bonvillain (2016) analyzes how her change of personality is related to an attempt to adhere to the "American societal ideal for women: someone who is demure and quick to admit fault" (BOINVILLAIN, 2016, p. 19-20). Since she is a Black immigrant woman, the need to be docile is even stronger because she needs to keep a distance from the stereotype of the 'Black angry woman' in order to keep her right to be in a country which is not hers, as the already analyzed scene in the supermarket demonstrates.

Aunty Uju's gender axis seems to become more evident when she starts her relationship with Bartholomew. Following social pressures to be in a relationship and specially to have another child and start a family in America, Uju starts talking to this man and invites him into her house for dinner. At this particular time, Ifemelu is still staying with Uju and her perception of the dinner leaves the reader with quite an impression of her aunt's suitor. The narrative states how

> it irked Ifemelu that Bartholomew was not interested in the son of the woman he was courting, and did not bother to pretend that he was. He was jarringly unsuited for, and unworthy of, Aunty Uju. A more intelligent man would have realized this and tempered himself, but not Bartholomew. He behaved grandiosely, like a special prize that Aunty Uju was fortunate to have, and Aunty Uju humored him (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 142).

As can be seen in the moment described above, Ifemelu has as instant perception that Bartholomew is not adequate for her aunt. What annoys her, especially, is how he behaves as if he was worthier than he actually is and how her aunt accepts and even indulges his behavior.

At a certain point, when he is about to prove her food, Bartholomew says he is going to evaluate it to see if it is good – as if he were evaluating if she would be a good wife –to which Uju simply laughs and Ifemelu observes how "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, p. 142). Once again, Ifemelu observes her aunt starting to walk a dangerous path: she realizes how she is already adjusting and diminishing herself in order to fulfill Bartholomew's expectations. Furthermore, she notices how the movement she is making is very similar to the one made in the supermarket: she is "shifting" (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2003) again, slipping into a different persona in order to fit in – in this particular case, into the social role of the perfect wife and mother.

When Bartholomew leaves the house and Aunty Uju asks for Ifemelu's opinion about him, the niece once again tries to warn her aunt of the dangers she is approaching. She starts by stating the obvious – his use of bleaching creams to make his skin look lighter. She asks Uju what kind of men bleaches his own skin and her aunt pretends not to have noticed by answering

> "He's not bad. He has a good job." She paused. "I'm not getting any younger. I want Dike to have a brother or a sister."
> "In Nigeria, a man like him would not even have the courage to talk to you."
> "We are not in Nigeria, Ifem."
> Before Aunty Uju went into the bedroom, tottering under her many anxieties, she said, "Please just pray that it will work."
> Ifemelu did not pray, but even if she did, she could not bear praying for Aunty Uju to be with Bartholomew. It saddened her that Aunty Uju had settled merely for what was familiar (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 144-145).

Uju's affirmation that they are not in Nigeria only confirms Obinze's hypothesis about immigrant insecurity: because she is in a country which is not her own, she feels the need to seize every available chance. It is not merely that she settles for the familiar, like Ifemelu said, but that she settles for that which is available and she thinks is all she can get in a country where, as a Black immigrant woman, she finds herself to have little value and opportunities.

Once again, as it happened in Nigeria when Ifemelu warned Uju about the situation with the General, she disregards Ifemelu's considerations only to suffer the consequences later. She establishes a relationship with Bartholomew that fails to give her everything she was looking for: more financial stability, a partner to help look for the family and the house, a father for Dike, and a new child. Years later in the narrative, we learn that whenever Ifemelu visited, Aunty Uju brought up all the dissatisfactions with her romantic relationship that she did not mention to her own partner. As we can see, Aunty Uju not only suffers the consequences of her choices but she suffers them in silence, allowing herself to vent her emotions only in Ifemelu's presence. This confirms more strongly the hypothesis of Bonvillain (2016) that she adopted the ideal of the American woman: she is silent, modest, and reserved about her family's problems and, for a long time, refuses to take any kind of action to solve the situation.

In one of Uju's outflows of complaints, we can see how the traditional gender roles bother her in the dynamics of her relationship. She complains more specifically about her domestic duties, the fact that he is supposed to be the one with the money in the family and his will to control not only her money but also her actions. These can be seen in the dialogue below:

> "I am tired," Aunty Uju said in a low voice.
> "What do you mean?" Ifemelu knew, though, that it would only be more complaints about Bartholomew.
> "Both of us work. Both of us come home at the same time and do you know what Bartholomew does? He just sits in the living room and turns on the TV and asks me what we are eating for dinner."
> Aunty Uju scowled and Ifemelu noticed how much weight she had put on, the beginning of a double chin, the new flare of her nose.
> "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" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 269-270).

We can see how, marrying a Nigerian man and being in America, she has to negotiate gender impositions from both her home country and her host one as explained by Friedman (2007), which only makes her position more exhausting. Despite her clear dissatisfaction with Nigerian impositions of gender into her marriage, she is reluctant to free herself from them and, consequently, from her unfulfilling and constraining relationship.

In other spheres of her life, Aunty Uju also accepts less, even when she believes she deserves better because, in her mind, there is no other option. Uju, much like Braga (2019) explained, did not create an illusion about Nigeria. For her, the memories and the reports of

lack of opportunity in the country are part of her present and return is, therefore, not a possibility. As becomes clear in the passage below, she remembers she had once failed there and considers it to be a broken country, in which she would have even less opportunities and get less than the very little she receives in America.

Only much later in the narrative, will Uju take matters of her life into her own hands: she will end the unfulfilling relationship with Bartholomew and move to another city in which her job is more valued and in which she and her son suffer less prejudice. In this way, she manages to construct a more fulfilling life for herself, but this is not to say her problems from being in a foreign land have an end. This is later discussed when I briefly approach Dike's suicide attempt.

5.2.2.2 Ginika

The second possible path presented to Ifemelu in the narrative is through the image of Ginika. According to Bonvillain (2016), Ginika is a character who is always willingly adhering to expected gender roles. As explicated by the author and as I have already discussed in chapter two, in her youth in Nigeria she is the sweet girl who does not question and conforms to gender norms. In America, Bonvillain (2016) argues, the character changes dramatically in relation to her previous self but only to conform to US gender expectations and its constraining beauty standards.

In a very similar way to which it happened to Uju, Ifemelu begins to notice the changes in her friend in the moment Ginika goes to pick her up at the bus station in Philadelphia. However, her perception of Ginika is completely different from the one she has had in relation to her aunt. One of the first differences she notices seems to be in relation to her financial situation. Her friend drives a nice car (which only later she discovers does not belong to her) and she is well dressed, or at least dressed in a way that is very acceptable within American dressing codes. It is Ginika's body, however, what most catches Ifemelu's attention at first. She arrives at the bus stop and observes how

> Ginika was much thinner, half her old size, and her head looked bigger, balanced on a long neck that brought to mind a vague, exotic animal. She extended her arms, as though urging a child into an embrace, laughing, calling out, "Ifemsco! Ifemsco!" and Ifemelu was taken back, for a moment, to secondary school (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 149).

Contrary to the experience she had when first meeting Uju, she notices how Ginika's vanity has increased, or rather how she had made a point to change both her body and her way of dressing in order to fulfill what Ifemelu would later comprehend were the American expectations for women's appearance. Again, in Ginika's experience we can see how a change in her geographical axis and the consequent patriarchal relations involved altered the ways in which patriarchy affects her life and the importance and form the gender axis assumes in her identity.

Later, in a conversation, Ginika explains her loss of weight and confirms that it was indeed a deliberate act to fit in a beauty standard of thinness. When asked about her body, Ginika tells Ifemelu:

> Do you know I started losing weight almost as soon as I came? I was even close to anorexia. The kids at my high school called me Pork. You know at home when somebody tells you that you lost weight, it means something bad. But here somebody tells you that you lost weight and you say thank you. It's just different here (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 151-152).

Here we can see how Bonvillain's (2016) ideas are confirmed: Ginika came even close to an eating disorder in order to fit in a standard that was imposed on her. This is a clear example of Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) argument that patriarchal socialization makes women mentally and physically ill. The authors claim that "it is debilitating to be *any* women in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 2000, p. 53). Thus, when women are faced with the stereotypes available to them in society, they run the risk of illness by both attempting to diverge or to conform. In the case of Ginika, first she is faced with the 'monster' title: because she does not conform to the ideal of beauty, she is called a "pork" by her colleagues. Then, when she decides to conform, she comes close to anorexia, which Gilbert and Gubar (2000) classify as one of the "diseases of maladjustment to the physical and social environment" (p. 53) that is especially pervasive in teenage girls.

Ginika represents, then, an example of the education destined to girls explained by Gilbert and Gubar (2000), one that is based on submissiveness, selflessness and docility. Since the nature of the human species is to prioritize one's pleasure and survival, the authors defend that this training is sickening and jeopardizes women's chances of living a healthy life. In the specific case of attempting to fit into a beauty standard, the authors explain how "learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about – perhaps even loathing of – her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real and metaphoric looking glasses that

surround her, she desires literally to ‘reduce’ her own body” (GILBERT; GUBAR, 2000, p. 54). This theory approximates to the idea defended by Adichie (2015) that our societies educate girls to shrink themselves and make themselves smaller.

Contrary to Aunty Uju, however, Ginika’s education in the art of sweetness and docility makes her give Ifemelu the warmest welcome when she meets her, even in the face of the problems she faces in the diasporic space. The narrator tells us how “the theatrics of their holding each other close, disengaging and then holding each other close again, made her [Ifemelu’s] eyes fill, to her mild surprise, with tears” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 149). Continuing her attempt to please everyone, Ginika uses a dated version of her Nigerian English in the attempt to prove she remained unchanged by America.

Nonetheless, “later, Ifemelu watched Ginika at her friend Stephanie’s apartment, a bottle of beer poised at her lips, her American-accented words sailing out of her mouth, and was struck by how like her American friends Ginika had become” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 152). Once again, Ginika presents a completely different fate in the diasporic space in comparison to Uju: whereas the first has failed in virtually every sphere of her life in diaspora, especially in the ability to assimilate, the latter has successfully changed into an American version of herself – she manages to become the so-called Americanah. This does not go unnoticed by Ifemelu, who observes how “there were codes Ginika knew, ways of being that she had mastered. Unlike Aunty Uju, Ginika had come to America with the flexibility and fluidness of youth, the cultural cues had seeped into her skin” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 152-153).

Nevertheless, such successful assimilation does not come without a price: as we have seen, Ginika came to the point of sickness in order to achieve a certain type of body, leaving a part of herself behind. This part is not only physical but also a metaphorical one since, despite her attempts, Ifemelu can no longer see the Nigerian in her friend. This is an example of what Patricia Hill Collins (2002) calls “assimilated” women – that is, those Black women who manage to get closer to the White standards and develop a denial of the Black community, negating their own racial identity – in the case of Ginika, her ethnic/Nigerian one – but also suffering with the absence of the sustenance such an identity may offer. In a passage from the novel, Ginika says: “I was telling them about back home and how all the boys were chasing me because I was a half-caste, and they said I was dissing myself. So now I say biracial, and I’m supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 151). As we can see, she is forced to adopt a new term to define herself and the new connotations that come with it: she has always been pleased to be a half-caste in Nigeria (because it meant to be closer to a White ideal of beauty) and now she has to be offended when someone calls her so.

We can observe, then, how, in assimilating new terms, new thoughts, and new ways of behavior, she is distancing herself from what she used to be. Though in a completely different way from Uju, she has also lost her self in her journey to and in her process of settling in in the diasporic space.

In the narrative, we can see how Ifemelu looks at Ginika with consciousness about all the processes I have described and analyzed so far and also how she looks at Ginika's path in diaspora as a possibility for herself. However, this possibility does not seem to be a desirable one either, as the following passage demonstrates: "watching Ginika preen in front of the mirror, Ifemelu wondered whether she, too, would come to share Ginika's taste for shapeless dresses, whether this was what America did to you" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 154).

Considering my analysis of Uju and Ginika, it is possible to confirm that the two characters work as one of the multiple pairs of women present in Adichie's narrative that respond directly to the "paired women" tradition in female African literature pointed by Florence Stratton (2002). They both function as a cautionary tale for the main character, showing both the consequence of assimilation (with Ginika) and of failure to assimilate (with Aunty Uju) into American culture. Faced with two undesirable possibilities of being in the diaspora, Ifemelu is at a loss to know what to do with herself in the diasporic space. This becomes evident in a scene where she attempts to use someone else's documents to get a job and, when asked about her name, she forgets she was supposed to be someone else and responds with her own name, to which Ginika responds:

> "You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They'll believe all kinds of shit about Africa."
> Ginika laughed, a sure throaty laugh. Ifemelu laughed, too, although she did not fully understand the joke. And she had the sudden sensation of fogginess, of a milky web through which she tried to claw. Her autumn of half blindness had begun, the autumn of puzzlements, of experiences she had knowing there were slippery layers of meaning that eluded her (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 160).

As the end of the quote shows, without any reference of which path to take and who to become in this new space, Ifemelu is lost and bound to face a very difficult period of adaptation in the diasporic space. This demonstrates Chris Weedon's (2004) point that "identity may be socially, culturally, and institutionally assigned" (p. 6). She defends that, these "external forces", which solicit an identification of the subject with certain identities, are often internalized by the individuals and become a part of their subjectivity. However, when

the individual experiences a non-identification or a non-belonging in relation to the identities that are offered as possibilities for him or her, this individual might experience a state of abjectness in which no agency, voice, or subjectivity is possible. This state in Ifemelu's life is what I explore in the following section.

5.2.3 Ifemelu's sense of homeland and belonging

This moment in the narrative is the most difficult one for Ifemelu. Other than losing both her references of being in diaspora (Uju and Ginika), she faces several problems. It is the moment of the narrative in which the several axes that constitute her identity and their internal contradictions become the clearest.

At first, the narrative shows us how she has difficulty adapting and fitting in in her house and in university. It is clear that she does not quite comprehend American society and feels an outsider to it. Because of such a feeling, she begins to realize how much she misses her own home, as the following passage shows: "the crisp air, fragrant and dry, reminded her of Nsukka during the harmattan season, and brought with it a sudden stab of homesickness, so sharp and so abrupt that it filled her eyes with tears" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 177). In spite of her attempt to cling to her idea of home as a possibility of belonging, she realizes, as time passes, that she has become more and more estranged from her home, as in the moment in which her mother tells her they remained two weeks without electricity and that situation seems oddly foreign to her, making her own home feel like a distant place.

At one point, Ifemelu almost physically assaults her roommate because the girl's dog had eaten her bacon and she realized how she

> had wanted to slap her dissolute roommate not because a slobbering dog had eaten her bacon but because she was at war with the world, and woke up each day feeling bruised, imagining a horde of faceless people who were all against her. It terrified her, to be unable to visualize tomorrow. When her parents called and left a voice message, she saved it, unsure if that would be the last time she would hear their voices. To be here, living abroad, not knowing when she could go home again, was to watch love become anxiety. If she called her mother's friend Aunty Bunmi and the phone rang to the end, with no answer, she panicked, worried that perhaps her father had died and Aunty Bunmi did not know how to tell her (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 187).

In the previous quote it is possible to see how Ifemelu's state is more than a mere homesickness, but an anxiety caused by her inability to belong in the US and, at the same time, the distance placed between her and what she knows to be her home. In such a stage of

her life, Austin (2015) claims that Ifemelu's identity is being threatened in diverse ways, but Obinze remains the anchor to her sense of self. It was him who would keep her connected to her previous self and home as well as help her adapt to her new environment. He advised her to read about America "and as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalisms – race, ideology, and region – became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 167).

At this same point in the narrative, however, Ifemelu's financial situation in the USA becomes really complicated. Considering Loomba's (1998) previously presented arguments about how colonialism and the creation of race as a category have influenced the economic inequalities present in the current world, we can deepen our understanding of how Ifemelu's postcolonial condition, her racial status in the USA, and her gender are intrinsically connected and in the routes of the economic experiences that combine to lead her to a desperate attempt to earn money and assure her survival in America. The main character meets herself in a foreign country, without a job (even after several attempts to get one), without a family that could provide her with money, and without any other resources she could turn to in order to get money to pay her tuition and her rent, as well as food and other basic necessities. Then, she finds a newspaper announcement of a tennis coach who needs help to relax. The first time she meets the coach, her economic situation is not in such a terrible state and the power balance is still on her favor, so she goes into the man's house, realizes that his intentions are related to sex and decides to leave. At this scene, she listens to the coach's proposal and thinks that "he had said this to many other women, she could tell, from the measured pace with which the words came out. He was not a kind man. She did not know exactly what he meant, but whatever it was, she regretted that she had come" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 177).

In her attempt to find another job, she also receives an indecent proposition, as described in the passage below:

> a large Mexican man said, with his eyes on her chest, "You're here for the attendant position? You can work for me in another way." Then, with a smile, the leer never leaving his eyes, he told her the job was taken. She began to think more about her mother's devil, to imagine how the devil might have a hand here (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 178).

These propositions are the first sign of how the violence against the female body and spirit pointed by Friedman (2009) manifests itself in the diasporic space. It is a point in which, because the balances of power are against her and several of her identity axes – poor and unemployed, migrant, Black, woman – seem to be defining her situation in complete

marginality, Ifemelu's gender becomes an even more prominent axis because her body and sexuality start to be seen by others as a source of money.

Such a possibility is a reflection of the prostitution and pornography industry. Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky (apud WALLACE, 2009) legally defines prostitution as "the performing of sex acts in exchange for money" (apud WALLACE, 2009, p. 455). According to him, prostitution is deeply ingrained in the pornographic industry and the images of women that it constantly reproduces in society. Such images are responsible for what the author calls the commodification of the female body and sexuality being at the core of our very culture. That is to say, the possibility of selling the female body and sexuality evidences the ideology of sexual violence and objectification of women as pervasive in our society.

Ifemelu, at first, refused to look at her body in that way, but when her situation gets to a desperate level, things begin to change. When her rent has been late for many days and she no longer has any possibility of getting the money, she listens to her roommates discussing about her and starts to become desperate. That is the moment in which she decides to call the tennis coach.

The narrative shows the reader that Ifemelu is determined to establish boundaries in her encounter with the coach, as she states that there were limits she would not cross and having sex was not a possibility. However, when she arrives at the coach's house, she realizes she should leave the minute she gets there. She claims that the power balance was turned on his favor from the moment she walked into the house and, when she says she cannot have sex, she states that her voice felt unsure of itself. She noticed how "there was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 189). It is a moment she also began to worry for her safety, attempting to move towards the door and wondering if he had a gun.

Here we have an example of Anne McClintock's (1995) affirmation that "women are driven by economic duress into battering their sexual services for profit" (p. 287). Even though Ifemelu made a choice to go there, this choice was made under very critical circumstances that threatened her permanence in the USA and her survival. She was compelled to go there by her situation, showing that the balances of power, patriarchy and the female identity are not monolithic and stable constructs, as previously pointed by Toril Moi (1989) and discussed in the first sections of this chapter. According to this author, if patriarchy was indeed such a construct there would be no space whatsoever in which woman

could speak and empower themselves. Here, we can see how these spaces inside the patriarchal ideology are unstable, causing woman to empower themselves in certain circumstances and yet be completely subjected in different ones. This becomes clearer when Ifemelu, a character who is usually assertive about her decisions related to her body and her sexuality, reflects on her experience saying:

> 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. Now, even after she had washed her hands, holding the crisp, slender, hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her (ADICHIE, 2013, p 189-190).

When discussing gender violence, Abuzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser (2019) explain how those people with institutional power over women abuse the fact that they *can* ask for sexual services. What allows this violence to happen is, for these authors, a hierarchical system of power based on the merging of gender, race, and class. The authors argue that the economical, professional, political, and racial vulnerability of women are the root of such types of violence: the women's dependence on the money, on the reference for a future job, or simply on nobody asking questions about their situation as migrants. Although Ifemelu is not institutionally submitted to the coach, her vulnerabilities are not so different from those described by the authors. As she is depending on the money to pay her rent and, therefore, to have a house and the opportunity to continue her studies at university, the coach asks and pays for a sexual favor because he *can*: he has a house, a regular income, a job, and his nation to welcome and accept him. Ifemelu *cannot*: as an immigrant with no job, no degree, no family present, no one to run to in a time of difficulty, she finds herself subject to his whims and desires in order to fight for her immediate survival and her professional future. This situation is a saddening example of how "female emancipation occurs at an intense and demanding cost of self-sacrifice" (CHIMA, 2015, p. 28). In order to emancipate herself later, Ifemelu has to go through self-sacrifice at this point of her life.

As the narrative goes on, it is possible to perceive how, as pointed by Gilbert and Gubar (2000) and as had happened to Ginika before, patriarchal socialization makes women sick, mentally and physically. After this episode, Ifemelu wallows in her silence, in her guilt and in a newly developed self-loathing of her own body. These feelings combined lead her to a depression that confines her in her bedroom and causes her to shut away all her loved ones.

Ifemelu feels guilty about the situation, illustrating Adichie's (2015) argument that people are raised to believe that women are inherently guilty and that is how women often think of themselves.

Despite the fact that I cannot name what happened to Ifemelu as rape (and we could not define it as sexual assault either because there was consent), I can argue, based on the symptoms the character presents later, that the experience with the coach was a sexual trauma. This can be argued because, as previously explained, despite the fact that she walks into the coach's office with her own legs, it is clear in her description of the moment that she does not desire to be there and that she is willing to do what she has to or in fact the only thing she can at that moment, even if unwillingly after all. The feelings related to a traumatic sexual encounter are clear when she leaves the coach's place:

> She walked to the train, feeling heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud, and, seated by the window, she began to cry. She felt like a small ball, adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily. Back in her apartment, she washed her hands with water so hot that it scalded her fingers, and a small soft welt flowered on her thumb. She took off all her clothes, and squashed them into a rumpled ball that she threw at a corner, staring at it for a while. She would never again wear those clothes, never even touch them. She sat naked on her bed and looked at her life, in this tiny room with the moldy carpet, the hundred-dollar bill on the table, her body rising with loathing. She should never have gone there. She should have walked away. She wanted to shower, to scrub herself, but she could not bear the thought of touching her own body, and so she put on her nightdress, gingerly, to touch as little of herself as possible. She imagined packing her things, somehow buying a ticket, and going back to Lagos. She curled on her bed and cried, wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 190).

After the coach episode, which is in Austin's (2015) evaluation Ifemelu's lowest point in the narrative, the character abandons her stronger ties with her homeland. As previously stated, Obinze functioned as a kind of link to Nigeria, her home, and her own self, but after this episode she is no longer able to keep him in her life. The narrative tells us how "Obinze called many times but she did not pick up her phone. She deleted his voice messages unheard and his e-mails unread, and she felt herself sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself up" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 192). After losing the last link to her past self, Obinze, Ifemelu abandons the boundaries of herself as she had known and at this point "a clear sense of identity keeps eluding her" (AUSTIN, 2015, p. 12).

If we consider Braidotti's (1994) previously discussed concept of 'elsewhereness', we can understand this moment in a clearer way. This is the point of the narrative in which the

character is placed in ‘elsewhereness’ in so many senses and with such strength that she loses her sense of place and reality. That is to say that so many of her previously minority identity axes come into play to move her away from any possibility of power and into the margins of society, that she feels disconnected not simply of her self, but of everything that surrounds her. It is a moment in which, transformed into an object and a commodity, she is deprived of any possibility of subjectivity or voice, feeling abject in her impossibility of finding identification and a self, as previously outlined by Weedon (2004).

Ifemelu’s loss of the possibility of voice is clearly stated when she says “she wished she had told Ginika about the tennis coach, taken the train to Ginika’s apartment on that day, but now it was too late, her self-loathing had hardener inside her. She would never be able to form the sentences to tell her story” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 195). She also did not want to talk to Obinze because she would have to tell him what had happened and she could not imagined doing so. In Ifemelu’s feelings, we can see the importance of silence when it comes to gender and oppression. Gilbert and Gubar (2000) point out that, for a long period of time, “women were deprived of the language and the consciousness to talk about their experience” (p. 22) and were, therefore, symbolically paralyzed. After this episode, the main character has trouble finding her voice and the language to express her experience. Once more, it is possible to notice the fragmented structures of patriarchy, identity and women’s writing, in the sense that some experiences are yet to be voiced, either because language fails women in the attempt to voice them or because there are too many social constricts that impose guilt, self-hatred, and silence on women who have experienced such things.

Rebecca Solnit (2017) also argues that all human beings are the sum of several species of silence and that the silences generated by gender roles are included in this math. She argues that we should mark a difference between silence and quietness, considering the latter as a voluntarily chosen lack of sound and the former as an imposed deprivation of voice and, consequently, humanity. The author defines silence, this forced absence of sounds and words, as that which one does not say because there are too many risks or impediments. In contrast, she understands voice as our capacity to express our opinions, to participate in society, to experience and be experienced in a world in which we are free and have rights. Solnit (2017) reasons that silence is the common root of all oppressions because it separates us, it deprives us from the real connections, the communion and solidarity that make us feel human and part of humanity as a whole. The author also contends that the relationship between gender and silence is specially complicated because violence against women is often built against our voices, which are refused or diminished as worthless. In this way, she explains how our

voices are annihilated by more powerful ones, or words become punishable and our stories are rendered invisible.

In addition, Solnit (2017) points to an important relation between silence and trauma. Examining the ideas of David Morris on trauma, she declares it as a destructive force, considering it undermines the narrative because it shatters the memory. She explains that, as the memory becomes flawed, the narrative is less credited because it can only be fractured and, if the narrative of one's story is fractured, so is one's identity. The author mentions ridicule, threats, discrediting, and isolation as other forms of silencing that keep the victim separated from the therapeutic processing of telling the story, considering shame as a permanent psychic post-trauma state.

Also discussing trauma, Kiloma (2010) establishes three main implicit ideas in a traumatic experience: first, comes the violent shock of the event that triggers the trauma and causes a search for alienation, anonymity; as a consequence, a separation or fragmentation, in which one is deprived of one's links to society, takes place; and at last, a sense of timelessness in relation to the event in question, in a way that it can be experienced in the present, even if it happened in the past. In the case of Ifemelu, these traits are clear in the narrative in the way her trauma turns into a paralyzing depression, as can be seen in the passage below:

> she woke up torpid each morning, slowed by sadness, frightened by the endless stretch of day that lay ahead. Everything had thickened. She was swallowed, lost in a viscous haze, shrouded in a soup of nothingness. Between her and what she should feel, there was a gap. She cared about nothing. She wanted to care, but she no longer knew how; it had slipped from her memory, the ability to care. Sometimes she woke up flailing and helpless, and she saw, in front of her and behind her and all around her, an utter hopelessness. She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, but she had no energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself. She lay in bed and read books and thought of nothing. Sometimes she forgot to eat and other times she waited until midnight, her roommates in their rooms, before heating up her food, and she left the dirty plates under her bed, until greenish mold fluffed up around the oily remnants of rice and beans. Often, in the middle of eating or reading, she would feel a crushing urge to cry and the tears would come, the sobs hurting her throat. She had turned off the ringer of her phone. She no longer went to class. Her days were stilled by silence and snow (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 192).

As the quote demonstrates, after the shock of her trauma, Ifemelu alienates herself form her surroundings and her loved ones, causing a fragmentation and an alienation of her own self, avoiding to relive her traumatic experience in constant silence.

Nonetheless, it is also Solnit's (2017) argument that when victims do not find a way to voice their trauma, their body ends up telling their story somehow in a sort of silent

testimony. This is what Ifemelu's state of depression does for her. When she first encounters Ginika after the coach episode, her body refuses to hide her emotions and Ginika realizes that something is wrong. At this point, Ginika tells Ifemelu she thinks she has depression, which she denies because she believes depression to be something that only happened to Americans, who turned everything into a disease. Ginika is an example of Solnit's (2017) argument that women tend to react differently when facing tension and danger because their instinct is to help and care, try to talk, listen and comprehend those who have come out of a tense moment. Even though the friend has no idea what happened to Ifemelu, she can see her state of tension and depression and she is eager to help her through it. Despite the fact that Ifemelu is not yet capable of putting her trauma into words, their conversation is the first moment of Ifemelu's processing, the moment that, as Solnit (2017) puts it, she starts to regain her voice and, in consequence, to re-humanize herself when she thanks Ginika and then collapses into tears. This is also an example of Nascimento and Souza's (2019) argument that Ifemelu's relationship with other women are an important function in the narrative, one that offers support and widens her possibilities.

It is also a moment that illustrates Jones and Shorter-Goodens's (2003) defense of how suppressing silencing leads to a loss of one's sense of self and a difficult in finding the center of one's identity, leading also to several types and levels of depression. We can see how, even in her depression, Ifemelu attempts to fulfill the myth of the unshakable Black woman, which makes her suffer silently, alone and without help. Ifemelu's depression also demonstrates Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) argument that depression is seen as incompatible with African American culture and – I add – with the Nigerian one. Thus, like many other Black women, Ifemelu has to deal with a sense of shame and guilt because she feels weak, instead of acknowledging she is sick. In fact, despite Ginika's help – which was unasked for – there is no record on the narrative that Ifemelu actually searched for other kinds of help, especially not professional ones.

Nonetheless, since, according to Solnit (2017), silence is not a homogeneous force, we watch Ifemelu re-learn her voice. For the author, silence is diffused, distributed differently between different categories and categories are also permeable, always provisory. Silence is constantly being broken, only to remerge again, be broken again, and so on. When previously silenced voices begin to be heard, power relations might be subverted. It is after the moment with Ginika that Ifemelu starts to regain some power over herself and her own life. It is also the moment in which her several 'elsewhere' positions, directly from the margins of the hegemonic discourse, "in the cracks of the power-knowledge apparati" (LAURETIS, 1987, p.

25) will start to be transformed from a place of alienation and trauma to both a form of resistance and of reinventing her self and her voice, as the previous analysis of the blog has shown and the following section illustrates.

5.2.4 The question of language

Language is a relevant issue to be taken into account when we think of identity and voice and also of *Americanah*'s narrative as whole. As a child, Ifemelu grew up speaking two different languages: English (the 'official' language she learned at school) and Igbo (the language of the ethnic group she and her family belong to in Nigeria). As can be observed in the analysis of her childhood and adolescence in chapter two, being divided between two languages is not faced as a problem by Ifemelu: she speaks both of them with ease.

In terms of narrative strategy, however, this use of two languages has a meaning connected to identity from the very beginning. In her paper, Patrycja Koziel (2015) analyzes Adichie's narrative strategies in terms of her writing techniques and practices. She focuses mainly on Adichie's use of Igbo language in *Americanah* and the functions such usage might perform. In the author's understanding, the way Adichie uses Igbo intertwined with both the English language and the context of enunciation – making sure the reader can grasp the general meaning of the expressions – might create different meanings. The author believes the use of the Igbo language by the characters is part of a process of creating identity for subjects in a migrancy context and also to make clear that two or more identities are being mediated through the narrative. In her conclusion, Koziel (2015) understands the use of Igbo as a method of manifesting identity and articulating a sense of belonging in relation to both language and culture, considering that "obtaining identity occurs during interaction, sending, receiving and interpreting messages, which are all crucial to the reconstruction of relational and oppositional identity" (p. 111).

In Adichie's narrative, this fundamental process of communication between the characters is mainly pervaded with Igbo terms and the cultural imaginary they carry. This attachment to an Igbo identity and the cultural imaginary might be more clearly perceived when Ifemelu and Obinze express a heartfelt admiration for Igbo expressions and popular sayings, as in the dialogue below:

> They traded proverbs. She could say only two more before she gave up, with him still raring to go.

> "How do you know all that?" she asked, impressed. "Many guys won't even speak Igbo, not to mention knowing proverbs."
> "I just listen when my uncles talk. I think my dad would have liked that" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 74).

It becomes clear in their dialogue how they are willing to cling to this representation of the ancestral Igbo culture even if their own generation is not so concerned with these issues. We can see how Obinze's attachment to proverbs is a connection to the figure of his father or, rather, to the person he thought his father wanted him to be.

This connection between language and identity is discussed by Catherine Belsey (apud EAGLETON, 1996). Basing her ideas on Benveniste's discussions about language and subjectivity, she defends that the subject is constructed only by means of language, which allows the subject to position him/herself in dialogue as an I, in opposition to a you, a non-I. Going further on linguistic theories, she uses post-Saussurean theory to explain that, only by positioning him/herself as a subject within discourse, can one produce meaning, including their own.

Including Psychoanalysis in her theoretical frame, Belsey (apud EAGLETON, 1996) states that only through identifying with an I, does the child learn to differentiate itself from others. It is this identification with I as a pronoun that she considers to be the basis of subjectivity. Parting from there, the individual learns to see him/herself in a series of subject-positions (such as boy or girl), in a way that identity becomes a "matrix of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent or even in contradiction with one another" (BELSEY, apud EAGLETON, 1996, p. 359), in agreement with what I have discussed throughout this dissertation.

Considering such affirmations, we can see how Ifemelu is a divided subject in language from the beginning of her life: identifying at one and the same time with the English and the Igbo pronouns that define a self. As stated by Koziel (2015), thus, the presence of both languages already signalizes Ifemelu and the other Nigerian individuals as not only divided ones, but also as individuals who negotiate between two possibilities of being and belonging.

In her moving to the US, however, the issue of language becomes an even more pressing one. Besides the two previously presented linguistic options, a third one presents itself in Ifemelu's arrival in the university. Ifemelu's realization of the problem of language comes from the reception she receives from Cristina Tomas, as in the dialogue that follows:

> "Good afternoon. Is this the right place for registration? Ifemelu asked Cristina Tomas, whose name she did not then know.
> "Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?"
> "Yes."
> "You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office."
> Ifemelu half smiled in sympathy, because Cristina Tomas had to have some sort of illness that made her speak so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering, as she gave directions to the international students office (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 163).

Ifemelu's first reaction, then, was to believe that the woman speaking to her had some kind of difficulty in speaking, but when their interaction continued, "she realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 163). Even though Ifemelu attempts to defend her identity, expressing that she speaks English, she is somehow robbed of her own past and her own identity by the attitude of this American woman towards her. This episode is an example of what Grada Kilomba (2010) calls territorial racism. The woman infers that she does not speak English well because she is not part of the White American nation. The way she looks at her and talks to her, infantilizing her and primitivizing her, as if she could not understand proper English because she came from an African country is a clear operation of everyday racism.

Ifemelu's description of feeling like a small child also reminds us of the previously discussed process of Othering in postcolonial discourse. As pointed by Sara Mills (1998), Eastern cultures have been negatively produced as Other in many different discourses. In the scene with Cristina Thomas, Ifemelu is produced in difference in relation to the American woman. The latter represents the civilized, well-articulated in language, hard-working colonizer whereas Ifemelu is reduced to a mere babbling child, attempting to speak the language of the colonizer, dehumanized and robbed of a language that was also her own and, consequently, of her own experiences and identity. This feeling becomes clearer in the following passage of the narrative: "She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 164)". After briefly attempting to defend her story and language unsuccessfully in her encounter with Cristina Tomas, Ifemelu decides, thus, to adopt an American accent. She spends some time practicing it to achieve perfection, believing this is the way to regain an identity, to be again treated as a full adult human being in the society in which she was now living.

Despite believing that achieving perfection in the American accent was what would make her a 'winner' in face of Tomas's attitudes, Ifemelu realizes in a different encounter that the situation had turned out quite the other way around. One day, when she is talking to a telemarketer on the phone, she receives a 'compliment' that makes her feel different about this situation. After they have talked for a while about international calls for Nigeria, the man on the phone asks if that is the place where her family is from (assuming she is from America) and she tells him she is actually Nigerian, to which the telemarketer reacts with: "Wow. Cool. You sound totally American" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 215). She thanked him, but later reflected on her own attitude, as the following passage describes:

> Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words "You sound American" into a garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. She had won, indeed, but her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. And so she finished eating her eggs and resolved to stop faking the American accent (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 215-216).

Still reflecting on why she stopped faking an American accent, Ifemelu evaluates that, even though it was perfectly convincing – because she had worked hard to perfect it –, "the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 213). As we can see in her reflections about using an American accent, Ifemelu realized that allowing herself to be affected by Cristina Tomas's view of herself was actually the loss: she had become a different person, speaking a language full of intonations and expressions that said nothing about the way she learned to see and express the world through discourse. When she asserts she would not be able to keep the perfect new accent in a situation of panic, she recognizes the accent and the new persona it brought along was only ever going to be a fake change: she was not able to fully become someone different from whom she had been her whole life.

Thus, we can perceive that it had not been a problem for Ifemelu to be divided between two languages in her childhood and adolescence because both languages spoke of her divided self, but it was an issue to have to turn her speech and her self into something else.

Here we can see how a process of "shifting" (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2003) had taken place and how, realizing the loss of herself involved in it, Ifemelu decides to shift back to her old accent and her old self.

Ifemelu's relationship with her accent is also an example of Anne McClintock's argument that "identity does not transcend power; it comes into being trough ceaseless contest and results in a dispersal and realignment of power rather that a vanishing of power" (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 319-320). Ifemelu negotiates her being and her voice according to her context and how power is exerted in each of them. Later in the narrative, when the power balances have shifted in Ifemelu's favor and she feels that another character attempts to rob herself of her past, her language, and her self, Ifemelu does not shrunk and defend her own language abilities as a way to defend her own subjectivity. When Aisha, the woman in the salon, asks her if she speaks Igbo, she immediately claims her own language in order to crush Aisha's suspects (and in this case, maybe her own) that America had changed her into someone else.

5.3 IFEMELU'S IDENTITY AND ANOTHER CHANGE IN TERRITORY

As explained by Elisa Araújo (2017) the notion of territory in *Americanah* subverts the idea of fixity. Territories are, in her reading of the novel, a key part of the identity (de)construction of the characters, as well as what determines where they speak from. She defends that in order for Ifemelu to find the voice she expresses in her blog, for example, the dislocation and the experience of the diaspora were necessary. Thus, the self and the voice the reader perceives in Ifemelu after spending some time in the USA is a direct consequence of her movements and of her coming to inhabit a new territory, with different physical and imaginary boundaries. Those are the boundaries of which she lost complete awareness only to recognize them later and discover new possibilities of being at once within and outside them. The previously explained issue of language is a case in point of her learning to be in American society without changing her own way of speaking and consequently her voice.

For Araújo (2017), the experience of the diaspora helps her to pluralize her own self and learn how to be many and to belong (or not) to the spaces in which she finds herself. She states that Ifemelu's physical dislocations are simultaneous dislocation of her self, which are marked by a sense of non-belonging, a de-territorialized subjectivity. This subjectivity is also a case in point of Butler's (2017) already mentioned argument that African subjects are

always negotiating belongings, their home is grounded in diaspora, and their sense of identity, as well as of home, is always fluctuating.

Unaware of this impossibility of a fixed and defined attachment to a specific territory or a community, Ifemelu remains constantly divided between a need to belong and the acceptance of her fleeting possibilities of identification. She continues to change, to grow, and to search for a different kind of subjectivity that would allow her to feel less marginalized, dislocated or de-territorialized. As stated by Butler (2017), in the case of African women in the diaspora, identity is reconstructed in relation to home but, as in any migratory subjectivity, it continues to be (re)constructed from diverse locations and positionalities. Ultimately, what the novel entails is Goyal's (2014) argument that "no 'single story' (as Adichie insists in her Ted Talk) can capture the heterogeneity of the diaspora" (GOYAL, 2014, p. xvi).

Ifemelu is, as we have seen so far and also according to Carine Marques (2017), a representative of the diverse positions occupied by migrants. I have discussed how, in the character's childhood and adolescence in Nigeria, the most evident identity constituents in her life are her gender, her postcoloniality and also her economic class. At the beginning of her journey to the USA, however, all her previously established identity axes suffer an alteration, showing how a change in the geographical axis is bound to cause a change in the point of reference in relation to which identity is constituted and, consequently, a change in how one sees and identifies one's self. For Marques (2017), the diasporic space, by presenting new forms of interaction, allows subjects to interrogate, question, and, consequently, transform their identities. As I discussed in this section, it is as a consequence of these transformations that Ifemelu decides to occupy a new territory and go back to Nigeria. Even though she is going back to Nigeria, I consider it to be a new territory because, as I explore in this chapter, neither Ifemelu nor Nigeria can be considered exactly the same from when Ifemelu last inhabited the country.

5.3.1 The reasons for leaving America

Considering the changes in Ifemelu's identity, I examine the character's return and her new assumed position as a returnee in Nigeria. First and foremost, we must comprehend how Ifemelu feels disconnected from her surroundings in the US. As I have explored in previous chapters, especially in the second one, Ifemelu experiences a feeling of non-belonging from a very early age, but her perception of non-belonging becomes even more acute in the diasporic space. According to Braga (2019), this feeling of non-belonging is a mark of Ifemelu as well

as of Adichie's characters: they are displaced and in displacement. Araújo (2017) is in agreement with Braga's (2019) argument that Ifemelu is in constant conflict with the idea of belonging throughout the narrative.

Even at the beginning of the narrative, when the character is presented to the reader, years after her migration, as a successful woman passing through the streets of Princeton, Braga (2019) observes that, even though she claims to feel peaceful at this moment, she recognizes in her reflections that she could only belong there by pretending to be someone else, as can be noticed in the following passage: "She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 3). In that sense, the author perceives a difficulty in being herself in the United States and the need to change her identity in order to be part of a group.

On that same journey, while Ifemelu goes to the beauty salon I have already analyzed in chapter three, the narrative tells us how

> it was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton – the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids – and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on the afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there was no place where she could braid her hair (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 3-4).

In this passage, it is possible to envisage how Ifemelu feels an outsider-within (COLLINS, 2002) her neighborhood in America. According to her description, there is virtually no one who looks like her – who has the same tone of skin or kind of hair – in that environment and, consequently, there is no demand for a salon that braids hair within Princeton. Despite recognizing that, Ifemelu cannot help but wonder about it, showing her feelings of inadequacy towards this place that denies her not simply a place to braid her hair, but also the kind of community that could create the demand for a braiding salon.

If Ifemelu feels disconnected from the place she inhabits, this feeling is also true in relation to most of the people in her life in America. After breaking up with Curt, she begins a romantic relationship with an African American man named Blaine. When discussing Ifemelu's romantic relationships, Bonvillain (2016) examines how they had an impact in her identity. Comparing her relationships with Curt and Blaine, the author explains how they both silenced a part of her identity, be it with their unwillingness to hear her voice or in their condescending attitudes towards her. As already demonstrated, in the case of Curt, the White boyfriend, her Black identity was to remain unadressed in order not to make him, his family,

and his friends uncomfortable and, when she did speak about it, he would dismiss her ideas – the previously discussed episode with the magazines being a case in point.

In the relationship Blaine, Bonvillain (2016) believes race ceases to be a problem, in the sense that she feels comprehended and listened to. However, the way Blaine criticizes Ifemelu's speech, her writings and readings, as if he knew better than her simply because he is a man (or American), evidences the silencing of the female part of Ifemelu. Thus, Bonvillain (2016) concludes that "regardless of the setting, her relationships, especially with her significant other, always require her to suppress some part of her identity" (p. 24). Much like it had happened before with Curt, Ifemelu seems to turn into someone else in order to inhabit Blaine's world, as the following quote shows:

> he ran every morning and flossed every night. It seemed so American to her, flossing, that mechanical sliding of a string between teeth, inelegant and functional. "You should floss every day," Blaine told her. And she began to floss, as she began to do other things that he did – going to the gym, eating more protein than carbohydrates – and she did them with a kind of grateful contentment, because they improved her. He was like a salutary tonic; with him, she could only inhabit a higher level of goodness (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 384).

In the process of doing so, she silences a part of herself – her gender – in order to make him comfortable. This always silencing a part of herself and becoming a new person in order to fit in a relationship are in alignment with what Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2002) have called 'shifting' and they do not come without a cost.

In the case of Ifemelu, she even comes to the point of losing (or at least having invaded) her previously created possibility of belonging in the diasporic space in order to please him. The narrative tells us that at the beginning, she was excited because of Blaine's interest in her blog and allowed him to read them before posting "She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said. Then she began to resent it. Her posts sounded too academic, too much like him" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 386). As the quote demonstrates, Blaine's edits, his voice, and his opinions invade her blog in a way that bothers Ifemelu and makes her feel like that space is no longer hers, robbing her of a created online community – towards which she actually managed to develop a feeling of belonging – without offering any other possibility in return.

The narrative tells us how Blaine's environment also became Ifemelu's. She goes to their friends's houses and gatherings, as well as to his sister's, Shan, famous 'salons'. She is in familiar terms with his sister and his friends, but even though most of them share the same

race and/or the same gender, there is always a feeling that she does not belong among them, except for the brief time when they unite around Barack Obama's presidency campaign. In a surprise party, for example, as Ifemelu says happy birthday to one of Blaine's friends, she feels "her tongue a little heavy in her mouth, her excitement a little forced. She had been with Blaine for more than a year, but she did not quite belong with his friends" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 399). The narrator also states that Blaine "expected her to feel what she did not know how to feel. There were things that existed for him that she could not penetrate. With his close friends, she often felt vaguely lost" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 388).

Considering the previous quotes, we can begin to comprehend how, eve though Bonvillain's (2016) argument about the gender issue and Blaine's condescending and silencing attitude towards Ifemelu is a valid one, something else seems to be the matter in their relationship and in Ifemelu's relationship with his friends. A hypothesis established by Bragg (2017) is in relation to race consciousness and the way Blaine and his friends's perspectives on Blackness differ from Ifemelu's and how he believes her to be naïve in the subject of race. The author also points to the constant "negotiation between her allegiances and alliances with African Americans" (BRAGG, 2017, p. 135).

Braga (2019) is another author who considers that, even though the relationship with Blaine is a change from the previously frequented White nucleus and she is well received, she does not find belonging among his friends and family. In their conversation throughout the narrative, we can see that their experiences and views of life are quite different, especially when it relates to matters of race. For the author, Ifemelu does not have a full understanding of race through the perspective of African Americans and all the historic questions that are embedded in their identities and their perception of themselves as Black, part African, part American individuals.

Braga's (2019) argument becomes clearer in the light of Angellar Manguvo's (2018) distinction regarding African diasporic people in the USA. According to Manguvo (2018), Old Diasporic people are the ones who were involuntarily exiled during the enslavement enterprise. New Diasporic people, on their turn, are the ones who voluntarily migrated to the US after the year of 1965 as a result of the Immigration and Nationality Act and, later in 1990, of the Visa Diversity Program which helped to increase immigration from African countries. In recent decades, the author analyzes that there is been a disconnection between these two groups, leading to the "development of radically different cultural identities" (p. 235). Studies quoted by the author, point to negative perceptions of the other group, as well as to negative experiences of disrespect and demeaning interactions between the two groups. The

author attributes the widening of such a disconnection between Old Diasporic people and New Diasporic people to mainstream racism.

One of the points of estrangement pointed by Manguvo (2018) is New Diasporic people's passive reaction to racism. Having had limited confrontations with racism in their homelands, New Diasporic individuals usually have to learn to address racism in a blunt form and ultimately choose a non-aggressive approach because they realize it is the one that best recommends them in the eyes of the White community and, thus, provide better access to White privileges. One example of this passivity given by her is the 'not-my-struggle' approach, in which New Diasporic people refrain from action by claiming that that particular struggle does not pertain to them. This approach is usually interpreted by Old Diasporic people as a distancing from racial issues and, consequently, a racial betrayal.

This division between the two groups becomes perceivable in Adichie's narrative in a specific moment which is used by Braga (2019) as an illustration of Ifemelu's alienation to African American issues: the fact that she does not go to the protest organized by Blaine to defend a university employee wrongly accused of dealing drugs and detained by the police without further evidence of any criminal involvement. Ifemelu's absence in the protest is cause for an immense crisis in their relationship because, from that moment on, they can no longer see each other with the same eyes. Blaine does not understand how she could simply not care about something so fundamental and she does not comprehend why he is deeply upset about something as simple as a protest. As an African, however, the injustice of the judicial system towards Black people and even the abuses of Black Americans performed by the police (both revealing the racism ingrained in America's social structures) might be issues Ifemelu is able to understand but is not able to deeply relate to, due to her own experience and lack of true awareness on the subject.

Even though I tend to agree with Ifemelu's alienation towards this issue, I believe it is possible to argue that her reasons for not going to the protest are more related to her gender axis. This becomes clear when she first hears the news about what happened to the men in question. "Blaine sent her a text: Did you hear about Mr. White at the library? Her first thought was that Mr. White had died; she did not feel any great sadness, and for this she felt guilty" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 423). It is not so much that she does not feel sympathy for what happened to Mr. White but that she does not feel sympathy for him at all. The reasons for this are later explained:

> She had met Mr. White a few times. “Does she have a sister?” Mr. White would ask Blaine, gesturing to her. Or he would say “You look tired, my man. Somebody keep you up late?” in a way Ifemelu thought inappropriate. Whenever they shook hands, Mr. White squeezed her fingers, a gesture thick with suggestion, and she would pull her hand free and avoid his eyes until they left. There was, in that handshake, a claiming, a leering, and for this she had always harbored a small dislike, but she had never told Blaine because she was also sorry about her dislike. Mr. White was, after all, an old black man beaten down by life and she wished she could overlook the liberties he took (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 423-424).

Thus, it is clear how the gender issue is also at stake here. Because she believes Mr. White’s behavior towards her to be inappropriate and objectifying, she does not manage to feel the same empathy Blaine feels towards the man. In addition, because she does not have the same level of connection with the previously explained racial issues in America, in this conflict between two of her identity axes, her gender axis becomes the most prominent one in her decision of not participating in the protest. Since she is not happy about the way the man treats her, protesting for him would be ignoring a more important part of her identity at this point. It is one of these moments Lorde (2007) describes in which women are encouraged to choose one aspect of themselves to be presented as their meaningful and whole self, excluding and denying all the other parts that form them as an individual. In the case of Ifemelu, who chooses to put gender before race in this particular case, she is – as often happens to Black women who prioritize gender issues over defending Black men – accused of being a race traitor.

Other than ignoring Ifemelu’s gender axis in his demand towards her participation in the protest, it is also possible to see that Blaine resents Ifemelu for her Africanness. His anger about her not going to the protest is mainly directed at the reasons why she chose not to go. The narrative tells us that if Ifemelu had forgotten to go because she was occupied reading or blogging, Blaine would be more forgiving. Since she chose to go to Boubacar’s colleague going-away lunch instead, her decision not to go becomes a larger problem.

Within the narrative, it is possible to see that her relationship with Boubacar – an African colleague from the university – deeply bothers Blaine. In fact, the narrator wonders if he resented this relationship and the way Ifemelu and Boubacar had easily drifted towards each other: sharing jokes, commentsm and a silent language that Blaine did not speak. “Perhaps Blaine resented this mutuality, something primally African from which he felt excluded” (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 421). Thus, it is possible to argue that her Africanness is the real problem behind Blaine’s indignation. As can be seen in the previous quote, it appears his anger is not exclusive of this moment: it just explodes in it.

When the couple is having an argument about the protest, he asks her

> "How is this lunch suddenly so important? You hardly even know this Boubacar's colleague!" he said, incredulous. "You know, it's not just about writing a blog, you have to live like you believe it. That blog is a game that you don't really take seriously, it's like choosing an interesting elective evening class to complete your credits." She recognized, in his tone, a subtle accusation, not merely about her laziness, her lack of zeal and conviction, but also about her Africanness; she was not sufficiently furious because she was African, not African American (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 427-428).

As can be seen in the quote, Blaine accuses her of not taking seriously what she writes about in her blog (when the title of the blog itself clarifies the perspective of her discussion about race) and, in his tone, there is a hint that he is actually angry at her not because of how she feels but because she cannot feel what he wants her to feel, given who she is and where she comes from.

These controversial feelings in relation to her Africanness are not exclusive of Blaine. His sister, Shan, also seems to share them and she does not hesitate to show them in passive aggressive commentaries. When Shan and Ifemelu are discussing romantic interests and Shan declares how Black men are usually not interested in her, Ifemelu reluctantly affirms her experience has been the opposite, to which Shan responds "'I guess it's your exotic credential, that whole Authentic African thing.' It stung her, the rub of Shan's dismissal, and then it became a prickly resentment directed at Blaine, because she wished he would not agree so heartily with his sister" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 397). It is clear, for Ifemelu, her dismissive tone and the way she talks about her Africanness.

At another point in the narrative, when discussing the production of fictional books about race in America, Shan deliberately provokes Ifemelu. She says that she can only write her blog

> "Because she's African. She's writing from the outside. She doesn't really feel all the stuff she's writing about. It's all quaint and curious to her. So she can write it and get all these accolades and get invited to give talks. If she were African American, she'd just be labeled angry and shunned."
> The room was, for a moment, swollen in silence.
> "I think that's fair enough," Ifemelu said, disliking Shan, and herself, too, for bending to Shan's spell. It was true that race was not embroidered in the fabric of her history; it had not been etched on her soul. Still, she wished Shan had said this to her when they were alone, instead of saying it now, so jubilantly, in front of friends, and leaving Ifemelu with an embittered knot, like bereavement, in her chest (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 418).

Thus, it is possible to notice how Shan makes a point in making Ifemelu uncomfortable whenever possible, even though Ifemelu is constantly trying to please her, just like Blaine and his friends. Ifemelu thought that in her "smile was the possibility of great cruelty. When, months later, Ifemelu had the fight [about the protest] with Blaine, she wondered if Shan had fueled his anger, an anger she never fully understood" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 418). As I have explained so far, I understand this anger, however, as the product of structural racism and its operations, resulting in what Manguvo (2018) calls the estrangement between Old Diasporic people and New Diasporic people – that is, the separation of Africans and African Americans not merely because of their different ethnicities but mostly because of the fissures mainstream racism creates between these different people.

Considering Ifemelu's difficult relationship with this new social nucleus, it is not hard to comprehend why she decides to leave for Nigeria. After the fight with Blaine, she manages to reunite with him around the strength of Barack Obama's campaign for presidency, but something has definitely been tainted in their relationship. As the days passed and she felt more and more disconnected from her surroundings and the people in it, she felt

> there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 7).

Because she can no longer belong to the people next to her and she has also been robbed – mostly by Blaine's interference – of the possibility of belonging represented by the blog, Ifemelu allows herself to finally feel homesick and think about the one person who has always represented a possibility of belonging for her. In her mind, "Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 7).

When we meet Ifemelu at the beginning of the narrative, going to the braiding salon, she is, in fact, going to fix her hair for her trip to Nigeria. It is in the previously analyzed beauty salon, however, that we begin to have a sense that Ifemelu is not so certain about her return. In Butler's (2017) view, it is in the salon that Ifemelu first experiences her distancing from her own nation of origin, caused by her recently acquired "Americanness". The distance she feels in relation to the women from the salon – which I have already analyzed in the third chapter – makes her realize how she is now a different person because of the time she has

spent in America. When Aisha asks her if she could really stay in Nigeria after living so many years in the US, she evokes Ifemelu's own worries about being able to adapt in her own country. The novel describes how

> Aisha reminded her of what Aunty Uju had said, when she finally accepted that Ifemelu was serious about moving back – Will you be able to cope? – and the suggestion, that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin. Her parents, too, seemed to think that she might not be able to "cope" with Nigeria (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 20).

It is in this moment of doubt, however, that Ifemelu receives the news of Dike's suicide attempt. For Braga (2019), Dike's suicide attempt can be considered the central structuring element of *Americanah*'s plot. Dike is Aunty Uju's son, a character with which Ifemelu has a profound relationship since his childhood and since her arrival in America. Thus, his attempt to kill himself has a profound effect on her. In addition, it is Braga's (2019) belief that Dike's conflicts are a reflex of Ifemelu's internal conflicts about her own identity and sense of belonging. In the novel, it is possible to observe how Ifemelu sees in Dike's depression a reflection of her own state.

Along several episodes in the narrative, Dike is marked as different from all those that surround him, especially at school. He is accused of doing things he did not do because of the color of his skin and there comes a point in which the teacher accuses Dike of being aggressive, wanting to put him in a special class. Considering he is virtually the only Black child in the school – the only other is very fair skinned –, Uju refuses the principal arguments that the school does not see him as different and understands the teacher's suggestion as an attempt to "mark her son".

Even though Uju acknowledges the school's refusal to see and accept her son for what he is, Ifemelu also sees in her aunt's position towards her son a refusal to face reality. He is not created in connection to his Nigerian roots: he does not learn Igbo, does not eat typical food, and 'sending him back to Nigeria' is used as a threat in case he does not behave well. After his attempted suicide, Ifemelu tells her aunt how she feels about it:

> "Do you remember when Dike was telling you something and he said 'we black folk' and you told him 'you are not black'?" she asked Aunty Uju […]
> "Yes, I remember."
> "You should not have done that."
> "You know what I meant. I didn't want him to start behaving like these people and thinking that everything that happens to him is because he's black."
> "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was."
> "What are you saying?" […]

> "You never reassured him."
> "Ifemelu, his suicide attempt was from depression," Aunty Uju said gently, quietly. "It is a clinical disease. Many teenagers suffer from it."
> "Do people just wake up and become depressed?"
> "Yes, they do."
> "Not in Dike's case" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 470).

In the previous citation we can see how, for Ifemelu, Dike's depression and the following attempted suicide are a direct consequence of the way he was raised in the US and his consequent impossibility of belonging: if he is not part of the White America or of the (American) 'black folk' and he is not brought up to see himself as Nigerian, Dike is at a loss to define his own self. Much life Ifemelu had been after the coach episode, Dike is alienated from his surroundings and from his own identity: he is not capable of finding a voice to talk about his depression and, much like Solnit (2017) has explained, it is his body who finds the language to ask for help. His attempted suicide is, thus, a crucial moment that impacts Ifemelu's decision to return to Nigeria, making her more certain that she needs to go there in order not to fall back into alienation.

5.3.2 Ifemelu as returnee

When discussing the idea of return, Krishna Sen (2011 apud BRAGA, 2019) coins the term "re(turn)" that differs itself from simply going back home in search of one's roots and origins. The "re(turn)" of the author means to come back to the homeland with a new and outsider perspective, able to be more critical because of what was absorbed from the host land. Blurring the lines between homeland and host land, Sen's (2011 apud BRAGA, 2019) concept entails the unique view of the migrant, who is able to analyze both lands from inside and outside that territory's perception. Return is, thus, in the case of diasporic individuals, never a simple act of coming home to a previously known land.

In the topic of returning home, Davies (2003) explains that even though one feels like a stranger in a new country, one is also bound to feel like a "stranger-outsider" when one goes home. Nevertheless, the latter feeling is accompanied by "a history and knowledge which extends beyond the limited identifications with which she [the subject] began her journey" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 76). In this perspective, home can only come into meaning after one experiences some level of displacement in relation to it. The author says that each movement claims for a redefinition of one's home and, consequently, of one's identity. It is this

movement of returning in Ifemelu's journey – and the consequent need to redefine her home and her self over and over in the process – that I intend to analyze in this section.

I have outlined in the previous section how Ifemelu decided to go to Nigeria to fight against the possibility of alienation in the US and to find some kind of belonging in her nation of origin. When it comes to identity in relation to nation, however, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1997) clarifies that defining where the line between an insider and an outsider is traced is not so simple. The author wonders whether it is language, skin color, geography, nationality, or political positions that which defines if a person can be considered a self or an Other in relation to a group. The author evaluates such a line is unclear and considers that, even if we consider the existence of a line,

> the moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate 'other' or 'same' who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at (MINH-HA, 1997, p. 418).

The description of the author about the insider who steps out of the limits of the national territory and cannot longer be considered simply an insider is a great definition for Ifemelu's situation. Before leaving Nigeria in her adolescence, she was considered an insider – even though her sense of belonging towards her surroundings seemed to be problematic. After returning from America, however, they cannot deny she is still Nigerian – and, therefore, like them – but she has also been irrevocably altered by America and cannot help but be different: she is at once an insider and an outsider with the new perspective of the returnee in search for a new home, much like the 'stranger-outsider' explained by Davies (2003).

These feelings in Ifemelu can be more closely analyzed when the novel tells the reader that, after arriving in Nigeria, "she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence?" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 475). Thus, observing her surroundings, she is at a loss to comprehend if they had changed or if she was the one who was now different, getting a closer comprehension of the 'new person' she had become in America. Ifemelu "was no longer sure what was new in Lagos and what was new in herself" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 478).

Right from the beginning, her friend Ranyinudo teased her by calling her an Americanah – an "incomplete one" because she does not have the accent – and stating that she is looking at things with American eyes. It is clear that her perception is aligned with the one defined in both Minh-ha (1997), Sen (2011 apud BRAGA, 2019), and Davies (2003): both an insider and an outsider at the same time, she cannot help but look at Nigeria with the perspective learned from her time in America. Even her standards of beauty seem to be altered, since in the drive from the airport "Ifemelu stared out of the window, half listening, thinking how unpretty Lagos was, roads infested with potholes, houses springing up unplanned like weeds. Of her jumble of feelings, she recognized only confusion" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 477). When she tells Ranyinudo that a house they had visited was ugly her friend responds:

> "Ugly kwa? What are you talking about? The house is beautiful!"
> "Not to me," Ifemelu said, and yet she had once found houses like that beautiful. But here she was now, disliking it with the haughty confidence of a person who recognized kitsch.
> "Her generator is as big as my flat and it is completely noiseless!" Ranyinudo said. "Did you notice the generator house on the side of the gate?"
> Ifemelu had not noticed. And it piqued her. This was what a true Lagosian should have noticed: the generator house, the generator size (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 484-485).

In the simple inability to notice the generator of the house, Ifemelu perceives her strangeness and her position as an outsider: she could no longer be considered a 'true Lagosian'.

At this point in the narrative, the position of the insider-outsider is not yet one that gives a privileged perception like the one defined by Sen (2011 apud BRAGA, 2019). It is only a source of confusion and desperation that makes Ifemelu even consider returning to America, as the following quote demonstrates: "a painful throbbing had started behind her eyes and a mosquito was buzzing nearby and she felt suddenly, guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag. It shielded her from choicelessness. She could always leave; she did not have to stay" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 481). In this moment of confusion, much like when she was lost in America, the narrative presents the reader with a new pair of women dialoguing with "the convention of the paired women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97) in the African female literature. As I analyze in the following sections, these two women – Ranyinudo and Doris – function as two possible paths and possibilities of identification for Ifemelu in her establishment in Nigeria.

5.3.2.1 Ranyinudo as a true Lagosian

As the previous quotes have shown, Ranyinudo is the friend that receives Ifemelu in Lagos and is the one that becomes a reference of how a true Nigerian should be or behave. She is one of Ifemelu's friends from her adolescence and she represents not only a link to Ifemelu's past, but also what Ifemelu could have become if she had stayed in Nigeria, as the following quotes suggests:

> Ranyinudo got up. There was a luxurious, womanly slowness to her gait, a lift, a roll, a toggle of her buttocks with each step. A Nigerian walk. A walk, too, that hinted at excess, as though it spoke of something in need of toning down. Ifemelu took the cold bottle of malt from Ranyinudo and wondered if this would have been her life if she had not left, if she would be like Ranyinudo, working for an advertising company, living in a one-bedroom flat whose rent her salary could not pay, attending a Pentecostal church where she was an usher, and dating a married chief executive who bought her business-class tickets to London (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 480).

As the quote also shows, even though Ifemelu admires what Ranyinudo has become and how even her walk can be considered Nigerian, Ranyinudo's lifestyle is not one she approves off or desires for herself.

This is related to what Adichie (2015) states about how the upbringing of Nigerian children is unfair, gender wise, because boys are brought up to be strong at any cost, which makes their egos more fragile. Women, on their turn, are brought up to feed and nurture these egos, raised to be the ones who compromise in a relationship and to see other women as their rivals in the search for the one thing they must achieve: marriage. Of course, this inequality could be seen in other types of society (including the American one), but the narrative suggests that the aspiration to marriage – especially as the only viable economic possibility for women – is stronger in Nigerian society. Priye – Ifemelu's friend who organizes weddings – illustrates the economic character of marriage for the women who aspire to it in Adichie's narrative. Talking about one of her friends, Priye explains how "she never understood the first rule of life in this Lagos. You do not marry the man you love. You marry the man who can best maintain you" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 492). Ranyinudo responds to this statement with 'Amen' and a series of anxious wonderings about when it will be her time to finally get married.

Priye's and other women's view of marriage as a way of supporting themselves can be explained if we consider Nigerian society as a whole. Anthony Chima (2015) outlines how the situation of contemporary Nigerian women is still very much determined by the

installment of limited options for young girls. They are mainly taught to aspire to marriage and motherhood as the only possibilities for the future, believing that it is not possible for them to be successful on their own. Thus, even if women do not look for marriage, they seem to look for men who can give them financial comfort, as can be seen in Ranyinudo's affair with Don and her expectations that he will give her a new car.

In such a scenario, Chima (2015) argues that young girls and women seek support from a male source as a solution and make marriage into a source of competition among women. This competition appears in the narrative in the conversations between Priye, Ranyinudo, and Ifemelu in the discussion of wedding ceremonies, comparing other women's events, budgets and measuring the success of a wedding by the number of governors that attended the ceremony. Ifemelu is critical of their views of marriage and dislikes the idea of a ceremony filled with authorities she does not even know.

Nevertheless, she cannot completely escape Nigerian social expectations when it comes to marriage – especially in regard to her status as a single woman. One of the aggravating factors of the competition for men's attention and the possibility of marriage pointed by Chima (2015) is the status of unmarried women in Nigerian society. According to him, those women are usually seen as lacking virtue or appeal and, sometimes, even as being cursed in regard to their marital life. Even though Ifemelu does not want a marriage like her friends, she does not want to be pitied by her friends, as the quote below describes:

> She did not have to lie to her old friends about Blaine, but she did, telling them she was in a serious relationship and he would join her in Lagos soon. 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. Ifemelu wanted to talk about the past, about the teachers they had mocked and the boys they had liked, but marriage was always the preferred topic—whose husband was a dog, who was on a desperate prowl, posting too many dressed-up pictures of herself on Facebook, whose man had disappointed her after four years and left her to marry a small girl he could control. […] And so she used Blaine as armor. 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. There was, also, a strained nostalgia in those reunions, some in Ranyinudo's flat, some in hers, some in restaurants, because she struggled to find, in these adult women, some remnants from her past that were often no longer there (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 490).

It is in her acquaintance with Ranyinudo and her friends, thus, that Ifemelu realizes that the people form her past no longer exist. Even though she had been altered by America, her

friends too had been altered by adulthood in Nigeria and she was not necessarily fond of what they had become. It is what makes her realize that, even if she could become a true Lagosian like them, she would not want to because – for worse or for better – becoming an adult in America taught her to have aspirations other than marriage in life.

5.3.2.2 Doris and the Nigerpolitan Club

When describing returnees, Fanon (2008) describes them as newcomers: a person who travels to the center, comes back home, and "no longer understands the dialect, […] but above all he adopts a critical attitude toward his compatriots" (p. 13). The author emphasizes that this refusal to speak the local language and to adopt the language of the center is a mark of a separation or dislocation in relation to the group into which one was born and is now rejoining. This figure can be seen clearly in the people who are described in Adichie's narrative as Americanah and also in the people who are part of the Nigerpolitan Club. The term Americanah, as previously explained, makes fun of those who, upon returning, make sure that they mark their American accent and mannerisms in a strong and artificial way just to let people know that they have come from the United States and are, therefore, different from the others. The people from the group, by their turn, are very judgmental of Nigerian's habits and ways of living, from what they eat to the way they talk and behave towards one another.

Doris – one of Ifemelu's co-workers – can be considered both an Americanah and an exemplary member of the Nigerpolitan Club. She is the editor of Zoe, the magazine for which Ifemelu starts to work when she arrives in Nigeria and is described as

> thin and hollow-eyed, a vegetarian who announced that she was a vegetarian as soon as she possibly could, spoke with a teenage American accent that made her sentences sound like questions, except for when she was speaking to her mother on the phone; then her English took on a flat, stolid Nigerianness. Her long sisterlocks were sun-bleached a coppery tone, and she dressed unusually – white socks and brogues, men's shirts tucked into pedal pushers – which she considered original, and which everyone in the office forgave her for because she had come back from abroad (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 495-496).

Although Ifemelu's first impression of Doris is not great, they start to get closer to each other because Doris, being a returnee form America, assumes they have a lot in common and are bound to be friends. The novel explains how "Doris sounded as if she and Ifemelu somehow shared the same plot, the same view of the world. Ifemelu felt a small resentment at this, the

arrogance of Doris's certainty that she, too, would of course feel the same way as Doris" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 496-497).

It is clear that Ifemelu dislikes Doris from the beginning, which might happen because she sees in her co-worker the Americanah she does not want to become. However, Ifemelu is in a state of confusion in her first months in Nigeria, searching for possibilities of belonging and attempting to create a new home, much like Davies (2003) has defended as common for returnees. For this reason, she decides to accept Doris's invitation to go to the Nigerpolitan Club, which Doris describes as "a bunch of people who have recently moved back, some from England, but mostly from the U.S.? Really low-key, just like sharing experiences and networking? I bet you'll know some of the people. You should totally come?" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 499). When frequenting the club, Ifemelu first feels a sense of belonging towards those people: they share opinions, eating habits, lifestyles, and she seems relieved to have found a place in which she can express certain ideas and parts of herself she no longer feels comfortable sharing with her Nigerian friends.

Nonetheless, when after a meeting one of the members invites her to a restaurant and says the place has the type of things they can eat, "an unease crept up on Ifemelu. She was comfortable here, and she wished she were not. […] This was what she hoped she had not become but feared that she had: a 'they have the kinds of things we can eat' kind of person" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 503). Thus, in her contact with the people of the group, Ifemelu is constantly divided between her feelings of comfort within the group and the person she wants to be.

When a woman comments about hair salons in Africa and how they do not value natural hair, Ifemelu agrees but immediately catches "the righteousness in her voice, in all their voices. They were the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 502). As the self-righteousness of the club begins to bother her even more, Ifemelu starts to feel the need to differentiate herself: maybe if she could be an outsider from this crowd, she could become an insider within her own community of friends and family. She believed that if she distanced her perception from theirs, she would become less close to the person she did not want to be.

Since Ifemelu decides to set herself apart from the people of the club, she also starts to distance herself from Doris, the person who invited her to the club and who embodies all the ideas and feelings of its members. Her behavior seems to irritate Ifemelu more and more and their relationship becomes tenser, until, after an argument, she decides to leave the magazine. When Ifemelu discovers that the profiles they make in Zoe are actually paid for and that Doris

has known and accepted it for a long time, Ifemelu questions her about it and Doris's excuse is that many things work like that in Nigeria. It is the moment in which their conflict explodes and Ifemelu decides to quit the magazine, as the citation above demonstrates:

> Ifemelu got up to gather her things. "I never know where you stand or if you stand on anything at all."
> "And you are such a judgmental bitch?" Doris screamed, her eyes bulging. Ifemelu, alarmed by the suddenness of the change, thought that perhaps Doris was, underneath her retro affectations, one of those women who could transform when provoked, and tear off their clothes and fight in the street.
> "You sit there and judge everyone," Doris was saying. "Who do you think you are? Why do you think this magazine should be about you? It isn't yours. Aunty Onenu has told you what she wants her magazine to be and it's either you do it or you shouldn't be working here?"
> "You need to get yourself a moisturizer and stop scaring people with that nasty red lipstick," Ifemelu said. "And you need to get a life, and stop thinking that sucking up to Aunty Onenu and helping her publish a god-awful magazine will open doors for you, because it won't."
> She left the office feeling common, shamed, by what had just happened. Perhaps this was a sign, to quit now and start her blog (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 516-517).

Thus, the fight with Doris gives her the impulse to actually start the blog she has been thinking about for a while.

It is possible to perceive, then, in Ifemelu's relationship with Doris, how the latter works as a possible path for Ifemelu as a returnee. In her relationship with this co-worker and with the other members of the club, Ifemelu is attempting to find or create a new home for herself within this strange and familiar Nigeria. Having failed to find such things in her first possible path – Ranyinudo and the possibility of becoming a true Lagosian –, Ifemelu decides to give a chance to the second path, presented to her in the figure of Doris, only to discover this might be how she will find belonging, but it is not how she can become the woman she wants to be. Much like she has done in the diasporic space of America, it is by rejecting the two paths presented to her in these "paired women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97) – who work as cautionary tales, showing the undesirable results of each path – that she will actually begin to found her own home and regain two of her previously explored possibilities of belonging: writing and Obinze.

5.3.3 Founding new homes, finding new selves

As already stated, Susan Friedman (1998) considers that the action of leaving home is that which often creates the idea of "home" and "the perception of its identity as distinct from

elsewhere" (p. 151). Discussing the routes/roots duality that many diaspora writers bring to light, she explains how "routes produce roots and routes return to roots" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 178), in a movement in which roots only begin to make sense when routes become a reality, and those same routes that took one away in the first place are the ones that can take people back to their roots and can even create new belongings. Thus, as her routs take Ifemelu back to Nigeria, she has to found new roots for herself.

As explained by Butler (2017), Ifemelu has to re-conceptualize her belonging in Nigeria and this is only performed by means of the foundation of a new home, which the author considers to be her new blog – *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. Since I have already discussed writing and blogging as a possibility of belonging for Ifemelu in the first chapter, I will simply illustrate with a quote from the novel how Ifemelu's second blog features in Ifemelu's descriptions of her feelings of belonging: "she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 586). It is clear how being in Lagos and writing her blog gives her a sense of home and also a more prominent sense of identity – she feels fully into her being, which contrasts heavily with her feelings about herself in America.

In addition to being a created home for Ifemelu, the blog also works as a tool to reconceive her other home: Lagos. As explained by Eva Hoffman (1989), leaving home is always arid for a reason: our emotions and affections towards the place that we conceive as home are real and its loss is neither painless nor easy. In order to overcome the sense of loss of the home, the author suggests simply returning is not enough. She argues that we must relearn our love of home from the position of knowledge, instead of fantasy. Hoffman (1989) asserts that

> to be sure, in our human condition, it takes long, strenuous work to find the wished-for terrains of safety or significance or love. And it may often be easier to live in exile with a fantasy of paradise than to suffer the inevitable ambiguities and compromises of cultivating actual, earthly places. And yet, without some move of creating homing structures for ourselves, we risk a condition of exile that we do not even recognize as banishment (HOFFMAN, 1989, p. 58).

As she explains it, it is a slow process of acknowledging the pain of leaving and creating new meanings for ourselves, a repositioning and repossession created in our own effort to understand and gradually arrive in this new home. In her ideas, through investigation and familiarization, one must bring one's first legacy into dialogue with one's more recent experiences, in order to build new meanings and (re)signify old ones.

The Small Redemptions of Lagos is the tool used by Ifemelu to achieve such a difficult task. In light of her experience in America and the different perspective she has gained in the diasporic space, she begins to write about Lagos and her surroundings. In her writings, there is a critical realistic view of the city in which she lives and, as she writes about it and comprehends the city for what it is – and not for what she wishes it were or remembered it to be – her affection for Lagos begins to re-emerge along with the possibility of envisioning it as a home for herself. The following citation of a post from the blog is a case in point of how this happens:

> Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Lagos has always been undisputably itself, but you would not know this at the meeting of the Nigerpolitan Club, a group of young returnees who gather every week to moan about the many ways that Lagos is not like New York as though Lagos had ever been close to being like New York (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 519).

As the quote shows, Ifemelu brings a view of Lagos for what it is: even though she knows New York – and precisely because of that – she can clearly comprehend the identities of both cities in its qualities and its defects, examining the difference between the two places not in a mere comparative perspective, but considering what each city is meant to be and has to offer.

Another factor that impacts Ifemelu's foundation of a new home and a new Nigerian self is the reunion with her former anchor to her previous home and self: Obinze. For the first few months in Nigeria, she is reluctant to contact her ex-boyfriend, even though she had contacted him by e-mail before returning. When she actually decides to call him, they immediately meet and, within a few dates, revive the romance of their adolescence, despite the fact that Obinze is now married and with a daughter. Being in contact with Obinze and their love again is something that causes Ifemelu to feel an immediate sense of belonging.

This sense is better explained in Jennifer Leetsch's (2017) analysis of *Americanah* based on love and its "potential to rattle boundaries and cross borders" (p. 2). In the author's argument, romantic love has the ability to create movement and, consequently, to disturb the categories of thought, place, body, and identity. Therefore, she believes love does not only have the ability to transform but also to resist the cultural orders and hierarchies as we know them. Despite the fact that Ifemelu and Obinze's love story seems to follow the traditional path at the beginning, Leetsch (2017) claims that the story evolves to undo the opposition between roots and routes. This happens when "continents are travelled, cities rediscovered, and oceans and borders crossed" (LEETSCH, 2017, p. 7) only so that Ifemelu and Obinze can

find home again in each other. In fact, the author argues that, at the end of the book, when they get reunited for the last time and Ifemelu invites Obinze to cross the threshold of her house, Adichie gives an idea of movement for their relationship, making the ending of the novel "not static or terminal at all" (LEETSCH, 2017, p. 7). Thus, it is not that Ifemelu returns to a previous sense of self and belonging, but rather that she finds a new form of belonging for her new self within this relationship filled with an idea of movement and change, much like she has discovered her Black female migrant identity (DAVIES, 2003) to be.

This is a demonstration of Austin's (2015) declaration that *Americanah* presents the reader to a new form of belonging in which one's rootedness to home culture are stressed, but global routes are also welcome and well seen. In the author's view, this is a way of transcending a simple dichotomy that presents only the two following options: an exacerbated nationalism that excludes external influences, on the one hand, and a cosmopolitism that discards the importance of roots and locality, on the other. For her, the novel recovers the concept of home in the contemporary world, but also gives the concept a new sense. Home is not Nigeria as a country or a nation, but it is rather located on the particular places in which her memories of her story and her self were previously enacted, it is a form of belonging and a sense of self.

In her reunion with Obinze, another factor impacts her new sense of belonging. For the first time ever, she manages to voice the traumatic episode with the tennis coach – the one which first alienated her from possibilities of belonging. In one of their first dates, Obinze wants to know why she drifted away from him and cut him from her life all those years ago and she tells him the truth.

> She told him small details about the man's office that were still fresh in her mind, the stacks of sports magazines, the smell of damp, but when she got to the part where he took her to his room, she said, simply, "I took off my clothes and did what he asked me to do. I couldn't believe that I got wet. I hated him. I hated myself. I really hated myself. I felt like I had, I don't know, betrayed myself." She paused. "And you" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 542).

This is a part of the narrative which also helps Ifemelu come fully into being because, as stated by Solnit (2017), if the narrative of one's story is fractured, so is one's identity. By putting her trauma into words and finally managing to express her feelings about, Ifemelu goes through what Solnit (2017) calls the therapeutic processing of telling the story.

After she finished telling the story, Obinze "took her hand in his, both clasped on the table, and between them silence grew, an ancient silence that they both knew. She was inside this silence and she was safe" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 543). As previously explored, Solnit (2017) defends there is a difference between silence and quietness. Before being able to voice her trauma, Ifemelu was under the spectrum of silence, as an imposed deprivation of voice and a part of her humanity. As Ifemelu regains her voice, her story, and her subjectivity, she is able now to inhabit a shared quietness with Obinze: a voluntarily chosen and comfortable lack of sound that somehow feels like safety and home.

Since Obinze is now a married man, however, their relationship is complicated because, even though Ifemelu has not become an Americanah, her perspective is different from most of the Nigerian women she knows and she cannot simply accept being the girlfriend of a married man (like Ranyinudo and her Aunty Uju have done). In light of such a fact, Kosi becomes a literary strategy within the narrative that allows us to see and better comprehend Ifemelu's new self in Nigeria. Even though Ifemelu never actually meets Kosi, in the narrative she works as the ultimate "convention of the paired woman" (2002): much like Ginika, in Ifemelu's adolescence, in their adult life, Kosi works as Ifemelu's complementary pair: she represents a woman who became the absolute ideal society had imposed on her and renounced her voice and her dignity in order to do so. In Obinze's view, Ifemelu and Kosi are in constant contrast with each other and this enlightens the reader's perception about the woman Ifemelu has become.

5.3.3.1 Kosi

When discussing the character of Kosi, Adichie (2014c) explains how she thinks Kosi is considered beautiful, but the author does not consider her to be interesting, because for her interesting women are those who own themselves and do not live their lives based on what society expects of them. Adichie (2014b) clarifies that, even though she is not particularly fond of the character, she understands her position in society and her constant "interest in performing gender" (verbal information[25]) by saying and doing what she is supposed to.

The reader mostly knows Kosi in the narrative through Obinze's perception of her and his frequent comparisons between her and Ifemelu. In his comments, however, it is possible

[25] CHIMAMANDA Ngozi Adichie "Americanah" – International author's stage. Produced by: Lars Winding. Interview with Synne Rifbjerg. The Royal Library, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2014b. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8r-dP9NqX8. Access on: 14 Jan. 2021.

to perceive his wife's attempts to be the previously explored "Angel in the House". One of the first noticeable features of the character is her need to be liked and agreeable. In fact, "Obinze had always been struck by how important it was to her to be a wholesomely agreeable person, to have no sharp angles sticking out" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 34). In discussions, he observes how she usually took two sides at the same time just "to please everyone; she always chose peace over truth, was always eager to conform" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 36).

Along the narrative, we can see Obinze does not have real conversations with his wife. Their relationship seems to be built in public appearances and he does not share his professional life with her. The novel explains how he told her things in the expectation that she would be interested and ask questions, but this never actually happened. At some point in the narrative, Obinze even tells Ifemelu ""It's just refreshing to have an intelligent person to talk to." She looked away, wondering if this was a reference to his wife, and disliking him for it" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 539). Kosi's desperation in keeping Obinze is also shown in a clear light in the narrative when they have their first child. At this moment, Obinze feels disappointed at how little his wife knows him as she apologizingly says that they will have a boy next time – even though he does not care at all about the sex of their baby. Even within their marriage, thus, Kosi only agrees: she is the silent wife who will do whatever it takes to please and, therefore, keep her husband.

Despite Kosi's clear efforts, it is possible to see how she and Obinze want very different things. From his adolescence, when he chose Ifemelu over Ginika, Obinze knew he was not interested in "sweet girls" and he only ends up in this marriage because of a moment of confusion and vulnerability in his life as a new rich man. Their values are completely different from one another as the following citation shows:

> it surprised him, that she could use the word "virtue" without the slightest irony, as was done in the badly written articles in the women's section of the weekend newspapers. The minister's wife is a homely woman of virtue. Still, he had wanted her, chased her with a lavish single-mindedness. He had never seen a woman with such a perfect incline to her cheekbones that made her entire face seem so alive, so architectural, lifting when she smiled. He was also newly rich and newly disoriented: one week he was broke and squatting in his cousin's flat and the next he had millions of naira in his bank account. Kosi became a touchstone of realness. If he could be with her, so extraordinarily beautiful and yet so ordinary, predictable and domestic and dedicated, then perhaps his life would start to seem believably his (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 565-566).

In addition to attempting to be perfect all the time and attend to every desire she believes Obinze has, she goes to church services that are specific for keeping one's husband

and she keeps every possible "threat" away from him. There is a moment in which Obinze "asked why her best friend from university, Elohor, hardly visited them, and Kosi said, "She's still single," as though that was a self-evident reason" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 43). Her jealousy is even exhibited with their domestic help. When she finds condoms in one of her employee's bags, she makes a point to make a scandal, accusing the woman of coming to her house to be a prostitute and actually firing her. Even when the employee explained that her last employer forced himself on her and she brought the condoms to protect herself, Kosi does not care and does not find it in herself to feel empathy for the girl, which deeply upsets Obinze. After the discussion, he wanted to ask her how she could not feel sorry for the woman,

> But the tentative fear in her eyes silenced him. Her insecurity, so great and so ordinary, silenced him. She was worried about a housegirl whom it would never even occur to him to seduce. Lagos could do this to a woman married to a young and wealthy man; he knew how easy it was to slip into paranoia about housegirls, about secretaries, about Lagos Girls, those sophisticated monsters of glamour who swallowed husbands whole, slithering them down their jeweled throats. Still, he wished Kosi feared less, conformed less (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 41-42).

As the citation show, much like Adichie herself, Obinze comprehends Kosi's position within Nigerian society, but, even though he feels empathy, he does not manage to feel love for her and, when Ifemelu appears, there is nothing keeping him from leaving, except a sense of obligation towards her and their daughter.

As a matter of fact, when talking about the specific scene in which Obinze tells Kosi he is leaving her, Adichie (2014c) says how sad it is that the only reaction for a woman in her position is to beg him to stay in a humiliating way. When Obinze told her he was in love with someone else "she raised her hand, her open palm facing him, to make him stop talking. Say no more, her hand said. Say no more. And it irked him that she did not want to know more. […] Then, slowly, she sank to her knees. It was an easy descent for her, sinking to her knees, (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 571). Instead of wanting to know the truth or being angry, her reaction is to go down on her knees and beg for him to keep their family together. As a matter of fact, as she talks about his obligations towards her and their daughter, Kosi reveals that she already knew Obinze was having an affair with Ifemelu, which only makes him feel less affection towards her and her ability to deny reality in order to keep their image of a good family and hers of a good wife and mother.

The contrast between Ifemelu and Kosi is immense. Whereas Ifemelu is willing to expel Obinze from her house and her life when his wife's presence becomes too much

between them, Kosi is willing to simply ignore the existence of Ifemelu in order to maintain the relationship at all costs – including her pride and dignity. If Kosi is willing to give up everything to keep Obinze by her side, Ifemelu makes sure to maintain her life, her house, her blog, her friends, and other possibilities of romance open, unwilling to let her values aside and be simply the mistress of a married man.

Another area in which the contrast between the two women is clear is their sexuality. For Kosi, sex is yet another way of keeping her husband by her side. Sexuality, for her, is what Lauretis (1987) calls responsive – existing only in response to male/Obinze's desire. This becomes clear in the following passage of the novel: "that night, Kosi sidled close to him, in offering. 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" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 568).

In contrast, as I have previously shown in the analysis of Ifemelu's sexuality, hers is not a responsive one, especially at this point in the narrative. Having had some partners and explored her sexuality, Ifemelu is much surer of herself than in her first relationship with Obinze, in which she mostly let her first time happen to her. As my investigation has shown, she learned to demand pleasure and satisfaction, "but Kosi did not. Kosi always met his touch with complaisance, and sometimes he [Obinze] 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, p. 569). In her speech, Ifemelu also continues to be open about her desire, her sexuality, and her past experiences, like when she tells Obinze "I touch myself thinking of you" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 551) and "I always saw the ceiling with other men" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 551), attesting her own sexuality and desire as independent of him.

According to "the convention of the paired women" (STRATTON, 2002, p. 97) Ifemelu works as the positive model (active resistance), whereas Kosi represents the negative model (passive submittance). As it is common in the African female literary tradition and as it has happened before with Ginika, the positive model is rewarded: Ifemelu is the one who gets Obinze's love and who gets to have a relationship with him while Kosi loses the one thing she fought so hard to maintain – her husband and her family.

Other than functioning as a strategy to show how resistance can be rewarded, the contrast between Ifemelu and Kosi makes it easier for the reader to notice both the changes and the similarities in Ifemelu's newly found self and the way in which she regained her voice and her ability to speak her mind without feeling censured, be it by her own family; by a White nucleus that could not deal with race like Curt's family; or by an African American

man who could not handle her Africanness as well as her powerful femaleness. Therefore, even though the axes of postcoloniality, race and diaspora have not and will never fully stop existing, they become less prominent in the new home she founds for herself. In that scenario, when she learns to inhabit and embrace her 'elsewhereness' positions, it becomes easier – considering her previous positionalities within so many axes of difference – to come fully into being a woman, accepting and embracing all the fragmentations the concept entails.

6 (IN) CONCLUSION

As I hope my analysis throughout this dissertation has shown, comprehending Ifemelu's identity has not been an easy task. As previously stated, in my analysis of the main character of *Americanah* – as well as of the characters that have a strong impact in her identity formation and construction –, I intended to demonstrate how Adichie explored the plurality of female subjectivities and, in the process, displayed how the multiple systems of oppression that cross these women's lives have a direct impact in their possibilities of subjectification in the narrative. It was my goal to analyze Ifemelu's journey – and the women who became part of it – in order to comprehend how their multiple positions in relation to these same oppressive systems are negotiated and how, at specific points in the narrative, these women might be either subjugated by power, which usually ends up in women attempting to perform or to resist imposed stereotypes, or resist these pressures and attempt to define their role in society and their own self in accordance with what they want to be.

Even though I believe there is no such thing as a full comprehension of an individual or a character's identity – especially one as complex and multiple as Ifemelu –, I hope this dissertation might have shed a light on a character which is often analyzed in academic papers, but is rarely seen throughout her whole multiplicity because researchers choose only one aspect of her to analyze. In focusing on the fluidity of Ifemelu's identity and how she moves through space as well as within her several identity axes, I expect to have enlightened the process of her identity formation and construction within the narrative – how she migrates from complete alienation to subjectivity, only to keep moving.

As I demonstrated, Ifemelu is a clear representative of Davies's (2003) Black female migrant subjectivity. This defense is based on the discussions throughout this dissertation about postcolonialism, race, and diaspora as part of Ifemelu's identity. By examining these diverse axes of identity and identification, it is possible to see how fluidity and movement are a constant in Ifemelu's life – even when she is standing still in a physical space, her identity is still flowing, going from one axis to another and inhabiting the multiple intersections between them in order to comprehend the elsewhereness (BRAIDOTTI, 1994) of her self. Ifemelu, as Black women in general, moves because power is also moving – its relations and the way oppression takes form in the lives of individuals are constantly shifting within social and historical contexts, causing identity axes to also shift, intertwine, and create new possibilities of subjugation but also of resistance. Within these complex and unfixed systems, as explained

by Collins (2002), one same individual might occupy the position of the oppressed or the oppressor, depending on specific circumstances.

In Ifemelu's journey it is possible to see how she is completely subjugated in specific moments of the narrative – such as the coach episode – and yet able to perform the oppressor's role at other points – her interaction with Aisha and the women in the salon being a case in point. In addition to being oppressed and oppressor, Ifemelu also manages to be the questioning and subversive part of the equation – as her blogs about racism and about the city of Lagos illustrate. As I have explored in my analysis, these different roles and the possibilities that come with them – to either repeat and accept the hegemonic discourse of the oppressing systems or to find the possibility to question these discourses and re-write them – are a clear consequence of Ifemelu's positionality at certain points in time and space and also within the different power relations her location as a subject entails. As Ifemelu shifts through several of these positions throughout her life, she demonstrates how her identity functions in Friedman's (2007) terms – an in-motion occurrence, a continual process of formation in relation to specific/multiple times and spaces.

Her identity is also constructed within the narrative in terms of Braidotti's (1994) nomadism – Adichie presents us Ifemelu in the present and, through her memories and her continuing journey home, offers us a map of where she has been and no longer is or can be. Adichie's narrative is, thus, a cartography of Ifemelu's identity presented to the reader. In her nomadic existence, we accompany Ifemelu in several moments of her life and the processes of negotiating the subject positionalities these moments involve.

When I talk about her childhood and adolescence in Nigeria, for example, I explore how she negotiates her gender and her postcoloniality in the formation of her personality – how she searches for belonging in her surroundings, even in the face of colleagues from a different social class and of a family that imposes a Christian morality and gender role that she is not willing to believe in or perform. In the attempt to find a role model, a mother figure with which to establish a linearity or a continuity, we have seen how she develops different motherly relationships – with her biological mother, with aunty Uju, and with Obinze's mother – in order to comprehend what she is or at least what are the possibilities of being as a woman.

In the diasporic space, with the discovery of race and the drastic alteration in her identity axes, we have accompanied the new negotiations of her identity. Again, she attempts to belong to several groups – in her house with her roommates, with her colleagues at the university, with her family and her memories from back home – only to find alienation.

Thrown into complete marginality for inhabiting an 'elsewhereness' in every single one of her identity axes in America, she comes to the point of illness – a depression follows the trauma of the coach episode and she can no longer even attempt to belong. Rather than learning form this experience and realizing the problematic of attempting to belong at all costs, Ifemelu keeps trying to fit into a group within the US, as we have seen in her relationship with Curt's family and, later, with Blaine's friends and family.

In these attempts to belong, what many authors quoted in this dissertation interpret as a multiplicity in Ifemelu's identity cannot be disregarded as a process of 'shifting' (JONES; SHORTER-GOODEN, 2002). Even though Ifemelu's identity is based on diversity and multiplicity, there is a difference between being many at the same time and actually turning into someone else in order to feel a sense of belonging. Throughout my analysis of her relationship with Curt, for example, it is possible to see how Ifemelu herself recognizes turning into someone else while with him and, later, reflects on how she silenced a part of herself in order to fit into their relationship and into his world. This is not merely a movement of being multiple but of actually making an effort to pertain to a specific environment – which, according to Jones and Shorter Gooden (2002), is always an inauthentic process because you either create an entirely new persona or, at least, annuls and silences an important part of yourself, which takes a toll on one's identity and mental health. In the case of Ifemelu's romantic relationships, for example, she is forced to silence her racial axis with Curt and her femaleness and her Africanness with Blaine.

As time passes and Ifemelu continues to migrate within the American territory and inside her own possibilities of being, we see how, despite her need to belong, she keeps rejecting the opportunities of identification presented to her in the narrative: Uju and Ginika are paths of assimilation she rejects in the diasporic space; Kimberly and Laura are paths she rejects within the American imposition of gender performance; Ranyinudo and Doris are ways of being woman and performing gender expectations – both American and Nigerian – that she rejects in her moment of finding and defining herself as a returnee in Nigeria. These multiple paired women (STRATTON, 2002) can only offer opportunities of being women that Ifemelu cannot relate to or perform herself because she has seen the results these performances have had in these women's lives. Much like Ifemelu, in their individual and diverse positionalities, these women sometimes only manage to perform what is expected of them in gender relations but, at other times, manage to express themselves and disrupt the roles that disturb them. This is clear in Aunty Uju and how, at her most vulnerable moment – the beginning of her career as a doctor and the difficult economic situation she faces in

America – she is subjected to the role of sweetness and the need to find a partner. As her economic situation and her social status improve, we can see how she manages to find her own voice to end an unfulfilling relationship and start another one in her own terms.

The female characters here examined, thus, function as cautionary tales Ifemelu rejects only to find her own ways of being and behaving in the spaces she inhabits. Like Stratton (2002) explains, these women represent Ifemelu's fears and the weaknesses she wants to reject in herself. As she leaves behind these female images offered to her for identification, she negotiates which parts of them might interest her and be encompassed in her own identity but leaves aside the parts that are merely a submitting performance. In this process of negotiating through several possibilities of identification, she develops her own identity and attempts to comprehend ways of being a woman without falling into the traps of previously determined (Black) female stereotypes.

Writing the blog and creatively theorizing (DAVIES, 2002) about her surroundings; transitioning and learning to know and love her own hair; discovering her own sexuality, acknowledging her own desires, and learning about her own pleasure and satisfaction are also major elements of Ifemelu's journey to her own female self. Because she has lived through these processes she manages to discover several parts of herself that remained unacknowledged and, when returning to Nigeria, she manages – once more through her writing – not only to comprehend her surroundings but also to observe herself from within. She comprehends her positionality and the inconsistencies and incoherencies that form her identity, making a movement towards finding a balance in her diverse locations and, consequently, a way to give voice to all these diverse parts that form her one self.

Araújo (2017) is of the opinion that Adichie's work is about searching for one's own place in the world and (re)building one's self through the act of writing. Adichie (2014e) herself has been asked by Synne Rifbjerg if her novels were often about a search for belonging. The novelist explains that they are but that, at some point, for Ifemelu the question becomes "should I fit in?" (ADICHIE, 2014e, verbal information[26]) – and the ultimate answer is that it is not necessary to belong and the feeling of unfitness does not have to be a negative one. She further clarifies that in order to fit in sometimes you have to conform to certain ideas that are not your own and this can be negative and silencing, especially for women, since

[26] THE GUARDIAN'S BOOK PODCAST: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Americanah. [Voiceover by]: John Mullan; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The Guardian's book club, 1 Aug. 2014e. *Podcast*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2014/aug/01/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-americanah-podcast. Access on: 11 Jan. 2021.

conforming is, in her words, a very gendered notion. Thus, fitting in or belonging in the terms we are used to – that is, belonging within the physical boundaries of a nation or a house and a family or identifying with a specific group or movement and its ideals – is often an act of silencing for women.

Consequently, it is my argument that *Americanah* is not about belonging. In addition to being silencing when we make an effort to fit in, Adichie's narrative shows us how belonging – even if achievable – is always impermanent, fleeting, and partial because, just like identity, it is related to context (places, time, people, territories). Even though the novel might appear to be a search for belonging, Ifemelu's journey is actually about learning to simply be, with no need to pertain. If we can talk about belonging in Ifemelu's journey, we must consider it is not about being home, in the sense of being within certain pre-established physical boundaries or in a particular place, but actually being able to belong with her own self. This belonging is not about returning to an essence – a fixed, stable, and monolithic identity that defines a subject –, but rather about acknowledging one's multiple identity axes and even the incoherencies between the different parts that constitute an individual and the several positions we might occupy because of that. Belonging, for Ifemelu, only makes sense through the idea of belonging to one's self in all its multiplicity and fragmentation, in its fluidity and incompleteness, being able to feel well within one's own skin – in spite of social impositions of different (Black) female roles and stereotypes. What she learns is to inhabit the "slipperiness" and "elsewhereness" (DAVIES, 2003, p. 26), of her own identity, always in movement to the outside of dominant discourses, finding her possibilities of agency and subjectivity as she crosses the established borders and permanently migrates.

When many of the theoreticians discussed in my analysis evaluate Obinze as an anchor of belonging to Ifemelu, many of them evaluate him as a link to her home country or to her past self, but they do not consider Ifemelu's affirmation that, with him, she managed to feel comfortable inside herself. Thus, it is not as much that he is a form of belonging but rather that he causes Ifemelu to feel belonging towards herself – her own body and her own identity. It is the same idea Ifemelu expresses in the part she states she has spun fully into being – that is, she has allowed herself to be all that she is and, instead of pretending to be someone else full of certainties[27]: she has embraced a self adorned with uncertainty, as the woedplay in the title of this dissertation suggests.

[27] In the beginning of the narrative, when walking the streets of Princeton, the narrator tells the reader how Ifemelu "liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone

If it is possible to think of Adichie's fiction as a creative theorizing in the terms defined by Davis (2003) – and considering the ways described by Collins (2002), Christian (1988), and Lorde (2007) of how Black women often offer a different type of theorizing through narrative –, I could defend that *Americanah* brings forward its own mode of looking at identity and its own definitions of belonging. If identity is always moving and impermanent, belonging – which is based on who we are – can only be moving and impermanent, which illuminates my discussions about the subject of feminism and other social movements based on the politics of identity. What Adichie's construction of female characters and the relationship among them entails is the impossibility of a feminist movement that addresses each and every female subject at the same time because, if identity in itself is always moving, there is no possibility of fully belonging within a fixed movement. In this way, we can see how Adichie brings light to the idea of female experience and the revelation of a female self through writing. Her construction of female characters and the journey of Ifemelu towards comprehending herself illustrate Kaplan's (EAGLETON, 1996) argument about women's earlier comprehension of the split, unstable, fractured, and fluctuant character of subjectivities, showing, in their written productions, the construction of subjectivity as contradictory and always in process, with no possibility of one true self.

Therefore, it is possible to notice in Adichie's writing a search for a female self-awareness, such as pointed by Elaine Showalter (2009) as a characteristic of the "female phase" of women's writings. According to the author, this is a moment in women's literature in which a female self-awareness might emerge through literature in a courageous exploitation of the female self. Through her characters's identities, Adichie (2014) depicts this search of the woman for herself, this attempt to understand her experience and her place (or not) in the world. I can affirm, then, that despite the distance in time between the establishment of White female literary tradition and the African and Black ones, this search for a female self-awareness and the bold exploitation of one's self that comes with it are a point of dialogue between these traditions nowadays.

According to Gilbert and Gubar's (2000) idea that female writing has a revising characteristic, as women writers revise and rewrite previously established images, Adichie finds a way to build her characters and, along with them, to build a new possibility of being woman and of conceiving a female subject for the feminist movement. As these subjects are also in movement, the open final of the novel and the idea of movement it establishes, leaves

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else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 3).

the feeling that Ifemelu, as well as women in general, continue their journey through self-definition. In light of all the identity axes of Ifemelu – female, Black, African, postcolonial, diasporic – it is even more important and more subversive to conceive of an individual identity that is not only multiple but that remains permanently open, contrary to all the stability and immutable essence that has been imposed as an identity to these minority groups.

The relationship between *Americanah*'s female characters, however, brings a way of envisioning a feminist movement that is built upon impermanent alliances and allegiances. As all the women in Ifemelu's life are confined to stereotypes and are forced to perform a gender role within specific circumstances, we watch how Ifemelu both identifies and empathizes with these women, finding the possibility of a commonality with them, even in the face of difference – her relationship with Kimberly being a good example. At the same time, she also rejects some of these women's way of behavior, admonishing them of the dangerous paths they are taking, and distancing herself when there is no possibility of dialogue or alliances – as is the case with Laura and Doris. Much like in the case of identity, pertaining to a movement such as feminism is, thus, always a negotiation to establish strategic alliances towards common goals, but also to dialogue when our perspectives are not being taken into account and, ultimately, to step aside and distance one's self of the movement in the moments the individuals that are part of it cannot bring themselves to listen to us.

These ideas are in alliance with Friedman's (1998) locational feminism, in which gender as a formation is seen as dependent upon each female individual positionality. Since no individual positionality is fixed, as one individual's position changes, the feminist movement must also move and modify itself in order to encompass new possibilities of being, of subjugation, of resistance, and, most importantly, of dialogues and alliances. If a movement based on identity politics refuses to be as fluid as identity, every individual is bound to feel excluded and unheard at some point and the movement only weakens itself. Even though it is impossible for each female individual to belong towards one specific feminist movement, it is possible for the movement to function as Obinze – to be the one element that makes us belong to ourselves, allowing us to spin into being by resisting and rejecting patriarchal impositions, especially on our behavior and ways of being. The feminist movement might work as what Butler (2017) calls a "floating homeland" – a notion of home that can only bring a possibility of belonging through the articulation and negotiation of one's self and identity; a home that is only grounded in movement and diaspora, never fixed and always fluctuating.

Within this "floating homeland", silence and voice have to be negotiated all the time. As Solnit (2017) explains, silence is diffused, always provisory. We need to break the silences

within the movement, knowing silences will remerge, only for us to have to learn our voices one more time in order to re-break it. When previously silenced voices begin to be heard, it is when Solnit (2017) believes power relations might be subverted. Within Adichie's narrative, we see this movement of silencing and (re)gaining voice all the time in the characters's journeys and in the author's writing. As Adichie's characters negotiate between silence and voice, subjugation and resistance, performing established roles and being their own selves, Adichie responds and dialogues with diverse literary traditions, in the previously established sense of an intertextuality between literary texts and their contexts of production. Through narrative, the author of *Americanah* regains her voice once more and brings to the fore the voice of other equally diverse Black African diasporic female subjects that have been silenced in face of previously existing and excluding traditions.

If we consider the complex character of silence and voice and if we think of writing as a political act in which one learns to reinvent one's self and name one's reality in one's own terms, as the passage from silence to voice and/or from objecthood to subjecthood (KILOMBA, 2010), we must also conceive of reading as a political act. In the way we read, as literary critics, we might shed light to previously unheard voices and newly constructed subjectivities, but we might also silence and invizibilize the attempts of subjectification in an author's writing. For that reason, I believe this dissertation might also work as a warning to other researches in the field of literature about the dangers of selecting one single aspect of an identity to analyze in a character.

Even though I comprehend the character of academic research – the need for a thematic approach and the impossibility to approaching all the aspects in a narrative or a literary character –, we must be careful when selecting our theoretical and reading framework lest we want to impose new silences upon those individuals that are attempting to break an imposed absence of voice. In a character as complex as Ifemelu, we are in danger of repeating or creating what Adichie calls a 'single story' – when we silence one or more character's identity axes in our analysis we run the risk of silencing parts of a self, and with them, one's possibility of authenticity. When we tell a 'single story' – considering only one aspect – about an individual, we disregard that this being is constituted by diverse identity axes, multiple parts and stories that we might silence with the simple choice of a theoretical framework. After our long journey through Adichie's narrative in this dissertation, we must defend the importance that, in academic readings – as well as in fictional writing –, the multiplicity of subjects, their voices, and their identities be taken into account. Only then does it become possible to have a wider – though never a full – comprehension of literary characters and the

individuals to each they bring a possibility of identification and, consequently, of voice and subjectivity.

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