

Original Paper

The Intersection of Race, Beauty and Identity: The Migrant Experience in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Eleanor Anneh Dasi^{1*}

¹ Department of English, ENS, University of Yaounde I, Cameroon

* Eleanor Anneh Dasi, Department of English, ENS, University of Yaounde I, Cameroon

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Abstract

Negotiating identity and the determining conditions of these identities are inextricably linked to the history of colonialism and its related practices of slavery, displacement and racial and cultural discrimination. Added to these are the recent waves of migration which have led to transnational experiences of misrepresentations that formerly colonised people are faced with, and which they have to deal with in order to assert or form new identities. The domain of beauty and its complex discourses involving its relationship to identity are intricately linked to ideology and power relations. The destabilisation of the African identity, especially in diaspora contexts, has been a direct consequence of the supremacist ideologies of the colonising powers. One of the fundamental questions raised by the cultural issues surrounding beauty is: how can the African overcome social expectations of beauty based on western standards that play negatively on their sense of identity? The answer to this question lies in the diverse definitions of beauty from different cultural perspectives. When awareness is raised on issues of racial stereotypes and cultural prejudices, the process of demystification of the myth of racial superiority begins, signalling also the start of the African's journey towards a new conceptualisation of self.

Keywords

beauty, culture, diaspora, identity, migration, race

1. Introduction

With the great gulf between the developed and developing regions of the world, migration has been on the increase within the second half of the 20th century. Technological advancements, modes of communication and developments in air transport have facilitated and intensified the mobility of people, commodities, capital information and particularly the circulation of cultural texts around the globe. These texts determine the way cultural groups are viewed on a global arena with regard to their worldviews, their cultural traits and their physical appearance. One of such cultural texts is observed in the domain of beauty.

Though there exists different conceptualisations of beauty, the dominant cultures' beauty standards have been made the norm, owing to supremacist colonial ideologies that suppress or annihilate other cultural perceptions of beauty, particularly the Africans'. Such ideological formations arose with race politics some centuries ago when western philosophers and scientists claimed there is a particular ranking of world species on the evolutionary scale. This ranking, according to Linnaeus' taxonomy, places the human being at the top of God's hierarchy of creation. However, the human being was further sub-classified into race, a term used to define the human species according to physical characteristics, mostly inherited, such as skin colour, cranial, facial features and hair type, which classification was used to create boundaries between people. By this classification, the European was placed at the helm and the African (black negro) at the bottom, closest to the animal species, while the dark Asiatic and red American are in-between. Physical and mental traits accompanied this grouping with the European described as hopeful, the dark Asiatic sad and rigid, the red American irascible and the black negro calm and lazy (Smedley, 1999, p. 164).

Linnaeus description of the races was further sustained by Meiners (Isaac, 2006, p. 105) who added ugliness and beauty to the black and white descriptions respectively, emphasising on the ugliness of the black people as an indicator of a deeper intellectual, moral and social primitivism and depravity thus promulgating institutionalised racism. Gobineau (1915) carries the argument on race disparity further by claiming that the white races are endowed with extraordinary energetic intelligence and a remarkable instinct for life and order (p. 207), which is unknown to the black man. For this reason, the black race can only be initiated into a civilisation when it mixes with the white race. Gobineau's taxonomy points out that even as recent as the 19th century, racial prejudice still formed part of the human classification schemes, which still have strongholds in some western and Anglo-American societies today, and have laid the groundwork for the discrimination and bias against black people.

In the American context in which Adichie's *Americanah* is set, there have been identity crises resulting from colour prejudices, with the colour line drawn between whites and blacks. These racial problems are still very much prevalent even in today's America, and haunt Africans who migrate there to live the American dream. The female folk are the most affected when it comes to beauty. Bartky (1990) explains that women are associated more closely with their bodies than men and are disproportionately

valued for how they look. They are always under constant pressure to correct their bodies to conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of the time, and above all, to gain social acceptability. Thus when women engage in practices that give them the “ideal” feminine body, it is principally because an inferior status has been ascribed to that body (p. 71). Since skin colour, hair texture and bodily features of blacks are interpreted as a statement of inferiority and ugliness, and are even used to judge moral, intellectual capability and professionalism, these women are often pressured to fashion their appearances closer to the dominant beauty ideals they come in contact with.

As such, they are faced with the dilemma of attempting to reclaim what is left of their original cultural identity, and aligning with the imposed Anglo-American standard which has been politicised and publicised to make it dominant. Capitalism and its controlling ability, the media, Hollywood and pop culture all help in reinforcing the Anglo-American concept of beauty and suppressing the black minority. This encourages cultural prejudices and exposes the social implications of race. It further affects the personality and identity formation of the victims given that it determines how one views oneself and the esteem that one accords oneself. All these issues fall within the domain of postcolonial criticism, which tries to reverse the discourses that promote race oppositions, and explore the possibility of reconstructing and/or restoring the original identities of the marginalised groups.

Adichie’s novel, *Americanah*, ruminates on the politics of beauty in relation to race and identity. It has triggered some conversations from critics on the current situation of race and identity in the American society. Saah (2016), offers a critique on racism in American culture, pointing out that ignorance, preconceived ideas about, and classification of a particular group of people, especially people of colour, pressures them to change their beliefs and attitudes to keep in line with the “owners” of the ideas. Similarly, Clark’s (2013) review of the novel brings to light the different kinds of oppression, gender roles, the layers of history it takes to construct national, racial and personal identities and the idea of home. I add to these discussions, the ways in which racial constructions of beauty and social expectations affect the migrant African female’s sense of self, and how she struggles to overcome these stereotypes in the American society. I argue that the recognition of the oppressive nature of the dominant ideologies on beauty, and the acknowledgement of one’s cultural prescriptions are fundamental to the understanding of identity (mis)representations. With this understanding comes awareness, which awareness prompts a reconsideration of the migrant African female’s position in relation to beauty and identity.

2. Racial Conceptualisations of Beauty and its Effect on Identity

According to Hegelian dialectics, the world is governed by reason and only Europe dominates as far as this ideology is concerned. All other regions of the world are the antithesis of Europe, characterised by irrationality and stagnation. Hegel was very particular about Africans whom he thought needed to be tamed and civilised by Europeans in order to be freed from backwardness. Hume furthers this argument

by stating that other species of men, particularly negroes are naturally inferior to whites. He observes that “there never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even an individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences” (Garrett, 2000, pp. 171-172).

The above preconceived notions about the black race were used to sustain the myth of white superiority since it was considered that members of each race shared some fundamental physical, moral, intellectual and cultural traits that were peculiar only to that particular race. These traits were interpreted favourably for whites than for blacks as revealed in the Manichean definitions of the terms “white” and “black”, which definitions conveyed moral meanings. Blackness was presented as naturally inferior and a condition to be treated with contempt as suggested by Jordan (1968) in the following binaries: “white and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, god and devil” respectively (p. 7). Central to this definition is the ascription of ugliness to the physical/bodily features of the black people, which was another deep indicator of their unrefined nature and intellectual depravity.

These categorisations of beauty based on race are still very much prevalent in 21st century American society as highlighted in Adichie’s *Americanah*. Many of the novel’s white characters still have a derogatory image of Africans that replicates those presented in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where the physical appearance of Africans, especially their skin colour and hair texture, characteristic of their race, are markers of ugliness and inferiority. Hair particularly represents an important site of meaning in the intersection of race, beauty and identity. Banks (2000) asserts that the last fifty years have seen issues of black hair raised in academic circles particularly among philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists. Two significant issues raised in these debates are “how hair is a significant site of meaning in societies with a history of racial discrimination, and how hair can be used to mediate the lingering effects of racial legacy” (p. 3). These issues shape our understanding of the multiple realities black women go through in relation to beauty and power.

Debates on hair are directly or indirectly linked to beauty and women. As Wolf (1991) observes, the beauty culture ascribes “value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard” (p. 12). She adds that it is a system of power relations in which resources have been usurped by men, pushing women to compete for these same resources. In competing for these resources, women are expected to spend time maintaining an attractive and appealing appearance (p. 12). As a result, recent feminist arguments look into the pervasiveness of powers that imprint femininity on women, considering their preoccupation with physical appearance as natural and voluntary. Other opinions argue for women who are victims of oppressive, idealised standards of beauty and where physical appearance push definitions of self towards conforming to such standards. Thus the voluntariness that is attributed to women’s obsession with their physical appearance, particularly their hair, is constrained by these same powers that design and construct feminine conceptions of beauty.

Adichie's concern with hair is stressed from the very beginning of the novel when Ifemelu is obliged to move from Princeton to Trenton to get her hair braided because the few black locales in Princeton are filled with light-skinned and lank-haired women who do not wear braids (p. 3). This journey brings Ifemelu face to face with the struggles black women, particularly migrants have to go through because of race differences. Coming from a background where race is not an "issue" to one where race "matters", Ifemelu has to find ways of dealing with these differences especially when she gets to find out that her natural dark kinky hair is not beautiful and not professional. The implication of this radicalized perspective of beauty and professionalism is that black women are forced to look for ways of altering their hair by using relaxers and hot combs to suit Anglo American beauty standards. The media (TV commercials), bill boards and women's magazines have all been put in place to reinforce these stereotypes and ideological systems. One of Ifemelu's blog posts vividly illustrates this fact by referring to a TV show which presents a black woman with natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky) as ugly "before" and pretty "after" her hair is straightened (p. 299). This is an indirect way of compelling black women to strive for "beautiful", "Professional" and "normal" hair. Aunty Uju faces this pressure when she succeeds in the United States Medical Licensing Examination and is expected to undo her braids and relax her hair to look more professional and normal. Straight and sleek hair is therefore synonymous to beautiful and professional hair.

Ifemelu has a similar experience like Aunty Uju as she prepares for a job interview. Already aware of the social prescription of professional looks when it comes to hair styles, she yields to the idea that "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" (p. 206). She must thus brave the burns of the relaxer to achieve the desired texture and when she finally does, the hair dresser seems very satisfied as she comments, "Wow, girl, you've got the white girl swing!" (p. 205). It is therefore all about keeping a closeness to white and curiously, hair relaxers and hot combs have been designed to maintain the pressures of black women to conform to white idealised beauty standards. This is an indirect form of institutionalised racism where whiteness is used as a yardstick for beauty. By implication, blackness is excluded from the domain of beauty as exemplified in the lack of black women and black beauty tips in beauty magazines. Of all the two thousand pages of women's magazines that Ifemelu and Curt flip through, no single page has the photograph of a dark woman, and none provides any form of beauty tips for pure black women, yet these magazines are meant to be universal. This only means one thing though; that universal means white and therefore there is no space for black in the American fashion and beauty industry. Beauty thus functions as a form of cultural imperialism with socio-economic implications for black migrant women particularly. The precondition for Ifemelu to be considered for a job is for her to "loose (her) braids and straighten (her) hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters" (p. 204). These words suggest a subtle tension that characterises race and cultural relations in America, which weigh heavily on the psyche of the black woman.

From all indications, the cost of being successful depends largely on giving up black cultural markers. Removing Ifemelu's braids and replacing them with relaxed hair then becomes a symbolic transfer from her natural self to a chemically altered self to suit the prescriptions of the dominant host culture. This process is not only physically irritating, as evidenced by the "needles of stinging pain (that) shot up from...her scalp" (p. 205), but also psychologically traumatising as it "made her feel a sense of loss" (p. 205). Significantly, therefore, black women's hair is a site for multifaceted socio-cultural power relations (especially as it is instantly read if it does not meet "conventional" standards), which sustained and later questioned conservative models of beauty. This intersection of race and beauty generates issues of identity insecurity and alteration for black women.

Adichie intimates in *Americanah* that black people have been conditioned to think in white ideological terms because of their close contact and exposure to dominant race stereotypes. While skin colour was the primary indicator of race, hair was the second important factor of black race stigma. As early as the days of slavery, the comb test was instituted as a determinant of acceptance into some social institutions like churches. Here, the eligible criterion was for a fine-toothed comb to pass through the hair of a black person (Byrd & Tharps, 2014, p. 22), which of course the majority of them failed. When Dike says, "there is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair" (p. 218), he is unconsciously working within this framework of black stigmatisation, negation and repugnance, which is reflexive of his own self-denial and the denial of the identities of black people especially migrants. Significantly, the social cultivation of hair is at the centre of personality construction, forming an axis in the determination of both individual and collective identity, thus hair becomes the core to identity making (Nyamnjoh & Fuh, 2014, p. 53). African migrants are therefore at risk of losing their cultural identities if they keep succumbing to the Anglo-American meanings of beauty.

Apart from hair texture, meaning is also attached to skin colour and body morphology, with the most visible features being dark skin, thick lips and broad noses. These features, as noted by Keith (2009), "were a sign of lack of intelligence, ugliness and evil" as opposed to white skin which represented "purity, civilisation and beauty" (p. 72). These negative assumptions about black physical features make them victims of chemical body alterations as they struggle to get by. Bartholomew is one of such victims who uses skin-bleaching products to have an acceptable complexion but which rather becomes inadequate and awkward as his face takes on a greenish-yellow tone instead of the desired "fair" tone. Further still, these unattractive labels deny them the possibility to be visible in American pop culture. In movies, for example, they play the role of the "fat nice mammy or the strong, sassy, scary sidekick...never...the hot woman, beautiful and desired" (p. 216). In contrast, the white woman finds love, not because she is probably more beautiful than her dark-skinned counterpart, but by virtue of the simple fact of being white.

Additionally, the adjective “fat” is not a simple description like tall or short; it is loaded with moral judgements like “stupid” or “bastard” (pp. 5-6). With such underlying connotations given to black women, they seem not to have any other option than comply with the demands of mainstream society. Ginika falls prey to the pressures of belonging to this society as she starts losing weight as soon as she gets to America because her high school peers referred to her as “pork”. While losing weight in the America society has positive leanings, the Nigerian society sees it as negative. This simply proves that the values of each culture are peculiar to that culture such that using foreign yardsticks to measure these values is harmful to members of that culture. That is why Ginika’s obsession with becoming thin is not without its own repercussions. Her features become disproportionate; “her head looked bigger, balanced on a long neck that brought to mind a vague exotic animal, and she gets close to anorexia”. In Ifemelu’s eyes, she looks like “a dried stock fish” (p. 123). Using animal imagery to describe Ginika’s transformation speaks to the dehumanisation that accompanies cultural assimilation. Not only are the victims psychologically traumatised by a sense of inadequacy but are also physically altered.

Another major site of contestation of beauty and the exercise of power over minority groups has been observed in the English language. By presenting British and Anglo American variants of the language as superior and therefore beautiful, correct and/or standard, the dominant groups are thereby reducing the other variants to substandard positions. A challenging situation is displayed at this level as members of the minority groups are stretched into taming their accents so as to sound beautiful, correct and normal in accordance with the dominant variant. This challenge comes after the immigrants have gone through traumatising experiences with regards to their foreign accents. Ifemelu’s encounter with Cristina Thomas devastates her when she finds out that Cristina speaks to her slowly, pausing after each word, because she is not sure of how well Ifemelu speaks English. Ifemelu feels denigrated and backward and thus considers the option of adopting an American accent. But this new way of speaking has its own shortcomings for as Ifemelu herself attests, it “creaked with consciousness...it took an effort, the twisting of the lip, the curling of the tongue” (p. 175). The conscious effort and the difficulty with which she articulates demonstrate unnaturalness, and problematize the beauty and accuracy in speech which she labours for. Similarly, Bartholomew’s tamed accent is flawed with “holes (and) mangling words (which) were impossible to understand” (p. 116). These struggles by migrants to fit into mainstream society push them to go through a painful process of identity alteration; rejecting homeland yet not fitting plainly into the new structure.

Prejudice and stereotyping arising from racial and cultural differences particularly in diaspora contexts push the excluded to seek to (im)prove their humanity in conjunction with the included. Apart from Adichie, Bulawayo (2013) has also been very concerned with the migrant experiences of African women in America. In her novel, she presents characters who, like Adichie’s, suffer under the pressure of either struggling to belong or being “different”. Bulawayo uses Darling to express the frustrations of black women in the American society. She complains that “when you are teased about something, at

first you try to fix it. But when the teasing continues to everything, even those that cannot be changed, it becomes very defeating; causing the characters to just feel wrong in their skin, body, clothes, language, head” (p. 167). Wrongness translates into an inferiority complex which pushes them to begin to look for alternative ways of coping and/or belonging. Thus like Adichie’s Bartholomew, Darling tames her accent and changes her dressing code while Aunt Fostalina, like Ginika, is obsessed with losing weight in a desperate attempt to measure up and more especially, escape the violence of American social structures. All these efforts amount to a rejection of blackness and all that is associated with it.

In attempting an understanding as to why black immigrants have to wear “white masks” to get by in Europe, Fanon (1967) writes that “when the black man comes into contact with the white world, he goes through an experience of sensitisation; his ego collapses, his self-esteem evaporates...the entire purpose of his behaviour is to emulate the white man...and thus, hope to be accepted as a man” (p. 80). These struggles to be accepted by the white man clearly involve a rejection of the attributes that associate the black person to their race and culture, with the impression that they have to be freed from “primitivism” and brought into “civilisation”. Unfortunately, these impressions come with trauma, pain, struggles and inconveniences as witnessed in Ifemelu’s hair burns which sting and ooze out pus. The more she tries to accept this new look, the more she suffers pain, which pain becomes a constant reminder of the weight of her altered self and the distance between her and her culture.

The struggles to belong in a dominant racist American society have not only been particular to African migrants; African-Americans too have had their fair share of the destructiveness of selfhood that comes with radicalized beauty ideals. Morrison’s 1994 novel depicts Pecola Breedlove, a little black girl, who falls prey to the dominant standards of blue eyes, fair skin and blonde hair as measurements for beauty. Unfortunately, these cannot be attained given the natural disposition and body morphology of black people; but yet the desire is sometimes so strong due to the overwhelming presence of constant reminders on bill boards and beauty pageants. In as much as attempting to be white is not feasible, it is very dangerous to the selfhood of Africans who try to cross an imaginary line to gain acceptance into a white supremacist culture. The dangers are enormous and culminate into racial self-loathing and subsequent frustration that can take away one’s sanity as is the case with Pecola.

Evidently, the problem of the colour line shows the multiplicity of ways in which race continues to define and divide people around the world. This is peculiar in diaspora contexts where different peoples and cultures meet, and these differences become the foundation on which racial prejudice and discrimination are built. Racial classification schemes place the black people at the bottom of the civilisation ladder thus pressuring them to strive to transcend this racial barrier by adopting make-shift strategies. In the process, their physical bodies are transformed, their psyches beaten and their egos shattered, which all culminate into a loss of selfhood. These are some of the dangers that ensue when there is an uncritical assimilation of dominant ideologies in the form of beauty, culture and civilisation

as exposed in Adichie's *Americanah*. To overcome these struggles, Adichie suggests a return to cultural roots as the basis for the construction of identity, even in diaspora circumstances.

3. Finding Reference Points

Of the many theorists who argued against the humanity of black people, probably only German biologist, Blumenbach (1865) presents an objective appraisal of all the human races. According to him, the basic difference in skin colour and body morphology did not in any way influence the intellectual and cultural superiority of the Caucasian race over the other races. He believed that all the races have attained or acquired a level of cultural development that permits them to reach a near perfectibility of form and so are able to produce offspring that can be described beautiful in every sense of the word. It is from this premise that the black power movement came up in the 1960s with the slogan, "Black is Beautiful", which gave black people world-wide the confidence to reclaim and judge beauty from a black perspective. Though this movement slowed down because black women started straightening their hair, it was recently revived in the form of the natural hair movement, which encouraged black women to love and take pride in their natural hair textures, and which has survived till this day. That is why most narratives on beauty conflicts strive to project this new image of the black woman vis-à-vis the white woman particularly when it concerns hair. It is for this reason that Caldwell (1991) insists that "I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it...before I knew that the burden of beauty—or lack of it—for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me" (p. 365). This statement carries heavy implications of the depravity that is associated with black hair, as well as signals a move towards revisiting and revising the ideological backing that considered black hair and features, undesirable and ugly.

Americanah, as illustrated above, chronicles the racial and cultural questions that African immigrants have to wrestle with. One of such questions lies on beauty, which has become a major site of conflict wherein the restrictive Eurocentric and Anglo American its definitions place a huge burden of conformity on people of African descent, causing them to engage in beauty practices which are not only potentially harmful but also threaten their sense of self. Beauty then becomes a way through which dominant culture attempts to define who and what an African should be. The Africans have been brainwashed into thinking that their cultures and nature are not worth exposing to the world. This poses serious problems of individual and collective cultural identities as the Africans in the diaspora cannot speak of themselves from the perspective of their socio-cultural realities but tend to measure themselves and their worth using western or colonising yardsticks.

In attempting to bridge the gap between migrant and host cultures, Madsen and Naerssen (2003) suggest that migrants have to adopt the identity of the host country in order to allow for broader international integration (p. 72) and also probably to avoid prejudice and marginalisation. But the dangers involved in trying to negotiate an African identity from a western and/or American position are

enormous, ranging from the inability to defend and define oneself to the lack of power in maintaining an attachment to one's culture. For this reason, Okpalauka and Dillard (2012) rather insinuate knowledge of the African background (customs and traditions) as a springboard for resisting racial stereotypes and the construction of an authentic identity in diaspora environments (p. 132). In line with Okpalauka and Dillard, Adichie in *Americanah*, opens up a conversation on how Africans can overcome the psychological and physical pressures from dominant culture and at the same time, build both individual and collective cultural identities. This is achieved through a questioning of dominant Eurocentric and Anglo-American discourses, while speaking from specified locales that are considered reference points.

Adichie uncovers one of these reference points through the African Students' Union, which serves as a reminder that Africa is not simply a country as has been misconceived by Europeans and Americans. She specifies the different countries of the continent from where the students who make up this union hail (Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Congo, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Guinea), with different worldviews, cultures and accents. These differences enable them to speak from specified distinct locales while acknowledging their shared experiences in America. Wambui's advise to Ifemelu to "remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help...keep...perspective" (p. 141) is a strong psychological force that helps not only Ifemelu but other Africans who are faced with the challenge of complying with mainstream American culture. The "gentle, swaying sense of renewal" (p. 140) that Ifemelu feels among members of this union is a leap towards self-assertion and psychic stability that serve as a springboard from which to renegotiate belonging and reconnection to home.

Being able to speak from a specified locale permits African women particularly to look back into their origins to be able to make sense of their existence. Adichie demonstrates this through Obinze's mother, who places Ifemelu within the framework of the Igbo culture by addressing her fully as Ifemelunamma, and giving her the literarily meaning of the name as, "made in good times" or "beautifully made". This gives Ifemelu a new feeling of pride, self-worth, wholesomeness and rootedness. Her new-found beauty acts as an impetus in understanding the dangers of aligning with dominant beauty ideologies, and rethinking black women's position in the beauty arena. This point of self-realisation allows Ifemelu to question the legitimacy of Eurocentric beauty norms on Africans, which questioning becomes a significant motif for her to detach herself from western-based beauty standards and their horrifying effects.

Her first significant move is her passage from relaxers and weaves to afro braids and natural hair which bears testimony to her rejection of the idea that straight and silky hair is beautiful and therefore standard, while kinky hair is ugly and substandard. This rejection is followed by the strength to transform the feeling of ugliness, hair-hiding and hate that she internalises, to one of beauty, pride and love as she regains confidence in her natural dense, soft and tightly coiled hair texture. In confirmation of this, she changes from, "I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today" (p. 211) to "I like my hair the

way God made it” (p. 2). These opposing utterances indicate a movement from a feeling of dejectedness that comes with not being able to conveniently fit into the frame of westernised beauty standards, into a feeling of acknowledgement and acceptance of one’s natural difference. Recognition of difference therefore constitutes one reference point from which black migrant women should be able to work through the pressures of internalising American standpoints of beauty.

Accepting natural differences would also mean resisting alterations of one’s image. Lupita Nyong’o, the Kenyan born Oscar winning actress, who curiously is the first dark-skinned woman to be termed “beautiful”, protests against the fact that the *Grazia* UK magazine edited out and smoothed her mass of curly black hair, holding it in a thick pony tail, in order to make it fit within the precepts of beauty according to western standards (Hausser, 2017). Nyong’o’s protest, with the harsh tag “don’t touch my hair”, is borne from her understanding of the implications of omitting her native heritage. This protest is significant at two levels: first, it instils a sense of pride and confidence in other black women and second, it sends out a strong signal to dominant culture to reconsider and appreciate beauty from different natural perspectives. Magazines like *Ebony* and *Essence*, as opposed to *Grazia*, help to disseminate this idea by promoting black beauty ideals thereby helping black people to feel comfortable in their skin.

Though white women also have issues with their hair, they have an overall cultural affirmation for their straight hair which black women do not have. This creates, in black women, a negative obsession for straight hair, which they however try to overcome by setting up hair braiding salons which take care of their natural reality about hair, and also help nurse a sense of belonging among them. The names displayed on the signboards in Trenton like Aisha and Fatima Hair Braiding, Mariama African Hair Braiding are indicative of the origins of these women braiders—francophone West Africa. Weaves braided in these salons symbolise the complex network of African women who are brought together by a common experience of loss, but who rediscover themselves as they connect with members of their various subcultures thus creating a reference point, which redefines them within that big homogeneous tribe called “black”.

With Adichie’s acknowledgement of the enormous power of the media in shaping humans’ thinking and affecting their everyday interactions, coupled with Kiely’s (2005) assertion that the western media are agents of cultural imperialism—promoting western values that undermine local cultures and resources on which alternative development strategies could be built (p. 122), she comes to realise that Africans have to take upon themselves to change current discourses particularly on beauty. One of the ways through which this can be achieved is by embracing the opportunities offered by technological globalisation to voice their own concerns and move towards global centres. Adichie therefore uses blogging as an effective narrative strategy, through which her protagonist Ifemelu journeys to self-realisation and rediscovery while helping others through the same process.

Through this same narrative strategy, Adichie makes Ifemelu part of an online community of people with natural hair. Photos posted on this forum are those of women with dreadlocks, Afros, twists, braids and massive raucous curls and coils, which all instil a sense of confidence and love for the natural features of black women. With this renewed confidence, Jamilah (1977) resolves never to put horse hair on her head again. She has become aware that trying to keep in line with white standards of beauty is illusive more so because it cannot be wholly attained. Similarly, Bartholomew joins online Nigerian groups as a means of reconnecting with home, which he has not seen for a long time, and which has become “a blurred place between here and there” (p. 166). Safran (1991) describes the likes of Bartholomew as subjects who “continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland...their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (p. 85). Bartholomew accords a high moral value to the dressing habits of Nigerian girls in contrast to American girls based on the kind of ethnic consciousness Safran styles. And however meaningless and sometimes irrational his arguments on the online forums may be, they nonetheless equip him with the solace and psychic stability he needs to withstand the social pressures of the western world.

Though the afore-mentioned schemes have been vital in reshaping the identities of black migrant women, it takes much more than just a rejection of Euro-American beauty standards for those blurred identities to be effectively reconstructed. Other western obligations that threaten the selfhood of the African migrants also have to be reconsidered. One of such burdens lies in adopting European and Anglo-American style and accent in speaking the English language, which style and accent have been labelled “standard” and correct as opposed to the marginal variants or inferior dialects produced by the minority groups. Ifemelu becomes a victim of this imposition but quickly moves away from it as soon as she realises that it makes her awkward and unnatural. Her native Nigerian accent, on the contrary, does not require any effort to articulate, freely expresses emotions of any kind and comes with a feeling of pleasure and fulfilment when uttered. It is this same accent, together with her native Igbo language, that Aunt Uju uses when she is angry; evidencing that the language of one’s thought is what can truly express one’s feeling. Thus oscillating between American and Nigerian accents, and the Igbo language, foretells the inability to fully maintain the dominant accent, which can be attributed to the innate differences that characterise the speech patterns of different cultural groups. To combat the pressure of adopting fake new accents simply entails a return to the abrogated variant, which though is not classified within the ranks of “proper”, nonetheless defines the realities of the abrogating group, and provides an alternative framework on which their identities can be built.

Despite the challenges that African women particularly go through in America, Adichie succeeds in debunking beauty stereotypes by celebrating natural hair through a discourse of the positive traits of natural hair and the sense of satisfaction that comes with embracing a distinct and healthy African beauty culture. In challenging the validity of oppressive western beauty ideologies, Adichie is in a way

acknowledging Chakrabarty's (2000) idea of provincializing Europe, which entails shifting frontiers to homeland and taking a leap from there. She further achieves this by presenting the imperfections of dominant society; the teenager urinating near a brick wall, the poorly lit streets, apartments with rotting cabinets, her small mouldy room, the presence of drug addicts around street corners and the corrupt instructor of the driving course amongst others. In presenting these shortcomings, Adichie is prompting a deeper understanding of how societies function and also provoking a critical look into it. This way, African women in particular and Africans in general will be able to appreciate the perspective from which to define themselves in relation to their aesthetic values beyond hegemonic western norms.

4. Conclusion

The relationship of domination and submission, which still exists between western cultures and African cultures, is informed by historical and ideological forces in the form of master narrative discourses designed to project the inferiority of black people. This racial and colonial legacy intersects with ideals of beauty to cause identity issues for black people. Consequently, the black migrant, particularly the female, is faced with the challenge of constructing and maintaining an authentic identity due to the pressures of dominant ideological beauty standards. More challenging is the desperate attempt to fit into these new structures more so because of the socio-economic implications involved. But the consequences are enormous ranging from physical deformities through psychological trauma to a negation of their cultural identities. However, Adichie proposes ways through which these women in particular and Africans in general can overcome the myth of the superiority of western standards of beauty. These include a questioning of Eurocentric discourses about Africa, falling back on roots and/or speaking from specified locales and using global tools to voice their concerns. This way, a new world view is generated, which does not only guard against cultural imperialism but also permits them to take a leap from peripheral margins to global centres.

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