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Hierarchy of Shades in Adichie's *Americanah*: A Feminist Study

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Abstract

This critical discursive study highlights how third-world women's writings perceive the hierarchy of shades in American multiracial society. Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* critiques the truths of American political thought about equal rights for black women in American white society and hence assesses the importance of black women's writings in a phallocentric white world. With reference to Helen Cixous's theoretical assumptions of ecriture feminism, this study focuses on the misery of 'women of color' in American society to understand how and why white and brown gazes, whether male or female, disregard black women's presence in White communities. This study will describe the affiliations between white men and black women, between white women and black women and between brown women and black women in White societies.

Keywords: Adichie, black women, brown women, ecriture feminism, phallocentric society, white women

1. Introduction

Since feminists' approach to how the phallocentric culture sees women, 'what is women' has been explored in socio-political and literary circles. The phallocentric perception that women were a mere womb for reproduction was countered in the 17th century. This perception later flourished in the 20th-century feminist movements that concerned women's subjugation in the phallocentric milieu. These feminist movements in Europe and North America have led feminists to probe the prevailing social and political premises to attain women's socio-political rights concerning education and employment. Helene Cixous (1976), a French feminist and existentialist, argues the representation of women in phallocentric societies with the claim that the phallocentric literary and non-literary discursive practices used language/ discourse as a tool to politicize women as intellectually inferior, physically weak, emotional and irrational. She,

therefore, insists on the institutionalization of the gynocentric discourse in women's writings to dismantle the phallocentric discursive practices of concretizing women as 'monsters' or 'angels' and to enlighten the truths of "what is women" (Cixous, 1976, p. 6). This theoretical approach was not new as feminists in the early 20th century also made women "write a fiction" (Woolf, 1929, p. 48), but they addressed patriarchal norms and made women explore their 'self' against the conventional standards of femininity. This thought enabled women to realize their discursive and non-discursive experiences of othering and therefore helped them to counter the patriarchal political thought of sexism. Therefore, women study stereotypes about their selves and develop various theories and movements. Black feminists were the avant-garde of these movements; however, they were claimed to have been ignored: black writers argued that the feminist movements in Europe and North America were marches for the rights of white women because black women could not obtain all the rights that the white women celebrated in the 20th century. They urge black women, who are being suppressed thrice: as poor, as a woman's body, and as colonized, to distinguish themselves with feminism as "womanism" (Walker, 1983, p. 34). They assert that the historical persecution of 'what is women' did not prove beneficial for black women who remained other not only in phallogocentric writings but also in white gynocentric discursive practices. Thus, they employ discursive ways to refute the patriarchal, colonial and white gynocentric repressive use of language to replace 'what is woman' with 'what are black women' as they have realized that blackness is their problem and they must "solve it" (Fanon, 1967, p. 93). The representation of women of color in Black women's writings defines this shift from feminism to womanism. This research examines how this shift in black women's discourse argues the conventional standards of defining 'what is a black woman' or woman of color: the story of Ifemelu – the protagonist of *Americanah* (2013), a black immigrant in the United States of America – reveals her colored womanhood concerning the patriarchal and colonial nature of the world's no 1 democratic state.

2. Literature Review

Teresa L. Ebert (2017) stated that prejudiced societies shun women's liberty and their human nature. She claims that women are still waiting for their legitimate rights, economic freedom and education in different regions of the world because the patriarchal social order restrains them from raising their voices for equal rights regarding social, political and economic opportunities. The patriarchal society does not bother with women's identity, which makes them feel inferior (Ebert, 2017, p. 89). Ebert argued that class structure is crucial to gender politics and gender writing. She argued that the suffering of women differs by class. She affirms that the issue of gender is not a concern for any class; thus, women of all communities must define the role of social perception in the construction of women. The mentality of writers, whether male or female, is very significant in writing in a social context. Ebert stresses naturalization when discussing the male/female binary, particularly in patriarchal societies. She argues that writing is different in different cultures because "it is also a political exercise" (p. 88); therefore, there is a

"controversy within feminism itself over theoretical, political, social and strategic priorities" (Ebert, 2017, p. 88). She asserted that the purpose of writing should be to promote the natural monotony between women and men so as to curtail this controversy through the belief that essential human nature is governed by a sensible consciousness that dwells in both women and men.

Juliet Mitchell, in her article "Women and Equality" (1984), asserted the need to record social and liberal democratic ideas to affirm the equality between men and women and to balance society. She asserts that feminists not only talk about women's rights but also about the "beneficial relationship between women and men" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 32). Dunbar (1980), however, believed it difficult because many women had been taught from their childhood a primitive concept of womanhood or maternity that constructs their consciousness and made them "cooperative and flexible" (p. 50). Therefore, it is challenging for them to talk about equality because they cannot oppose patriarchy. Carol Gilligan (1982) argued that men and women are constructed in distinct social forms of ethical reasoning and moralities: women are related to ethics of concern and ethics of responsibility (p. 23). Ebert (2017) stated that females as a group are peaceful, healing, creative, and non-dominating, whereas patriarchal institutions and practices have generated violent, dominating, exploitative, and destructive ways, so they became more associational, emotional and sensuous in their opinion (p. 91). Therefore, it is not possible to trust men under whom women's lives are subjugated.

Focusing on women subjugation, Maria Stewart (1879) favored writings on the subjugation of women to highlight women's self-reliance and independence. She claims that women are subordinated or inferior to men based on race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. Such social othering encountered by women is a wake-up call for feminists, as "[i]t is useless for [women] any longer to sit with [their] hands folded, reproaching the [man] for that will never evaluate [them]" (Stewart, 1879, p. 53). Eva Hunt (1998) asserted that texts can change people's thinking about social taboos, especially in third-world countries where women cannot speak because they lack freedom of thought and expression. In an interview with Vera, she argued for women who were subordinated by both white and black men. She exhorts to write about this subordination, as "writing is resistance [and t]o write is to banish silence" (Hunt, 1998, p. 93).

3. Research Methodology

Ecriture feminism lets women write to view women's bodies as metaphors for everything that has been repressed by traditional philosophical discourses. It is not that a woman writes in feminist style because she is a woman but she is a woman in a system that privileges men where she is put in prison, gets down with the apartheid tradition, and is presented as inferior just for her body and color. Helen Cixous (1976), the founder of ecriture feminism and a French

existentialist, argued that one-way portrayals could spoil the present and the past. She says whatever has been done in the past should not be repeated; therefore, women must define their problems or sufferings, their experience of injustice, their confinement in the social hierarchy, or in the narrow rooms where they hardly breathe to fill their space from which they always kept away (Cixous, 1976, p. 12). Because these memories are present in them, they can explain them better in a way that they can do something for themselves. To move forward, they must replace new things with old ones and must talk about the unbelievable struggle of women and their importance in society and history. In the past, many poets have presented women as loving, emotional, but weak. They viewed her as a mother, sister, daughter, or beloved according to their thoughts, feelings, and emotions; therefore, they altered the feelings of the readers and made them pointless. Consequently, readers and social members dreamt of her as a fairy, not a woman. A woman who could not meet her expectations must be a monster or Medusa.

For Cixous, writing is a powerful weapon for women that they can use to secure or identify their characters. She argued that if women write about women, they can easily return to their bodies, which had been presented as a mystery. Writing herself, she can discover her body because writing is a powerful act that proves her womanly power and gives them the real pleasure of their inner feelings without any guilt they could not express under masculine power. A woman with the absence of the body is silent, speechless, and visionless; therefore, she is not a good fighter to fight for her rights, thus consequently becoming the servant of a man. Cixous urges women to destroy this false picture of a weak woman and reconfigure it in ways that are different from the conventional conception of a woman. She stated that every new thing was appreciated because it replaced the old; however, feminine theories that replaced the old patriarchy were criticized (Cixous, 1976).

4. The Hierarchy of Shades in American White Society

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a 20th-century well-known Afropolitan writer who grew up in the town of Nsukka in Nigeria, a country with complex cultural background. Her work has demonstrated her concern for addressing issues related to immigration, gender, and race, thus propelling her to the international stage. Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) highlights the socio-political issues of women of color and, through the characters' migration to the United States, she portrays issues of gender and race in the story and their impact on immigrants' identity transformation. This study examines the impact of gender and racial discrimination on the identity formation of women of color. Adichie challenges the white gaze and argues that the disgusting and discomforting issues of racism and gender in the United States make the voices of Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou louder.

Adichie chooses Nigeria for the initial setting of *Americanah*, a country whose cultural background is deeply embedded in colonization, economic imbalance, and socio-political unrest

and instability. She portrays citizens with complex cultural backgrounds that may be involved in the idealization and crystallization of a 'diaspora of hope'. Arjun Appadurai (1996/ 2003) was the pioneer of the term "diaspora of hope" who differentiates it from the other two categories of Diasporas: "[W]e may speak of diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, and diasporas of despair" (Appadurai, 1996/ 2003, p. 6). Those immigrants are more privileged and find themselves entangled in the first category of diaspora than those who are involved in the latter two categories because their homeland, which is embedded in social and political unrest, may not provide them with much more wealth and fame. Thus, they move toward their dreamed land where they can earn more wealth and privileges. However, when they find themselves unable to make ends meet in their dreamed land, they can choose to return to their homeland. *Americanah* (2013) describes the journey of women of color from a non-existent state to 'being' that is full of angst. Adichie exposes the sufferings of a Nigerian woman who migrated to the United States for quality education. She receives a fake identity card from Aunt Uju when she is in dire need of work. Adichie's portrayal of Ifemelu illuminates how whites view African women migrants as despised by Whites solely for being women of color. During her identity transformation, Ifemelu exhibits a firm character that overcomes the issues of racism and gender and finally becomes self-independent. As a Nigerian immigrant, she had to face discrimination in her quest for self-identity because the role of gender is crucial in the process of identity formation.

By focusing on the hurdles and challenges that Ifemelu experiences in the process of her identity formation, my research will contend how in *Americanah* (2013), Adichie confronts the White Gaze and presents the experiences of women of color. This paper analyzes how gender and race have threatened the lives of women of color in the United States and how a black female, Ifemelu, confronts the challenges and inconveniences that eventually emerge in America. To propagate this analysis, this study explores how race determines the quality of life of Ifemelu and other women of color and makes them stand apart because of their skin color. Adichie presents the bitter reality of placing women of color at the very bottom of the racial ladder and demonstrates how under the yoke of predominantly white culture, opportunities are confined and destinies are dwarfed.

As Nigeria's background is embedded in tribal conflicts, socio-political unrest, economic instability, and colonial struggles, many Nigerians, including Emenike, Aunty Uju with her son Dike, Ginika's family, Okoli Okafor, the Zed, Obinze, Ifemelu, and their respective friends, migrate to their "dreamed" land with a "diaspora of hope", exploring opportunities that would permit them to thrive. Nevertheless, some disjointed pieces i.e., "shoes which … touched the snow", "Fresh Prince of Bel-air", "Huckleberry Finn" and "BBC" (Adichie, 2013, p. 34) are sparkling objects that often built their perception of the country of arrival. On their arrival in their "dreamed" lands like America and England, these Nigerian immigrants first confronted racial discrimination and segregation. They step into this background with their heads full of

dreams and the bitter reality of "race" quickly bites them. Unlike the United States, Nigeria does not suffer racism, despite its complex cultural context. Ifemelu wishes that race would not have been an issue. All Black people wished it were not. But it is not true. She grew up in a country where race was irrelevant: "I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie, p. 290). Adichie's concern for depicting the sufferings and discrimination that black female immigrants encounter in adapting to a white supremacist culture is illuminated here. This statement exposes the acknowledgment of becoming Black under the influence of a white gaze.

This reminisces us of Frantz Fanon's experience in the United States as he describes his arrival in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008): "I was up against something unreasoned" (p. 89). In Fanon's opinion, there is nothing more neurotic than coming into contact with unreason for a man whose only weapon is weapons. This "unreason" defines the reason behind racial discrimination, as this study does not find any rational explanation for discriminating blacks from whites just for their skin color. Adichie portrays this "unreason" when a taxi driver despised Eminike based on the color of his skin. One evening on Upper Street, he called a cab; the light was on from a distance, but as the cab got closer, it went out, leading him to believe that the driver was not on duty. He noticed the cab light was back at a short distance up the street after the cab passed him by. "[It] stopped for two White women" (p. 275). When Eminike first disclosed this to Obinze, his hatred and anger were obvious "he was shaking … his hands trembling for a long time, *a little frightened by his own feelings*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 275, emphasis added). The taxi driver ignored him because of his dark skin, which he had never conversed with.

In *the Americanah community*, female immigrants of color were alienated from a white supremacist society from the perspective of others. Adichie establishes Ifemelu's hurdles and inconveniences as a Black woman in America. Once she lands on American soil, her first confrontation is with racism while adjusting to the situation and adapting the cultural identity of the mainstream society to construct her identity in it, but ultimately, she finds herself in absolute isolation. In a short time, she acknowledged that because of her skin color, she had been made to 'belong' to the disadvantaged group. She becomes conscious of her blackness only after she sets foot on a cultural territory. One of her blog posts exposes this consciousness of blackness and warns all black immigrants: "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby … America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now" (Adichie, 2013, p. 220). Everybody has a moment of being initiated into the society of former Black people. When asked to present a black perspective in an undergraduate class, she had no notion of what a black perspective was. Thus, she simply made something out of it. Aunt Uju is judged and rejected as a woman of color in a white supremacist society in the same way. She tells Ifemelu that the guard said to her that black people never do anything right and when she went to the public library the other day and failed to take out the book: "How she

walked into an examining room and a patient asked: "Is the doctor coming?" and when she said she was the doctor the patient's face changed to fired clay" (Adichie, p. 182). She called that afternoon to ask for her file transferred to a different doctor's office. This statement shows the resentment of the guard and patient not only for Aunty Uju but also for the whole race of Black women. Adichie demonstrates that even Uju's profession cannot provide her protection from racial discrimination in England, where she is a doctor. This exposes the prevalence of the "unreason" in our societies that Fanon experienced on his arrival in the United States. Adichie exposes the blows of racism and shows that women of color are oppressed and othered not only by White people but also by white and brown women. She articulates this racial ladder or the hierarchy of shades to show that a woman of color is to be at the very bottom of the ladder. Ifemelu stated in a blog post that the United League of the Oppressed does not exist. In the white community, everyone else believes that Black people are superior. Lili, a Spanish-speaking, coffee-skinned, black-haired housekeeper for Aunt Uju in a small New England town, made demands, cleaned the house improperly, and behaved disrespectfully. Although Aunt Uju is her employer, she considers herself superior because of the hierarchy of shades. She feels that she is entitled to act like a White woman solely for being "coffee-skinned" (Adichie, 2013, p. 205). Thus, she uplifts herself through her arrogant behavior.

Adichie's (2013) presentation of women of color reveals how the entire race of Black women is treated in several ways by their color and body. For example, Ifemelu's refusal does not address her as an individual but to all women of color when the Asian receptionist denies shaping Ifemelu's eyebrows by claiming that they "*don't do curly*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 292, emphasis added). She says: "Maybe they've never done a black woman's eyebrows and so they think it's different, because our hair is different, after all, but I guess now she knows the eyebrows are not that different (Adichie, 2013, p. 292). Ifemelu's use of the possessive pronoun "our hair" while discussing it with Curt shows Ifemelu's acknowledgment that the receptionist does not limit herself to excluding Ifemelu but the entire group of Black women. Here, Adichie demonstrates that issues of racism and gender prevail because of 'ignorance' and "there's a ladder of racial hierarchy" (Adichie, 2013, p. 184), and the hierarchy of shades will rank the people on this ladder. American blacks are always at the bottom, and white, or more precisely, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, are always at the top. What lies in the middle varies depending on the period and location: "If you are white, you're all right; if you are brown, stick around; if you are black, get back!" (Adichie, 2013, p. 184). The receptionist's refusal to let Ifemelu in for treatment shows her instinctive superiority on the grounds of racial hierarchy.

In *I Know WhytheCaged Bird Sings* (2000), Maya Angelou displays a despised attitude toward black women when she is rejected by a white receptionist for the job of a conductorette. Likewise, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison presents the same resentment for the Black race when the little girl Pecola is ill-treated by a white migrant storekeeper solely because of her skin color. Such incidents of instinctive superiority in seminal Black novels expose the fabric of

American racism and white supremacy. They show that people with white skin can choose to make Black people disappear because their skin color ranks them above the hierarchy of shades. Stereotypical racist remarks about whites not only segregate and discriminate against women of color but also make them disappear. Ifemelu states: "[R]ace is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not a genotype; race is phenotype" (Adichie, 2013, p. 337). Race matters because of racism. Because racism is based solely on appearance, it is also absurd, not about blood type. It is related to the hue of the skin, shape of the nose, and direction of hair curls. Ifemelu confronts racial discrimination against White women in America who have relationships with Curt. For instance, each time Ifemelu and Curt hold each other, white Americans not only make her invisible but look astonished, "a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not and in their expression was the question "why her?" (Adichie, 2013, p. 290). Adichie presents many such instances in which Ifemelu is segregated and discriminated against by white Americans. When they walked into a restaurant with linen-covered tables, and the host looked at them and asked Curt: "Table for one?" Curt hastily told her the host did not mean it "like that". And she wanted to ask him, "How else could the host have meant it?" When the owner of the bed-and-breakfast in Montreal refused to acknowledge her as they checked in, a steadfast refusal, smiling and looking only at Curt, she wanted to tell Curt "how slighted she felt, worse, because she was unsure whether the woman disliked Black people or liked Curt. But she did not because he would tell her she was overreacting or tired or both" (Adichie, p. 294). This discourse depicts Ifemelu's refusal from her host or owner, which excludes her and makes her feel inferior and invisible. bell hooks in *Ain't I Woman* (1987) claim: "White Americans have legally relinquished the apartheid structure that once characterized race relations but they have not given up white rule"(p. 63). The act of ignoring Ifemelu's presence in the above instances is a prime example of what hooks (1987) calls a "systematic devaluation of black womanhood … a calculated method of social control"(p. 60). The perpetuity of the unwritten rules is attested by people who ignore Ifemelu's presence and only see Curt.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that Adichie's women of color are psychologically deteriorated by their new environment. Rajan et al. elucidated this concept in *Dreaming Mobility, Buying Vulnerability* (2013) as "the vicious and endless cycle of debt … and the tall expectations of their families back at home, which often leads to desolation and sometimes forces them to resort to the extreme step of suicide" (p. 86). Although this study does not find Ifemelu guilty of physically committing suicide, she is overwhelmed with profound despair and completely alienates herself from society when her financial crisis compels her to become involved in sex.

Adichie's literary technique gives her novels a new dimension that allows her to deal overtly and vehemently with gender and race. She exposes how the women are forced to undergo transformation by adopting a foreign accent to survive in their host country. They suffer the loss

of their true selves by distancing themselves from their intrinsic roots. At first, Adichie's protagonist Ifemelu appeared to us as an optimistic and successful immigrant. She was enticed by her when she became financially independent and intellectually recognized through her friendship with Curt. Nevertheless, a close examination of Adichie's representation of Ifemelu reveals that her portrayal is not as optimistic as presented in the idea of hybridity by Homi K Bhabha (1990).

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