
HAIR AND RACE RELATIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A BLACK FEMALE CHARACTER IN *AMERICANAH* BY CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE

CABELO E RELAÇÕES RACIAIS NA CONSTRUÇÃO DE UMA PERSONAGEM MULHER E NEGRA EM AMERI- CANAH DE CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE



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Resumo/Abstract

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O objetivo deste artigo é investigar como o cabelo de Ifemelu, personagem principal do romance *Americanah*, de Chimamanda Adichie, pode ser visto como uma estratégia para questionar o padrão branco imposto às pessoas negras, tanto em termos estéticos quanto em termos de vivências. Demonstra as complicadas relações raciais estabelecidas no romance e compreende o significado da descoberta da raça por Ifemelu e suas consequências em sua vida, suas experiências e sua relação com seu corpo – especialmente seu cabelo – e seu eu.

cabelo, identidade, Literatura Africana, Chimamanda Adichie

The aim of this paper is to investigate how hair in Chimamanda Adichie's construction of Ifemelu, the main character of the novel *Americanah*, might be faced as a strategy to question and escape the White norm that has been imposed on Black people as both a beauty standard and a way of living. It demonstrates the complicated racial relations in the novel and establishes the meaning of Ifemelu's discovery of race and its consequences in her practical life, in her experiences, and her relationship with her body – especially her hair – and herself.

hair, identity, Female African literature, Chimamanda Adichie

Introduction

Americanah (2013) is Chimamanda Adichie's most recent novel. It 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 Ifemelu is presented to the reader as a successful woman living in the USA. The character is a Black¹ female immigrant, coming from a turbulent postcolonial context, who establishes herself professionally and intellectually, finding her voice in her career as a blogger who talks about race – an issue that came to be very important to her after migrating to the United States.

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 article, we propose to discuss how race relations start to have greater impact in Ifemelu's identity construction from the moment she migrates from Nigeria to the United States of America. We attempt to investigate these racial relations in the novel and to establish the meaning of Ifemelu's discovery of race and its consequences in her practical life, in her experiences, and her relationship with her body – especially her hair – and herself. In order to achieve these goals, this paper begins with the establishment of a theoretical framework about the concept of race and its relations to gender and coloniality. We proceed to explore some of Ifemelu's experiences with race in the context of the United States of America and how they affect the construction of her identity in the novel, her relationship with her own hair and, ultimately, her own sense of self and self-esteem.

Colonialism and the creation of race

In *Black skins, white masks*, Frantz 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 came to shape the Black individuals's view of themselves and of the group to which they belong.

Ania Loomba's (1998) argument is that the relationship between race and colonial exploitation is a dialectic one, considering how both racial assumptions and stereotypes helped give rise to and were nurtured by economic exploitation. The author tells us about the establishment of stereotypical images of different peoples, 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 oth-

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.

er, 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 to explain certain cultural and civilizational characteristics. 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, Anne McClintock (1995) adds that the theory of evolutionism increased the tendency to determine racial worth based on the geometry of the body. 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 Charles Darwin, a “tree of evolution” was created 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.

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 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 as a discursive category, as defined by Stuart Hall (2001). Since there is no biological evidence capable of uniting the number of differences dispersed within a particular race, we may 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.

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. The term Black is, thus, used by Stuart Hall (2001) as a possibility of identification that might have different meanings in different contexts. 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.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu claims only to have discovered herself Black in America. 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”.

In the case of Ifemelu, the particularities of discovering herself Black in America must also be taken into account. Oyèrónké 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 (2003) 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

‘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, 2003, 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).

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 simply be defined in black and white terms, especially in contexts such as the American one. With regard to the racial situation in the United States, Susan 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. The author 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 in her blog reflections.

In the novel, 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 of Ifemelu's blog in the novel, the writer character 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 and its relations as contextual, as previously defined in our discussions in this paper.

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 a Black female 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".

The ways in which Ifemelu's comprehension of race is in alignment with the perspectives here outlined also becomes 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.

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

Considering the racial relations in Ifemelu's new country, in this paper we chose to focus on Ifemelu's relationship with her hair as a form of resistance that is produced in the imposition of a racialized identity upon the character, considering that 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 they are presented or seen vary 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. 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.

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. 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.

The reasons for this politicizing of Black hair in the US have their roots in the history of slavery in the country. 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.

When approaching more specifically the experiences of Black women in relation to their hair, Teiahsha Bankhead and Tabora Johnson (2014) also highlight 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, 2014, 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 people’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.

As a matter of fact, Charisse Jones and Kumea 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.

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. The known dichotomy ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ hair is pervasive in our societies and 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. 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 we 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 NAB², 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.

Considering, thus, 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, we 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, my analysis shows how Ifemelu’s choice of wearing her natural hair comes to be a very political one.

For Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019), *Americanah* brings hair as a key element both in the narrative and in identity construction. For her, “transitioning becomes a trope for identifying, 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 the novel 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 begin to have a direct effect on Ifemelu’s life. After experiencing a traumatic event 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. 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) 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

² According to context, in Ifemelu’s blog, the initials AB and NAB are used, respectively, for ‘American Black’ and ‘Non-American Black’.

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 the result of combining and institutionalized pressures of gender and race.

Even so, the devastating effects of this change in her self-perception are not less pervasive. In spite of the fact that this could 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), “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 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, 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 an 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 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 rela-

tions stated by Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) and Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019) between Black female hair and professionalism.

We can see how Ifemelu must 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 but also a fear of the consequences such hair change might have in her professional environment.

Despite all these complications, Ifemelu maintains her natural hair and, thus, begins one of her journeys through self-knowledge and self-love. One important feature of this journey is a website indicated by a friend. Because she is unable to look at herself in the mirror with her new hair and refuses 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.

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 returning to Nigeria, the critic interprets it as an attempt to recapture her African-ness by reconstructing one of her identity elements.

Conclusion

As we hope our analysis in this paper has shown, hair in *Americanah* works as an important metaphor of Ifemelu's journey to discover her own female and African self.

In her migration from Nigeria to the United States, Ifemelu sees herself positioned into new and complicated race relations, which have a direct impact on her perception of her self. Because Ifemelu only 'discovers' race when she moves to the US, she does not seem to internalize the negative stereotypes related to Black people in the same way many Americans around her have. Nevertheless, the intricate and structural ways in which racial relations take place in America have a direct impact in how Ifemelu is perceived and inserted in society.

As previously outlined, being a Black female immigrant defines the spaces she is allowed to occupy and her positions within her new country. Such definitions have practical consequences in her life and her experiences, impacting, for example her chances of getting a good job and securing her permanence in the US. In face of this newly experienced exclusion based on body traits, her relationship with her own body and her own self begins to change and she starts to believe the narrative which states that it is necessary to change herself in order to be accepted and to be successful. The straightening of her hair is the most physical symbol of such a change in perception.

On the other hand, the posterior process of transitioning to natural hair, learning to take care of and to love her own hair within this context represents the creation of a possibility of resistance to the hegemonic forces that impose White (beauty) as the norm. In

the acceptance and love for her own hair, the character creates a revolutionary acceptance of her own self, which allows for a re-construction and a re-signification of Ifemelu's African and female identity.

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