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**RECONSTRUCTING THE AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORIC WOMAN:
GENDER, RACE, CLASS AND THE MAKING OF A CONSTRUCTIVE
RADICAL AFRICAN FEMINIST**

BY

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DISSERTATION

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature
in the Graduate School of
Binghamton University
State University of New York
2018**

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Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature
in the Graduate School of
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of New York
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Abstract

This dissertation takes a generational look at issues of identity construction of the African and African diasporic woman, in regard to gender, race/ethnicity and class, from the late twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century African women's fiction writing. This dissertation examines Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and the journey of Aissatou, its female character, to establish not only the sort of debut of the diasporic African woman's migration, but also her self-expression through her choices and views vis-à-vis patriarchal and imperialist institutions, hence she overturns gender, race/ethnic and class institutions of her society. Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* has also been discussed along with *So Long a Letter* to enhance the discussion on the debut of the African woman's migration and her self-representation and self-assertiveness in the African diasporic arena. To establish how the identity construction and the choices of this type of female character evolves in African migration literature, the dissertation uses Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Americanah* and its approach to societal institutions that affect her protagonist, Ifemelu, in terms of gender, race/ethnicity and class. While *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah* place the African woman at the center of their narrative, they also take interest in the relationship between the female character and her male counterpart. From this perspective, this dissertation establishes that the story of the African male characters, in the diasporic context, intersects with as well as parallels with the story of the female characters. This intersection establishes the ground for the critique of patriarchal and imperialist institutions in both the host and home places; institutions that affect the gender, race/ethnicity and class identity of the female character, not only as a woman, but as a black, and as a minority. *Americanah* also creates instances where

mainstream views and concepts of social constructs regarding gender, race/ethnicity and class have been turned upside down. Thus, for instance, the reader becomes the witness of a transnational phenomenon of reverse migration in terms of class between, a said majority, Nigel, and a minority, Obinze.

Mainstream African feminism and the African worldview in general have argued against and rejected any sort of radicalism in their approach to social issues, especially, women's issues. This dissertation argues that the African and African diasporic woman in both *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah* present radical, yet constructive qualities which ensure her social mobility. I establish that her radicalism is contextualized in African culture and therefore does not seek to destroy the core values of African culture and beliefs. The female characters discussed in this dissertation have been radical towards both their home and host countries' institutions and expectations that affect them as black, minorities, and women. In both novels, the female characters question discriminatory institutions; moreover, in particularly *Americanah*, the female protagonist questions not only discriminatory social constructs and institutions outside her identity, but also those that she identifies with. Thus, a particular attention has been given to the notion of alterity/other and 'self' in the process of identity construction of the African radical feminist.

The dissertation reasonably argues that African feminism has a contextualized radicalism in African culture and African worldview. Yet, it has simply rejected the attribute of radical mainly due to the leanings of western radical feminism with which most Africans do not identify. Thus, this dissertation fills a gap in African feminist scholarship, and also in African diasporic and global migration discourse with a

theoretical perspective of African constructive radical feminism. It calls upon scholars across disciplines, gender and race/ethnicity, and class spectrums to further research in these perspectives and carry on the project of a fair and new world for all, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, and class that this dissertation project has begun.

The dissertation ends with a short public opinion piece on issues of illusion and disillusion in migration, with the aim to contribute solutions to the endemic migration tragedy, turning into a form of modern slavery of Africa and its youth population. Here, in addition to using current news to discuss the issue of illusion and disillusion in migration, I have used Adichie's *Americanah* and two short stories—“The Thing Around Your Neck” and “The Arrangers of Marriage”—from her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

Dedication

First, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to God, my Strength and my Redeemer! To my lovely and dear son Dgidula, you are everything to me. Thank you for bearing my long absences, for staying with babysitters, friends, and even spending the night with them sometimes; all because your mom alone couldn't always handle all the stress and the workload! Your name Dgidula means, God Is the Winner! And yes, God has won for us. He has given you and me victory over all! I Love You So Much! A special dedication to my dear and beloved father, the late Essoneya Toyou Emmanuel Patabadi. Thank you! You have made sure I'm educated. Unfortunately, death has taken you too soon. I would like to honor you with this doctoral dissertation! I wish you were still alive to see this day and to celebrate it with me. "Docteur Vétérinaire," as your friends used to affectionately address you, today, your daughter has become a Doctor in Philosophy. May your Soul Rest in Peace! To my dearest mother, Adigbli Afi Kafui Alice Dieu-Donne. Your unfailing support and sacrifice for us, especially when papa left this world and things became hard, has made me realize how you love and care and how you always wished you could have had more to offer your children. Thank you for your support throughout my graduate studies in the US and through all the hardship I encountered here. I would like to thank the support group God has put on my way in Binghamton: my dear friends Susie and Gary Ganoung, their family and friends; the International Students Incorporated volunteers, Bill and Wendy Stephen, Kate and Brian, Tammie and Kevin McCauley, Alice and David Allison, Sue Briggs, Lee Douglas, and the group director David Larson, his wife Beth; Kathy and Feyi Gaji, Sue and the beloved Gary French, and our Pastor and wife Alex and Bethany Howarth and their kids, and all the members of New Hope Presbyterian Church. In various ways, you have shown God's Love to me and my son, you prayed, you supported emotionally, financially, and materially, you gave us a roof when we had nowhere to stay, you babysat Dgidula, and the list goes on. Pages will be filled, if I have to list them all. May God continue to bless you and your

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Introduction:

Introducing the African Woman Migration: A Generational Overview

Migration in the twentieth century African literary discourse, has for the most part been considered a male experience, and women have been mainly characterized as wives who migrate to join their husbands. In *Second Class Citizen* (1974) for instance, Buchi Emecheta illustrates such a reality when Ada, the main breadwinner of the family and a librarian, was told by her in-laws to hold back on her dreams to migrate to England until after her husband migrates there as a student, after which she can join him as his wife. This male dominated migration discourse is alluded to in the following comment of Adesayo Adelowo, Liz Smythe and Camille Nakhid (2016), “Traditionally, women are seen as family dependants that migrate only to join their husbands. [...]. Unlike the period when migration from Africa was dominated by men, the women [participants in the field study of these co-authors] shared stories of migration in order to secure educational and economic opportunities for their children, and to access opportunities for professional development.” (52-58). Thus, as early African women writers started to gain ground on the African literary scene, these women started writing their own stories, correcting such images and even changing the story of migration as it had been represented and discussed thus far. And as, Adelowo et al. (2016) further add, “[t]he women presented themselves as active in decisions regarding their migration” (ibid.). Thus, not only did early writings such as Buchi Emecheta’s *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) start representing the migration story of the African woman and reconstructing her diasporic identity, but also writings such as *So Long a Letter* of Mariama Bâ have served, in my viewpoint, to present migration as a choice and an option for the African woman to escape some traditional oppressive institutions that hinder the

fulfillment of women. Thus, I view the story of migration of the African woman to have taken a few different forms in the twentieth century, from that of being a dream, an ambition, to being an option to escape from oppression to fulfillment.

One may ask, “since when have Africans been migrants?” It is worth highlighting that as argued by a few scholars, for instance Jayne O. Ifekwenigwe (2003), Africans—both males and females—have for a long time been migrants. Ifekwenigwe identifies two periods in the history of African migrants, the pre-Colombian and post-Colombian African diasporas. And as some scholars such as Khalid Koser (2003) maintain that slavery marks the main focus of African diasporic literature with a tendency to view it as starting in the post-Colombian migration (1), Ifekwenigwe argues that the forced migration of continental Africans due to the transatlantic slave trade does not constitute the first African diaspora (57). Beginning in the twentieth century, the history of African diaspora literature has evolved and departed from being mainly focused on slavery and its descendants—namely referred to as the “the African diaspora” (Koser 1) to extend to “the new African diasporas”—a form of inclusive diaspora in a plurality of forms that discuss students, professionals, asylum seekers, clandestine migrants, etc. (2-3). This plurality of African diasporas is best characterized in the writings of some twentieth and most twenty first centuries African migration writings; especially in the writings of diasporic African women writers, the focus is mostly on women’s migration and how they have also contributed, in forms and contents, to the plurality of the “new African diasporas.”

In this regard, my dissertation analyzes the story of the African woman migration from a generational perspective. It discusses Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (1979) as the

foundation of an initial African woman's migration story and the evolvement in the female identity construction. It then uses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* as a new, yet different and more contemporary approach to the same subject. In other words, this dissertation explores how the contemporary approach to storytelling and identity construction has changed the African woman's migration story and her identity construction since Mariama Bâ dealt with them nearly forty (40) years ago. Thus, I analyze the techniques that Ba and Adichie utilize in constructing their diasporic characters' identities, and establish that there is a trend of constructive radicalism in these identity constructions. I establish that the notion of radicalism should be revisited in African discourse and especially in African feminist discourse. I argue that Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Adichie's *Americanah* exhibit an African contextualized radical approach to gender, race/ethnicity, and class issues that are oppressive to women, and to society at large. For instance, as established, Bâ adopts modernism and African traditional values—that she sees empowering to African women, yet there is also a 'radicalism' or "privileges [of] women's freedom over oppressive culture and men's welfare" (Ezenwanebe 264) in her novel *So Long a Letter*. This idea of constructive radicalism constitutes along with the African female migrant story, the building block of this dissertation, and fills a gap in African feminist discourse. The dissertation establishes that the constructive radical African feminist pulls from tradition, modernity, and her personal judgment to make her choices in her identity construction and her self-assertiveness. Thus, I analyze and discuss tradition, modernity and culture, and engage with the changes occurred in the construction of the African female migrant's gender, class, ethnic and racial identity from the twentieth

to the twenty first century—specifically from *So Long a Letter* (1981) to *Americanah* (2013).

Between *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *Americanah* (2013), techniques of identity construction and the debate around the source of empowerment and liberation of the African woman and the diasporic African woman have varied and evolved. It is important to note that the debate around the source of empowerment and liberation of the African woman is rich and full of controversies. Women writers in their characterization of empowered African women have constructed and defined the source of women's liberation and empowerment from different angles—a blend of African tradition and modernity, a predominantly modern adoption, and a predominantly conservative African tradition. In *So Long a Letter* for instance, one can argue that Mariama Bâ seems to have drafted two different paradigms of liberation for the African woman—a mix or blend of tradition and modernity on one the hand, and the predominantly adoption of modern ideas on the other hand. From these two paradigms, the African woman was called upon to choose in order to liberate, define, and empower herself. It is also argued that other women writers and critics have adopted a more conservative approach, in the instance of the Ghanaian writer and critic Ama Ata Aidoo, and the "the matriarch of Nigerian drama" Zulu Sofola" (Obafemi 155 qtd in Ezenwanebe 264, 2010). These two women, for instance, have shown in their writings and theories that the source of liberation and empowerment of the African woman is within African traditional culture. As Osita Ezenwanebe (2010) notes about Zulu Sofola's traditional paradigm of liberation and empowerment,

Zulu Sofola [...] offers a traditional model for women's liberation in Nigeria. Her gender theory, like that of Aidoo, is conservative and un-ideological. She [Zulu

Sofola] never hides her reservation for Western radical feminism as a liberating model for African women. Hence, though she creates powerful female characters who interrogate oppressive norms, she situates their freedom within and not outside a cultural framework. [...] Sofola believes that Western civilization has the tendency to “de-womanise” African women. According to her, “De-womanisation” refers to modern African women who have lost hold of the liberating models in African culture. (264)

Thus, Ezenwanebe argues that Sofola as well as Aidoo offer a paradigm of predominantly conservative, an almost uni-dimensional type of liberation and empowerment to the African woman – a liberation and empowerment that are grounded in African traditional culture. According to the ideology and theory of Sofola, African traditional culture has been, at some point in time, as full of several liberating tools that the modern African woman can use to liberate herself (264).

About Ama Ata Aidoo for instance, it has been noted that her female characters—Esi, Opokuya and Fusena—in *Changes: A Love Story* (1993), present a three-dimensional paradigm of liberation and empowerment of the modern Ghanaian woman—one is a blend of tradition and modernity, the second is the exclusive western and modern oriented approach, and the third is a blend of modern, traditional and religious submission oriented. Yet, Aidoo seems to be offering while simultaneously criticizing the three different paradigms of liberation and empowerment that her narrative presents, consequently creating a complexity and dilemma in the choices that her female characters make. For instance, Aidoo has Opokuya draw her empowerment and liberation from both ends of the traditional and modern cultures and ideologies; she is well educated, and a

nurse by practice, yet Opokuya sets limits to what she considers beneficial from the western world and what she sees as Eurocentrically and politically destabilizing for the African woman and the whole African community (14-15). As such, one sees Opokuya sometimes in opposition to her friend Esi's radical choices and decisions (33-53; 93-98). Opokuya, according to Esi, seems sometimes to sound more like Esi's grandmother and mother—this gives Opokuya the image of being closer to her traditional roots and ideologies. Subsequently, she chooses to embrace most of the traditional expectations of a woman from her culture. In this sense, we see Opokuya balance her role of wife and mother with her job as a nurse, even though this usually consumes her (13-15; 34).

Esi, unlike Opokuya, draws her liberation and empowerment from a more exclusive western and modern approach. She adopts more the western and modern culture and rebels against most of the traditional expectations of her as a woman, a wife and a mother. The narrator states that Esi feels herself distanced from the world of her mother and her grandmother, and she feels that her western education has created such a distance between her and her own people (112-114). The financial power and independence in *Changes* seem to also characterize the approach to liberation and empowerment that Esi and Opokuya adopt. Thus, Esi has more financial power and independence than Opokuya. By having Opokuya maintain her marriage, her job and her children by the end of the novel, and having Esi stay lonely, suffer from depression, be unmarried, lose a close relationship with her daughter Agyaanowa, yet keeping her financial autonomy and the power and ability to choose what suits her desires, one might conclude that Aidoo seems to have not fully departed from her conservative view of the African woman's liberation and fulfillment. Consequently, one sees the unhappiness and

loneliness of Esi at the end of the novel, a situation that her western and modern revolutionary views and decisions have put her into.

The third paradigm of liberation and empowerment of the modern Ghanaian woman that is noted in *Changes* is seen in the third main female character, Fusena—whose co-wife Esi will become. Though educated, Fusena has chosen to sacrifice her teaching career ambitions to the profit of her roles as a wife, mother and a faithful believer in her Muslim religious views and practices, as well as to the benefits of her husband's Ali Kondey's educational and professional fulfillments. Fusena is characterized as one of the richest women in Accra, and her store is one of the biggest stores that has everything a customer would need; yet, her source of economic power comes through her husband Ali who has financed her business. It is noteworthy that Aidoo has endowed all these three female characters with education and economic power, and who draw their empowerment and sense of liberation from different paradigms, yet, one could conclude that Aidoo seems to assert that the modern Ghanaian woman or the modern African woman is in a dilemma and therefore can't have it all; she either gains or loses in forms of sacrificing one thing for the other; thus, her choices are all problematic, unsatisfactory and complex, within traditional, modern and religious paradigms. This challenge, dissatisfaction, and complexity are also seen through the two paradigms of liberated and empowered Senegalese women noted in Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

It is worth highlighting that the two paradigms of liberation and empowerment—traditional, and a mix of tradition and modernity—of the Senegalese or the African woman in *So Long a Letter* does not overlook Bâ's sense of nationalism, despite her

approach to link the Senegalese or African woman's liberation to modernity and the colonial school. Hence, Bâ's indirect critique of anticolonial male literature in the subjugation of gender issues in their literary productions. In other words, Bâ's position and choice to adopt modernism and praise the colonial school in women's liberation and empowerment come from her critical stand on the anti-colonial male writers' agenda and how they deal with gender issues. To illustrate this negligence of gender in the anticolonial nationalists' agenda, Ezenwanebe notes, "Ladele rightly observes that the literary legacies of anti-colonialist male writers generally subsume gender issues within their potently masculine national ideology" (263).

Additionally, Ezenwanebe's critique on gender issues and theory in Nigerian playwrights' works maps out the gender discourse around various paradigms of liberation and empowerment of the woman, in African literature. She sketches three groups of African feminist critics and theorists. The first group—which she calls the first generation of Nigerian gender theorists and critics—advocates conservatism of African traditional cultures and values, while the second generation, a more radical one, opts for the western radical¹ feminism (264). According to her, the second generation—the radical feminist “privileges women's freedom over oppressive culture and men's welfare [...] dismantling both man and oppressive cultural traditions on their way to freedom²” (ibid.). Among this second generation of African radical feminists she identifies, are writers and critics such as, Tess Onwueme (2009) and Stella Dia'Oyedapo (2002), “Tess

¹ This notion of western radicalism in Africa is reconsidered in this dissertation, and looked at from an alternate perspective—the contextualization of radicalism in African feminism.

² Does the very fact that the second group “privileges women's freedom over oppressive culture and men's welfare [...] dismantling both man and oppressive cultural traditions on their way to freedom” make of them radicals? This question is elaborated under new horizons in this research project.

Onwueme and Stella Dia'Oyedapo for example, employ the radicalism of core Western (radical) feminism in addressing women's issues in their plays" (264). The third generation of gender theorists and critics Ezenwanebe identifies is indicative of the balance between tradition, modernity and feminist ideas. According to her, the third group or third generation, otherwise called the contemporary gender theorists "seek[...] to harmonize the gains of traditional aesthetics with those of radical feminism by eliminating the ineffectual assertion of [conservative] female protagonists and the violence-ridden, counter productivity of [...] radical feminists" (265). In Ezenwanebe's view, the contemporary gender theorists contextualize gender discourse and radical feminism within African culture in order to preserve the basic values of African life, while simultaneously "emphasiz[ing] women's empowerment [...], strong individualistic and collective contestation, and hence, foreground[ing] strong female characters that not only dare but transcend gender oppression" (ibid.). From Ezenwanebe's metacritique of gender theories in African literary discourse, I infer that the contemporary gender theorists, in fact, adopt a constructive radical feminism agenda in the context of African cultures. However, the term radicalism dreaded in African discourse, is viewed and understood as negative and un-African, and therefore has been altogether avoided by Osita Ezenwanebe.

Probably at this point, it is worth wondering whether 'radicalism' means 'violence' to African core values, because according to Ezenwanebe, the second generation of gender theorists embrace western radical feminism and do violence to African values in their agenda to liberate women from oppressive cultural traditions. It is also worth inquiring and discussing whether there is violence in African radical

feminism? What is radical feminism? And what is African contextualized radical feminism, which I coin, African constructive radical feminism? These questions, and many more, need addressing. According to Finn Mackay—a British feminist scholar, in a reflection about her book *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (2015), “[r]adicalism [sic] feminism often seems to serve as the vessel or totem which signifies a feminism gone too far, an extreme example of feminism and a destination at which no sane person would presumably wish to arrive” (334). In Mackay’s words, radical feminism is characterized by extremism and is subject to stereotypes that aim to curtail women’s choices. As Finn MacKay (2015) notes, radical feminism or a radical feminist is viewed by society as the one who dares to do what no sane person would do. In this case, sanity is associated with morality and respect of established rules and norms. Consequently, a norm or rulebreaker is insane and radical, in this very context of our discussion. In this regard and for so long, the term ‘radicalism’ has been excluded from African discourse and African feminist discourse, similar to how the term ‘feminism’ had been rejected by several early African women scholars before it was redefined and contextualized in African culture and discourse.

In fact, feminism had been regarded as un-African and western imported into African culture (Latha, 2001; Aidoo, 1998; Adichie, 2014), therefore, any woman who held feminist ideas was regarded as a rebel that had been brainwashed by western ideas. For instance, Adichie (2014) recounts that the first time her male friend called her ‘a feminist’ because of the opinions she held, she sensed from her friend’s tone that she was like a supporter of terrorism (8). Even though feminist ideas and practice were inherent in most African cultures, they were not called “feminism” or “feminist” per se, and so have

been argued by most as un-African and western imported. “Feminism” in those days was likened to ‘terrorism,’ rule-breaking,’ outcast,’ ‘un-African,’ ‘rebel,’ etc. Yet, today, it has sunken into the heads of most African women and some African men as well, that being a feminist is not being a rebel, or a terrorist. Aidoo (1993), in her narrative, shows that the non-existence of a word in a language does not necessarily mean that its practice does not exist. A similar effect resonates today with the use of the word ‘radical feminist’ or ‘radical feminism’ in Africa and perhaps in the African diaspora. When one uses the term ‘radical feminism’, the interjection they receive is, “what?” “where did you learn that from?” “it is not African thinking,” “African feminism and African feminists have never been radicals,” and the list goes on and on. I’m confident that it will take time, education and sensitizing for Africans to unlearn that the term ‘a radical woman’ or ‘a radical feminist’ is not necessarily something bad, because, wait for it, a ‘radical man’ is mostly sanctioned by our African society.

For instance, in 2015 when the new Tanzanian president John Magufuli was elected, news about his new approach to ruling Tanzania and making changes hit the world. News titles such as, “New Tanzanian President John Magufuli Makes Radical Changes” (*Lusakatimes.com* 2015), “President Magufuli Makes Radical Changes - The Namibian” (*The Namibian* 2015) “Tanzania’s newly-elected President John Magufuli Implements Radical Changes,” and the like, have flooded the internet. And the “radical change” alluded to in these titles are positive changes President Magufuli has been implementing in his country since his election. If a man can be radical and bring positive changes, then why can’t a woman be radical and make positive changes? In “Narrating Feminism: The Woman Question in the Thinking of an African Radical,” Rogaiia Mustafa

Abusharaf (2004) discusses the Sudanese national and international feminist activist Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim as an African radical. Fatima Ibrahim in her interview with Abusharaf has revealed how her actions with her co-female activists have been regarded by the male dominated Sudanese government as rebellious and against Sudanese traditional culture. Ibrahim promotes sustainable radical changes and denounces any negative or radical acts that do not yield sustainable changes in the situation of women. She believes that radical changes should occur in the economic dependence of women and in traditional oppressive institutions, the two main areas that she focuses her activism on. She states, “I stressed that emancipation should entail an ability to rid ourselves of traditions harmful to the well-being of their practitioners and that we should be able to think critically about oppressive practices that become tools for women’s oppression. To me, emancipation meant transcending culturally sanctioned oppressive practices” (155). While Ibrahim’s statement calls for an eradication of oppressive traditional practices, it does not mean a complete riddance of all our traditions; for that could be nonsense and absolute extremism and negative radicalism. What is meant is a radical turndown of any traditions that harm the wellbeing of its people, in this case women. She further sustains that women should transcend oppressive practices that society approves of and corroborates for male supremacy and privilege.

Other African feminists have held similar views as Ibrahim, yet their approach seems to lean more toward African traditions than Ibrahim’s. For instance, African feminists, activists and theorists such as Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), Chikwenye Okondjo-Ogunyemi (2006), Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo (1996), Mary Kolawole (1997; 1999), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Osita Ezenwanebe (2012; 2006), to mention just few, have held

views that promote a compromise between traditional and modern practices that liberate the African woman. In Ezenwanebe's words for instance, a friendly and sustainable context that should "preserve the basic fabrics of African life" is the type of emancipatory strategy that African women should aspire to. What differentiates this group of feminists from Ibrahim is their rejection of any radicalism associated with the ideological and emancipatory strategy African women should adopt. For example, the fact that Ezenwanebe identifies a group of Nigerian feminists as radicals who adopt western radical feminism with an agenda she qualifies as "violent" and which privileges the interests of women, marks some limitations in her ideology and strategy, and this, in my view, underlines the limits in African women's actions to attain a total liberation. Therefore, I posit that transcending traditions that are oppressive to African women, in Ibrahim's sense, requires a radical turnover of oppressive practices. It is worth pointing out in Fatima Ibrahim's radical change strategy that she rejects global or universalist discourse of women's rights. Her view is deeply entrenched in the roles that history, culture, economic and political practices of a specific region play in the subordination of women (155-156). Thus, Ibrahim's advocacy for the need for change, which alludes to a radical and sustainable change in the situation of women, is a Sudanese contextualized change with due respect to Sudanese cultural values that do not oppress women but ensure their equality and equity with men and their access to power. In my view, this makes of Ibrahim a constructive radical feminist who preserves the values of her Sudanese culture. In this sense, the radical approach to oppressive issues I argue about in the life of the female characters in Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Adichie's *Americanah* is contextualized and constructive for a sustainable change in African and African diasporic

gender issues. Yet, a failure in sustainable change is doomed to sending women back in time, as Ibrahim notes fifty years after she wrote her book, *Our Path to Emancipation* (1962)³ (cited in Abusharaf, 2004).

While it is worth noting that a western radical feminism has different cultural and historical interests⁴ and goals than African constructive radical feminism that I argue for, the common goal is a desire to break from patriarchal institutions from these cultures that control and subjugate women. While my aim here is not to condemn or criticize western radical feminism, I however put a distinction between the realities in the radicalism of African radical feminists, and the radicalism of western radicals. The extremism in western radical feminism (Mackay 334, 2015), as viewed by western cultures is not comparable to what is perceived in African contextualized radicalism, the African constructive radical feminism. Most would agree that the first element that characterizes western radical feminism as extreme is its radical exclusion of male company, its anti-feminine⁵ principles, etc. yet, these are not characteristics of all that western mainstream

³ Fifty years after Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim wrote her book, *Our Path to Emancipation* (1962), she comments that “despite marked transformations of Sudanese society, the current political context—militarization, Islamization, and suppression of rights—has sent women back in time” (156). What she means is that because the political system has gone back to being male-dominated and oppressive to women after all the disruptive changes that the Sudanese Women Union (SWU, created in 1952) was able to bring to the political and traditional structures of Sudan. Thus, Sudan fails to see a sustainable change, and this failure resulted from the all too common beliefs of Sudanese men that any language about radicalism is western imported to corrupt African women. This attitude and belief of African men, Aidoo has exemplified in “The African Woman Today” (1998).

⁴ By different cultural and historical interests of the western radical feminism from African constructive radical feminism, I mean that western women have had a different reality, history and culture from those of African women, and hence, the need to stress the different goals and aims of these two tendencies. For more information on western radical feminism, please see MacKay’s *Radical Feminism: Feminist Activism in Movement* (2015).

⁵ Western radical feminist Anti-feminine principles: Its beliefs and principles that women should not, for instance, wear make-up, lip-gloss, high-heels, etc., for the western extreme radical feminism argues, among other things, that women who do so are doing it for men and therefore perpetuating the female

feminism stands for. Yet, despite the historical progress of radicalism in the West, its approach to male exclusion and exclusion of feminine characteristics have distinguished it from mainstream feminism in the West (Mackay, 2015). To draw the line back to African feminist discourse, radicalism in African feminism is constructive, productive and is not squared away at the hate of men, or a construction of a world for women without men⁶, like Katherine Frank (1987) in “Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa” falsely criticizes African women writers.

In the following, I establish characteristics of African constructive radical feminism, however, the list and ideas are not exhaustive, and could certainly be a subject of future research. I argue that African constructive radical feminism is based on choice and is characterized by what the woman chooses to make up her fulfilled and liberated life. Thus, African constructive radical feminism:

- Is a disruptive approach for a constructive change
- Embraces constructiveness, reformism, and progressive ideas against oppressive patriarchal and cultural institutions
- Is about refusing to be part of a norm defined by others.
- Is refusing to live by the expectations of others, while at the same time being candid to the values of one’s people and culture.

body’s servitude to men. C. N. Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) alludes to such feminist beliefs characteristic of the western extreme radical feminism.

⁶ Finn Mackay (2015) claims western radical feminism sees male violence as the main source of women’s control and exploitation; she identifies four criteria by which she defines western radical feminism, “first, the acceptance of the existence of patriarchy alongside a commitment to end it; second, the use and promotion of women-only space as an organizing method; third, a focus on all forms of male violence against women and their role as a keystone of women’s oppression broadly; fourth and finally, an extension of the analysis of male violence against women to include the institutions of pornography and prostitution” (334)

- Is choosing to break away from institutionalized sexism, racism, classism, without being a negative rebel whose actions harm or destroy other cultures and peoples.
- Seeks to make choices that liberate women and tend to their fulfillment without trampling down the values that advance a whole culture, a whole community of people.
- Contextualizes its needs and desires in the specific culture and history of the people it discusses.
- Does not argue that choices of liberation and fulfillment of women should go against the African cultural belief of biological relationships and reproductions. It does not go against marriage and motherhood, and leaves the free choice for each woman to choose to embrace these institutions or not. It does not call for an embracing of lesbianism, however does not intend to judge or critique western women who opt for such a sexual identity.
- It promotes the welfare of children and the whole community
- It promotes male and female reproduction for the progress of society
- It makes room for men for complementarity and collaboration between women and men.
- Is feminine and gives the woman the choice to be feminine or not
- Is about a world of parity between men and women. It is about equity and equality
- Radicalism for the African radical feminist is about a positive change, a complete eradication of the roots of oppression, biased judgments, male privileges over women, and about women's having the same rights, privileges, values, etc. as men

- **Theories and Critical Approach**

The theories and ideologies that inform my argument in this dissertation are postcolonial feminism, post-national feminism, narrative ethics of alterity/intercultural alterity, new African diasporas concept, spatial social mobility, and their intersections with constructive radical discourse in African feminism, an ideology and concept that my dissertation advances. Postcolonial feminism, as stated by Ahmad (2010) is concerned with the “inequities based on class, race, and gender that exploit and oppress women and all disenfranchised” (2). It is also about the analysis of power structures that affect individuals, cultures, nations or countries (ibid.) I argue that the experiences of female characters in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah* are respectively built around issues of gender, class, social caste, and ethnicity; and gender, race and class, but more importantly, these characters use the very tools of discrimination to transcend any forms of oppressions and inequities. Thus, the novels put into play the power relations and structures that affect men and women, whites and blacks, majorities and minorities, rich and poor, etc.

I use Hena Ahmad’s theory of post-national feminism—which she says is the new postcolonial feminism—to explain the central interests and foci of Chimamanda Adichie and Mariama Ba on gender issues in African migration literature. Hena Ahmad (2010) states that contemporary postcolonial Third World women writers shift the focus from the national question to the woman question, with women becoming the center-stage and receiving priority in terms of women’s issues (15). In this pattern, my argument moves from postcolonial feminism and its concerns with oppression of women and all disenfranchised, to a woman-centered focus, where the experiences and viewpoints of

women are at the center of African migration narratives. Yet, as conceded by Ahmad, the foci of these women's narratives on women does not utterly efface a nationalistic agenda in their works (2-3), hence the enterprise of writers such as Adichie to engage in socio-political and economic discussions on issues such as, access to power and politics, race, class, ethnicity—language, culture, religion, etc., in addition to their concerns for gender equity. Thus, these writers initiate and call for fair and equitable opportunities for all, women, men, children, blacks, whites, minorities and majorities. In other words, the woman-centered approach of contemporary African women writers in migration literature does not overlook nationalistic concerns for all disempowered people.

In their engagement with socio-political and economic discourse, these contemporary postcolonial and African diasporic women writers have their female characters posit a critical view on all cultures—both homeland and host cultures—as well as pose actions that radically disrupt established unequal, oppressive and discriminatory practices and institutions. Consequently, we see African diasporic female characters such as, Ifemelu in *Americanah*, publicly engage in conversations on race and class in America, conversations that, otherwise, would have been the rights of only Americans to do. Ifemelu blogs and gives talks on race and diversity in America. Yet, while her first talk on diversity, a talk in which she speaks her mind to a white audience is not well received, her blog is a place where she can truly speak her mind on race, class and diversity in America (*Americanah* 375-380). In a word, the female characters in *Americanah* make choices that otherwise would be qualified, from a patriarchal point of view, as radical and unethical. As mentioned earlier, radicalism coming from women, has been viewed in most cultures as negative and bad for society, just as Ama A. Aidoo

(1998) argues feminism was initially looked at as negative and bad for African women and African worldview (46). While each culture has its own realities, and some radical actions can indeed hurt the culture, not all radical actions are bad, negative and unethical. This thinking is exemplified through Finn Mackay (2015)'s view on people who condemn any form of radicalism coming from women; an act that MacKay qualifies as another way to control choices that women make. She states:

To accept or fail to comment on feminist stereotyping leaves intact the notion that there is something wrong with identifying as a [...] radical feminist. Every time this happens, the feminist choices, activist choices and arguably the sexual choices of a new generation of feminists are limited and policed. Ironically, of course, this is the precise aim of those very stereotypes, to discourage women from a feminist identification, perhaps particularly a radical feminist identification. As activists, we must not aid the backlash in this quest, but instead must reclaim such so-called stereotypes as sterling and real examples of feminism at its finest. (335)

Even though Mackay's defense for free feminist choices extends to feminist sexual choices, it equally serves well the defense of all women's choices including choices that are culturally contextualized. Thus, the radical feminist choice in my work is constructive and contextualized in African culture because it is based on radical changes that enhance the fulfillment of not only women but of all disenfranchised, and is in line with the realities of Africa and its culture, that is, it does not threaten African values but instead questions the unfair privilege that society bestows on men and asks for equity and equal opportunity for all. Mackay (2015) has a point when she calls up to defend feminist

choices, and I would add, we should all defend radical feminist choices as long as they do not hurt a culture, community or society in terms of true ethical values but rather fulfill liberating roles, individually as well as collectively. In her choices, most of which are radical, the protagonist female character Ifemelu in *Americanah*, constructs her own identity as she uses the very elements of oppression—gender, class and race—to define and position herself in her home as well as host countries; she also denounces any forms of discriminations against not only women but all disempowered, while trying to lay out particularities and different realities that affect individual women as well as all African migrant women.

The collective identity usually ignores particularities and realities of individuals and this very ignorance and absence of recognition of realities and experiences of individuals, and the identity imposed by others, is what the contemporary postcolonial feminist migration literature challenges. Personal identity is often understood to refer to ‘who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others,’ while a collective identity is an ‘absence of distinction between people of different ethnic groups.’ While the personal identity rests upon the individual and the notion of difference, either as a self-perception, an identification or representation imposed by others, or the characteristics that distinguish the individual from others, the collective identity emphasizes commonness, thus a lack of distinction. Moreover, the feminist migration literature also challenges the identity constructed and imposed on African and African diasporic women by the

‘other’⁷.’ Adichie in *Americanah* questions the identity imposed by the ‘other,’ and establishes a new and constructive relationship between the ‘self’⁸ and the ‘other.’ So, instead of an imperialistic relationship between ‘self’ and the ‘other’, the ‘self’—the one in the position of action—uses a fair rational thinking to question the unjust systems and practices of the ‘other’ in order to awake their consciousness and call for an equitable society. Also, the ‘self’ does an auto-critique of ‘self,’ personal choices and beliefs and, thus presents a fair representation of ‘self’ and the ‘other.’ In this enterprise, the ‘self’ does not position herself as superior to the other, nor does it present the other in an inferior and negative position.

It is however worth noting that this form of representation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ objects to all forms of subjective representation and identification of African and African diasporic women and all disenfranchised by the West, including Western women. In this order of thoughts, postcolonial theorists, in the instance of Chandra Tapalde Mohanty (1991) and Karina Eileraas (2007) argue that western feminism⁹ in its reductive representation of Third World women as objects of study, eternal victims who are fleeing war, oppression, political violence, famine, etc. and as “lacking political and historical agency” (Eileraas xiii), actually engage in a process of colonization of these women; a process of colonization in which Third World women, especially the migrant women, see themselves stereotyped by the Western system, both white men and white women. These

⁷ The ‘other,’ here, not only represents the western perception and identification of the African woman, but also the contemporary patriarchal African perception and identification of African and African diasporic women. It also represents: patriarchy/man/white/majority/US/UK/rich

⁸ “self” in this discussion represents: woman/black/minority/Nigeria/poor

⁹ Western feminism in this context is used to represent the mainstream western feminism

Third World women thus become subjects to identity distortion and violence. As stated by Edward Said (1978) in “In the Shadow of the West,” “[t]he act of representing others almost always involves violence¹⁰ to the subject of representation.” In this order of thoughts and to address the Western feminist politics of representing Third World women, Rey Chow in *Writing Diaspora* (1993) advocates an intersectional¹¹ approach in studying and understanding oppression and resistance (qtd in Eileraas xiv, 2007) in postcolonial women’s identity representation. From this standpoint, this chapter discusses identity of African and African diasporic women from African women’s perspectives of their own gender, class and racial experiences. The women thus take the center stage to represent the ‘self’ yet in relation to the ‘other.’

To shift the gaze of otherness and representation of Third World diasporic women, Eileeras (2007) notes that “contemporary postcolonial feminist critics like Mohanty and Chow have repeatedly called for more self-conscious and sophisticated formulation of difference, agency and representation” (ibid.). Recent postcolonial African migration fictions, in the instance of Adichie’s *Americanah* can be said to respond to that call of Mohanty and Chow, in a form that is a “self-conscious and sophisticated formulation of difference, agency and representation,” yet also a fair representation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ on issues of identity in relation to gender, race/ethnicity, and class. This is done to better understand the oppression of African and African diasporic women,

¹⁰ Edward Said’s statement is contextualized in his critique of the Western representation of the oriental world.

¹¹ The intersectionality approach is based on interpreting women’s oppression through the interrelationship of race, class, and gender. See Bonnie T. Dill and Ruth E. Zambrana’s *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice* (2009).

represent them from their own perspectives, and call for a constructive change in relationships in which equality and equity prevail.

The question of identity and identity reconstruction in African and African diasporic women and their male counterparts in women's writings call for our attention on its complexity and richness. A short historical background literature for a sound and comprehensive positioning of this discourse is thus necessary. The colonial history, its imperial enterprise and impacts on Africa and its cultures has for long been a subject of concern for African writers as they deal with questions of identity. At the onset of independence, postcolonial writers, mostly men, embarked on national liberation and national identity construction projects (Harrow iv). These projects, based mainly on male dominating principles and privileges overlooked fairness in the representation of women—the latter's interests and needs for equality, equity and progress. Thus, the representation of women in male writings, for instance, was subject to male point of views.

The representation of African and African diasporic women in silent voices and as objects of men's desires have been brought to the world mainly through the perceptions of African males' eyes. The famous writing of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), along with other writings of the same era in the instance of Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961), have been criticized for stereotyping the identity of woman in an image of wife, mother, widow, spiritual goddess, lover, prostitute, etc. Achebe's female characters in *Things Fall Apart* are mainly seen as devoted wives and mothers, with the exception of Chielo, the spiritual goddess—who, nevertheless, is portrayed no different than other 'ordinary' female characters in her daily activities. Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* was

mainly characterized as a prostitute and a mother. This is not to say that female characters have not carried out some important roles or been constructed as protagonists in some of these male writers' narratives, for example in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), E. Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), and Nzekwu's *Highlife for Lizards* (1965), to mention just a few. Yet, the commonality between most female characters in most male writings was that they were all spoken for, carved as men's possessions and were objectified.

However, the representation of women by women themselves, in the 1950s and 1960s—the time the African woman writer started to gain voice on the literary scene—has brought to light different perceptions of women. Female characters can now speak for themselves, they are conscious of their predicament and determined to change their situations. Women are then seen through their own eyes and heard through their own voices. An example of the book series *In their Own Voices*, is a vivid illustration of the determination of women writers and women to tell their own stories, and to define and represent themselves. Examples of literary fictions and autobiographies across generational women's literary productions such as *Efuru* (1966), *Une si longue lettre* (1979) translated as *So Long a Letter* (1981), *Adah's Story* (1983), *Head Above Water* (1984), *Nervous Conditions* (1988), *Changes: A Love Story* (1993), to cite just a few, have served as a turning point in the representation of women across Africa and the diaspora. The female characters have thus taken on roles—even though at times conflicted with cultural institutions and expectations—that position them as actresses of their own destiny and faith. They speak and decide for themselves and for all women, and work as agents contributing to the wellbeing and development of their communities. Efuru and Esi, respectively in *Efuru* and *Changes*, choose to embrace the type of

marriage they want; Efuru marries without a bride price or a dowry (*Efuru*), and Esi divorces her first husband and deliberately enters a polygamous relationship (*Changes*). Adah (*Adah's Story*) and Tambu (*Nervous conditions*) are conscious of racial discrimination and oppressive conditions in their lives and the society in which they live. While Esi chooses to be the type of mother she wants and not what society expects from her, hence deciding not to have more than one child for her husband Oko, but instead use much of her time for her professional development, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, middle-class professional women whose lives are met with oppressive expectations and institutions of their culture and traditions, each in her own ways defines and asserts herself in the male-dominated culture in which she lives (*So Long a Letter*). A unifying idea in the acts of these female characters, though each one's approach is distinct, is their determination to be in control of their identity and destiny, to perceive the political, economic, cultural life from their own perspectives. These female characters pose a critical view on society and define the place of women in relation to the historical, cultural, economic and political events and institutions. They represent from a female point of view the oppressive conditions of women and their dilemma in the attempt to position women in society. Thus, gender politics, race/ethnicity and class have floored the writings and interests of African women and critics.

Representations of gender politics, race/ethnicity and class from the female point of view have taken on new approaches vis-à-vis nationalism and national liberation. It is important to note that early African women writers have used two different but close approaches in their postcolonial writing for national liberation. Writers such as Ba have been pro-modern and pro-national writers as they simultaneously write for both women

and national liberation, with an emphasis on women's liberation as the basic condition for national liberation. As Ama A. Aidoo (1998) asserts in her conference address, titled "The African Woman Today," "[i]t is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer" (47). In other words, the independence of African continent should go hand in hand with the independence of women, and consequently, the postcolonial African women writers engage in socio-political, historical and economic events of their nations from women's perspectives while adopting a modern approach to liberation of women (Harrow iv). As a result, these women writers put their focus on women's liberation and use modern ideas and tools to construct new identities for female characters, enhance women's emancipation, liberation and progress. Their approach in my view, is both disruptive and radical. It is worth noting that this approach did not spare them a critique from their male counterparts who qualify their approaches as non-anticolonial (Harrow iv-v), therefore antinational.

To characterize the new approach by postcolonial women writers through their female characters' identity construction, Hena Ahmad (2010) talks about 'non-subjective identity construction' in postcolonial third world women's writings (3). Ahmad argues there is an implicit antinational stance in the construction of 'new postcolonial identities' for female characters in new postcolonial women's writings. Hence according to Ahmad, postcolonial women writers have moved from a postcolonial feminist approach to a post-national feminist approach; yet she argues this new approach paradoxically "oppose[s] and reaffirm[s] nationalistic agendas" simultaneously (2-3). The post-national feminist approach thus underlines a more women-centered approach to issues of liberation,

equality, gender, race/ethnicity, class and culture (15), yet in its critique of the role of nationalism in complicity with the patriarchal, posits its nationalistic views and concerns. Besides, post-national feminism disrupts every notion ever constructed against its women, its people, its culture, customs and practices while simultaneously sifting its own society and cultures for a more equal and equitable society in which both women and men will complement each other.

The questioning of the 'other' and 'self' in identity construction becomes an interest in the female identity construction in this dissertation, so I use Nora Berning's notion of "intercultural alterity" to analyze and discuss the new identity construction of the female character in contemporary women writers' diasporic narratives, in the instance of *Americanah*. The representation of female characters is continuously subject to change, and new women writers especially writers of the 21st century, most of whom are concerned with diasporic narratives, expose the world and their readership to new forms of identity construction of females in their writings. In these narratives, the reader is called upon to identify and question various factors that make up the identity of characters. Several writers and critics concur that factors such as, race, class, gender, language and culture, ethnicity/multi-ethnicity, geographical locality, and even age, play each a role in the identity formation of African characters. In the multiplicity and complexity of factors in identity formation, Nora Berning (2015) notes that the diasporic literature of the 21st century focuses on identity and ethical values of the 'other' and their fluid nature. In this regard, the experience of the 'other' is important in these narratives, a process of narration that Berning calls, "the narrative ethics of alterity" (2). This experience of the other, Berling notes, allows the characters to experience the

alterity/'other' and to be able to pose an ethical judgment on their own identity and the identity of the other (2). As she further states, the incentive of the ethical narrative or “the narrative ethics of alterity” rests upon the triangular interrelation between the alterity/'other', the self and the moral/ethical values (ibid.). Thus, one understands that besides the conception of multiplicity, complexity and fluidity of factors in the new identity formation of characters, the characters can ‘understand’ and define themselves vis-à-vis the experience of the other, and are free to identify and choose elements that define who they are, or who they project to be. To cover the plurality and fluidity in identity in the conception of African diasporas, Khalid Koser in his introduction to the collection of articles, *New African Diasporas* (2003), states that *New African Diasporas* depart from the dominant discourse on the African diaspora—associated with slavery and its descendants and the idea of a single and unified diaspora—to a “more recent African migrations that have created new diasporas” (2).

In other words, Koser argues that the new African diasporas’ experiences and identity constructions have moved beyond a focus on a ‘single diaspora’ and unifying characteristics—such as a “pan-African political movement, a shared cultural heritage, a common experience of ambiguous identities, and outright racism and exclusion from host societies (ibid.)—to a plurality of African diasporas (3). In this plurality, one can argue that the experiences of the migrants are varied and individual. This form of interpretation of the new African diasporas can be seen as a departure from the national interests and pan-African movement (10) to an individual-centered approach where the individual identifies herself in relation to the ‘other,’ hence the intercultural alterity, or the “narrative ethics of alterity” in the 21st century diasporic literature. Thus, diversity and

plurality emerge in this approach as Koser reemphasizes that there is no pan-African unity between the new African diasporas (10), yet acquiesces that this approach to diversity and plurality in the new or recent African migrants does not negate a common and specific experience that they share—racism and social exclusion that these migrants are subject to in many host countries (11). Also in accordance with Koser’s interpretation of diversity and plurality in the African diasporas, Jayne O. Ifekwenigwe (2003) challenges any essentialized ideas about “English-African diasporas” in particular and African diasporas in general. Thus, one can infer that the realities and identities of the African diaspora are far more complex than any singular, unified or binary theory of either/or. The notions of narrative ethics of alterity and intercultural alterity narrative that Nora Berning (2015) attributes to writings such as Adichie’s *Americanah* adds on to the notion of complexity, plurality and diversity in the new African diasporas. Per her opinion, Berning claims that Adichie’s *Americanah* is an intercultural alterity novel based on an “aesthetic reflection upon norms and values and the felt encounter with alterity” (2). As exemplified by Vassallo and Cooke (2009), alterity is about questioning the identity imposed on us (*by the society or the other*), the identity for which we search (*in the other*), and the identity we claim for ourselves (*the self in relation to alterity*) (qtd in Berning 2, 2013) (*my emphasis*).

The questioning of the other and self extends to the questioning of social institutions that are either discriminatory, oppressive or both. Thus, in both *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*, a critique of identity in regard to class, access to upward social mobility and the discrimination that female characters are subject to call for the reader’s attention. To discuss this, I use the spatial class mobility theory to discuss African and

African diasporic women's class identity construction in *Americanah* and in *So Long a Letter*. In *So Long a Letter*, spatial class mobility theory comes into play in the instance of the female character Aissatou's class mobility through education and migration. Thus, I draw from a few African scholars such as O. Oyewumi (1997), B. Emecheta (2007), Nwapa ([an interview] 1995)¹² who have promoted the education of the African woman and have argued about its contribution to her access to upward class mobility and economic independence. Education is thus a key asset in the African and African diasporic woman's spatial class identity or spatial upward class mobility. Philip Kelly (2012, 175)'s analysis of education as an asset in the class performance of migrants, in his case the Filipino migrants in Canada, also serves to discuss education as key access to upward class mobility of female migrants in *Americanah*.

The class mobility of migrants brings up a new perspective and approach to defining and understanding class identity. Thus, I use Kelly (2012)'s notion of transnational effect on class identity or, the spatial class mobility theory to discuss the subjective understanding of class (Kelly, 2012); I also use the same theory to discuss the constructive radical approach to class identity construction of female migrants in *Americanah*; a constructive radical feminist approach to class identity which also addresses my theory of reverse migration in class terms, or the reverse class migration theory. In the context of migration and movement across nations and cultures, a subjective understanding of class relates to Floya Anthias (2005)'s notion of "narrative of locations," defined as "a story about how we place ourselves in terms of social categories, such as those of gender, ethnicity and class at a specific point in time and space" (qtd in

¹² Refer to chapter three for a detailed discussion of the ideologies of these African scholars with regard to education and access to upward class mobility of the African woman.

Kelly's "Migration, Transnationalism, and the Spaces of Class Identity" 162). In other words, and specific to class identity, the African migrants in *Americanah* define their identities from a transnational and a transcultural experience point of view—across Nigeria, and the United States, or the United Kingdom—and consequently choose their own diasporic class belonging and attributes. The migrant characters in *Americanah*, in one way or another, view class positions and perform their class life from the perspective of their cultural and ethnic values. Thus, in line with Floya Anthia (2005)'s notion of "narrative of locations," the female characters, in the instance of Ifemelu and Auntie Uju, write their own stories of class category and position themselves in a specific class category, not according to the concept of class of their host country, but according to their own definitions, understanding and analysis of what class means to them as African diasporic women. Consequently, class as a position and as a performance, in Kelly's terms, varies as these female migrants move from their home, Nigeria, to the host country, the United States. So, for example, either in *So Long a Letter* or in *Americanah*, characters who cross the Atlantic Ocean and travel to places like the United States, the United Kingdom, or France, etc. see themselves and are seen by their people from the lens of people having 'a set of some of class markers.' Therefore, it is important to note that the emphasis, in the case of migration, is placed not so much on the type of jobs¹³ a person has access to anymore, especially in *Americanah*, but more on how much money she or he has, how much she or he accumulates in terms of material possessions. As

¹³ It is important to note, as Philip Kelly (2012) observes for instance, about the Filipina migrants in Canada, that the types of jobs migrants work in their host countries, classify them into class categories as viewed by their host cultural understanding and classification of class positions "[...] the association between Filipina bodies and subordinate caring work, as domestic helpers, maids, nannies, or nursing aides [...] has direct implications for how those bodies are incorporated into positional hierarchies (160).

Kelly (2012) contends, “[m]igration usually involves labor market integration in ‘host’ societies, so that occupational type and prospects for mobility in one society are assessed relative to those in another” (164). Therefore, due to the cultural and spatial mobility connotations associated with the migratory movement of these characters, financial resources and material assets become salient in class understanding and assessment of these migrants.

- **Detailed Plan**

The Introduction, “Introducing the African Woman Migration: A Generational Overview,” has established the background history on male and female identities in African literary discourse and African migration literature. It has traced the changes that occurred in gender, class and race identities and establishes the ground for African constructive radical feminism, a new theory that I develop in my research.

In chapter one entitled, “From Oppression to Liberation: A beginning in the Making of the African Diasporic Woman in *So Long a Letter*,” I use Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* to discuss the traditional and modern identities of the main female characters, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, and the choices each one makes when confronted with oppressive traditional and cultural institutions. Even though *So Long a Letter* has been traditionally discussed outside the migration literature, I establish that the choice of the female character, Aissatou, to migrate after divorcing her husband is an important piece of puzzle in the migration history of the African woman that should not be ignored. It marks a sort of beginning in the change of traditional migration history, which previously presented women who migrated only as appendages to their men. It also marks a change in the identity

construction of the African migrant woman about her gender, class, ethnicity and race, and constitutes in my analysis a constructive radical action chosen by Aissatou, in a traditional and cultural milieu that sanctions or approves male privileges and subdues women's voice and rights.

Chapter two, "From the African woman to the Diasporic African Woman: Gender and Race Identities through Self-Critique and the Critique of 'Other'," analyzes Adichie's *Americanah* and discusses gender and race identities of the characters. It looks at how the author uses the migration experiences of characters to critique gender, race and class. Yet, this chapter focuses mainly on the author's critique of gender and race, and establishes that contemporary writers such as Adichie, initiate a new dialogue on choices African and African diasporic women make by breaking boundaries that were once viewed as radically negative. Although racism is not an issue in Mariama Ba's novel, it becomes an issue in Adichie's *Americanah* as the reader gets to witness the life of the diasporic characters, and their experiences with race and racism in their host countries, unlike in *So Long a Letter* where the narrative does not take the reader through the life of Aissatou in her host countries, France and the United States.

Chapter three, "Education, Migration, and Class Mobility: Destabilizing Institutionalized Class Discriminations and Class Mobility Global Concept of the African Female Migrant in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*," analyzes class identity and class mobility as well as class discriminations in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*, and establishes that education serves as a complementary tool in both the identity construction of the female character, her access to social class mobility. In *So Long a Letter*, gender and class identities dominate the narrative, yet one reads into the class identity a Senegalese

caste system based on exclusions and inclusions depending on the individual caste, hence a form of discrimination not based on race but rather on ethnicity and class nobility. In *Americanah*, the class identity of the diasporic female character evolves from a critical view on class discrimination and a critique of class mobility of female versus male African diasporic characters. Thus, class mobility is revisited from a gender perspective. In this chapter, I also develop the theory of reverse migration in class terms or class reverse migration and argue that Adichie uses a constructive radical approach to class mobility in mainstream or global migration literature.

In the conclusion titled, “A Gaze at the Future of African Constructive Radical Feminism,” I reestablish my ideas and contributions to the scholarship on African and African diasporic literature, and I call for future research on radicalism and constructive radicalism in African feminist discourse across disciplines, nations, gender, race/ethnicity and class.

I close the dissertation with a bonus chapter titled, “From Illusion to Disillusion in Migration.” It is a public opinion piece in conjunction with a socio-political literary discussion, in which I use current events in contemporary African youth migration, along with *Americanah*, and two short stories— “The Thing Around Your Neck” and “The Arrangers of Marriage” from Adichie’s collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), to discuss the idea of illusion and disillusion in migration. I close the piece with a call to action to my readership, particularly the African readership. The call section contains future project ideas that I have for my country, Togo, and the African continent, at large.

Chapter One:

From Oppression to Liberation: A beginning in the Making of the African

Diasporic Woman in *So Long a Letter*

So Long a Letter, originally published in French in 1979 under the title *Une Si Longue Lettre*, outlines two main historical facts in the life of the Senegalese woman: first, her oppression in a post-independent Senegal; and second, her liberation and choices in the second half of the 20th century—a period that marks the entering of most African countries into independence, characterized as an era of nationalism and modernity. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye the protagonist and her friend Aissatou, are two school teachers from the middle-class. They are respectively married to two influential men, Modou Fall and Mawdo Ba, who are also friends from school. The novel opens with the death of Modou and the rituals undergone by Ramatoulaye and her co-wife, the young Binetou for who Modou left Ramatoulaye and their nine children. In a series of long letters from Ramatoulaye to her friend Aissatou, the reader witnesses the pains, the joys and the choices of two brave modern Senegalese women who have been betrayed by their husbands. Yet, the choices and decisions of these two female friends take different paths that leave each one with no regrets but satisfaction and success. While Ramatoulaye stays in her broken marriage and seems to have leaned towards more traditional, conservative and some modern approaches to face her betrayal and life challenges as an abandoned wife and later as a widow, Aissatou leaves her husband and breaks away from oppressive traditional institutions, turns to advanced education and leaves the country for the West for a better life for herself and her four sons.

This chapter analyzes the movement of the Senegalese woman, in *So Long a Letter*, from oppression to liberation and draws a comparison between this movement and how it parallels with the movement of Senegal as a country from its colonization to independence. I analyze the narrative of oppression and liberation in the novel, the factors that favor them and argue that the question of choice of the African woman is important because it constitutes a breakthrough for her self-autonomy and self-fulfillment, particularly with regard to Aissatou's choice of advanced education and migration in order to set herself free as she breaks away from oppressive and discriminative societal expectations and institutions. While I discuss and acknowledge the traditional empowering and liberating strategies chosen by Ramatoulaye to free and empower herself, I focus especially on the discussion of advanced education and migration as choices and liberating tools of the African woman¹⁴, chosen by Aissatou. I argue that Aissatou's choices overall are radical yet constructive approaches to responding to oppressive institutions in her culture: Aissatou chooses to divorce her husband by going against the expectations of her society; she chooses to seek refuge in books and studies to find solace and comfort; she chooses to raise her four sons alone despite her society's warning that a woman cannot raise boys alone; and she chooses to migrate for advanced studies and professional avenues to offer herself a position that Senegalese society denies her—the access to upward class mobility. Since I argue that the choices made by Aissatou are against societal expectations, subsequently, I call for the

¹⁴ Disclaimer: Even though I use the examples of the Senegalese female characters to touch the empowerment of the African woman, I do not mean that all African women have a common experience or culture. The diversity of African cultures, practices, and religions are a reality, and any generalization of one specific group of women to the African woman in general, is only a way to ensure the discussion is coherent without too long detours to acknowledge every single specificity.

need to debunk the myth of radicalism in African worldview¹⁵ and the need to revisit the notion of radical feminism in African context. This is important because just like, too spoken, the debate was necessary to revisit the notion of feminism in African context to open perspectives on feminism and what it stands for, I argue that contextualizing radicalism in African context will debunk the myth that radicalism is only negative, especially when it comes from women.

It will be sidestepping to argue that African culture has never known any form of radicalism, therefore I claim that women writers like Aidoo, Adichie, and even Ba, in some context, have constructed some constructive radical female protagonists. Many African critics have argued about the disruptive techniques of female characters in contemporary postcolonial writings, but have avoided being straightforward on the fact that these disruptive techniques of African female characters constitute forms of constructive radicalism in African feminism. It is high time we rethought ‘radicalism’ in African culture and see the constructive attributes it embodies for a positive and sustainable change in gender relations. I thus establish that the radicalism of the African women is constructive and can be sustainable. In *So Long a Letter*, this new view on radicalism opens with the choices of Aissatou, choices that are constructive radical and among which, the choice to migrate to the West. This new approach unlocks the discussion on early migration in African women’s writings that my dissertation starts with, and the question of gender, ethnic and class identities of the female character as constructed by the author.

¹⁵ The notion of radicalism in African worldview has leaned toward a negative connotation, especially, when it comes from women. This will be further discussed with evidence in this dissertation.

The liberation path of the female character in *So Long a Letter* parallels the liberation path of her country Senegal. Patricia J. Schulster (2004) draws a remarkable parallel between two phenomena in the history of Africa and in the history of the African woman—the movement of ‘colonization to independence of African countries’ on the one hand, and on the other hand, the movement of oppression to liberation or independence of the African woman (365-366). Schulster (2004) states that the progression of the female characters from oppression to independence in *So Long a Letter* “parallels the path of colonization to independence in Africa” (365). This is arguable in the sense that the woman in *So Long a Letter* stands for the “colonized” and the man, for “the colonial master.” Interestingly, Schulster (2004) points out that both the African man and woman in the eyes of the colonizer master are simply “individuals” whose willpower is subsumed and oppressed (367). From a discursive standpoint, both the African man and woman in *So Long a Letter* are subject to domination and control by the colonial master—Europe—even though their nation Senegal is declared as independent. Because of their common state in the eyes of the European colonial master (ibid), Schulster (2004) additionally notes that both dominated and oppressed African man and African woman “work toward progress and liberation”—an act that will mark their independence. Yet, paradoxically, between the two dominated and oppressed subjects, the African man acts as the dominant and oppressor of the African woman.

While I agree with Schulster (2004) on the parallel movements of African countries and African women, I nonetheless argue that the “colonization” of the African woman by the African man, and in the context of *So Long a Letter*, the domination and oppression of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou by their respective husbands, Modou and

Mawdo, only reveal the state of little understanding of the independence of Senegal and by extension, the independence of Africa. This goes against the “national unity” sought by both men and women of independent Senegal. As Ramatoulaye writes,

“[i]t was the privilege of our generation [a generation of both men and women] to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. [...] I heard people repeat that all the active forces [*including women*] in the country should be mobilized. And we said that over and above the unavoidable opting for such-and-such a party, such-and-such a model of society, what was needed was *national unity*. Many of us [*women included*] rallied around the dominant party, infusing it with our new blood” (25). (*my emphasis*)

Unfortunately, the national unity as a model of society, sought by the Senegalese nation for its development excludes the question of gender and ultimately did quite the opposite towards its women by opting for only male supremacy. Therefore ironically, the low level of understanding of independence is revealed through the level of understanding of Modou in his engagement on change and social issues, and his realistic pragmatism on issues that are “*easily satisfied*” (*my emphasis*),

Modou rose steadily to the top rank in the trade union organizations. His understanding of people and things endeared him to both employers and workers. He focused on points that were easily satisfied, that made work lighter and life more pleasant. He sought practical improvement in the workers’ conditions [...]. His point of view was not unanimously accepted, but people relied on his practical realism (24)

Despite all the tact and diplomacy of Modou in his trade union organizations, in addition to his caring side for “the improvement in the workers’ conditions,” Modou could be said to have a state of minimal care and understanding of the independence of Senegal and the freedom of women in his “focus on easily satisfied points” as a pragmatism to solve workers’ problems. Moreover, Modou’s betrayal of his wife Ramatoulaye complicates and contradicts his ideologies that he stands for. Ramatoulaye meditates over Modou’s act of betrayal and wonders if it “[w]as [...] madness, weakness irresistible love? What inner confusion led Modou Fall to marry Binetou? [...] Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?” (12-13). Ramatoulaye in her meditation wonders if her husband’s act of betrayal originates from an inner torment, madness, confusion, heartlessness or if it is due to some weakness or irresistible love Modou has for Binetou. This could be equated to wondering if the act of betrayal of the African man as an oppressor of the African woman originates from the confusion, torment, madness, or heartlessness that colonization left him with, or whether it developed from their weakness and an irresistible love for the colonizer’s system of ruling that they copied. Perhaps, the answer lies in the ironical situation Modou puts himself. While on the one hand Modou criticizes the newly independent Senegalese government for its corruption, its “too costly” and futile expenses abroad, its haste with which it takes on projects and wastes money to the detriment of the people—the working class (26), on the other hand, Modou himself acts no differently than the Senegalese government, and at the very first chance, engulfed himself in similar corrupt, excessive and futile expenses,

With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account. His promotion to the rank of technical adviser in the Ministry of Public Works, in exchange for which, according to the spiteful, he checked the trade union revolt, could not control the mire of expenses by which he was engulfed. [...] Acknowledgements of debts? A pile of them: cloth and gold traders, home-delivery grocers and butchers, car-purchase instalments. Hold on. [...] the origins of the elegant SICAP villa, four bedrooms, two bathrooms, pink and blue, large sitting-room, a three-room flat, built at his own expense at the bottom of the second courtyard for Lady Mother-in-Law. And furniture from France for his new wife and furniture constructed by local carpenters for Lady Mother-in-Law. (10)

The parallel between Modou and the Senegalese government is a sad disclosure that the independent Senegal, and by extension Africa, is ideologically colonized and pragmatically an oppressor. Sehulster (2004) additionally believes that *So Long a Letter* reveals not only the move from oppression to freedom of the female protagonists Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, but the move from colonization of "all of the African nations" (367) toward independence. One could argue that the sixties mark a time period of independence of most African countries, yet, it is crucial to read between the lines and dissect what it means for the man of an independent country to 'dominate and oppress its own woman' with who they have been under the rule and oppression of the white colonial master—a master they have both fought to gain their independence. I hereby

highlight that if African nations are said to have gained their independence, then its man and woman are also independent and the opposite is also true. I do not mean to deny that there has been a process to independence of Senegal or of African nations; however, my argument lies in the fact that to replicate the very same oppression on women calls for an alternate look into the independence of Senegal, and by extension, into the independence of most African nations. Conclusively, one might say that Senegal, and by extension Africa, minimally understands its own independence.

One could ask, “why would independent African men perpetuate the domineering or bossy ruling system of the colonizer?” To this question, Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997)’s conclusion that colonization is "a process by which male hegemony [is] instituted and legitimized in African societies" (156), is an appropriate answer. Oyewumi’s view on colonization and male hegemony in Africa gives an overview of the post-independence system of ruling that most African nations have adopted. At the independence, power and control have been unilaterally transferred into the hands of the African man, leaving the African woman out of the then social, political, economic structures of ruling that many African communities had before the arrival of the colonizer¹⁶. It is worth noting that, today, the structure of most African governments and societal institutions presents little change to what they were at the time of independence. Before the arrival of the colonizer, social structures in Africa were different, and the difference is not negative as the white

¹⁶ Patricia Sehulster (2004) writes that, “The African societies which once functioned autonomously as well-balanced communities, each member of which played a crucial role in the balance of labor and of the economy and so garnered a kind of value and respect from other members precisely because of that contributing role vanished under the colonial rule” (366). Other writers, such as O. Oyewumi (1997), A. Aidoo (1998), Z. Sofola (1998), N. Nzegwu (2006) and many others, have accounted for the well-balanced ruling system in Africa before the arrival of the colonizer. Nzegwu (2006) in her book *Family Matters* elaborate well on the dual system of ruling that existed in Igbo and Yoruba communities.

colonizers said about Africa and its culture. The difference doesn't mean these societal structures were bad, barbaric, or savage as many African history books, from the perspectives of the colonizer, would make us believe. Yet, after the arrival of the colonizer, African nations experienced a change in almost every aspect of their socio-cultural, economic and political life.

The postcolonial period in Africa was marked by the independence of most African countries in the 1950s and 60s; the Senegal which Mariama Bâ represents in *So Long a Letter* received its independence on August 20, 1960. Yet, the arrival of the white colonizer in Africa up to the independence of African nations brought both liberating and stifling changes in the lives of women of these nations. As illustrated, the changes affected not only the nation as Ramatoulaye recalls in her letter, “[i]t was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained young and efficient, for we were the messengers of a new design. With independence achieved, we witnessed the birth of a republic, the birth of an anthem and the implantation of a flag” (25), but they also affected individual citizens across the gender spectrum, particularly women, “[...] being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were very few of us. Men would call us scatter-brained. Others labelled us devils. But many wanted to possess us. [...] Our lives developed in parallels. We experienced the tiffs and reconciliations of married life. In our different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom” (15-19). However, many scholars and activists would differently approach these changes that mark the modern era in the socio-political structures of independent African nations and the lives of its women.

Regarding the differences in the approach to changes that occurred, Harrow claims that “Bâ’s espousal of modernism entailed a project of liberation for women that had had to defer to the men’s project of achieving national liberation” (qtd in *So Long a Letter*, “Introduction” iii). While I agree that “Bâ’s espousal of modernism entailed a project of liberation for women,” I, however, assert that African women writers like Mariama Bâ do not overlook the impact that modernism and colonial education have had on African cultures, customs and its people in general. For instance, Buchi Emecheta in her autobiographical novel *Head Above Water* (1986) takes the reader through the hardships she has faced as an African woman, a second-class citizen, a mother and a single woman in England; she takes the reader through all the oppressions, discriminations and pains that ensued as well. Yet, this autobiographical novel simultaneously depicts the modern opportunities that Emecheta seizes to keep her head above water. Similarly in *So Long a Letter* (1979), Bâ does not ignore the oppressive institutions African women experience on a daily basis in modern Senegal. For instance, even though the main female characters Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are considered middle-class women, mainly due to the educational and professional opportunities offered to them, it does not make them less subjects to gender discrimination and injustices instituted by the modern patriarchal Africa. Daouda Dieng, a former and current suitor of the widowed Ramatoulaye, acquiesces to the status of women in their nation and positions himself as a voice for women in the National Assembly of Senegal; a conversation between him and Ramatoulaye unfolds,

I (Ramatoulaye) went on: ‘It must be all right, that male Assembly!’

I said teasingly, rolling my eyes round. [...]

‘Still very critical, Ramatoulaye! Why this ironical statement and this provocative epithet when there are women in the Assembly?’

‘Four women, Daouda, four out of a hundred deputies. What a ridiculous ratio! Not even one for each province.’ [...]

Nearly twenty years of independence! When will we have the first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of our country? And yet the militancy and ability of our women, their disinterested commitment, have already been demonstrated. [...]

Daouda listened to me. [...]

‘Whom are you addressing, Ramatoulaye? You are echoing my speeches at the National Assembly, where I have been called a “feminist” (62-64)

Amidst the cry of Bâ about the inferior position of women in the newly independent Senegal, an inferior position resulted from the colonial ruling heritage and also the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran (Latha, 2001), is Bâ’s cry about the acculturation of Senegal, of the young generation, and the relegation of African traditional values to the background to the profit of modernity, “[a]s soon as your elder brothers left the huts of the circumcised, they moved into this particular world [“the working of the gold”], the whole compound’s source of nourishment. But what about your younger brothers? Their steps were directed towards the white man’s school. ... apprenticeship to traditional crafts seem degrading to whoever has the slightest book-learning. ... Were we not beginning to witness the disappearance of an elite of traditional manual workers?” (*So Long a Letter* 18). Bâ’s cry to national concerns here englobes all citizens of Senegal, particularly the youth. She laments the torment the youth faces as they deal with school,

puberty, and all sorts of youth depravation issues that modernity has brought (*So Long a Letter* 19). This shows the concerns of modernist women writers, like Mariama Bâ, upon issues that do not only relate to women—even though the liberation of the woman is of an utmost concern—but also upon issues of national liberation. Consequently, one can infer that these modernist women writers see the liberation of the woman alongside the liberation of her nation, yet in ways that denounce and crush the oppressive institutions and allow for a man and woman's equity and equality, as well as for the fulfillment of the woman. Therefore, the narratives of oppressions of the woman written by modernist African women writers reveal the need not only to free and liberate the African woman, but also the need for African nations to reach their full autonomy and liberation from the western oppressive culture, as well as their liberation from the new imperialism.

Modernity is seen as a double edge product with two different tastes, the bitter and the sweet. Yet, as Bâ shows in her novel, it was a necessary evil for the liberation of the woman and for the progress of the nation. Bâ (2012) writes: “[w]e all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the ‘hard sweat’ that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but we were resolutely progressive” (*So Long a Letter* 19). The above examples testify to my argument that the modernist African woman writer has not disregarded national issues over the sole interest or focus on the African woman's liberation. What these modernist women writers have done, among other things, is to lay emphasis on the school education of the African woman as a means to fight patriarchal control and oppression and climb the socio-economic and political ladder. Thus, Ramatoulaye notes

that her generation of women [not many of them] are “the first pioneers of the promotion of African women,” the first to be promoted and emancipated. The program of the promotion of women adopted by many African countries after independence (16)¹⁷ came mainly through the education of these women and the opportunity for them to work for wages. Many African women fiction writers of the post-independence period—Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dagaremba, etc.—have promoted the education of women as yet another key to liberation from institutionalized gender oppression. In *So Long a Letter* for instance, Mariama Bâ endows her female protagonists with modern education to fight the national and traditional institutionalized gender oppression of women. In this regard, Bâ creates Ramatoulaye and Aissatou who as educated middle-class women who exercise the profession of school instructors. In times of the betrayal from their husbands, they seek solace in books, cinema, etc.—some of the elements that education and modernity brought to Africa. The other minor characters, such as Daba—Ramatoulaye’s daughter, Binetou—the second wife of Modou, young Nabou—the second wife of Mawdo, are also educated¹⁸; yet, the level of education of these characters varies from one to the other. Not only does education serve as a promoter of the African woman’s liberation, but it also enhances her ability to speak up and choose for herself.

¹⁷ *So Long a Letter* “... it is because the path chosen for our training and our blossoming has not been at all fortuitous. It has accorded with the profound choices made by New Africa for the promotion of the black woman” (16).

¹⁸ I further develop more the education of the African woman’s idea in chapter three which covers both Ba and Adichie

1- The African Woman's Voice and Power to Choose

This section argues that education serves as a complementary tool—both tradition and modernity complement each other—for the African woman to regain her voice, assert her opinions and make decisions that she judges sound and beneficial for her. Education in the lives of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, in *So Long a Letter*, has not only favored these characters' ability to serve their community through their teaching careers, regardless of the educated beneficiaries' sex or gender, but has also served as a complementary tool to enhance their ability to use their voice for self-defense and interests while simultaneously dissecting and refuting the oppressive aspects of their tradition and culture.

Several writers have dealt with the place of the African woman's voice in her society and while some early male writers have characterized the precolonial African woman's voice as silent, as in the case of Chinua Achebe's most female characters—especially the wives of Okonkwo—in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), others have portrayed the female voice as subdued during the colonial and post-independence eras, yet as equally valuable and important as men's, as in the case of Ousmane Sembene's proactive female characters in *God's Bits of Woods* (1960). Others have actually portrayed the African woman with a powerful voice and shown that her empowered voice comes from her traditional heritage, as in the case of F. Nwapa's female protagonist Efurú in *Efurú* (1966). Moreover, others have argued in favor of the complementarity of modern education to the traditional empowerment of the African woman's voice, as in the case of Mariama Bâ's female protagonists Aissatou and Ramatoulaye. Some scholars have also theorized that the precolonial African woman's voice has always been powerful and

authoritative, as in the case of Zulu Sofola's theory of the de-womanization of the western educated African woman (1998). However, whether we argue that the African woman's voice has always been subdued, or liberated, or has been empowered through a complementary role of traditional values and modern education, it is highly arguable that the voice of the African woman at some point in history has been subdued, yet has since regained authority.

In *So Long a Letter*, education is complementary to the traditional empowerment of the African woman's voice. Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, has an equal say in discussions and decisions she and her husband make (77). Ramatoulaye tells Aissatou about the strong opinion Daba has about everything, whether it is about her husband or about a woman's struggle and place in Senegal (77-78). Aissatou defies oppressive traditions by speaking up and defining her own identity (32-33). As for Ramatoulaye, she has chosen to break her silence after 30 years of marriage, to use her voice to define her identity and to follow her heart desires. Ramatoulaye refuses to be passed over like an object, as in the Senegalese custom where a woman is inherited by her late husband's brother(s). She uses her voice, this time not as teacher, but as a woman fighting to defend and define herself,

I look Tamsir straight in the eye. I look at Mawdo. I look at the *Imam*. I draw my black shawl closer. I tell my beads. This time I shall speak out. My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It burst out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous. [...] Mawdo signalled with his hand for me to stop. 'Shut up! Shut up! Stop! Stop!' But you can't stop once you've let your anger loose. I have concluded, more violently than ever: 'Tamsir,

purge yourself of your dreams of conquest. They have lasted forty days. I shall never be your wife.’ (60-61).

One could wonder how teachers—like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou—could be said to have finally broken their silence and used their voice? To show Ramatoulaye and Aissatou break their silence after presenting them as teachers—who supposedly use their voice to educate—is to show the distinction between a ‘modern voice’—in this case, that of a teacher—and a voice sprung out of a blend of tradition and modernity. It is to show how education has helped and served as the postcolonial African woman’s complementary tool to build up and develop a voice of discernment. In my view, education therefore modernity, is much needed for the African woman to break from the bonds of gendered patriarchal and or modern and traditional institutions and customs that are oppressive to her and which hinder her identity. The voice of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou as teachers—a voice that can be labeled ‘a communal welfare voice¹⁹’—enables them to work for the progress and wellbeing of their nation and its future generation. Yet, the voice that they have found after many years of silence in their relationship with their men—a voice that can be labeled ‘a female self-empowered voice²⁰’—springs up when these two female protagonists have been able to identify, through the exposure to other cultures and knowledge, the bogged side of Senegalese tradition and customs. The exposure to other cultures and knowledge through school education have enabled Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, and many women alike, to do more than just identify the gender oppression in

¹⁹ I have labeled this “a communal welfare voice” because it is the voice used to educate and benefit the community, therefore it is the whole society without distinction of sex.

²⁰ I define the female self-empowered voice’ as the voice used by a female to defend and define herself; it is the voice attained through consciousness of one’s oppressive condition and the consciousness to fight and change existing oppressive institutions, practices and cultures.

their traditions and customs; so, with their abilities to discern the bogged side of oppressive traditional institutions, close the class gap and speak up for themselves, these female characters have gone to great lengths to choose what they find best suitable for their liberation, empowerment and fulfillment.

Yet, it is worth recalling that several scholars have seen and construed varied and different paths to liberation, fulfillment and empowerment of the African woman, consequently theorizing and defining different paradigms for her—whether conservative, a merge of traditional and modernist, or radicals (Ezenwanebe 264). But bell hooks’s take on feminism as the woman’s “freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex determined role, freedom from society’s oppression and restrictions, freedom to fully express her thoughts and to convert them freely into action” (24) describes in Ezenwanebe’s view the group of African women that she characterizes as African radical feminists who embrace western radical feminism (Ezenwanebe 264). It is worth asking if attributes of radicalism all carry negativity, since radicalism of women has been viewed in African culture as negative. What is radicalism, and what is radicalism in African context? In the context of Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, is Aissatou a radical feminist or an African contextualized radical feminist—in other words, a constructive African radical feminist? At this point, it is also important to bring in the question about Bâ’s claim not to be a feminist (Ogundipe-Leslie 11, 1987 qtd in Latha 23, 2001) and her identification with Alice Walker’s womanism (Plant, 1996 qtd in Latha 24, 2001). Well, could these give any room to analyze and categorize Aissatou and her disruptive acts as radicals in this dissertation?

2- Constructive Radicalism in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*

Before one concludes whether an account of radicalism is possible in Bâ's novel, it's important to highlight that Bâ claimed herself a womanist²¹. The objective of this conclusion is to question whether Aissatou's pursuit of her individual goals (Latha 25), her choices to divorce her husband and raise her sons without their father, her pursuit of advanced degrees and consequently her migration to the West, hence "escap[ing] from the traditional society of Senegal" could be viewed as radicals. As far as Bâ's claim to be a womanist is concerned, it could be argued it is a legitimate claim since her protagonist Ramatoulaye embodies a balance between traditional cultures, the "audaci[ty], courage[...], responsib[ility], serious[ness] and traditional[...] capab[ability]" (Satoko, 1998 qtd in Latha 24, 2001) that Alice Walker's womanist theory advocates. Latha writes, "Ramatoulaye does try to give a balanced perspective of her life [...]" Ramatoulaye is more subservient but achieves a certain amount of self-empowerment within the confines of her traditional society" (24-25). Thus, the balance represented in Ramatoulaye's behavior and choices is indicative of characteristics of a womanist. This balance is also indicative of the third generation of gender theorists and critics that Ezenwanebe (2015) identifies in Nigeria. According to Ezenwanebe, the third generation or the contemporary gender theorists "seek[...] to harmonize the gains of traditional aesthetics with those of radical feminism by eliminating the ineffectual assertion of [conservative] female protagonists and the violence-ridden, counter productivity of [...] radical feminists" (265). In Ezenwanebe (2015)'s view, this contemporary gender theory contextualizes gender discourse and feminism within African culture in order to preserve

²¹ "Alice Walker's definition of a womanist [...] is audacious, courageous, responsible, serious and traditionally capable (Satoko, 1998)" (qtd in Latha 24, 2001).

the basic values of African life, while simultaneously “emphasiz[ing] women’s empowerment [...], strong individualistic and collective contestation, and hence, foreground[ing] strong female characters that not only dare but transcend gender oppression” (ibid.). In other words, the contemporary gender theorists and feminist critics seek to establish a compromise or a middle ground between the conservative theory of liberation of the African woman and that of the African radical feminist who embraces western radical feminism. Thus, according to Ezenwanebe, the compromise and harmonization of the two takes from the productive parts of each theory and disregards the “ineffectual” and “radical” parts, in respectively, the African conservative theory and the African radical feminism. Accordingly, Ramatoulaye, who seems to draw from both the traditional Senegalese culture and the western education and culture could be within the context of this ideology, representative of the contemporary gender discourse, backed up by Ezenwanebe’s view of contemporary gender theorists and feminist critics.

Yet, unlike the “balanced perspective” exhibited by Ramatoulaye, “Aissatou chooses to escape from the traditional society of Senegal by pursuing her individual goals” (Latha 25). Consequently, the balance between the traditional and individual goals’ pursuit seems to be absent from Aissatou’s choices and conclusively, not characteristics of Bâ’s womanist view, from Ezenwanebe’s perspective. In this line of thought, this alludes to the approach of the second group or second generation of gender theorists and critics as identified by Ezenwanebe (264), where women’s individual goals and interests are given privilege over patriarchal and society’s oppressive institutions. As far as Aissatou is concerned, she has not only given privilege to her heart desires, freedom, and self-fulfillment over oppressive expectations, but has also disrupted both

patriarchal and Senegalese oppressive culture and traditions on her way to freedom. In line with bell hooks's statement about a feminist, Aissatou allows neither her husband nor her community to decide her destiny; she does not allow her community to dictate to her or lecture her on forgiving her husband and subsequently subsumes herself to a polygynous life she does not want; neither does she allow her community's belief that a woman alone cannot raise boys to impact her decision. Actually, she freely and fully expresses her thoughts to Mawdo her husband and freely implements them into actions. Hence, we see her leave Mawdo, create a new life for herself, give herself new potentials through higher education and successfully raises her four sons abroad. Through these actions which "privilege [...] [Aissatou's] freedom over oppressive male and cultural institutions," an act that Ezenwanebe claims is characteristic of African radical feminists, one wonders if Aissatou can be characterized as a radical feminist character, after Bâ actually claims she is not even a feminist, but a womanist!

In her critique of Bessie Head and other African women writers' rejection of the label of 'feminism' and their sole association with womanism, Wicomb (28, 1996) warns critics, "we should look at [a] writer not in terms of her avowed anti-feminism, but in terms of 'the fissures in her discourse' where meanings which are considered to be unacceptable 'percolate through' and so under-mine an overt womanist message" (qtd in Rizwana Habib Latha 24-25, 2001). A similar reasoning is applicable to the claim of most African women and men, as well, who reject the label of radicalism. Are there any 'fissures' in Bâ's *So Long a Letter* that could lead to interpreting the female character Aissatou as a constructive *radical* feminist?

Even though most critics have analyzed Aissatou's choices as a break or a distance from traditional Senegalese oppressive institutions, no critic has openly claimed Aissatou to be a constructive radical feminist, less a radical feminist, perhaps because of the complexity of the reality of Senegalese women as postcolonial African women and as Muslims²². Yet, as Latha observes, "[Ramatoulaye's] generally favourable attitude to Aissatou's escape to New York has prompted western critics such as Katherine Frank (1987) and African critics such as Ojo-Ade (1982) to infer that Bâ promotes only a western style of feminism in her writing" (28). By western style, these critics indirectly state a type of feminism that is not in conformity with our African values. Moreover, contrary to what Latha sees in Ramatoulaye's words to Aissatou, "[y]ou had the surprising courage to take your life into your own hands ... You are developing in peace, as your letters tell me, your back resolutely turned on those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationships" (33) as "...imply[ing] that her friend retains strong cultural and religious links with her own country" (Latha 29), it is rather evident that Ramatoulaye's statement only reaffirms the distance of Aissatou from her oppressors—both patriarchal and traditional— yet, not from her Senegalese roots. In choosing to escape or distance herself from her oppressors, Aissatou opts for migration to the West where her education and later her appointment as an Interpreter at the Senegalese embassy would take her.

In view of the above analysis, one might conclude that Bâ has offered a *radicalism*—which in African feminism context, is 'African constructive radical

²² Latha states that "the feminisms in *So Long a Letter* emerge not only as separate manifestations of the central character [Ramatoulaye]'s identity, but also as intersecting forms which demonstrate the hybridity which characterizes women's identities in post-colonial societies. Readings of the novella which focus only on western or African feminisms, without paying due regard to the factor of religion, ignore the complexities of women's identities in some post-colonial contexts" (29, 2001)

feminism’ or a ‘disruptive approach for constructive change’—as an option for the modern African woman to liberate herself from obstructive institutions that hinder her liberation and empowerment. From my perspective, I argue that Bâ offers two distinct paradigms or frameworks to the modern African woman to choose from. She offers, on the one hand, a womanist paradigm that presents a balance between conservative tradition and modernism, and on the other hand, the African constructive radical feminism which embraces constructiveness, reformism, and progressive ideas against oppressive patriarchal and cultural institutions. These are seen through some of Ramatoulaye’s choices as a womanist, representing thus the third generation of the contemporary gender discourse Ezenwanebe (2015), and also through Aissatou’s choices to escape to the West and her distance from oppressive Senegalese patriarchal traditions. The above discussion of Mariama Bâ’s political choices in her writing, coupled with the choices of her protagonists, constitutes the blue print for my discussion of migration as a choice in *So Long a Letter*. Migration in Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* has hardly been a focus of critics, whether Westerners or Africans. Despite the claim of the western critic Katherine Frank (1987) and the African critic Ojo-Ade (1982) that Bâ seems to offer only western style of feminism, these critics’ focus has hardly been on migration. It is worth establishing that migration history in African women’s writings carries a manifold of motives and presents several dimensions. Yet, in early African women’s writings, even though migration has been a topic of interest, it was hardly seen and discussed as a means to break from oppression.

3- **From Oppression to Education and Migration: Early Migration Motives in two African Women's Writings, *So Long a Letter* and *Second-Class Citizen***

The African female migrant's status in *So Long a Letter* and in *Second-Class Citizen* constitutes a baseline to argue not only for the need to escape oppression but also for the need to seek a better life and opportunities that the migration story of the African female presents. In early African women's writings, writers were primarily focused on rehabilitating the image of women, as women were unfairly represented in male writings. Amidst the image rehabilitation agenda, some writers in the instance of Emecheta and Bâ, have included migration themes in their narratives. In Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) for example, Adah the protagonist migrates to England with her children to join her husband Francis who she had previously sent to England with savings from her Librarianship position at the American Consulate Library in Lagos. On the ground that all privilege is to men, Francis tells Adah that Pa, his "Father does not approve of women going to the UK" (30), yet Adah is to pay for everything for Francis' travel and the latter will be back to her in three years. All these talks and decisions are made regardless of the fact that Adah is capable of paying for her own travel expenses and that she has had this dream about going to England since she was a child. Yet, Adah is resolved to make her dream come true and so finds a way to convince her in-laws to let her and her then two children join Francis in England (35-36). Adah then migrates to London. In *So Long a Letter*, originally published 5 years after Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*, Aissatou one of the female protagonists, migrates to the West after she breaks up with her husband due to gender and class oppressions from her Senegalese culture. On an early African literary scene where both the African woman writer and the female

character had barely any consideration and fair representation (Salami-BouKari 136-137, 2012; Aidoo, 1998), Emecheta and Bâ “...understood the importance of women’s participation in a male-dominated literary arena. This understanding is expressed through [their] characters’ choices, and through the women’s perspectives covered in [their] novels” (Salami-Boukari 137) as Safoura Salami-Boukari notes of Flora Nwapa’s novels, *Efuru* and *Idu* (Ibid.). This understanding transcends the confines and borders of the African woman’s local empowerment and liberation. Writers such as Bâ and Emecheta use specific situations of each of the female characters to pave the way for their migration to the West.

As females less valued compared to males, one notes a common fate of discrimination and oppression in Adah (*Second-Class Citizen*) and Aissatou (*So Long a Letter*). Adah is denied education as a young girl to the profit of her younger brother Boy. Her stubbornness to go to school finally earns her an education, yet without the support of her family. This situation forces Adah to steal money for her entrance examination and to face physical punishment from her uncle (9-23). Additionally, the lack of support and the patriarchal rule in her culture that forbids a teenage girl to rent a place forces her to get married in order to have the male protection that her society prescribes a woman needs (25). After her marriage, her father-in-law and mother-in-law become other sources of control and oppression in Adah’s life, because anything that relates to her life and her marriage must be decided by the in-laws. However, unlike Adah, Aissatou is one of the few women who benefitted from the program of African governments to promote women’s education. Yet, Aissatou’s oppression and discrimination start with her belonging to a lower caste and class. Her oppression then went on with a betrayal from

her husband, a betrayal she was not prepared to accept and forgive. Thus, Bâ and her contemporary writer Emecheta use gender, class oppression and discrimination to pave the way out for their characters, while simultaneously endowing them with educational skills and knowledge to overcome their male-dominated culture.

Two categories of female migrants characterize the migration narratives in Bâ and Emecheta's novels, the student and the professional. From Khalid Koser's argument, there is a range of different types of diasporas in contemporary debate on African diaspora— "legal and illegal, professional and low-skilled, asylum seekers and economic migrants" (*New African Diasporas*, 2003). In more detailed categories, Koser identifies "students, professionals, asylum seekers and 'clandestine migrants'" (ibid.). Aissatou and Adah can be classified in the "professional [and] economic migrants" group, as well as in the group of "students"—Adah goes to school in Nigeria and becomes a librarian, then migrates to England, works and later goes to school for a higher education and degree. Aissatou goes to school and becomes a teacher in Senegal, then after leaving her husband, she migrates to France as a student, and then later migrates to the United States as a professional—an Interpreter at the Senegalese embassy in the US.

To bring my point home, the early journey of female migrants in these two novels basically starts from a state of oppression and discrimination, goes through the education of the subjects, and ends with migratory choices. Yet, the early migration of African females is also entrenched with the ambition for a better life, a life not only away from oppression and discrimination, but a new life with better economic and educational opportunities. In an interview with Mary Louise Kelly, a Contributing Editor of *The Atlantic* at *The Atlantic's Washington Ideas Forum*, Chimamanda Adichie, the storyteller,

feminist and activist talks about a new form of African migration that she sets off to present to the world in her novella *Americanah*. In fact, as pointed out by Adichie, the world has thought about African migrants as “people fleeing from all kinds of paranoids” like wars, famine, etc. As a self-assigned mission, Adichie sets off to present African migration as also a migration about seeking more choices and better opportunities. While Aissatou as well as Adah cannot deny the oppressive state in their culture, their migration to the West is also about seeking a better life. In my view, these female characters are presented as being able to make choices that are radical, yet they are constructive radical choices. Their choices not only take them away from “those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationships”—referring to their oppressors—but also give them the opportunity to have a better life and access social statuses that society has denied them.

Chapter Two

From the African woman to the Diasporic African Woman: Gender and Race Identities through Self-Critique and the Critique of ‘Other’

In her novel *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the acclaimed young writers of the new generation of African and African diasporic women writers, presents the readership with new perspectives and new realities of the recent African migration. Adichie highlights this new representation in an interview on *Americanah*, wherein she talks about Africans who migrate to the West not because they are fleeing wars, famine, or political violence, but because they want to escape the familiar (“Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Refugees, Race and Americanah” 00:01:20-00:02:13); as she puts it in her novel, they are “merely hungry for choice and certainty” (*Americanah* 341). In the interview, she indicates that her duty is to present a more realistic image of African migrants, different from what the world has mostly been presented with. And so, *Americanah* like some of Adichie’s other writings, in the instance of *The Thing Around your Neck* (2009), is a way for Adichie to present the more realistic image of African migration by focusing on African women’s migration story—a story that has been absent or unjustly represented in African as well as global migration literature. Thus, *Americanah* depicts the African migrant experience by reconstructing the image of the African male and female migrant, as well as putting women at the center of its narrative and representing an reconstructing the African woman migrant who has been invisible in the African as well as the global diasporic discourse. In this representation, the identity of both African female and male migrants are questioned, in terms of gender, race and class,

along with culture from the standpoint of a minority—Ifemelu, the protagonist female character in the novel.

The story of *Americanah* unfolds with the love story between Ifemelu and Obinze, two Lagos high schoolers, who while attending university in Nsukka experience continuous academic year turbulence due to numerous strikes by students as well as by teachers. With the uncertainty of ever graduating from college and finding a decent job, Ifemelu, encouraged by her cousin Aunty Uju, applied for an American college scholarship and was admitted with a grant of three quarter ($\frac{3}{4}$) of her tuition. Subsequently, Ifemelu leaves for America while Obinze stays in Nsukka with plans that he will join Ifemelu after graduating. Yet, after the 9/11 terrorist attack of the United States, hence the strict US immigration laws, Obinze is several times denied a visa of entry in the US. Meanwhile, Ifemelu who is experiencing financial difficulties gets into a severe depression after an immoral act, and consequently, cuts off every contact with Obinze, who with the help of his mother migrates to England on a limited visa entry after which, he became an illegal. The story unfolds with the struggles of Ifemelu and Obinze on their search and construction of identity in their host country, respectively in the US and in UK. While Ifemelu succeeds in overcoming most of her gender, racial and class discriminations through hard work, degree, and questioning of self and the other, Obinze, like most of the African male characters in the novel, has a hard time finding and establishing his identity in his host country. The story ends with both characters' return to Nigeria where they reignite their relationship, even though Obinze is already married with one child by the time Ifemelu returns.

This chapter analyzes gender and racial identities of the African female and male migrants and theorizes that *Americanah* features a constructive radical approach to issues of gender and race, similar to its female characters who present radical attitudes towards issues of gender and racial oppressions, disparity and discriminations. In this chapter, I argue that the author uses the female and male characters' transnational and intercultural migratory experiences to form critical judgements on race and gender. The author, through the female protagonist, projects a critical view on society, 'other,' and 'self.' Through this, not only do the characters, particularly, the protagonist female character establishes her agency and defines herself in her new environment, but she also establishes herself as a cosmopolitan citizen with a local root as her initial haven. The female protagonist's attachment to the local root is shown, among other things, through her resolution to stop using the American accent, her return to Nigeria after many years in the United States, her appreciation of Nigerian products—Nollywood movies—, foods, etc. The argument about self-critique and the critique of 'other' in this chapter is informed by Nora Berning's ideology of "intercultural alterity" in the narrative ethics of alterity literature. As Nora Berling states, "[n]arrative ethics regard moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling because narratives themselves implicitly or explicitly ask the question, 'How should one think, judge, and act – as author, narrator, character, or audience – for the greater good?'" (Phelan <http://www.lhn.unihamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics>, qtd in Berning 2). In other words, intercultural novels such as Adichie's *Americanah* focus on questioning moral values and norms for a fair and well-balanced society. As Berning further states,

Adichie's novel [*Americanah*] is best understood as a creative and experiential space within which an ethical dialogue with alterity unfolds. Through its aesthetic reflection upon norms and values and the felt encounter with alterity, the novel projects visceral ethical knowledge [...] Adichie contributes to the emergence of a new kind of narrative ethics at the heart of which are the construction and dissemination of an ethical knowledge that revolves around norms and values related to such concepts as identity and alterity and individual and collective perceptions of self and other” (ibid.).

Berning implies that the characters’ experience with the other allows them to project critical judgement on the ‘other’ and the ‘self’. In other words, these characters question not only the ‘other,’ by ways of judging what is good, but also question their own identity, their own choices, their own society, its practices and expectations. So, from the perspectives of the characters, this chapter analyzes ethics, questions social norms and issues such as, gender disparity, oppression and racial discrimination. I further argue that through the characters’ critical judgment of norms and values of the host and home countries, the novella calls for a positive change in society’s conception of gender expectations, its perceptions and categorizations of women. As race, class and gender practices and expectations that are oppressive to women as well as to men and children are sifted and resifted, the author calls for constructive radical changes in society. To be explicit, I argue that Adichie initiates a new dialogue on the choices that African and African diasporic women, men and children make, hence breaking boundaries that were once viewed as radically negative. By having her characters make choices and pose actions that disrupt norms and values of their host and home countries, yet attain positive

outcomes for self and society, in my viewpoint, Adichie and other diasporic women writers alike, challenge previous views and discourse on radicalism²³ in African feminism. Adichie also challenges gender expectations on men and women, as well as traditional parenting²⁴ of diasporic descents by their immigrant parents in the host society. Thus, my argument states in explicit terms that the shift in focus of contemporary postcolonial feminist discourse, entails not only a shift from nationalism to post-national feminism or a shift to women-centered approach—as argued by Hena Ahmad (2010)—but the shift also entails characteristics of a constructive radicalism in women’s as well as other African diasporic individuals’ approaches to issues of identity in relation to gender, race and class. In other words, in addition to the disruptive ideology and techniques identified by scholars in African and African diasporic feminism, novels such as Adichie’s *Americanah* add a constructive radical dimension to contemporary African and African diasporic feminism.

²³ The previous views and discourse on radicalism in African feminism had been tainted with negativism and viewed as unethical to African values and norms. See Ama Ata Aidoo’s “The African Woman Today.” 1998

²⁴ In *Americanah*, Dike and his mother (Aunty Uju)’s interests and ways of viewing things are constantly brought up to highlight the diasporic descents’ vs the diasporic parents’ cultural conflicts and differences in approaching and or embracing the host culture in which they settle. For instance, Aunty Uju finds issues with Dike’s choices of clothes (267-268), his questioning of his identity, his identity crisis which probably resulted in Dike’s attempt of suicide (453-454), his curiosity about his genital parts at age seven (174), etc. Aunty Uju, just like the Grenada immigrant parents, Jane and Marlon, believe in spanking children (136). Other parenting approaches have been highlighted in the novel, in the instance of Aunty Uju’s, Ojiugo’s and Nicholas’, as well as other diasporic parents’ rejection of their children’s use of the Igbo language in favor of English (134; 296). Ifemelu for instance fears that Igbo language “would become for him [Dike] the language of strife” (211) because Aunty Uju only speaks Igbo to Dike only when she is angry (ibid.). Note: this theme of diasporic parenting is not however discussed in this dissertation; it is part of my future research projects.

1- Identity in Regard to Gender: Revisiting and Rewinding Gender Roles and Expectations

Although gender in *Americanah* seems to be less emphasized as an issue threatening the core identity and choices of the female character, the society in which the female characters reside function from a gender ideological perspective. This section on gender identity construction of the female character analyzes the techniques of Adichie the author, as she questions both male and female gender expectations in *Americanah*. It analyzes and discusses gender discriminations and cultural privilege of men—the privileges men benefit from in society just because they are men. It also takes a critical view on how gender does a great disservice not only to women but also to men, by emphasizing the constructive radical approach *Americanah* features in seeking parity between men and women.

Gender practices have been critiqued by most African scholars as having been institutionalized in African socio-cultural structures by colonizers and their societal norms and practices. In line with this thought, scholars such as Nkiru Nzegwu (2006), Oyewumi Oyeronke (1997), Ifi Amadiume (1987) have questioned gendered structures and their practice in Igbo and Yoruba societies and cultures. They have subsequently argued that Igbo and Yoruba societies did not use to function on the basis of gender, but on the basis of seniority and complementarity between men and women in socio-political and economic divisions. Yet, it is undeniable that today gender plays a big role in Igbo and Yoruba societies and in most African societies; therefore, it constitutes the basis of Igbo and Yoruba, and by extension most African societal, political and economic power structures. As the political theorist Mona Abul-Fadl notes, the oppression of women in

African nations today is first of all a patriarchal issue based on “an order of society sanctioning male domination” (qtd in Abusharaf’s “Narrating Feminism: The Woman Question in the Thinking of an African Radical” 152). In other words, society’s privileges of men over women create an imbalanced relationship between men and women. In this imbalanced relationship, women are oppressed due to expectations and institutions that work in favor of men.

1-1- **Questioning Gender and Norms in Society: A Radical Approach to Constructing the African and the African Diasporic Female Identity**

The consciousness of the current generation of women, feminist writers, feminist activists and scholars to advocate a fair society in which men and women and all marginalized people are put on the same plane, have led writers such as Adichie to focus on gender debate in the African diasporic discourse. As Ama Ata Aidoo (1998) puts it, “[w]e [women] need to be able to challenge gender and class oppression, imperialism and exploitation [...] Because in our hands lies, perhaps, the last possible hope for ourselves, and for everyone else on the continent” (“The African Woman Today” 48). With regard to challenging gender issues, *Americanah* stands for the response to the call of Aidoo through its new representation of African and African diaspora women who “challenge gender and class oppression, imperialism and exploitation.” As tuned in by Aidoo herself, her female protagonist Esi in *Changes*, defies gender roles and expectations from her as a woman.

In this chapter, gender roles and expectations refer to society’s categorizations and classifications of roles and expectations based on gender and sex. The chapter also

discusses commonly or universally agreed upon behaviors or practices that a certain gender is expected to display or fit in. The female characters in *Americanah*, —although not primarily faced with issues of gender expectations, in the instance of the pressure to be a wife, a mother, and to act in certain ways that are common to patriarchal practices—however, live in a society where gender roles and expectations are the norms. It is undeniable that gender disparity has lost a bit of its societal tenor than what it used to be. All this, thanks to some changes in governmental and political institutions. Adichie (2014) alludes to these changes in her famous talk *We Should All Be Feminists*, “[t]oday, there are more opportunities for women than there were during my grandmother’s time, because of changes in policy and law, which are very important” (36). The Sudanese activist Fatima Ibrahim highlights similar progress when she points to women’s dedication and efforts to fight national institutions that subjugate Sudanese women, because these women were able at some point in history to improve the condition of the Sudanese woman and her chances of access to political positions (qtd in Abusharaf 166, “Narrating Feminisms”). Yet, it is undeniable that gender still matters today. One notes a new form of gender discrimination that has taken over the contemporary era—the 21st century—because nowadays gender discrimination seems to be no more explicit in forms and practices, but implicit. Part of this new form of implicit and veiled gender discrimination can be related back to the education boys and girls receive from a tender age. In her essay, Adichie (2014) makes a call for change in our attitudes and mindset regarding gendered education,

Gender matters everywhere in the world. And I would like today to ask that we should begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. [...]
We are all social beings. We internalize ideas from our socialization. [...]
... what matters even more is our attitude, our mindset. What if, in raising children, we focus on *ability* instead of gender? What if we focus on *interest* instead of gender?" (25-36)

Thus, it is obvious that as social beings we ascribe ourselves to the gendered education society inscribes in our psyche to the point where we make of these expectations and roles, the norms. Several scenes depicted in *Americanah* critically challenge such social norms. Those scenes are in my view the author's strategies to question societal norms and institutions that have more tolerance for what men do, and less tolerance for women when women do the exact same thing.

For instance, society's conception of a man's and a woman's sexual relationship has mostly been about chastity and sexual purity for the woman while the man is less, or even in some circumstances, not at all expected to hold such attributes. Adichie criticizes such types of gender expectation when she says, "[w]e teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way boys are. If we have sons, we don't mind knowing about their girlfriends. But our daughters' boyfriends? God forbid" (Adichie 32, 2014). In *Americanah*, when Ifemelu was dating Obinze she fantasized about kissing Odein, a collegemate and a member of the Student Union. Ifemelu does not see anything wrong with her fantasy about Odein and so is honest with Obinze when the latter enquires about Odein. She tells Obinze she is curious about Odein, and reassures him that nothing will ever happen between her and Odein, "Ceiling, it's nothing. I'm just curious about him.

Nothing is ever going to happen. But I'm curious. You get curious about other girls, don't you?" (*Americanah* 112). Her honesty and forthrightness with Obinze lend themselves to common perception and interpretation as shocking. To the common man, it is shocking that a woman in a relationship with a man will be curious about kissing another man and be open about it, when in fact she is expected to be faithful. Due to the little tolerance society has for women, most women would hide such feelings from their partners; they would never dare say or admit it for fear that society will label them unfaithful, undignified, prostitute, or any sort of adjectives that will diminish their self-esteem and worthiness. Yet in *Americanah*, it is Ifemelu who does not see anything wrong with being curious about another man and confronts Obinze about him probably having the same experience, "[y]ou get curious about other girls, don't you?" (ibid.). This confrontation is a symbolic critique against society's injustice toward women while the same society mostly sanctions men for such acts. On a similar critical note of gender expectations, the author makes Ifemelu be the first to ask Obinze to kiss because *she wanted* to kiss. Obinze is startled by the question, because, usually women are *not supposed* to be the first to ask for such things. When Obinze says he didn't want to ask for fear that she would think *he only wanted* to kiss her, it becomes evident that in a relationship, what the woman wants is not important or is simply overlooked; it is mainly about what the man wants. Ifemelu's response in this situation gives a glint into how many women have been forced to hide their feelings because of society's expectations of what a woman should or should not want,

"Aren't we going to kiss?" she asked.

He seemed startled. "Where did that come from?"

“I’m just asking. We’ve been sitting here for so long.”

“I don’t want you to think that is all I want.”

“What about what I want?” (*Americanah* 75)

It is however important to note that gender expectations in this situation stifle Obinze as a man. Thus, his fear about asking Ifemelu to kiss is generated from society’s characterization of men as sexual predators who only seek to sleep with a woman and take advantage of her when the opportunity presents itself. This similar reasoning or interpretation is later observed in Ifemelu’s and her white American boyfriend Curtis’s argument over Ifemelu’s cheating act (357). In the above scene, Ifemelu’s way of startling Obinze does not stop there. She is determined to express her feelings without letting someone else express them for her, and so she is the first to express her love to Obinze:

“You know it was love at first sight for both of us,” he [Obinze] said.

“For both of us? Is it by force? Why are you speaking for me?”

“I’m just stating a fact. Stop struggling.” [...]

“Yes, it’s a fact,” she said.

“What?”

“I love you” [Ifemelu declares]. How easily the words came out, how loudly. She wanted him to hear and she wanted the boy sitting in front, bespectacled and studious, to hear and she wanted the girls gathered in the corridor outside to hear.

“Fact,” Obinze said, with a grin. (*Americanah* 75-76)

Ifemelu as a character does not stop catching the reader off guard when she goes as far as to cheat on Curtis, her white American boyfriend. In a sexual encounter between

a man and a woman, society has mostly conceived it as the woman giving herself to the man, in the sense that it is understood the woman loses something while the man gains. This patriarchal assumption surfaces when Ifemelu cheats on Curtis with another white man who is her neighbor. I view Curt's words to Ifemelu as resulting from his patriarchal upbringing and views of a sexual encounter between a man and a woman,

“You gave him what he wanted,” Curt said. The planes of his face hardening. It was an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of things Auntie Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say.

In a sudden giddy fit of recklessness, she corrected Curt. “I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental.”

“Listen to yourself, just fucking listen to yourself!” (*Americanah* 357)

Yet, Ifemelu refuses to take the position of the giver and loser in her sexual encounter with Rob her neighbor. So, she repositions herself in the spot that society has reserved for men—the taker, the one who gains, the one in control. Consequently, not only does Ifemelu defy societal rules by being the cheater, an act that society mostly sanctions as normal when it is done by men; but she also sanctions her act as not a big deal, “[i]t was a mistake. People make mistakes. People do stupid things” (*Americanah* 355). Looked at from a different perspective, if a man makes such a mistake and can be forgiven, why can't a woman make the same mistake and be forgiven? Yet, Curt would not forgive her; probably she could have been forgiven if and only if she had made herself the ignorant and feeble woman who a man had abused by taking from her what he wanted. Even Ginikka, Ifemelu's female friend could not understand Ifemelu's act and so called it in simple and plain terms, a “self-sabotage” (*ibid.*). In Ifemelu's response to Curt, one could

probably see a challenge to people who reason like, “it is not a big deal when men cheat, *but it is a big deal when women cheat.*” So, Curt’s uncompromising decision not to forgive Ifemelu could also be viewed as society’s censure of women’s cheating act over men’s.

Being bold, outspoken, and taking the lead in relationships, are attribute that characterize Ifemelu. When she first met Blaine on the bus, Blaine who will later become her black American boyfriend, she imagined dating and kissing him. She boldly asked for his phone number, and boldly called him repeatedly until she was convinced Blaine was neither going to return nor answer her calls. The boldness of Ifemelu, a female character, contradicts every notion ingrained in our psyche by the patriarchal culture we grew up in. the above attributes are not the only ones that characterize the female protagonist Ifemelu; she also likes her own opinions to shine and does not let them be overpowered by other people’s opinions. When she first started dating Blaine, Ifemelu would take his comments into consideration and would add or remove stuff from her blog posts before putting them up. Yet, she came to dismiss his suggestions and only wrote her blog posts from her own perspective with the goal she had in mind,

“At first, thrilled by his interest, and graced by his intelligence, she let him read her blog posts before she put them up. She did not ask for his edits, but slowly she began to make changes, to add and remove, because of what he said. Then she began to resent it. Her posts sounded too academic, too much like him. [...]

“I don’t want to explain, I want to observe,” she said.

[...] “I’m not saying you have to be academic or boring. Keep your style but add more depth.”

“It has enough depth,” she said, irritated, but with the niggling thought that he was right. (*Americanah* 386)

With all the bold characteristics Ifemelu is portrayed with, the author does not represent her as an ideal perfect woman with no faults or failures; in fact, Ifemelu has weaknesses. These weaknesses of her are mostly representative of characteristics that society disapproves in women. They constitute what society would condemn and qualify as shortcomings. In my view, Adichie’s representation of Ifemelu’s weaknesses that society condemns or disapproves is the author’s critique about some of society’s expectations from a woman. So, while Adichie promotes a liberated and constructive radical woman with values that enhance her happiness and fulfillment, she also sees to it to start a debate about some expectations from a woman; expectations to be exemplary with no intentions or actions on her part that would defy what society qualifies as good moral values. Thus, Adichie seems to question what ‘good moral values’ or ‘ethical values’ stand for in society when for instance she makes of the female protagonist Ifemelu, a husband snatcher, yet an intelligent and successful woman. Can a woman be a husband snatcher and yet, be smart and successful? These, for instance, are attributes that the patriarchal society would put in binary opposition with each other. Many of us would not hold such a woman in high esteem, as we will advance any arguments, whether from an ethical or religious perspective to justify our blame and accusations. Yet, the author creates all situations around such a female character to highlight not only her accomplishments, but also her talents, intelligence, and success. In this regard, the novella seems to call for a revision of what “ethics” or moral values” stand for in societies. As Adichie (2017) states in her manifesto, “Suggestion Number Six” (6), one

should question the premises of certain societal ideologies, for instance, "...what are the things that women cannot do because they are women? Do those things have cultural prestige? Why only men can do prestigious things?" While there is nothing prestigious about snatching someone else's husband, were Ifemelu a man, she would not be viewed as a 'husband snatcher,' but a cheater or simply a lover. In fact, in most of our languages, the term 'spouse/partner snatcher' in most cases relates to a woman doing the action—the proof is that there is no such common term as a "wife snatcher" to describe a man. In the instance where a married woman has an extra marital relationship with a man other than her husband, that man would not be the first target of accusation but the married woman. She would be blamed and labeled an unfaithful woman, a prostitute. As evidenced, language plays a heavy role in gender discrimination as Adichie (2017) points out in her manifesto, *Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*.

Language, Adichie says, is the "repository of our prejudices, beliefs and assumptions," and Adichie incites society— or our minds—to always question it. For instance, a woman is called a mistress, but there is no common term use for a male counterpart in English. Being a mistress is taking the illegal position besides a married man. While a woman is involved together with a married man in an act that labels her a mistress, the married man is hardly called a name that would label him in that demeanor manner. He is usually called a cheater, yet the cheating of men has mostly been sanctioned by society. If one googles the "opposite of mistress." the following is what they would probably read, "[i]n common use, the male equivalent of "mistress" is "lover" or "boyfriend". Those aren't exact equivalents, though. "Mistress" is usually used for the unmarried girlfriend of a married man who is supporting her financially. "Lover" could

apply to either sex with no implication whether either is married to someone else”

(www.google.com/search?hl=en&biw=1536&bih=734&q=opposite+of+mistress, 2017).

Well, there is no exact equivalent word for mistress to designate a man. Society praises a man who is in relationship with a woman, whether married or not, and calls him a lover or boyfriend. Wouldn't it have been in the best interest of society to condemn both men and women who cheat, for cheating is an immoral act and a betrayal? To draw the line, Adichie's *Americanah* questions gender expectations and roles and condemns society's bias judgments.

Adichie in her enterprise to question society's bias judgments has endowed most of her female characters with acts that are not simply out of the norms but that radically change patriarchal gender perceptions, institutions and practices. Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim said about the oppressive regime in Sudan, “In fact, there is no solution other than overthrowing the current regime. In my view, the conditions are ripe for radical change” (qtd in Abusharaf 167-168). Likewise, the female character, particularly Ifemelu in *Americanah*, overthrows institutions that hinder her fulfillment and bring a change in how such institutions should function. It is also understood through Fatima Ibrahim's words that, either one wants a change or there would be no change; this resonates with Adichie's notion of “the danger of feminism light²⁵.” “You either believe in the full equality of men and women or you don't” (*Dear Ijeawele*, “Fourth Suggestion” 00:00:22-00:00:27). If women's actions to call for gender equality and the end of gender discrimination have not yielded an absolute solution, “the conditions are ripe,” to borrow

²⁵ In her manifesto, Suggestion Number Four (4), Adichie says, “beware of the danger of feminism light. She views feminism light as a partial belief in feminism that, actually, compromises the belief in the full equality of men and women, “[y]ou either believe in the full equality of men and women or you don't.”

Ibrahim's words, for radical change. The conditions are ripe for African and African diasporic women, and for African and African diasporic men as well "to begin to dream about and plan a different world. A fairer world" (Adichie 25, 2014), a world of parity between men and women.

Consequently, the radical acts of Ifemelu and some female characters in *Americanah* seek parity between men and women. For instance, if a man kisses because he wants to, then it should only be fair to expect a woman to kiss because she wants to. Fatima Ibrahim, who in my view is a constructive radical feminist and activist, says that she and other women activists,

[...] concentrated on [their] vision for parity by highlighting central concerns and stress[ing] that [they] did not consider men [their] enemy. Instead, [they] exposed the main roots of women's subordination: men, as males, are not responsible for discrimination against women. Most of them are also exploited and discriminated against. For this reason, [they] believed that women and men should work together to make social changes that preserve democracy, which is based on social justice and human rights" (qtd in Abusharaf 165).

To put this differently, parity between men and women can eradicate roots of women's subordination, which of course are not men; men are not responsible for gender biases and discriminations, but socio-cultural and political institutions and ideologies are, because men are as victims of patriarchy as women, even though they benefit from some male privileges that patriarchy supports. Therefore, men and women should come together to fight all forms of gender biases.

Additionally, in *Americanah*, other minor female characters also stand up to the level of Adichie's critique of the lack of parity between men and women, hence a critique of gender discriminations. For instance, Obinze's mother, a lecturer in literatures in English at Nsukka University, is said according to rumors, to be a strong woman who once fought with her male colleague although the real version of the story is that the male professor slapped her because she publicly accused him of misusing funds. People's reaction and sympathy to Obinze's mother have reduced her to a mere widow who "does not have a husband to speak for her." She has felt angry because she has not been seen as a full person who can speak for herself, but as a woman and a widow who has no voice. In response to the reprehensible act of the male professor and to people's reactions to the situation, she speaks up for herself and "wr[i]te circulars and articles about it [...] and some of her female students [have gone] and printed Full Human Being on T-Shirts. [...] it made her well-known" (*Americanah* 71). Obinze's mother's honesty and belief in fair public funds management, something that her society has overlooked in the whole scenario, is a challenge to male-dominated and corrupt political institutions and governments. It is unfortunate and paradoxical that the intellectual, professional and economic independence of Obinze's mother have not constituted, in the eye of her community, enough reasons to see her as an autonomous woman. By speaking up against funds misuse and writing against the gender perception of the scenario, she establishes herself as a "Full Human Being." The strong stance and actions of Obinze's mother challenge the core of her society's gender ideologies, which oppress women. As Fatima Ibrahim notes for instance, two factors—the colonial rule and gender ideologies during colonial rule contributed simultaneously to the oppression of women and led to the

Sudanese women's consciousness to rally together for a change in their conditions as women and as citizens (qtd in Abusharaf 159-160).

In this critique of oppressive gender ideologies, one notes how Adichie makes use of the same oppressive ideologies, roles and expectations of her female characters, both in Nigeria and the United States, to endow them with tools to fight discriminatory identifications and categorizations of women and henceforth establish themselves in these societies. Aunt Uju, Ifemelu's cousin who has been brought up by Ifemelu's parents, is a young graduate doctor with a full hope that one day, she will own a private clinic in Lagos. So, despite the joblessness in which new graduates tumble in the country, and the too common daily strikes of workers and pensioners do not deprive Uju of her dream even when her mates seek applications abroad. In her long hopeless wait, Uju meets one of the Generals of the State of Lagos at a friend's wedding reception. The General becomes Uju's 'sugar daddy,'—a common name attributed to old married men who date single young ladies (*Americanah* 55-56). Her relationship with the General is not well regarded in society and is usually subject to gossiping. Perhaps because of that, Ifemelu's mother always pretends or prefers to refer to the General as "Uju's mentor." As for Ifemelu's father, he has never really approved the relationship yet has never openly condemned it either; perhaps because after all, the General provides for every financial needs of Aunt Uju, and has bought her a new mansion. So, while in relationship with the General, the latter creates a doctor post for Uju, "[...] "[t]he hospital has no doctor vacancy but the General made them create one for me" were [Aunt Uju's] words" to Ifemelu and her parents. The power that people such as the General have is oppressive to the socio-economic wellbeing of Nigerian people, because it only benefits a small group

of people and leaves the majority of the population to hang around in despair. While this situation presents itself as ironical, Uju uses the opportunity with the General—a symbol of the corrupt Nigerian system—to use the very system of injustice and corruption established by such oppressive regimes as the one to which the General belongs, to climb the social ladder and make a position for herself. Her next decision to keep her pregnancy and have a child for the General is probably the last blow in the face of patriarchal view and perceptions of ladies such as Aunty Uju.

While her relationship with the General is not welcomed and is critically viewed in her community, Uju does not let her society define her or decide what she should do with the out-of wedlock pregnancy. She does not only keeps the pregnancy but gives her child her own family name, then names the child, Dike, after her own father. After the death of the General during a military plane crash in Lagos, Aunty Uju gives herself and Dike, a life and a living in the United States. Not only does Aunty Uju go to medical school in the US and earn her degree to become a family doctor, but she also devotes herself as a mother to her son Dike, and makes sure Dike receives the best education. However, Uju's journey was not without struggles, especially when she becomes convinced that she needs a man in her life to be a father figure for her son, Dike. In her internalization of society's expectations of a woman to be a wife, she started dating Bartholomew—a middle aged Nigerian man who migrated to the US. Yet, after a life together with Bartholomew, who is neither interested in being a father to Dike nor being a supportive and loving husband, Aunty Uju decides to leave him; she later moves to a different city with her son Dike where they both live a happier life.

Characterizations of female characters from a patriarchal culture perspective have usually not given the readership a rendition of such rounded, intricate and successful characters as Adichie's Ifemelu. Adichie's enterprise to portray her female characters as strong women, outspoken, self-confident and alert to the conditions surrounding them, bears thus a portrait characteristic that differs from most of her predecessors' representation of female characters. One may question, how can a woman who cheats on her boyfriend, is sexually proactive, doesn't hide her feelings (Ifemelu), or a woman who is a widow (Obinze's mother), or a woman who dates an old married man (Aunty Uju), be yet portrayed as strong and successful? Adichie's female characters, particularly, Ifemelu, Aunty Uju and Obinze's mother, are brought to the reader in a raw nature that presents them with both their strengths and flaws—the flaws in this case constitute the things that society forbids or denies women simply because they are women. All of this blend together to contribute to these female characters' awareness and their use of the very discriminatory tools to fight against any gender ideologies, roles and expectations that demean and oppress them.

1-2- **A Post-modern Critical View of Gender, Mother and Wife Identities**

In *Americanah*, one witnesses a new approach and view on marriage and motherhood that differ from most previous critics' approach to wifeness and motherhood identities. Thus, this section analyzes the free-choice of most of the female characters in *Americanah* to choose to embrace such roles. Moreover, it argues that new factors—outside the traditional pressures critics have argued constitute the pressure on women to marry or become mothers—work as external pressures, particularly in the diaspora, and

lead some female characters to choose to embrace such social roles. Nonetheless, I highlight that *Americanah* underlines that the traditional pressures still manifest themselves in some of the female characters' choice to marry or have children, mainly due to how gender roles are difficult to unlearn. In this instance, one sees Auntie Uju judge herself using her internalized knowledge from her society which views a woman at her age as the one who should be married.

While the pressure to be a wife or a mother is not typically the experience of the female characters in *Americanah*, the reader witnesses some female characters' choice to embrace them. In this regard, the female character in the novel chooses to either be a sexual partner, a mistress, a wife and or a mother. No matter what her choice, she is free from the outsider's pressure and critique; remarkably, she alone decides whether to walk out of her relationships and choices or to stay in. For example, Auntie Uju's 'sugar-daddy practice' or her position as a mistress to the General has been her choice alone. Despite her uncle's—Ifemelu's father's—rejection of the relationship basically through his attitudes, he has never expressed himself on the issue (90-91). Later in the US, when Auntie Uju decides to engage in a relationship that will lead to marriage, she has been the sole decision-maker to get in the relationship and later to get out of it because it was not working. Similar to Auntie Uju, one sees Ifemelu walk out of her relationships, first with Obinze and then later with Blaine, her Black American boyfriend. Through these female characters' choices, Adichie presents a new image of female partners, wives, as well as mothers. For instance, the female character Ojiugo in *Americanah* is the wife of Obinze's cousin, Nicholas. She is presented in the novel as a brilliant student with great potentials in the future. Yet, when she migrates to the United Kingdom with her husband and is the

first in their relationship to do graduate studies, earn a Master's degree and get her citizenship papers, she chooses to be a stay-home mother to their two children and is characterized as happy in her role of wife and mother. Consequently, Adichie nuances wifehood and motherhood from how they have been conceived and criticized in most twentieth century African women's writings. For instance, writings such as *The Joys of Motherhood* (Emecheta, 1979) and *One is Enough* (Nwapa, 1981) present motherhood and wifehood as expectations that oppress their female characters. Similarly, African critics such as, Remi Akujobi (2011) and Carole Boyce Davies (1986) have argued that motherhood and or wifehood are represented in most African women's writings as oppressive to women. While *Americanah* does not refute such rendition of wifehood and motherhood, it represents these as choices that its female characters make and apparently, these females rarely present any suffering, regrets or oppressions as resulting from their choices.

Wifehood and motherhood as attributes to women have a long time been the foci of several writers—both males and females—and in the research and writings of African and African diasporic scholars; yet, these writers and scholars have had differing representations and interpretations of these two attributes. Ostensibly, the difference between male and female perspectives on motherhood and wifehood is not only inherent to African literature and criticism. This is also a reality in foreign literature, in the instance of African American literature. For example, the African American critic Barbara Christian (1994) argues that “the meaning of motherhood has always been interpreted by societal institutions which, as far as we know, have always been under male authority” (25). Andrea Benton Rushing (1979) asserts that the prevalent portrayal

of Black women in African poetry is that of “Mother is Gold” (19). The “Mother is Gold” figure has mainly been the Black male writers’ portrayal of motherhood. This male representation of motherhood veils other aspects of motherhood in Black mothers’ daily experiences—the sacrificial, suffering, pain, and sometimes its disappointing aspects. Writings such as Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*, to cite just the two, have unveiled some true experiences of motherhood. These experiences are not as goldish and joyful as they have often been represented by male writers. The critic Laretta Ngcobo (1998) alludes to the difference between the male literature produced on African motherhood and the reality of motherhood as accounted for by African mothers themselves and their children. Laretta Ngcobo contends that many African writers present their respect, honor and love for mothers in their writings yet, “... away from this hall of writers, into the streets and hills of Africa one will meet hordes of mothers who will [...] quietly qualify what motherhood, the institution, really means, for them” (533). Thus, motherhood as societal institution can be according to these critics and writers, oppressive, painful, disappointing and full of suffering.

Amidst the critique around the gender perspectives on motherhood, some female scholars have however explored and argued in favor of the importance of motherhood in the life of the African and African diasporic woman. Nkiru Nzegwu (2006), for instance, asserts that “mothers are the producers of family wealth and social regeneration” (51). Nzegwu’s assertion outlines the importance of motherhood at three levels: first, in the life of African women; second, in the life of their families; third, in the development of society. Critics such as R. Akujobi (2011) and L. Ngcobo (1988) state that motherhood was as sacred and important in African communities and culture in the past as it is in the

present. In this line of thought, Oyewumi Oyeronke (1997) notes that the main reason of marriage in the Old Oyo society (in Nigeria) was procreation (53). However, besides the importance and value bestowed on African motherhood, these critics would agree with Barbara Christian (1994) in her comparative study of B. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian* that in African as well as in African American communities, motherhood both respects and restricts women (97). So, one can conclude that the myth and sometimes the veiled realities around motherhood are what contribute to underestimating the motherhood identity and experiences that women can carry. As B. Christian highlights, the prevalent idea in black American community is that mothers should live a life of sacrifice (ibid.) and the same analysis applies to *The Joys of Motherhood* wherein Emecheta portrays a society who believes that mothers, like the protagonist Nnu Ego, should excessively sacrifice everything in order to fulfill their motherhood and mothering roles. By doing this, they are said to live to the expectations of their children, husband and community and hence, are identified as the 'good mothers' and the 'good wives.'

It is worth highlighting that wifhood and motherhood are often associated together in most patriarchal absorbed cultures yet, some African feminists, in the instance of Nkiru Nzegwu (2006), have argued that to establish a link between wifhood and motherhood is to miss on the rights women have had in African societies, because "women did not have to be wives to become mothers" (Nzegwu 51). In other words, the Nigerian feminist and philosopher Nzegwu identifies a difference between wifhood and motherhood and asserts that unlike motherhood, wifhood is a demeaning and subjugating identity for a woman. However, African society sees wifhood as an integral

part of a woman gender roles and expectations. In this regard, African society's intolerance for single ladies and single mothers as represented in most African women's writings of the 20th century, has brought the western critic Katherine Frank (1987) to state that single women in most African women's writings have to struggle to make a place for themselves in their society which does not have room for divorced or single women and mothers.

Yet, unlike previous depictions of female characters under wifhood or motherhood umbrella, Adichie's *Americanah* presents a wide range of wives and mothers with different choices, positions and responsibilities towards marriage and motherhood. So, unlike previous critics and writers' representation of marriage—the intolerance for single women in patriarchal societies, the demeaning and subjugating identity of wifhood, or the sacrificial and painful aspects of motherhood—some of Adichie's female characters freely choose to embrace such societal roles. Yet, while some of the female characters seem to have evolved in their perception and understanding of wifhood and motherhood, others have internalized gender expectations and to some extent seem to remain unchanged and or flat.

For instance, in *Americanah*, after dating the General and having one son with him out of wedlock, Aunty Uju moves to the United States after the death of the General. Her beginnings in the States as far as job, financial needs, school constraints are concerned, have not been easy. She has to work three jobs; she has to simultaneously manage to be a single parent and a college student in medical school. She seems always unhappy and stressed out as Ifemelu notices upon arriving in the United States (127-131). Comparatively, Uju's situation is not very different from the situation of most African

immigrants in the US. Amidst Uju's stressful and crazy life, she thought about the one thing she knew could bring some happiness into her and Dike's life: a husband and a father figure. She needed a husband for herself and a father figure for her son Dike. It would be perhaps too easy to blame Uju later when her relationship with Bartholomew, the man she thought would be her husband and a father for her son would fail. Yet, how many of us²⁶ have not had or are still nurturing that 'dreaming dream mindset!' because the patriarchal sociocultural upbringing we have received leaves us no other choice. Uju said to Ifemelu, "I'm not getting any younger. I want Dike to have a brother or a sister. [...] Please, just pray that it will work" (*Americanah* 144-145), a statement that implies she is expected to be married by this time of her life yet she is not. In my view, the teaching about expectations for women to marry is a sort of indoctrination in women's lives up to the point where without even an apparent pressure from family and friends to marry, most women put themselves under this pressure to marry. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Chimamanda Adichie (2014) questions the premise and concept of marriage in the following terms, "[b]ecause I'm female, I'm expected to aspire to marriage. I'm expected to make life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Marriage can be a good thing, a source of joy, love and mutual support. But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage, yet we don't teach boys to do the same?" (28-29). Teaching women to aspire to marriage or view marriage as the most important thing is prevalent in most societies, not only in Africa or in the African diaspora. As "[g]ender roles are very difficult to unlearn" (Adichie, 2017), so is the social teaching to girls and women about marriage. Thus, Uju finds it very difficult to think otherwise about

²⁶ Both African and African diasporic women

herself as an unmarried single mother who is not getting any younger. As in Uju's case, most African and African diasporic women would use their growing age as a self-pressure tool to seek marriage. While age may constitute one of the reasons why most contemporary African and African diasporic women aspire to marriage, other factors such as loneliness, unhappiness, lack of emotional support, etc. are essential factors that affect some of these contemporary women's decisions to embrace marriage and or motherhood.

Yet, beyond these new essential factors *Americanah* presents a new look into possible reasons that push African women and especially diasporic African women to seek marriage. Consequently, through the female character Aisha, the reader discovers the insecurities of residing illegally in western countries as new reasons that push some African immigrant women to aspire to marriage, or as Ifemelu imagined it as a good title for her blog, "A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy" (*Americanah* 22). Yes, "the pressures of immigrant life" seem like the new pressure tool on some diasporic women who choose to marry. Aisha is a Senegalese braider and illegal resident in Trenton, New Jersey; she works in the hair salon of Mariama, the employer braider from Mali. Aisha engages in a conversation with Ifemelu about her two boyfriends and her reason to want to marry,

"... I have two Igbo men. Igbo men take care of women real good. [...] I want marry. They love me but they say the family wants Igbo woman ..." [Aisha said].

Ifemelu swallowed the urge to laugh. "You want to marry both of them?"

"No." Aisha made an impatient gesture. "I want marry one ..." [sic] (18).

She continued and revealed her intentions, surprising Ifemelu even more,

“How you got your papers?” Aisha asked.

“What? [...] I got mine from work,” [Ifemelu] said. “The company I worked for sponsored my green card.” [...]

“Chijioke [one of Aisha’s Igbo boyfriends] get his papers with lottery,” Aisha said. “My father die, I don’t go,” she said.

“What?” [Ifemelu said].

“Last year. My father die and I don’t go. Because of papers. But maybe if Chijioke marry me, when my mother die, I can go. She is sick now. But I send her money.” [sic]

Aisha’s decision to marry is a novelty among all the reasons previously used by society to justify why women marry. This novelty has nothing to do with the reasons the traditional society has conceived marriage to be for women. Thus, Aisha’s intentions and desire to marry have nothing to do with seeking safety, whether financial or physical from a man, nor do they have anything to do with having a child—a reason that many scholars such as O. Oyeronke (1997), R. Akujobi (2011), and Carole B. Davies (1986) have argued is the main reason for marriage in most African societies. In the case of Aisha, not only does she seek marriage to enjoy the legal status in the US, but the need to travel back and forth to the US in case of emergencies or funerals such as her dad’s funeral that she missed is essential for her. Besides Aisha, Wambui, Ifemelu’s friend from college is said to be working hard to save five thousand dollars (\$5000) for a fake marriage in order to get a green card, “Wambui was working three jobs under the table to raise the five thousand dollars she would need to pay an African-American for a green-card marriage” (*Americanah* 249-250).

Nevertheless, aside from society's robe of wifhood and its derived expectations it places on women, it is worth noting that *Americanah's* tale/novella also posits a critical view on especially the gendered concept of wifhood in African and African diaspora. It challenges the notion that marriage is a safe haven, a status or protection for only women. Thus, despite societal conception that only women aspire to marriage, whether it is under the 'outside pressure'²⁷ or under the 'auto-pressure' and personal interest's needs, some male characters in *Americanah* have also been put in the positions where they have to seek marriage to fulfill similar needs as Aisha's and Wambui's. Accordingly, *Americanah* presents experiences of male characters such as, Obinze and Emenike, who because of seeking a financial protection (Emenike) or a legal status in England (both Emenike and Obinze) choose to legally marry or go through a sham marriage. Obinze, for instance, lives in England as an illegal because his visa—with which he came on the pretense that he was an assistant researcher for his mother—has expired. It was not only hard for him to work under somebody else's name but he was also living in fear for the worse—the fear of being caught with an expired visa. He thinks of himself as an invisible person who has no purpose for his life. He often says to himself when he sees the British citizens on the street, "[y]ou can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don't even know how fortunate you are" (*Americanah* 281). Obinze is invisible, the kind of invisibility society attributes to women whether married or unmarried. To overshadow his invisibility, Obinze goes through a process to prepare a sham marriage with the help of two Angolans who make him pay money for such a fake marriage. Obinze prepares himself to have his sham marriage with Cleotilde—an Angolan lady born in England—

²⁷ Pressure from family, parents, friends, in brief the pressure from the community

and to get divorced in a year after he gets his papers. The sham marriage is supposed to give him some sort of visibility and legality in England. Unfortunately for Obinze, before the sham marriage even takes place, he is arrested and deported to Nigeria for illegally residing in England.

Another male character in *Americanah*, Emenike the “sharp,” as he is called by his fellow secondary schoolmates back in Lagos, also seeks status and financial care through a marriage with a white British citizen. Emenike marries Georgina, the English lawyer, gets his papers and lives a luxurious life under the care and protection of Georgina. Emenike’s marital state does not only challenge the common societal and patriarchal perception that only women need marriage for protection and financial care, but it also calls for a fair and sound analysis of the contemporary life of men and women. Adichie (2014) alludes to this idea when she urges society to stop teaching boys and girls roles and expectations that are based on gender, and instead, to focus on abilities and interests (36). Consequently, if a man needs to get married for papers or get married for financial care of a woman, society should not criticize that man based on the assumptions that he did something that only women should do. The same goes for a woman who seeks to get married for papers for reasons that she feels will facilitate her life conditions. In this case, society should not view that woman’s decision as part of her fulfillment of her gender roles. In a nutshell, gender roles and expectations complicate the life of not only women but of men as well. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie (2014) calls attention to what gender does to men,

We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a *very* narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small

cage, and we put boys inside this cage. [...] [For example,] [w]hat if both boys and girls were raised *not* to link masculinity and money? What if their attitude was not ‘the boy has to pay’, but rather, ‘whoever has more should pay’? [...] if we start raising our children differently, ... boys will no longer have the pressure of proving their masculinity by material means. (26-27)

Adichie (2014) argues that “[t]he problem of gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are,” (34) and I add that gender has a way of molding our lives—both men’s and women’s—into shapes that our body, mind, desires, etc. may not fit or may not desire. Conclusively, in line with her thought on the disservice gender does to men, Adichie (2013) in *Americanah* sets off not only to challenge gender expectations on women, but on men as well. Thus, for instance, while society would expect Emenike to shrink himself around Georgina, to feel threatened by her, or have a “*very fragile ego[.]*” (Adichie 26, 2014), Emenike’s attitudes in front of Georgina’s friends at their dinner party were bold and at ease in his new world, “[h]ow thrilled he was, to be in Georgina’s world” (*Americanah* 340). Emenike even considers himself British, a complete slipping into the identity of Georgina. When Obinze said that “[...] English people are in awe of America but also deeply resent it,” Emenike jumped in and said, “But the Americans love *us* Brits, they love the accent and the Queen and the double decker” (336) (*my emphasis*). Then the narrator’s comment reads, “[t]here, it had been said: the man [Emenike] considered himself British” (*ibid.*). So, Emenike’s attitudes in *Americanah* highlight Adichie’s critique on gender expectations on not only women but on men as well.

However, amidst the choices of some female characters to embrace marriage and or motherhood and the critique on gender expectations from both men and women, *Americanah* also presents a category of women who for the sake of their family have chosen to give up their jobs to be just wives and mothers (The General's wife), or who simply live a life of insecurity in marriage for fear of losing their man (Obinze's wife Kosi), "[t]he General [Aunty Uju's sugar-daddy]'s wife [... is]: a lawyer who had given up working to raise their four children in Abuja, a woman who looked portly and pleasant in newspaper photographs" (*Americanah* 102). Although the General's wife circumstances in which she gives up her lawyer profession "to raise their four children" have not been disclosed in the novella, Adichie (2014) states that in Nigeria, "[w]hen women say 'I did it for peace in my marriage,' it is usually because they have given up a job, a career goal, a dream" (31). It is common to see most modern educated African women live in a sort of insecurity when they get married. So, for peace in their marriage, or to save their marriage, some of these women would give up their career, especially if their husband is a wealthy man who can provide for the whole family needs as it is in the case of the General.

Zulu Sofola (1998), in her critical essay on modern educated African women alludes to the insecurity of modern educated married African women,

Consequently, because of this "wifhood" syndrome, the educated African woman spends most of her time panicking over the possibility of rejection or dethronement by her husband, thus making herself less relevant and less effective. This extreme feeling of insecurity tends to make her distrust her fellow women unduly, and makes it difficult for women to close ranks [...]. (63)

This state of insecurity of modern educated married women does not go unnoticed in *Americanah*. Kosi, Obinze's wife is portrayed as the modern, yet conservative African woman who lives only to please her man Obinze. Kosi also lives in fear of having her man snatched from her hands by unmarried women. So, not only is Kosi represented as a woman who devotes her whole being to her wifedom and motherhood, but she is also an insecure woman,

Her insecurity, so great and so ordinary, silenced him [Obinze]. She was worried about a housegirl whom it would never even occur to him [Obinze] to seduce. Lagos could do this to a woman married to a young and wealthy man; he knew how easy it was to slip into paranoia about housegirls, about secretaries, about *Lagos Girls*, those sophisticated monsters of glamour who swallowed husbands whole, slithering them down their jeweled throats. Still, he wished Kosi feared less, conformed less. (*Americanah* 42)

To implement Kosi's conformity to norms, her level of insecurity and her way of making sure she keeps her husband, the narrative reads,

She [Kosi] had, in the years since they got married, grown an insecure intemperate dislike of single women and an intemperate love of God. Before they got married, she went to service once a week at the Anglican church on the Marina, a Sunday tick-the-box routine that she did because she had been brought up that way, but after their wedding, she switched to the House of David because, as she told him [Obinze], it was a Bible-believing church. Later, when he [Obinze] found out that the House of David had a special prayer service for Keeping Your Husband, he had felt unsettled. Just as he had when he once asked

why her best friend from university, Elohor, hardly visited them, and Kosi said, “She’s still single,” as though that was a self-evident reason. (*Americanah* 43)

It is ironic that Kosi’s degree of dislike of single women—who she fears will cause her to lose her husband by stealing him away—is the same degree of love she devotes to God to keep her husband. Some modern educated African women’s embrace of marriage comes with a baggage of insecurities that, in my view, reinforces gender expectations and women’s hate and violence against other women. This also deepens the competition of women against each other for the attention of men, “[w]e raise girls to see each other as competitors—not for jobs or accomplishments, which in my opinion can be a good thing, but for the attention of men” (32), Adichie (2014) deplores in a talk of 1992 at TEDxEuston, now published as a feminist critical essay.

In a nutshell, gender identity in *Americanah* challenges gender expectations and roles as conceived by patriarchal ideologies. The characters in the novella, both men and women, challenge these discriminatory institutions; yet, it is the identity of women that is mainly reconsidered. With the use of male identity to challenge gender institutions, the author questions the one-sided view, in other words, the biased view that society has had on women and on gender expectations and roles. This questioning approach is also seen through the female protagonist who does not only choose to define her ‘self,’ but does so by questioning the other, the socially established patriarchal and discriminatory institutions and the ethical values both in the diaspora as well as in her home country. As Nora Berning (2015) argues, the individual and collective perception of self and ‘other’ form an integral part of the migrant’s search of ethnic, cultural, and national belonging (2). *Americanah* does not only challenge and radicalize women’s identity in a

constructive way, but it also sets a platform for discussions of issues that discriminate women and all the disenfranchised. Yet, it also highlights an issue very dear to my heart, the fact that there is no unity between married and unmarried women and this is because of distrust and insecurities. In my view, *Americanah* also disseminates the idea that the fight against gender discrimination and oppression should be carried out by women themselves, yet stresses that this fight will be far from ending and far from being won if women do not deter themselves away from perpetuating gender ideologies through violence and hate against one another, and also against themselves, simply to earn the attention or love of a man. In other words, women should fully embrace their fellow women and create a solid bond between all women. Based on this, I see it only fair to assert and stress that race, gender and class should not take precedence on the unity between women.

2- Identity in Regard to Race: Race as a Source of Unity and Division/A Common Experience of African Immigrants

Race per se has known divergent and inconsistent definitions for centuries; sometimes, it is due to its rejection of the notion that it lacks scientific basis and is socially constructed (Coleman 91-92, 2011), or other times, due to the voluntary omission by scholars who use it as a stepping stone to define and discuss racism. But mostly, race has been defined as a set of biological traits common to a group of people and which differentiates them from other groups of people. Samuel Coleman (2011) notes the “lack [...] of consensus on [the] treatment of race” (91) in social work literature for instance; Osagie K. Obasogie (2010), a researcher in Law, Bioethics, and Race

highlights the controversy around the definition and nature of race and states that despite the controversy, one consensus seems to arise, a belief that “race is primarily a matter of visually obvious physical features [...] a consistent and dominant feature ... thought to primarily derive from self-evident and visually obvious human differences” (586) such as, “skin color, facial features, and other visual cues” (585). In his study, “Do Blind People See Race? Social, Legal and Theoretical Considerations,” Obasogie (2010) argues against such dominant visual perceptions of race and shows that race could be thought of and discussed beyond visual features and therefore embodies social and political practices,

[Obasogie] challenges existing understandings of race by investigating the significance of race outside of vision. Without dismissing the role of visual cues to race, [he] empirically investigate[s] the significance and relevance of visual cues in social understandings of race by asking: How do blind people understand race? [His] hypothesis starts from the somewhat counterintuitive premise that the salience and significance of race depend little on what we see; taking vision as racial truth may very well obscure a deeper understanding of precisely how race is communicated and socialized, as well as how race plays out in everyday life.

(586)

Obasogie (2010) draws attention to how vision plays a minor role in our understanding and perception of race and how instead, it is society and culture that inform and shape our racial conception. In my view, society and its political culture contribute to racial institutions or institutionalized racism, creating thus racial disparities. Consequently, racial awareness is apparent only in socio-cultural environments or places where two or

more races cohabit and where one or more races feel they are superior to other races. In his study, Obasogie (2010) demonstrates that “race [is] visually salient through constitutive social practices [...]” (585). In other words, socialization plays a big role when it comes to creating, institutionalizing and perpetuating racial discrimination.

This section analyzes racial identity formation and experiences of both female and male migrant characters in *Americanah*. Laying emphasis on the female experience, this section analyzes the main female character—Ifemelu’s racial identity formation through her questioning and understanding of ‘self’ and ‘other.’ Adichie’s technique of using the female migrant’s critique of ‘self’ is discussed from the point of view of the protagonist Ifemelu as a racial minority and a woman. Race in this section is not only analyzed to show how it affects the female migrant’s diasporic identity formation, but also to show how it serves as a tool the diasporic female uses to initiate a radical change of established racial injustices and discriminations.

The diasporic characters’ experiences in *Americanah* show that race becomes only an issue when these characters settle in their western receiving countries. For instance, the female protagonist Ifemelu, similar to the author Adichie herself, is not aware of her black race until she sets foot in the United States, a country defined as multi-racial and where racism persists (Coleman, 2011; Obasogie, 2010; Dulin-Keita, Hannon III, Fernandez and Cockerham, 2011). Adichie (2009) confesses in a TED Talks speech, “The Danger of a Single Story” that “[...] before [she] went to the US, [she] didn’t consciously identify as African, but in the US whenever Africa came up, people turned to [her], never mind that [she] knew nothing about places like Namibia. But [she] did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways [she] think[s] of [her]self now as

African.” Likewise, Ifemelu in one of her blog posts on ‘race in America’ writes about how she is first made aware of her black race, and so, tells her Non-American black readers—as she usually refers to herself and other African immigrants—to be aware of the change in this new identity, to stop rejecting it and to embrace it,

To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop Arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian.

America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t “black” in your country? You are in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up.

(Americanah 273)

Jayne O. Ifekwenigwe (2003) on her concept of ‘dis-Africanization’ of Africans in the diaspora, writes, “[f]orget you are African, remember you are Black” (59). She further highlights that no matter the host territory, the “popular folk concept of ‘race’ [...] inform[s] and impede[s] the collective and personal projects of African diasporic identities formation” (60). In other words, race is the primary factor in identity formation of pan-African diasporic individuals, as pan-Africans, in the instance of Ali Mazrui, (1986) argue. Consequently, recent African immigrants have been robbed of their ethnicity of African and of their nationality and are only seen through the color of their skin and their kinky hair, in most cases. Also, and in most cases, these African immigrants only become aware of the difference between the white race and other races like Hispanic for instance when they first arrive in their host countries. An example in

Americanah is when Ifemelu first arrived at Auntie Uju's house: Dike introduced her to Alma, "a pale-skinned, tired-faced woman with black hair held in a greasy ponytail" (128). Alma was babysitting Dike. Yet, "[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" (*Americanah* 18-129).

My own experience was not so much different from Ifemelu's encounter with Alma. During my first days of arrival in the States, a group of friends from Togo and Ghana—well, you quickly befriend people from your ethnicity (in this case, African ethnicity) when you 'first arrive' in the United States and the bond would feel like you knew each other years before then—took me for a walk in one of the beautiful parks of Chicago, whose name I can't recall now. We met different groups of people and at one point in time, I heard the Ghanaian friend say, look at this Mexican family. I was perplexed because to me that family was white and I couldn't tell how he was able to tell they were Mexicans. A few minutes later, he pointed at a couple and said, these are Indians; of course their skin tone was a bit different from the family he mentioned earlier, but still I could not fathom how he and my other friends were able to tell the different races apart. When I asked, he told me, "Just wait, you will be able to tell very soon the difference between all the races in America." And he was right, now I can tell the difference between Latinos, Europeans, Indians and other Asians, I can even tell the difference between the Chinese and Koreans. Similar to Ifemelu's experience, I can also tell the difference between African immigrants and native-born African Americans. I'm

still at awe at how quickly I became knowledgeable of the differences between races, sometimes between ethnicities, simply by telling their biological differences apart. While visual cues are definitely part of my abilities to tell races apart, my socialization and experiences with racial and ethnic disparities and institutions in the US have definitely been the main factors to my understanding of race in America. In my country Togo, I wouldn't have been able to do so because the socio-cultural and political institutions are not set around racial differences.

2-1- **The Outsider-Insider Look on Racial and Ethnic Issues: Questioning the 'Other' and 'Self'**

Putting two presumed unequal countries and languages on equal foot is what Ifemelu does when she first sets herself off to critique not only the 'other' but also the 'self.' Thus, this section analyzes Ifemelu's constructive radicalism in initiating a different yet fair and equal view of American and Nigerian ethnicities—cultures, practices, beliefs and languages.

Similar to her approach regarding gender, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses the approach of 'other' and 'self' questioning to address the issue of race and racism in *Americanah*. The female protagonist's awareness of race in the United States springs out of her experience with discrimination of her race, her hair, her accent, even the historical deeds of her African ancestors, all of which have been used to treat her and make her feel different. As she decides to blog on race, racism and other issues that affect the daily life of minorities in the US and to initiate a change, she uses personal and the other people's stories to create a platform of conversation and exchange. Not only does she question the

white race, the alleged superior race in America, but she also questions the black race and different ethnicities and other minority races.

In her technique used to question the ‘other,’ Ifemelu makes use of the “back to the sender” method to take ground and posit a critique on the ‘other’ by way of understanding not only the other but by also making herself understood. She thus recreates the conversation around race by using the discrimination directed at her, not to discriminate, but to put on equal plane her ‘self’ and the ‘other’—in this case, the discriminator. Language for instance is a source of discrimination to not only black students but to mostly all international students, especially those coming from countries where the native language is not English. On the day Ifemelu goes to school for registration, she is treated differently because of her different and foreign accent. Cristina Tomas, the white woman at the registration front desk gives directions to Ifemelu in a crippled, slow spoken English that made Ifemelu feel “[...] like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling” (*Americanah* 163). Feeling as Ifemelu felt or feeling inferior, ignorant, or dead, are probably the right attributes with which to describe the state in which most African immigrants are put when they ‘speak with an accent;’ even though everybody, including the Americans themselves have accents. Resolved not to remain in the inferior, limbed and ignorant status she is put in, Ifemelu decides to practice the American accent,

[...] she [Ifemelu] realized that Cristina Thomas was speaking like that because of *her*, her foreign accent [...]

Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas’s face before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf. [...] she

should not have covered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent. (163-4)

While Ifemelu's retaliation to Cristina Tomas' treatment of her can be regarded as a politics of assimilation into mainstream white America, it also marks the beginning of change in her ethnic identity as a migrant. By assimilating, Ifemelu seeks to feel as 'somebody' with values; after all, she has felt like nobody since she arrived in the US until the day she received a junk mail with a preapproval for a credit card, which "[...] made her a little less invisible, a little more present" (162). Ifemelu's experience denotes the struggle of African migrants with establishing their identity, their visibility, and this becomes a dilemma for most of them as they struggle with overcoming the racial and ethnic discriminations that they face. Similarly, Auntie Uju's experience with language or accent-based discrimination or in other terms, the language-based ethnic discrimination²⁸ at her workplace leaves her confused and frustrated. She tells Ifemelu, "I don't even know why I came to this place. The other day the pharmacist said my accent was incomprehensible. Imagine, I called in a medicine and she actually told me that my accent was incomprehensible. And that same day, as if somebody sent them, one patient, a useless layabout with tattoos all over his body, told me to go back where I came from. All because I knew he was lying about being in pain and I refused to give him more pain medicine. Why do I have to take all this rubbish?" (271). The language-based ethnic discrimination is thus a factor of discrimination common to the experiences of African migrants in *Americanah*. Because she is aware through discrimination that her accent and

²⁸ By 'language-based ethnic discrimination' I mean, the discrimination based on a foreign or different language

language are different, Ifemelu starts analyzing and questioning her host country linguistic culture.

Thus, the difference in meanings of the use of certain words and expressions, — obviously generated by the culture and the intercommunication between people of the same culture—the educational system, parenting, cultural dress codes and other practices have astonished Ifemelu to the extent to push her to engage in a comparative analysis of her home country cultural language and that of her host country, the United States. Consequently, as Ifemelu decides to practice the American English accent as her way of assimilating into her host society and its culture, she starts questioning some of its cultural practices and beliefs, that is, some of its ethnic values. She thus puts the American and the Nigerian ethnic values on an equal footing. She finds the educational system easy; the air-conditioning in classrooms, the teacher-student interaction, and class time participation as a requirement and part of the final grade; all of these appear as odd to her. It is worth noting that not all her observations and questioning are negative impressions since her questioning is an engagement to better understand herself, understand the other and to make herself understood as well. Also, some of her questionings constitute a critique of her home country's socio-political system, the lack of infrastructure and adequate means for the success of students and the seemingly never-ending strikes by teacher and students (*Americanah* 110-111; 120-121). Yet, “[...] she was uncomfortable with what the professors called “participation,” and did not see why it should be part of the final grade; it merely made students talk and talk, class time wasted on obvious words, hollow words, sometimes meaningless words” (*Americanah* 164). Through the eyes and observation of Ifemelu, a member of the presumed minority race

and ethnicity, not only does the reader discover some of the cultural practices and beliefs of the American culture, but the reader comes across the critical perspectives of a minority race and culture over the presumed superior race and culture. Ifemelu, the minority—the black, the woman—accounts for her racial and ethnic experiences not from the perspective of the superior race and culture over the minor race and culture, but the other way around. Her approach of comparing the American cultural language to the Nigerian one, vice versa, establishes not only the equal value of each of these cultures, but denotes the radical approach of the author Adichie to change the Eurocentric approach of comparing African cultures to Western cultures. In this perspective, Ifemelu interrogates the American use of the English language from her Nigerian English perspective,

They [Americans] avoided giving direct instructions: they did not say “Ask somebody upstairs”; they said “You might want to ask somebody upstairs.” When you tripped and fell, when you choked, when misfortune befell you, they did not say “Sorry.” They said “Are you okay?” when it was obvious that you were not. And when you said “Sorry” to them when they choked or tripped or encountered misfortune, they replied, eyes wide with surprise, “Oh, it’s not your fault.[...] Some of the expressions she heard everyday astonished her, jarred her, and she wondered what Obinze’s mother would make of them [...] “These Americans cannot speak English o,” she told Obinze. (*Americanah* 164-165)

Ifemelu also discovers through Ginika the opposite meanings of certain words and expressions between American and Nigerian English (151-152). The dress code and the partying habits (154; 157-158), the invitation codes that are not in the sense of “You are

my guest” or “I will treat you to drinks or food” or “it’s on me” (157), the suspicious yet legal system of bribing called tipping (158), etc. have all shocked Ifemelu. Moreover, she was disappointedly surprised to see dirty apartments (155), immoral habits that she has no idea existed in America until she came; all this because of the glamorous image of America with beautiful and perfect skyscrapers she had been familiar with (145-155) through reading and on television.

The approach of the author Adichie in juxtaposing and questioning, through her female character Ifemelu, certain notions of America as a host society and culture challenges and nullifies the presumed superiority of America and creates a sort of interrelationship between the two cultures where each one presents its flaws as well its qualities. More often than ever the difference between cultures or ethnicities does not make one superior over the other; yet, it alludes to the notion of a global village where individuals complement one another. Nonetheless, there are instances in which the notion of globalization brings up the idea of imperialism and inequality between cultures, ethnicities, powers, nations or communities involved. Despite this, the ability of Ifemelu to question the American use of the English language and the cultural differences in usage and meaning of some words and expressions, differences in practices and beliefs, etc. challenges any idea of ethnic imperialism (Dulin-Keita et. al., 2011; Obasogie, 2010; Coleman, 2011; Portes and Zhou, 1993), in this case, the superiority of American ethnicity/culture over the Nigerian and by extension over African ethnicities and cultures. The challenge in this dynamic also leads one to question the scholarship of assimilation, in this case, the assimilation of African migrants into the American culture.

2-2- **Assimilation, a Tool in the Hands of Recent African Migrants**

Contrary to some scholars' popular arguments that the black African diasporas assimilate into the white America to either access upward social mobility and or demarcate themselves from their homologue black Americans, it is important to highlight that this group of migrants uses assimilation as a tool to counteract or overcome the systems of class discrimination they experience in their host countries. Thus, this section analyzes assimilation as a tool to constructively radicalize systems of discriminations and oppressions that black Africans experience in their host countries. Most of these black Africans, in the instance of Ifemelu and Obinze, do not lose their root Africa. It also posits that black African diasporas experience both ethnic and racial discrimination on top of class discrimination.

The black African diaspora has been said to assimilate into mainstream America—that is, the white people—for various reasons, yet the politics and reasons for assimilating oneself vary according to the origin of people or cultures being assimilated. For instance, it has been argued that European immigrants to the United States assimilate into the American culture by way of subsuming their ethnic identity over their racial identity (Showers 1817), while the theories of assimilation sustain that “non-white groups [black immigrants] ... emulate the cultural practices of successfully incorporated European ethnics. Therefore, as blacks achieve upward mobility, the popular contention by scholars was that they seek assimilation into the socio-economic mainstream, which in the US Ethnic and Racial Studies context means assimilating into white America” (Portes and Zhou, 1993, qtd in Showers 1817-1818). Consequently, contrary to European immigrants, black African immigrants subsume in most cases, both their racial and ethnic

identities as these two are often found to negatively affect their position and social mobility (Showers 1817-1818). Fulamiyo Showers (2015) concludes that,

[...] a segment of black African immigrants divorced themselves from ethnic identities in the workplace to gain upward mobility [...] [They] also equated whiteness with success in the world of work, and explored strategies to gain entry into white-dominated fields. This finding also lends empirical support for claims made in the traditional assimilation and segmented-assimilation frameworks. [...] [The] research participants in this study clearly understood racial hierarchies and racial discrimination as problems that they faced in professional contexts. [...] [The] black African immigrants [...] are racialized as blacks in the US racial context and experience racial discrimination [...] [Therefore, they] employ strategies of assimilating into whiteness to gain upward mobility. (1827-1828)

In other words, as these black immigrants understand the racial hierarchies and the racial discrimination they experience, they adopt strategies that will propel them up in their host societies. My theory on the assimilation of recent African immigrants partially supports the scholarship on assimilation of black immigrants which claims that black immigrants seek complete assimilation into the mainstream American culture, and partially challenges it by contending that in the case of recent African immigrants, they do not assimilate into mainstream American culture to the point of losing both their racial and ethnic identities. My position on the theory of assimilation of black immigrants goes to lend empirical support to F. Showers (2015)'s theory and asserts that both race and ethnicity serve as disadvantages to black African immigrants in the US; yet unlike Showers who argues that these black Africans shun their race and ethnicity to assimilate

into mainstream white America, I contend that the act of subduing their race and ethnicity constitutes strategies of combatting sources of racial and ethnic discrimination.

In *Americanah*, black Africans, like Ifemelu, have used assimilation into mainstream white America as strategies to combat sources of racial and ethnic discrimination in the US. Consequently, one can argue that the theories of assimilation of black Africans into mainstream American culture, though undeniable, are questionable in the sense that they are usually solely interpreted—as dominating and subsuming the immigrant culture and ethnicity. While the submission to the host culture is undeniable, it serves the immigrant’s main purpose for which they initially migrated—the access to better opportunities and access to upward mobility. In *Americanah*, one can argue that by practicing the American English accent (*Americanah* 164) and clearly showing an assimilation into mainstream American culture, Ifemelu adopts an openness to knowing and understanding the ‘other’—the American culture and its people—yet, also a strategy to understanding her ‘self’ and establishing her own identity—that of achieving her American dream and finding a place and a position for herself in her host society. This strategy of achieving one’s purpose is clearly revealed when Ifemelu decides to stop faking the American accent. Yet, after achieving her purpose, henceforth her resolution to stop faking the American accent (*Americanah* 213-216), Ifemelu does not revert to the person she initially was before her contact with the American language and accent. Instead, she represents a new understanding of ‘self’ and a consciousness for the preservation of her ethnicity and African-ness. On a similar note, as Ifemelu relaxes her hair for her job interview, an episode that could be interpreted as Ifemelu having been subsumed by the white American culture, this could be viewed as a metaphor instead.

This metaphor of Ifemelu's relaxed hair and later its fall out could hence represent a climax of her assimilation, then her understanding of 'self' and finally, the denouement which leads to her going natural hair (*Americanah* 262-264). This metaphor can also be viewed as representing her embrace of who she is and an attachment to her racial roots and values. All stages of assimilation can therefore be understood as building strategies to uphold oneself and the migrant's formation of their new identity—the cosmopolitan identity that will allow them to feel at home whether they are in their home or host country.

In this line of thought, Ifemelu's encounter with the American English accent for instance, operates at a level of forming her cosmopolitan identity without necessarily completely subsuming or making her lose her Igbo/Nigerian identity. Nigerian and American languages intersect in this context to give Ifemelu a cosmopolitan identity that allows her to combat discrimination based on accent and to feel at ease in her host culture. Her experience with the American English accent and her ability to speak it puts her in a better position to assess and understand not only the effects such a simulation has on her, but also to assess the importance of not losing her identity and hence preserving it. Conclusively, most African immigrants do not completely assimilate into the American culture as the theorists of assimilation have claimed (Portes and Zhou 1993), neither do they eschew or shun both their racial and ethnic values as Showers (2015) notes in the case of the African women participants in her study who claimed that they distanced themselves from their co-racial and co-ethnic workers to gain upward mobility, but a process of cultural intersection and cultural interrelation takes place between the cultures and one assists at a birth of an ethical alterity—understanding 'self' through

questioning and understanding the ‘other.’ This process results in the migrant’s control of the effects of assimilation. This, one assists at the birth of a radical criticism in mainstream concept of assimilation because assimilation becomes the migrant’s tool to combat discriminations. Another example is seen through Ifemelu’s use of questioning of the ‘other/alterity’ culture as a way to establish a radical change in the relationship between the presumed superior American culture and ethnicity and the presumed minority Nigerian culture and ethnicity. Thus, one can conclude that similar to Hena Ahmad (2010)’s along with Laura Chrisman (2003)’s note about Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993)—which challenges the asymmetrical binary opposition that exists between the metropolis vs the nation and its diaspora (qtd in Ahmad 4) and helps in “leveling the playing field” (ibid.)—there is in *Americanah* a new form of connection between the “metropole” US and the “nation” Nigeria and its diaspora.

Equally, In William Branigin (1998)’s discussion of the resistance of Mexican immigrants to assimilation in the US, one notes a new form of connection between Mexican immigrants and the United States, however, Branigin concludes that despite the veracity of this sort of resistance to the culture of assimilation into mainstream American culture, it is quite impossible for immigrants, especially, for their children to remain the pure natives of their country of origin that they were before their contact with the American culture,

There is a sense that, especially as immigrant populations reach a critical mass in many communities, it is no longer the melting pot that is transforming them, but they who are transforming American society. [...] [Yet [t]he children of immigrants, especially those who were born in the United States or come here at a

young age, tend to learn English quickly and adopt American habits. [...] Schools exert an important assimilating influence, as does America's consumer society. But there are important differences in the way immigrants adapt these days, and the influences on them can be double-edged. Gaps in income, education and poverty levels between new immigrants and the native-born are widening, and many of the newcomers are becoming stuck in dead-end jobs with little upward mobility. (par. 3-8; 24-25)

In William Branigin (1998)'s assertion that Mexican immigrants assimilate into American culture despite their resistance to assimilation, one notes an important point which also alludes to the double-edge influence that assimilation can have on immigrants. Among these influences are the gaps in upward mobility between recent immigrants—who shun assimilation—and native-born Americans, with obviously a “little upward mobility” for the former due to their rejection of the idea of assimilation. From such an analysis, it is conceivable that assimilation can and serves as a tool the migrant can use to close social gaps that perpetuate discrimination and oppression from the host. In this regard, Adichie's characters in *Americanah* are open to assimilation; they do not shun its idea, yet do not let their ethnic values to be completely engulfed or overtaken by the host ethnicity. These characters use assimilation as a tool to gain upward mobility while simultaneously remaining attached to their home ethnicity.

However, the novel concedes that there are migrants who in their openness to assimilation let their identity be engulfed and utterly changed. Thus, Adichie uses characters such as Emenike—who considers himself totally part of his British host culture—to critique the idea of loss of identity of some migrants through assimilation into

the host society and culture. This critique is also presented in her short story, “The Arrangers of Marriage” (Adichie 167-186, 2009) when the male protagonist—the “new husband”—assimilates into the American culture to the point of changing his Nigerian first and last names, “Ofodile Udenwa” to “Dave Bell,” a name that he believes is easier for Americans to pronounce and makes him “to be as mainstream as possible” (Adichie 172, 2009). Ofodile’s assimilation goes to such an extreme that he shuns away from Nigerian foods and smells and consequently buys his wife a “*Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook*” (Adichie 179, 2009). Adichie’s writings set a critical view on the complete assimilation of Nigerian immigrants and by extension African immigrants. In this regard, Adichie in *Americanah* would agree with E. Boehmer’s assertion that “[...] a cosmopolitan is culturally shortchanged, belonging to more than one world” but would refute Boehmer’s conclusion that “but [the cosmopolitan belongs] [...] to no one entirely” (qtd in Ahmad’s *Postnational Feminisms* 4).

Americanah offers the reader the chance not only to view the new dynamics between two cultures that are asymmetrical from a western imperialist point of view, but also engages the reader in reflecting upon the internal relations between individuals of the same race, ethnicity and or sex, and in this case, between blacks, between minority races, and between women.

2-3- **Questioning the Self²⁹: American Blacks and Non-American Blacks on Black Race: An Internal Perspective**

This section discusses the technique of questioning ‘self’ that I argue *Americanah* makes use of in the identity construction of the protagonist diasporic character, Ifemelu. It thus discusses the protagonist’s questioning of blacks like herself and the latter’s own attitude towards their race. It posits that history as well as some contemporary representations—through media—have done wrong to the mindset of black people. It also highlights that it is high time black people counteract such racist attitudes and attributes and build a community of support systems that will promote the capacities and beauties of black people. In my viewpoint, a disunity among people of the same race or even of the same ethnicity would only further the discrimination they all face from the ‘other’ or the outside.

While some scholarship in African studies and or African American studies have emphasized a shared cultural heritage (Hall and Freedle, 1978 qtd. in *New African Diasporas 2*) between black Africans and black Americans, while African American scholars such as Carole Boyce Davies (1986) and African scholars such as Zulu Sofola (1998) trace some common cultural beliefs and practices among Africans and African Americans such as their family structure, conception about motherhood, the authority and assertiveness of their women etc., it is understandable that the scholarship on the relationship between black Africans and black Americans has mostly been an attempt to stress a pan-African unity among these two groups, leaving barely touched the reality of a

²⁹ ‘Self’: I define it from two perspectives in this context: the first perspective about ‘self’ is about the incorporation of minor races in America. ‘Self,’ from the second perspective incorporates minor gender, i.e. the women, therefore white women and all women of color—all Black women, both African and African-Americans or the ‘American Blacks.’

blame that black Americans put on black Africans for their fate in the United States. In one of Ifemelu's classes in the US, her Honors History seminar to be specific, an episode occurred after Professor Moore showed some scenes from the movie *Roots* and asked students to discuss historical representation in the film. When the discussion took a turn otherwise not expected by the Professor, "a gravelly voiced African-American girl" said what in the blatant sense of the terms is the often untouched and dormant tension that seems to exist between African diasporas and their fellow black sisters and brothers who are native-born Americans, "Well, if you all hadn't sold us, we wouldn't be talking about any of this" (*Americanah* 170). Historically, this statement presents the subtle hate that African Americans or "Black Americans" as they are referred to in *Americanah*, nourish towards black Africans by referring to the transatlantic slave trade. These two groups often use their ethnic differences, even though this is debatable, to distance themselves from one another. In defense of the blame, Africans mostly say the Europeans are the ones to blame for having initiated the slave trade. So Wambui, the lady from Kenya, responds in defense of Africans being blamed for the discrimination and injustice black Americans suffer from their white compatriots, "Sorry, but even if no Africans had been sold by other Africans, the transatlantic slave trade would still have happened. It was a European enterprise. It was about Europeans looking for labor for their plantations" (*ibid.*).

Despite the scarcity of the nature of the relationships between black Americans and black Africans on the one hand, and the over-discussion of their pan-Africanism and unity on the other hand, the Nigerian Historian Tunde Adeleke (1998) in his book *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission*

“reveals a deep historical and cultural divide between Africa and the black diaspora;” as he argues, “[b]lack American nationalists had a clear preference—Euro-America over Africa.” This statement does not only denote a “historical and cultural” divide between Africans and African Americans but also reveals how ethnicity and nationalism prevail over race in the relationship between black Africans and black Americans. Even though black African diasporas have been arguably reported to privilege their African ethnicity over black race and also to adopt a distancing attitude from black Americans (Bashi and McDaniel, 1997; Habecker, 2012; Kasinitz, 1992; Vickerman, 1999; Waters, 1990; 2001; qtd. in Showers 1816), the attitude of black African diasporas could be explained by their ambition to close the discrimination gap and access upward mobility (Showers 1818), but not by the dormant tension that some black Americans seem to nurture against black Africans.

In fact, black Africans have nurtured for a long time before setting foot on the United States soil, a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood with black Americans despite the sort of informal ‘warning’ Africans receive against socializing with black Americans in the United States. This nurtured desire is disappointingly not reciprocated in most cases, perhaps because some black Americans have a different perception and understanding of black Africans in America. Unfortunately, what these two groups of blacks miss in the relationship is that they all face a common fate, somehow. *Americanah* illustrates black Africans’ sense of ‘we are together in this’ and their understanding of the black American history and condition in the United States. This is shown through Ifemelu’s defense of both black Africans and black Americans, when Laura—the sister of Ifemelu’s babysitting employer, Kimberly—with some sort of mockery and in a

demeaning manner alludes to the division between black Americans and black Africans in America,

[...] In graduate school I knew a woman from Africa who was just like this doctor, I think she was from Uganda. She was wonderful, and she didn't get along with the African-American woman in our class at all. *She didn't have all those issues.*" [Laura said] (*my emphasis*)

"Maybe when the African American's father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan's father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford," Ifemelu said. (*Americanah* 207)

Laura stared at her, made a mocking confused face. "Wait, did I miss something?"

The above passage reveals not only the understanding most black Africans have of the situation of black Americans, but also a share in the common fate of racism and discrimination that both groups of blacks experience in the United States, even though, Laura's thought about the Ugandan woman not "get[ting] along with the African-American woman at all" could as well be explained by the dormant tension, but not because "*she [the Ugandan woman] didn't have all those issues.*"

History and its aftermath could as well serve to explain the division between black Africans and black Americans, but one wonders why the difference between Africans, by this I mean, all Africans from North Africa to the South of Africa? Adichie's *Americanah* gives a glint into this division in the membership of Non-American Blacks, "[b]y the way, what is it with Ethiopians thinking they are not that black? And small Islanders eager to say their ancestry is "mixed"? [...] light skin is valued [...]" (265). In Ifemelu's blog post titled, "On the Division Within the Membership of Non-American

Blacks in America,” the reader is taken on to discover the cultural and ethnic differences among the “Non-American Blacks.” Adichie, the storyteller as she likes to call herself, accomplishes in this narrative and critique of division between all Africans, something that her predecessor writers have started. Yet, she does it in a more postmodern way as she blatantly writes about the subject of race conception among black themselves, a thing that has rarely been seen or read.

Adichie goes beyond exposing the root of the tension between people of the black race and their division based on race to lay bare the acculturation and the self-hate of black race that most blacks exhibit, due probably to the belittling of the black race by white supremacists and their condescending ideologies and also due to the brainwash to which blacks have been subject. Referring to the brainwash and acculturation Africans have been subject to vis-à-vis their race and ethnicity, Chinua Achebe (1975) recommends to the African novelist to teach their people the truth about their history and culture. The following anecdote from Achebe (1975)’s essay lays bare the sad reality of acculturated Africans, and also incites the black race to purge themselves from such a negative thinking and henceforth reassert their values,

Three or four weeks ago my wife, who teaches English in a boys' school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great blasphemy be purged? I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry.

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse — to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. (“The Novelist as Teacher” 56)

In the same regard, Zulu Sofola (1998) alludes to the acculturation and brainwash of Africans and particularly, African women, “[...] due to mental blankness caused by years of brainwashing, most educated Africans, male and female, are ill-equipped to discuss the African experience. And for the African woman, there is an added dimension which I refer to as the *de-womanization* of African womanhood³⁰” (51-52).

These acculturation, racial indoctrination and brainwash have affected the psyche of Africans and all blacks in many ways, have resulted in black people rejecting their own skin color and even their own hair. In a blog post, Ifemelu writes about the “middle manager” white man from Ohio she has met on a plane and who has made a good point about how black Americans themselves do not like their own race, “[e]ver write about adoption?”, he said; “[n]obody wants black babies in this country, and I don’t mean biracial, I mean black. *Even the black families don’t want them*” (*Americanah* 5) (*my emphasis*). In another blog post, Ifemelu writes about the rejection black American people have for black skin and their preference for light or white skin,

Many American blacks proudly say they have some “Indian.” Which means they are not too dark. (To clarify, when white people say dark they mean Greek or Italian but when black people say dark they mean Grace Jones.) American blacks like their black women to have some exotic quota, like half-Chinese or a splash of Cherokee. They like their women light. But beware what American blacks

³⁰ Refer to Zulu Sofola (1998)’s “Feminism and African Womanhood” for more information on the de-womanization of African womanhood

consider “light.” Some of these “light” people, in countries of Non-American Blacks, would simply be called white. [...]. (*Americanah* 265)

As the narrative further shows, the rejection of black skin is not only a problem specific to black Americans, “[n]ow my fellow Non-American Blacks, don’t get smug. Because this bullshit also exists in our Caribbean and African countries. Not as bad as with American blacks, you say? Maybe. But there nonetheless [sic.]” (*ibid.*). Thus, the disdain of black race is sadly shown to be a reality among black people.

Moreover, the African or black kinky hair is often disdained, making the politics of hair in America, a politics of integration into the norm; you are either part of the norm or you are not. The hair of whites, straight, loose, or spiral curly is the norm (252), “pretty” is the hair of whites, and “jungle,” “ugly” is the black kinky hair (263). Furthermore, black kinky hair has been made unprofessional. Consequently, Africans or black people with kinky curly hair have grown up aspiring to have the straight or curly hair of white folks. For instance, after the professional hairdresser applied hair relaxer to Ifemelu’s hair, since Ifemelu wanted to look professional for her job interview, the hairdresser said, “[j]ust a little burn,” [...] But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (251). *Americanah* shows that the hair politics in the United States has engendered a lot of insecurities for black women and black men alike. Auntie Uju and Ifemelu’s experiences with their hair and how to look professional to obtain the job for which they are interviewed, reveal not only the discrimination of black women’s hair but also the insecurities of black women. So, Ifemelu’s response to Curt—who seems ignorant or unaware of ‘race and hair politics’ in his country—“[m]y full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to

look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky" (252) shows the insecurities of Ifemelu. These insecurities become further apparent when she sends a text to her friend Wambui and says, "*I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today*" (259). In another incident with her white boyfriend Curt, her anger and jealousy arousal against the latter have little to do with believing that Curt is actually cheating on her but more to do with the fact that the lady that Curt is flirting with has "long flowing hair [...] long straight hair" (261), while "[s]he look[s] so ugly [she is] scared of [herself] [...] she look[s] unfinished" (258). "She felt small and ugly" is how Ifemelu's feelings about her natural hair look are put. Irrefutably, the insecurities of black people about their natural hair contribute to a shrinkage of their personalities, of who they really are and they have been made to believe so. Achebe (1975)'s belief in the duty of a writer or novelist, "to help [their] society [the black society] regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (56) appeals to the role of writers towards their society. Yet, it also testifies to the discrimination and brainwashing that has resulted in a self-degradation of black people about their look. As Achebe sees it, "[...] for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man [or woman] but that we are much better" (56). Therefore, black people should commit themselves to reversing the self-abasement that they have self-inflicted for generations, yield ways to uplift their confidence and *love* who they are and how they look.

It is undeniable that the media also work to mainly promote white people's look, and consequently debase the look of black people. For instance, Ifemelu's question to Auntie Uju about the representation of black reveals the role that media play in sanctioning white hair as being "pretty" and being the norm while belittling black natural hair, "[w]hat if every magazine you opened and every film you watched had beautiful women with hair like jute? You would be admiring my hair now" (*Americanah* 269). Ifemelu's questioning is also indicative of a call up to society in general—both black and white—to represent black hair with values that have been for long only bestowed on white hair. In Jean-Paul Sartre's sense of "anti-racist racism," one can argue that it is important for black people to set up counteractive systems and defenses that will prove wrong any racist attack on their look, ethnicity, race, philosophies etc. For instance, when a black man's comment on Ifemelu's Afro hair was just enough to trouble her spirit, the online natural hair community happilykinkynappy.com however, has been a source of confidence to Ifemelu as she comes to "[fall] in love with [her natural] hair" (264). In *Americanah*, this website is designed to promote black hair, teach black women how to care for and love their hair, etc., yet, it is also a system of defense and a community of support for black women against any racist attack on their natural hair,

[...] a black man walked past and muttered, "You ever wondered why he likes you looking all jungle like that?" [...] She felt dispirited, [...] she drove to the beauty supply store and ran her fingers through bundles of silky straight weaves. Then she remembered a post by Jamilah1977—*I love the sistas who love their straight weaves, but I'm never putting horse hair on my head again*—and she left the store, eager to get back and log on and post in the boards about it. She wrote:

Jamilah's words made me remember that there is nothing beautiful than what God gave me. Others wrote responses, posting thumbs-up signs, telling her how much they liked the photo she had put up. She had never talked about God so much. Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her. [...] she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it in any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair. (263-264)

Accordingly, the necessity to change the perception and representation of hair in society and in media is more needed now than ever. The necessity to have a community of support that teaches about values of black race and self-love should be a conscious enterprise that all black people should personally engage in. While many black people are conscious of the problem of self-disdain of black skin and black natural hair, it seems that little is done to remedy the problem. Adichie's address of the problem and advancement of ideas on how to counteract racist systems is to be appreciated, for it is like welcoming a baby that has been expected for so long.

Moreover, Adichie's contribution to finding a solution to how the media can be a platform to promote black natural hair and also counteract any racist ideas presents her nationalistic stance on critical issues such as racial and ethnic discrimination.

Consequently, *Americanah* reserves a good portion of the plot to Barack Obama's election in 2008—a historical event that many believed would have been the turning point in the history of racial discrimination in the United States. Thus, female characters in *Americanah*, dark skinned Black American women and Non-Black American women, are presented with so much hope for a change in how dark skinned black women are

viewed by the society of black men, white men and women, all this because of the then future First Lady Michelle Obama—an amazing dark skinned black woman (264-266). Acting as a postnational feminist—in Ahmad’s words—and simultaneously as deeply involved in pro-national issues, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in my view, also fulfills the role of teacher teaching and correcting the debasement of black people; and also sewing a new seed of self-love and praise in black people. She initiates conversations about difficult and controversial issues that often lie dormant or untouched among not only people from different races, but also from people of the same race. The sense of unity in the midst of diversity in cultures and beliefs should be the leitmotiv of all people, especially those that classify as oppressed or minorities, that is, women, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Jews—a unity between black people, between blacks and whites, between whites, between whites and other races, and between blacks and other minority races should prevail.

2-4- **Questioning Self as a Minority and as a Woman: “No, There is No United League of Minority Races or of Oppressed Women in America”**

In the following section, I analyze the protagonist Ifemelu’s questioning of ‘self’ as a minority and as a woman. I argue that race takes precedence over gender and class. Thus, I establish that, similar to what *Americanah* presents, there is a hierarchical classification of races in America with the black race at the bottom of the ladder. On the gender spectrum, race also precedes gender in America and thus results in a disunity between women as minorities.

Through Ifemelu’s questioning of institutions and practices in her host country, *Americanah* represents the racial competition that exists among minor races in the United States. Thus, her blog post, “**Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Do WASPs Aspire To?**” mainly relates to the racial competition among these minorities. Not only do these racial minorities, in other words, the oppressed of the American racial classification, compete about whose race is at the bottom of the ladder, “[...] all the others [the other minority races] think they’re better than blacks because, well, they’re not black” (253), but they also compete about who is the worst discriminated or oppressed; but ironically, as Ifemulu puts it, “each [race] secretly believes that it gets the worst shit” (ibid.). As the narrator stresses, “[...] there IS an oppression Olympics going on [...] all the others [Hispanics, Asians, and Jews] think they’re better than blacks because, well, they’re not blacks” (ibid.). The “oppression Olympics” among racial minorities in America is historically grounded, yet it is reinforced by the culture of racism that primarily focuses on visual cues such as skin color and natural hair texture. While the following question is more directed to black people who deny or reject being black, it is well applicable to all minority races in America, “[a]nd admit it—you say “I’m not black” only because you know black race is at the bottom of America’s race ladder. And you want none of that. Don’t deny now. What if being black had all the privileges of being white? Would you still say “Don’t call me black [...]? I didn’t think so” (*Americanah* 273).

The fact that everybody, including the other racial minorities, rejects black is because ‘black’ has been socially constructed and represented to be the most inferior race and therefore has been deprived of all privileges. Conceding, efforts are being made to

compensate for some of the injustices to which blacks, women and other underrepresented groups are subject, in the instance of the Affirmative Action³¹. Yet, though Affirmative Action does not only address black people's underrepresentation, it has mostly been thought of as a racial privilege for black people (Jordan-Zachery and Seltzer 120, 2012). In a blog post for instance, Ifemelu alludes to how Affirmative Action is mostly thought of as only benefitting the black race; in do so, she instructs "Non-American Blacks" and "American Blacks" as well on how to endorse and live their blackness in America, "[i]f you are in an Ivy League college and a Young Republican tells you that you got in only because of Affirmative Action, do not whip out your perfect grades from high school. Instead, gently point out that the biggest beneficiaries of Affirmative Action are white women" (*Americanah* 274). In "The Bottom Rung of America's Race Ladder: After the September 11 Catastrophe Are American Muslims Becoming America's New N ... s?" Jonathan K. Stubbs (2003) highlights that the black race is at the bottom of America's race ladder or at least it seems that it used to be; he then argues that after the September 11 tragedy, American Muslims are being characterized as a race and are occupying the bottom racial position black race used to occupy in America (115-151). Race has been invented by human beings to identify and distinguish groups of peoples from one another (Stubbs 119), but it is also largely used by the Western society to discriminate against other groups of people based on their looks,

³¹ In "Responses to Affirmative Action" Is there a Question Order Affect?" Julian S. Jordan-Zachery and Richard Seltzer (2012) briefly trace the history of Affirmative Action and define what it stands for, "President Kennedy, on March 6, 1961 issued Executive Order 10925, which included a provision that government contractors "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin." The Order was later expanded to protect other groups such as women and the disabled. The intent of this executive order was to affirm the government's commitment to equal opportunity for all qualified persons, and to take positive action to strengthen efforts to realize true equal opportunity for all in education, business and other sectors of society" (120).

language, religion or creed, ethnicity and nationality. Among the groups of people represented as minorities or oppressed are women, regardless of their skin color or natural hair texture; sadly, race supersedes gender, subjecting women from minority races to white women's racism.

Race is probably the only factor that, no matter your gender and class, affects you negatively as a black person in America. Obinze clarifies Emenike's comment about the difference between America and Britain in terms of race and class, "I think class in this country [England] is in the air that people breathe. Everyone knows their place. Even the people who are angry about class have somehow accepted their place," Obinze said. "A white boy and a black girl who grow up in the same working-class in this country can get together and race will be secondary, but in America, even if the white boy and black girl grow up in the same neighborhood, race would be primary" (340). Consequently, in America the black woman and white woman, despite their seemingly common fate as minorities and oppressed in their cultures, hold race as primary, even though this attitude is more salient in white women. Without the need to rehearse the history of feminism and the distancing of women of color from mainstream feminism, otherwise known as the white women feminism, it is perceptible that white women choose their racial privileges over gender issues that they have in common with women of other races. In *Americanah*, Laura, with some sort of mockery demeans and discriminates both black Africans and black Americans in her superior white race and nationalist attitude,

"[...] I read on the internet that Nigerians are the most educated immigrant group in this country [United States]. Of course, it says nothing about the millions who live on less than a dollar a day back in your country [Nigeria], but when I met the

doctor I thought of that article and of you and other privileged Africans who are here in this country.” Laura paused [...]

“I’ve never been called privileged in my life!” Ifemelu said. “It feels good.”

[...] In graduate school I knew a woman from Africa who was just like this doctor, I think she was from Uganda. She was wonderful, and she didn’t get along with the African-American woman in our class at all. *She didn’t have all those issues.*” [Laura continued] (*my emphasis*)

“Maybe when the African American’s father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan’s father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford,” Ifemelu said. (*Americanah* 207)

Thus, it is apparent that the white woman in *Americanah* chooses her race over gender, probably because unlike gender, the white race has been stuffed with all possible privileges. Yet, as the gender studies in America show, the American society exhibits and sanctions a privilege of men over women. For instance, the very practice and culture of gender pay gap (Blau and Kahn, 2004; 2006; Dahl, Dezsó and Ross, 2011) is, among others, a clear mark of male privilege that the American society presents. Adichie points to this in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), “[...] we kept hearing of the Lilly Ledbetter law, and if we go beyond that nicely alliterative name, it was really about this: in the US, a man and a woman are doing the same job, with the same qualifications, and the man is paid more *because* he is a man” (17). The gender discrimination that the black woman and the white woman face affects their positions in American society even though the white woman’s privileges from her white race socially position her above the black woman. In a nutshell, *Americanah* presents a critique on the division between all

minorities, a division that undoubtedly perpetuates either class and or racial discrimination—in other words the common fate—they face from the other/outside.

Chapter Three:

Education, Migration, and Class Mobility: Destabilizing Institutionalized Class Discriminations and Class Mobility Global Concept of the African Female Migrant in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*

In African women's writings, the economic independence and the access to upward class mobility have often played a great role, leading several African writers, scholars and activists to promote the education of the African woman as one of the key ways for her independence from patriarchal domination and oppression. Yet, as education has seemed for some time in classical literature to be a way for the African woman to be economically self-sufficient, migration literature brings an additional perspective and presents itself as an enhancement of not only the educational opportunities of the African woman, but also as an enhancement of her economic autonomy as well. Thus, in this chapter, I argue that the authors Mariama Bâ and Chimamanda Adichie use education and migration of the African woman to critique class discriminations, challenge and disrupt institutional class discriminations based on ethnicity, race and imperialism, and to reconstruct the class identity of the African woman as well as the class identity of the African in general (*Americanah*) by radically reversing the imperialistic class institutions and discourse in African and global migration literatures.

In Adichie's *Americanah* for example, the class identity of the African diasporic woman, in the instance of Ifemelu or Auntie Uju, is reconstructed in ways that surpasses the class identity of most of their male counterparts in the host countries. Equally, the reverse class mobility in *Americanah* serves as another big constructive radical jump of contemporary diasporic African women writers, in the instance of Adichie. In Mariama

Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, the class identity of the African woman is reconstructed, through Aissatou, to critique the caste system of class discrimination based on ethnicity in institutionalized hierarchical social ranks. As a result, along with race, ethnicity and gender, class is of great importance in *Americanah* and in *So Long a Letter* and similarly in the lives of their characters, both females and males, and marks one of the social stratifications and identities of the characters. Not only does class contribute to regulating the lives of the characters, but it conditions their aspirations for a better life; it creates in some instances, a discrimination; and in some individuals, it creates a spirit of migratory adventure. In *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*, I discuss social mobility as intrinsically linked to education and migration and I establish that the African woman writer sees in higher education, international education and the experience of migration, means of liberation of the African woman, her access to upward social mobility and economic autonomy. I use Ifemelu and Auntie Uju in *Americanah*, and Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* to analyze the movement of social mobility of female characters through education and migration.

1- Revisiting History: The Education Path of the African and African Diasporic Woman

It is significant to give a historical synopsis of the African female education in African literary discourse in order to map the evolution of class identity construction of the African female character. Education was gendered during the colonial and early independent African nations (Emecheta, 2007; Oyewumi, 1997, Nzegwu, 2006); so, to promote female education in their writings, writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo (*Changes: A*

Love Story, 1991), Buchi Emecheta (*Second-Class Citizen*, 1974; *Head Above Water*, 1984), Tsitsi Dangarembga (*Nervous Conditions*, 1988), Mariama Bâ (*So Long a Letter*, 1981)), to cite just these few, have constructed female characters with high educational interests and high educational degrees and opportunities that modern education comes with, such as working a salaried job or profession and being financially autonomous as well as making a place for these female characters in the middle or upper high-class community. This particular attention to modern education in relation to social mobility, access to upward class and autonomy of the African woman has been carried through the twenty first century women writers' works, in the instance of writers such as Chimamanda N. Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2003; *Americanah*, 2013), Taiye Selasi (*Ghana Must Go*, 2013), Imbolo Mbue (*Behold the Dreamers*, 2016), etc., whose interests extend to and or focus on the contemporary African diasporic woman. In Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* for instance, the female protagonists are privileged women who have access to modern education and to civil services (15, 16, 23-24). Mariama Bâ, like Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, to cite just these few and several of their contemporary women writers lay emphasis on modern education of the African woman as they view in modern education, a source of liberation from traditional, national and patriarchal institutions and customs that are oppressive to the African woman. Therefore, with education and the African woman's access to upward social mobility, the female characters are endowed with tools to fight issues of class discriminations, unlike instances in which it is impossible to fight gender and racial discriminations with just a higher education and an economic autonomy. These writers have consequently shown that with modern education, the African woman can fight class discrimination, close the

social mobility gap and also find her voice. It is worth underlining that the issue of voice has usually been associated with gender in postcolonial writings, in the instance of Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Woods* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, wherein male characters—whether in traditional or modern arenas—had control of the power of voice. In both *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*, it was until the female characters progressively³² learn to rid themselves of that which subdue their voice and independence that they made their voice and opinions heard through assertiveness. To draw the line back to modernity and the novels under study, education is associated with the rise to upper middle class of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter*, and in the lives of Ifemelu and Auntie Uju in *Americanah*.

Yet, the association of African women writers with modern education propaganda in their writings (qtd in "Introduction" to *So Long a Letter*, iii), at a time where African male writers embraced an anti-colonialism and anti-nationalism agenda, has tagged African women writers with a critical image of opponents to the anticolonial and antinational agenda of African literature—an agenda that questions colonialism's imperial nature and questions the state of African nations after independence. The anticolonial/antinational agenda has as mission to point out the failures of the promises made by the colonizer and the long-lasting effects of their cultural, political, religious

³² In *So Long a Letter*, the process was progressive for the protagonist female characters because, even though they were from the beginning of the novel presented as educated women, their voice in especially the family and on the political scene was subdued and controlled until they learned to break free. In *God's Bits of Woods*, the women (mainly portrayed in the traditional realm) were presented in the beginning of the narrative as passive women whose fate was in the hands of their husbands, the unions' leader Bakayoko and the undergoing strike against the white master and colonizer. Yet, as things seemed reluctant to change and the women and their children faced the dreaded famine in the city, the women took matters under control, organized themselves, marched and protested until they had victory and their husbands' claims were granted by the white master and colonizer. From there, the men quickly learned not to undermine the voice, power and abilities of their women and hence associated them to matters that were of interests to the whole community.

heritage on African culture, politics, religion and population (Ahmad 2, 2010). Kenneth Harrow (2008) in his introduction to *So Long a Letter*, points out the “radical opposition” between Bâ’s representation of the colonial school and the position of anticolonial national liberationist—who Harrow identifies as mainly men. The latter have had different views of the modern school, modernity and post-independence era in Africa. While African men writers such as, Ferdinand Oyono (1956), Mongo Beti (1957), Sembene Ousmane (1962), Cheik Hamidou Kane (1961), Jean-Marie Teno (1992) account for the passage to modernity as a loss in many different forms –integrity, culture, customs, etc., and also regard it as “an extension of the repressive mechanisms of colonial enterprise” (Harrow 2008, qtd in “Introduction” to *So Long a Letter* iii), African women writers, in the instance of Nafissatou Diallo (1975), Mariama Bâ (1979), Flora Nwapa (1986), Buchi Emecheta (1986), have looked at the modern and post-independence era as liberating. African men and African women, therefore, have not only had different views of the independence and modernity of their nation, but have also had two different gains and goals. Through Harrow’s notes, one can infer that men’s aim was mainly to take control of the power and rule (iv), but since the “independence for the New African woman came a full generation after independence of the African states” (ibid.), the new African woman’s aim was not primarily geared towards conquering power but first towards education, a tool of liberation for the woman. (ibid.). Yet, most men writers and scholars at the time view such women writers as anti-nationalists and criticize them for their stance.

Contrary to most African male critics, Hena Ahmad sees the postcolonial feminist—who Bâ can be identified with—as a national liberationist. Ahmad argues that

the postcolonial feminist is a national liberationist while a postnational feminist is antinational, yet also with a national agenda. (3). In fact, Ahmad claims that her ‘postnational feminist’ is different from the postcolonial feminist in the sense that there is an implicit antinational stance in postnational feminists’ constructions of *new* postcolonial identities (ibid.). While one can argue that women writers such as Mariama Bâ, Ama Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta’s agenda to promote the colonial/modern education is a form of its positive representation and that this parallels with the male African nationalists’ forms of representation of the colonial school, it is however important to note the foremost reason that motivates such women writers to represent the colonial/modern school as such: this reason among others is to seize the colonial/modern school as an opportunity for the new African woman’s liberation. In *So Long a Letter*, we read the following statement of Ramatoulaye in her letter to Aissatou,

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an ‘uncommon’ destiny. [...] To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal, moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress (*So Long a Letter* 15-16).

In Ramatoulaye’s words, we see the eye opening that modern education brought to the African woman—an education that grants her the opportunity to discern the bogging side of traditional customs, to be open to other cultures, to cultivate her personalities and qualities without renouncing to the values of her own culture. The African woman, through education, is henceforth represented as being made whole and complete by

drawing from other cultures including her own. This is better translated in the following words, “to make up for our inadequacies.” Even though there has been other women writers and critics, in the instance of Zulu Sofola (1998), who see an alienating system in modern education of both African women and men, Mariama Bâ sees in education an element of complement to the new African woman’s identity. She, like many of her contemporaries, sees education/modernity and African traditional values as complementing each other in the formation of an identity for the new African woman.

1-1- Education and Social Mobility of the African and African Diasporic Woman in *So Long a Letter: A Critique of Social Class Discrimination Based on Ethnicity*

The colonization of Africa, among other things that have been brought to Africa and its people, has brought modern education or the colonial school. Yet as mentioned above, modern education was gendered and men were privileged to go to school and women were good for just the basics (Oyewumi, 1997). However, history shows that the African woman has gradually gained more space in the school arena to pursue her education beyond the basics. However, some of the women have gained access to education out of revolt or stubbornness against the wishes of their families and communities. In her novels, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) for instance, Buchi Emecheta explores how her female characters³³ are required to be contented with just the basic education or no education at all and how some of these

³³ In the *Joys of Motherhood*, we have Nnu Ego’s daughters; Adaku’s daughter Adambi—who Adaku puts in school against social expectations. In *Second Class Citizen*, we have Adah the protagonist whose junior brother is schooled while she was left at home to help with her mother’s chores. Yet, through stubbornness Adah has gained access to school education and later furthers her education in London.

female characters, through revolt, desire and passion, have worked against the rules to gain access to education and more. Likewise, several critics have promoted girls and women education, theorize on the successful future and opportunities for educated females and condemned gendered education (Oyewumi 128-36, 1997; Beverly Guy-Sheftall 77-89, 1990). As Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) notes, the education of girls has been a highly critical issue in families. Emecheta (2007) expresses in “feminist with a small ‘f’” that the African woman faces many obstacles among which, her lack of access to education, “[w]orking and achieving to great heights is nothing new to the woman of Africa, but there are still many obstacles in her way. Her family prefers to educate the boy, while she stays at home to do the important jobs called ‘women’s duties’” (557). Yet, beyond the gender discrimination against the African woman to attend school in the early days, is the social class discrimination emanating from the gender discrimination to which she is subject. In fact, as discussed previously, only the African man used to have the economic power because he was the first one to access modern professional and paid jobs based on his educational degree(s). Moreover, beyond the financial control to which the African woman is subject from her male counterparts, is her subjectivity to class discrimination based on ethnicity and or race— race discrimination is common in migration literary works.

Particularly in *So Long a Letter*, one observes a system of discrimination called, a caste system³⁴, common to the Senegalese culture; yet, this caste system is also

³⁴ The caste system is not only proper to Senegalese ethnic groups but is practiced in several parts of Africa, Asia, and other continents. The caste system in Senegal has especially received international interest due to its representation in Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, a novel that has received international acclaim and has been classified as one of the best novels to come out of the continent. The caste system is a social stratification—a complex one due to its several sub-classifications that it contains. But basically, the Senegalese caste system could be said to comprise two main castes, the nobles and the slaves, in other

intrinsically linked to social class discrimination because the caste one belongs to is also believed to determine or is linked to the types of jobs, assets and social rank of one individual and their caste group. In this section about class identity construction in *So Long a Letter*, I establish the ground for a comparative analysis of the African female character's class identity and class discrimination based on ethnicity, in terms of how these compare to class identity and class discrimination in *Americanah*. This section and the section on *Americanah* rely on elements of commonalities and differences in the class identity construction and class discrimination of female characters. On the one hand, I use race and ethnicity as the different grounds on which these female characters experience class discrimination and on the other hand, I use the females' radical tools of assertion—voice power, self-assertion and self-definition, education, and migration, as common constructive radical tools in the pursuit of self-sufficiency and self-liberation in the life project of these characters.

Through the depiction of Aissatou in *So Long a Letter*, the narrative pictures the Senegalese caste system and characterizes Aissatou as a daughter of a goldsmith—a social rank that characterizes probably the lowest-class rank in Senegalese social stratification—while her husband, Mawdo, and his mother are pictured as descents of a royal lineage or heredity—the highest-class rank in the Senegalese social stratification, “Mawdo’s mother is Aunty Nabou [...]. She bore a glorious name in the Sine: Diouf. She

words, the high caste and the low caste. As mentioned earlier, there are several other sub-groups in each caste and they are classified based on the types of occupations they hold in society and which they pass on from generation to generation (Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” 1991). Even though the contemporary modern Senegal has people from the low caste who hold important job positions, or who are rich; and some people from the high caste who are economically less fortunate, the traditional belief is against social mobility and therefore strongly holds the belief that once a person is born into a caste, they belong to that caste forever, regardless of whether they change their trades, or occupy important and highly classified positions in the community (“Can Love Finally Beat the Caste System in Senegal?” France 24, 2016).

is a descendant of Bour-Sine. [...]. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she believed firmly that blood carried with it virtues [...]. Now, her ‘only man’ [Mawdo, her son] was moving away from her, through the fault of this cursed daughter of a goldsmith, worse than a *griot* woman. The *griot* brings happiness. But a goldsmith’s daughter! ... she burns everything in her path, like the fire in a forge. [...] She [Aunty Nabou] swore that your existence, Aissatou, would never tarnish her noble descent” (*So Long a Letter* 26-28). Through these words, the reader discovers Aissatou is a descendant of a poor lineage synonymous to curse and destruction, while her husband Mawdo, through his parents, is a descendant of a royal, noble and privileged lineage. Thus, being a descent from the lowest social rank, Aissatou is ipso facto classified and defined by her poor lineage and not by her own abilities and achievements. Aunty Nabou, the mother-in-law, clings to her beliefs in the caste system of the Senegalese social class discrimination and therefore never accepts Aissatou as worth being her son’s wife; consequently, she has never accepted Aissatou’s four sons as her grandchildren, “[y]our sons did not count. Mawdo’s mother, a princess, could not recognize herself in the sons of a goldsmith’s daughter. In any case, could a goldsmith’s daughter have any dignity, any honour? [...] Ah! for some people the honour and chagrin of a goldsmith’s daughter count for less, much less than the honour and chagrin of a *Guelewar*³⁵” (*So Long a Letter* 30-31). Because of the highly practiced caste system of discrimination in Senegal and the belief that some groups of people are born noble with pure blood and others are born poor and or slaves, Aunty Nabou takes her brother’s daughter—the young Nabou—, raises her and then makes her a wife for her son Mawdo (*So Long a Letter* 26-31). Laurie Edson (1993)

³⁵ A *Guelewar*: A Princess

in “Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family” notes that “[...] through Rama [sic] [through Aissatou], [Bâ] sees caste prejudice as one of the elements detrimental to Senegal as a nation” (21).

The social prejudice that the caste system entails is argued by some as mainly representing a hereditary ethnic practice and belief that does not necessarily entail class discrimination. This belief is implied in a France 24 online reportage, “Can Love Finally Beat the Caste System in Senegal?” (France 24, 2016); the reporter in her conclusion states that while the caste system is still present in Senegal, *nowadays* (my emphasis), Senegal is more structured into two social categories, the rich and the poor. This, in my view, implies that the discriminatory caste system did not entail a classification based on the rich and the poor, but nowadays, is turning out to do so. Yet, in *So Long a Letter*, the caste system as represented embodies class discrimination beliefs and practice. For instance, Aunt Nabou is represented as a *Guelewar*, a descendant of the noble superior caste and is born with all honors and privileges, hence her view and belief that Aissatou—a descendant of the low caste of Goldsmith—is a symbol of destruction in simulation to the trade practice common to Aissatou’s caste and therefore, a harbinger of poverty (*So Long a Letter* 26). The caste system stratification does, discreetly or in most instances openly, entail a class discrimination because the low caste descendants in Senegal are regarded as commoners, slaves and poor due to the types of occupations they traditionally hold and pass on from generation to generation.

In *So Long a Letter*, the author Mariama Bâ criticizes the caste system discrimination Aissatou endures from her mother-in-law; she radically subverts the system by offering Aissatou through education and migration, what the Senegalese

society denies her—an access to a high social class. Buchi Emecheta (1988) argues that “... but she [the African woman] still will have higher aspirations and achieve more when those cleverly structured artificial barriers are removed [...]” (557). In other words, once the barriers that social class discrimination such as the caste system in Senegal, and barriers such as patriarchy and its politics, etc. constitute for women are removed or fought against, the African woman who has always had higher aspirations can achieve and will achieve more. Through Aissatou, we see the realization of such an assessment by Buchi Emecheta. Thus, Bâ accomplishes the subversion and destabilization of the socially institutionalized Senegalese caste/class system as represented in *So Long a Letter*. The “higher aspiration with more achievement” that Emecheta refers is represented through several female characters in women’s writings. Some examples include heroines from novels such as, A. A. Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), F. Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1981), B. Emecheta’s *Double Yoke* (1982) and *Destination Biafra* (1982), etc., and as well as in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* (1979; *So Long a Letter* (1981)). Thus, Bâ’s female character Aissatou, after divorcing her husband, leaves for France and furthers her education. Aissatou takes her destiny into her own hands and with the power of education, recreates herself and climbs the socio-economic ladder; from being “a goldsmith’s daughter,” then a school teacher, she later becomes a member of the upper-class (*So Long a Letter* 31-33). With a new degree from the School of Interpreters in France, she is employed as an interpreter at the Embassy of Senegal in the United States (33) and she and her four sons live a well-to-do life, “[t]hey [books] enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted: examinations sat and passed took you also to France. The School of Interpreters, from which you

graduated, led to your appointment in the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. You make a very good living. You are developing in peace” (32-33). Thus, from the perspective of gender and class discriminations on women, while some might argue that African women writers use different paths—trade, marriage, farming, etc.— to have their female characters climb up to middle or upper-class statuses, modern education and particularly access to higher education has mostly been a focus for the new African woman’s access to financial freedom, economic power, self-sufficiency and her ascent to middle or upper-class society.

Adding on to education as an important asset in the economic independence and access to upward class mobility of the African woman, is migration—another asset that most African diasporic women writers use to promote the female economic independence and her upward social mobility. It is important to note that these women writers portray their female characters as educated women who migrate in search for better opportunities, making thus of education a factor that favors the migration of these female characters and their upward class mobility. As discussed above, Bâ and many of her contemporary women writers and scholars have laid emphasis on the education of the African woman and its many liberating facets and opportunities it brings her way. For instance, Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* is well educated and employed as a Librarian at the American Consulate in Nigeria (26); she later migrates to London where she furthers her education and becomes a renowned writer. Similarly, Aissatou’s education favors her migration to France to attend the school of Interpreters and from there to be appointed as an Interpreter at the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. Thus, Aissatou’s pursuit of higher education serves as a fundamental key that favors her migration to the West. With

the education of the African woman is her ambition to live a better and financially independent life. In *So Long a Letter*, we read from Ramatoulaye that Aissatou is “mak[ing] a very good living” (33), while in *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah tries to reason with her mother-in-law by telling her about the better life they will all have if she and Francis go to England and come back to make more money than they are making now (35-36). In *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), Esi is a university graduate and works as a Data Analyst for the Ghanaian government. Her school education has earned her a well-paid job, despite still facing gender discrimination when it comes to receiving promotions in her job. In *Changes*, where the female protagonist stays in her home country Ghana, earns a high university degree, the reader through the conversation of two friends—the know-all-goddesses of the story—learns about the socio-economic status and financial power of the contemporary modern educated African woman, like Esi (101-102). These two know-all goddesses present the reader with reasons why contemporary modern women like Esi have the powers they have and why they can freely choose to do what they want to do; for instance, as Esi chooses to become a second wife,

Aba: We must not forget that these days it could be the woman herself who would have such power.

Ama: [...] power of beauty, of youth, political, financial ...

Aba: A top athlete, a film star!

Ama: Nor should we forget high education, a degree or two.

Aba: A government job with side benefits.

Ama: One of the topmost posts.

Aba: One of the largest pay packets! (*Changes* 102)

Thus, higher education has given the contemporary African woman the economic and financial power she needs to be independent, self-sufficient, and above all, to choose and decide for herself. Marie Umeh (1995) in an interview and a co-authored article with Flora Nwapa notes that “[Flora Nwapa’s] canonical contribution to Nigerian letters is, [...] a "poetics of economic independence and self-reliance for female empowerment” (23). When asked if she had a message for African women, Nwapa stated the following, “Yes, I do. I feel that every woman, married or single, must have economic independence”” (28).

As such, as the pursuit of higher education and migration lead to the financial independence and economic power of Aissatou in *So Long a Letter*, her economic power and upward social mobility become a key factor in her freedom from patriarchal control and domination, hence, from the caste system of social class discrimination to which she is subject from her mother-in-law. This freedom gives Aissatou the latitude, for instance, to prove traditional gender discrimination wrong about the indispensability of her husband Modou in the successful upbringing of their four sons. She makes the resolute decision to stand up for herself and her sons. Her written words and her voice go against the expectations of her society. Ramatoulaye recalls Aissatou is told a woman cannot raise a child alone, particularly a male child, “[y]ou [Aissatou] were threatened through your flesh: ‘Boys cannot succeed without their father.’ You took no notice. These commonplace truths, which before had lowered the heads of many wives as they raised them in revolt, did not produce the desired miracle; they did not divert you from your decision. You chose to make a break, a one-way journey with your four sons [...] Your sons were growing up well, contrary to all predictions” (*So Long a Letter* 32-35). The

power of freedom produces in Aissatou a resolute decision not to give way to the gender discrimination of her society. The voice of society, which resonates loud in Aissatou's ears, attempts to disable her own voice and her resolution to choose to divorce Mawdo and raise her sons alone. Yet, Aissatou's ability to jump-start her life with a fresh and fulfilling new beginning and to be financially powerful and independent remain consistent with her ability to speak and decide for herself and her children. As such, Aissatou's level of education in complementarity with a woman's authority from her culture, adds on to her ability to choose, to use her voice and to refuse the gender and class oppression that society sanctions. Addressing Mawdo in the divorce letter she leaves him on their conjugal bed, Aissatou's voice resonates against her society's expectations,

Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. [...]

I'm stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way.

Goodbye, Aissatou. (*So Long a Letter* 32-33)

Through this epistolary form, a form that the narrative takes to critique social and political institutions unfair to women as well as to give voice to its female protagonist Ramatoulaye who writes a so long letter to her friend Aissatou, Aissatou breaks her silence, owns her voice, makes decisions and chooses what seems best for herself and her four sons. Far from reducing Bâ's *So Long a Letter* to just a "coming to writing" in

Helene Cixous (1991)'s original words, "la venue à l'écriture"³⁶, I argue that Bâ's novel is also a critique of Senegalese socio-political systems of discriminations. Thus, through Aissatou, Bâ breaks not only the African woman's silence but also breaks the traditional beliefs and practices of polygyny/polygamy, the caste prejudice system as well as class discrimination.

Not only an issue in the first writings of African women, class identity construction and class discrimination are still issues of concerns in the writings of twenty-first century African women writers as they continue to impact the life of African women as well as African diasporic women, as represented through the experiences of female characters. Thus, *Americanah* of Chimamanda Adichie is an archetype of a twenty-first century class identity construction and class discrimination of the African woman.

2- A Theoretical View of Class Ideologies as Intrinsically Linked to Gender

Class identity and class mobility continue to play a great role in the narratives of the contemporary twenty first century African women, just as they had in the first writings of African women writers. Consequently, the following section analyzes the female characters' class identity and class mobility and sets a comparative as well as a constructive radical tone to issues of class discriminations based on race, as well as to the global worldview of class mobility between third world countries in the instance of Nigeria, and developed countries in the instance of the United States and England.

³⁶ "La venue à l'écriture" is a French feminist perspective on the break of silence of women through writing.

Beyond how race and/or ethnicity intersect with class identities of female characters, as represented in *So Long a Letter*, *Americanah* goes beyond the intersection of ethnicity/race in the class identity construction of African and African diasporic female characters to critique the patriarchal class identity construction in African diasporic literature. In this, it juxtaposes the diasporic African female's and male's class identities and mobility and positions the female character as autonomous and successful than the male. This characterization, however, does not necessarily mean that women always have the upper hand economically, but it is a depiction that aims to correct the unfair class identity attributed to the African woman in literature and hence a production of a fair representation of certain real-life situations. Along with race and gender, class is of great importance in *Americanah* and in the lives of its characters, both female and male, and marks one of the social stratifications and identities of the characters. Not only does class contribute to regulating the lives of the characters, but it conditions their aspirations to a better life and creates in most the spirit of migratory adventure. This section about class identity construction in *Americanah* comparatively discusses how the female characters experience class identity differently than male characters. In this, I analyze the class mobility of both the female and male migrants, highlight the critical eye of Adichie on the classic literature about class migration between men and women and also present a different view of class migration between developed and developing countries—the reverse migration.

Literature from gender perspectives, as argued by the feminist sociologists Myra Marx Ferree and Elaine J. Hall (1996) shows that the privilege of men, sanctioned by society, has allowed men to be the primary accessors to economic resources and be

power holders over women, creating thus class differences between men and women. As discussed, Ferree and Hall (1996) argue that class—a social stratification—serves as an empowering tool of men and consequently can serve the same purpose for women to challenge oppressive patriarchal and social institutions. However, it is noteworthy that class in recent theoretical or school ideologies has known quite a bit of controversial definitions, moving from being a position about access and possession of resources, to be a process, a performance and a politics, as analyzed and argued by Philip Kelly in “Migration, Transnationalism, and the Spaces of Class Identity” (153-162)³⁷.

Social stratification based on class forms a social identity that distinguishes individuals or groups of individuals from one another based on their occupation and income. Yet, as the feminist sociologists Ferree and Hall (1996) in “Rethinking Stratification from a Feminist Perspective” note, economic stratification³⁸ up until the 1970s—1975 to be specific—was mainly conceived as the only aspect of social inequality; thus, leaving out gender and race as integral constituents of unequal social structures. In other words, gender and race were not viewed as whole entities of social stratifications or social aspects of inequality but only as “factors contributing to an individual's position in purely economic stratification systems” (Ferree and Hall 931). Consequently, several feminists argue in favor of gender and race to be fundamentally recognized as whole entities of social stratifications; they also posit that in many

³⁷ For more information, see Philip F. Kelly’s analysis of class as a position, a process, a performance and a politics “Migration, Transnationalism, and the Spaces of Class Identity” (153-162)

³⁸ Ferree and Hall (1996) define “economic stratification” as “models of inequality that focus on differences in economic resources (income or wealth) and on factors conceptualized in terms of their relation to such economic resources (occupation, education, prestige)” (931), in other words, it is a differential access to resources

instances gender and race intersect with class (Ferree and Hall, 1996; etc.). From Philip Kelly (2012)'s analysis, the intersection of race and gender with class falls in the category of "class embodiment"—a subjective analysis and understanding of class. "Class embodiment" in Kelly's classification falls under the big umbrella of "class performance"³⁹ (because "class performance" encompasses "class as consumption" and "class as embodiment"). A close reading of *Americanah* is essential in understanding how migration and transnationalism—the movement across nations and cultures—of African migrants, particularly migrant women, affect the analysis and understanding of the class categories and identities of the characters as well as how they challenge any gender and racial discriminations in class terms. In this sense, I use Philip Kelly's ideology of spatial class mobility—or the transnational effect on class mobility, the prioritization of 'subjective understanding and assessment of class' (162) and the notion of reverse migration in class terms⁴⁰ to analyze and discuss the constructive radicalization of class by the migrants and the author Adichie. In this discussion, I coin the concept of "reverse migration in class terms" or "class reverse migration" to develop the African constructive radical feminist view of class and migration.

Class, as defined and understood in mainstream literature constitutes a set of markers that determines a person or group of persons' belonging to a specific class

³⁹ According to Philip Kelly (2012), although class is generally analyzed from an abstract and objective point of view as a position and process, it is also understood as a performance from a subjective position, allowing individuals to understand themselves in relation to others in terms of class. Thus, under 'class performance,' Kelly identifies 'class as a consumption' and 'class as embodiment' (158-161).

⁴⁰ The notion of 'reverse migration in terms of class' is what I define as the phenomenon created by Adichie to allow a white English man to migrate from England, from a working-class position and performance to Nigeria (Africa) to an upper middle-class position, allowing him to access an upward mobility. This phenomenon radicalizes mainstream ideology that African migrants are the only ones who migrate for better opportunities in the West.

category, yet as Philip Kelly (2012) notes, “[s]ubjective understandings of class are not always given great credence in the conceptual literature” (162). Class markers have always differed from nation to nation, culture to culture, and from time to time. Thus, the migratory movement from a nation to another, particularly in *Americanah* from Nigeria to the United States and to the United Kingdom, compels us to reconsider how space affects class in *Americanah*. In this line of thought, it is arguable that class as perceived and conceived by mainstream literature affects very little, if any at all, the class position and performance of the individual African migrant in *Americanah*. consequently, the class category of African migrants in *Americanah* is more affected by their Nigerian national, cultural and ethnic conceptions of class than by the class conceptions and markers as perceived by their host societies, the United States and the United Kingdom.

2-1- **Appropriating and Radicalizing Class Concepts: The Female Migrant Redefines Her “Class”**

Philip Kelly (2012) talks about a ‘subjective understanding’ of class, which according to him is the migrant’s understanding and assessment of class. A subjective understanding and assessment of class therefore means that the individual defines and sets their own markers that classify them in a certain class category. To put this in context, in *Americanah* the class markers of an upper class, a middle-class or a working-class person in Nigeria are not the same as those in the United States or the United Kingdom due to some factors such as differences in economy, politics, geographical locations, cultures, etc. It is worth highlighting that the state of development of a country or nation, whether industrial, economic, or sociopolitical, affects how class is perceived

and understood by its people. Thus, a middle-class family in Nigeria—a developing country—might not be considered a middle-class family in the United States—a developed country—but rather as a working class; likewise, a middle-class family in the United States might not be viewed as one in Nigeria but rather as an upper class. In *Americanah* for instance, Ifemelu’s middle-class family in Nigeria is marked by their access to resources, professions, financial and material possessions such as cars, televisions, access to electricity, etc. Yet, even though Ifemelu’s family is technically a middle-class family, her family’s assets compared to Obinze’s middle-class family and lifestyle in Nigeria are on the down side. Thus, the lifestyle, the types of jobs—the nurse position of Ifemelu’s mother and the university professor position of Obinze’s mother—, having a family abroad, having more options like Ginika’s parents do (78) or the privilege of traveling across the Atlantic, borders and nations—examples of Ginika (67), Kayode DaSilva and Yinka (66-67)), or even being a ‘half caste’/mixed race and ethnicities as in the case of Ginikka (67) etc., affect the class categories, performances and conceptions of the characters in *Americanah*. For example, when Ifemelu started visiting Obinze and his mother, she was always fascinated by the atmosphere and the life between this mother and son, “Ifemelu stood there mesmerized. Obinze’s mother, her beautiful face, her air of sophistication, her wearing a white apron in the kitchen, was not like any other mother Ifemelu knew. Her father would seem crass, with his unnecessary big words, and her mother provincial and small. [...] Their flat smelled of vanilla on weekends when Obinze’s mother baked. [...] her own mother did not bake, their oven housed cockroaches” (85-86). The differences between Ifemelunamma’s family and Obinze’s family are striking details of not only characteristics of class categories and

markers in Nigeria in the novel, but also how the individuals' consumption and performance of class categorize them in the class category to which they belong.

Thus, in *Americanah*, Nigeria as a nation and community understands its class concepts and categorizations based on what they all culturally view and agree upon as class markers. The reader hence discovers from the high schoolers in Lagos how class categories and markers play out in *Americanah*. The “Big Guys”—Kayode, Obinze, Ahmed, Osahon, and ‘Emenike’—and the “popular girl”—Ginika—and Yinka, Ifemelu, Bisi, have all some marks of class wealth, lifestyle and good social status (66-68). Yet, some people like Emenike invent for themselves a class category that they wish they belong to. When the Big Guys and “popular girls” share their abroad travel experiences or passport possessions stories, Emenike’s invention and longing of pertaining to a well-to-do class is made known to the reader. He lies about having rich parents who promised him a foreign education when he enters university (79). The class markers as elaborated above and many others that the novel underlines, affect how class category is determined in Nigeria in the novel. Thus, when Nigerians such as Ifemelu, Obinze, Emenike, cross the ocean and settle in their host countries, their cultural understanding of class relies mostly on financial resources, material assets, and lifestyle that they possess and not so much on the types of jobs or activities that generate their income.

Therefore, one can argue that “class consumption” in Kelly (2012)’s words, characterizes Ifemelu’s access to upward mobility as blogging becomes a job and a source of income for her (375-380), because blogging might not be commonly viewed as an upper class or upper middle-class type of job or profession in her host country, America. Yet, the financial income from her blogging is what allows her to perform and

consume a class life. In the case of Filipino migrants in Canada for instance, Kelly points out that “[t]he material benefits of an upper middle-class Philippine lifestyle are, therefore, available in Canada with working-class employment. (174). Thus, in terms of viewing blogging in America as a job and source of income, Ifemelu views herself as “play-acting this professional, this negotiator of terms, [...] [but] she was, in fact, an unemployed person” (376); yet, her financial capabilities and material possessions mesmerize her, and she lives as an upper middle-class individual would live in her home country. As Kelly highlights, “[w]hile occupational markers of class may indicate a downward movement, the consumption markers of class provide something of a compensating countermovement” (174). Thus, Ifemelu’s life choices, style and self-perception change to reflect her class consumption, “[t]o receive phone calls, she wore her most serious pair of trousers, her most muted shade of lipstick, and she spoke sitting upright at her desk, legs crossed, her voice measured and sure (ibid.). In terms of class consumption as a marker of class belonging, Ifemelu is accordingly an upper middle-class individual even though her occupational marker as a blogger does not indicate an upper-class profession. She is therefore not classed from the perspective of class concept in the United States her host country, but from her diasporic conception of class through her ability to possess resources and live like an upper middle-class (378) individual would live in Nigerian society. There is thus, in Ifemelu’s class category, a subjective understanding of class which Kelly (2012) argues, migrants apply to class in their host country. Ifemelu thus defies class as conceived and perceived by her host culture; in her defiance she also creates a set of new markers that place her in the class category that she sees herself performing. As Ifemelu consumes and performs her class, not by the type of

profession she has but by her financial and material possessions, it is highly important to note that education has contributed to marking her class category as it has marked most of the other migrants' class categories in the novel.

In line with education serving as a class marker, Kelly (2012) asserts that education also serves as a class performance for Filipino immigrants in Canada, even though, “the educational [...] markers of class [are] not recognized in the Canadian labor market [as class markers]” (Kelly 175). Accordingly, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s blogging ability though nourished and birthed by her social encounters and experiences is primarily possible because of her education and intellect. Khalid Koser (2003) notes a range of different groups of recent African migrants and although his analysis focuses on the African migrants to Europe, it is well applicable to the range of recent African migrants to America. Koser writes, “[recent African migrants] have arrived variously [...] as students, professionals, asylum seekers and ‘clandestine migrants’” (3). Among these groups of migrants are students who use their education as class markers from their diasporic identity conception. Yet, while Ifemelu and some of the migrants in the novella migrate to the United States as college students, one identifies other groups of migrants who arrive as professionals, traders or job seekers and whose class identities also defy their host place’s concept of class.

In *Americanah*, the reader discovers from the beginning of the novel, a group of African migrants—professional hairdressers—who constitute an important aspect of recent African migrants, and arguably, one of the most important contributors to their home countries’ economy. Yet, the shabby state and conditions of these professional

hairdressers' hair salons in *Americanah* are characteristics of a state of poverty in the American concept of class and class performance,

[...] they [the hair salons] had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer [...] Inside, the room was thick with disregard, the paint peeling, [...] A small TV mounted on a corner of the wall, [...] the poor audio quality jarring [...] the fan on the chipped table was turned on high but did little for the stuffiness in the room. [...] the rusty hair dryer that had not been used in a hundred years [...] “Sorry the air conditioner broke yesterday,” Mariama said. Ifemelu knew the air conditioner had not broken yesterday, it had been broken for much longer, perhaps it had always been broken (*Americanah* 10-13).

Yet, although their occupational markers are low-ranked occupations and their work places bear markers of deprivation, “[African hair braiding salons ...] were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people” (10), these professional hairdressers mark their class by their consumption and performance abilities through remittances, and sometimes through the high education they had in their home country before migrating. In other words, despite the markers of poverty that taint the business location and belongings of these hairdressers in *Americanah*, they consume and perform their class status through their ability to send money to their families and relatives back home.

Consequently, these abilities confer upon this group of migrants, characteristics of a middle-class or upper middle class in their home culture—because they are able to send money and help families and friends decrease the level of poverty; as Obinze once said

displaying his upper-class performance, “[...] I do what rich people are supposed to do. I pay school fees for a hundred students in my village and my mum’s village” (*Americanah* 541). The practice of remittance by this group of migrants is shown through Mariama, the hair salon owner, and through Aisha. Mariama receives a phone call, from her country Mali and communicates the Western Union money transfer reference number to the recipient on the other side of the line (13). Also, Aisha a professional hairdresser employed at Mariama’s hair salon, accounts for sending money to her mother back in her country Senegal (451). About the practice or culture of remittances, Khalid Koser (2003) highlights the financial contributions of Somalian migrants in the USA and Europe to their home country and argues that “[they] send home the equivalent of 120 million US dollars per year—these remittances regularly doubling the average household income in parts of Somalia” (1). Dinah Hannaford (2016) equally notes in her study on ‘intimate remittances’ between migrant Senegalese husbands and their non-migrant wives in Senegal that “[i]n 2010, overseas migrants sent an estimated \$1.4 billion dollars in remittances to Senegal, according to the Central Bank of West African States. This amounted to about 10 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. [...] remittances contribute significantly, not only to village-level and national projects, but to individual households” (94). These money transfers occur through both formal (Western Union, MoneyGram, etc.) and informal ways, such as through religious medium, family members or friends traveling back home (Ibid.). While it should not be assumed that this remittance culture is only about Somali and Senegal, or that the individual migrants sending the money home are only well established and well-to-do migrants, there are many migrants with low-ranked professions such as Mariama and Aisha who may or not

have any education or may not have any legal status as citizens in their host country, but who embody some of the characteristics of a high-class or middle-class individual in their country. This class consumption of migrants, such as professional hairdressers, falls in line with Kelly (2012)'s observation of Filipino immigrants in Canada, "[t]he material benefits of an upper middle-class Philippine lifestyle are, therefore, available in Canada with working-class employment" (174). Thus, the fact that individual migrants with low job status or even no legal status consume and perform characteristics of a high-class than what their job category or occupational marker would attribute them in their host country, establishes in my view not only the financial power of African migrants but also their abilities to defy class conception and perception in their host country. Thus, these migrants do not establish or determine their class identity features based on mainstream criteria of class identification and stratification in the host country, but based on their home and diasporic cultural capital of class understanding and performance. One witnesses, thus, a disruptive yet constructive concept of class and class mobility and a self-positioning and identification in class terms of recent African migrants.

Philip Kelly (2012) argues that the transnational movement of migrants across borders and nations affects their subjective analysis of class and the classification of self in a class category, yet I argue that this transnational movement also affects their class mobility. Fumilayo Showers (2015) implies in her article that African immigrants seek upward mobility; she then argues that factors such as their ethnicity and race complicate how these migrants access upward mobility. A few authors in migration literature concur that the main reasons that push individuals to decide to migrate is for the search of better opportunities, better life and the opportunity to move upward in class hierarchies. Yet, as

asserted above, the sense of being in a higher-class is not necessarily associated with the higher-class professions as perceived by the host society. This means that occupations in labor market dominate the job status of these migrants, yet their consumption and performances through material possessions, remittances and contribution to the development of others back home, mark the upward mobility and class of these African migrants. I will talk more about the effect of transnational movement on class mobility in the context of reverse transnational class mobility in *Americanah*.

2-2- **A New Look at Gender and Race Intersection with Class Mobility in *Americanah*: Recent African Migrant Women Striving Abroad**

In *Americanah*, the societal factors—gender and race—define or condition the choices of many of the female characters, especially in class terms and sometimes work together or individually in the lives of these female characters. Yet, in terms of how gender intersects with class in the experiences of migrants in the novel, Adichie offers us a new standpoint from which gender barely affects the class position and performance of the migrant female characters. Even though the experience of Ifemelu as she offers her body to gain some money and pay for her late rent could be interpreted as a gender and class intersection in the identity formation of the migrant woman, this incident does not curtail her abilities and access to work because after her depression, she happily embraces her new job of babysitting and uses its income to pay for her needs. This approach to gender and class intersection in the class identity formation of the female migrant in *Americanah* does not, however, limit gender effects on the class identity of the female characters in the home country—Nigeria. Thus, the example of young ladies who have

sugar daddies who basically finance most of their needs (*Americanah* 480-482; 501; 512; 520-521) is an illustration of how the national politics that privilege men in power and authoritative positions, *sometimes*⁴¹ leaves little to no option to women and ladies to use their gender social identity and the very oppressive political system to make their way up in class consumption terms.

Yet, as gender plays a little role in the class identity formation of the female migrants in the novel, race, as Ali Mazrui (1986) and Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe (2003) seem to agree on, is the primary factor in the identity formation of African diasporas, in this context, in the life of these female characters. As Ifekwunigwe adds, the popular folk concept of race sets up differences that are justified and which in turn create and maintain social inequalities and injustices and perpetuate differential access to privilege, prestige and power (60). Race, consequently, is a factor that seems to affect all immigrants no matter what their gender is and it conditions their access to resources, power, and privileges, etc., all necessary factors for an upward class mobility. Thus, Ifemelu for example, like many of her fellow African migrants, experiences discrimination from a white male carpet cleaner. As presented, the carpet cleaner is surprised to see a black person open the door of the stately house he rang up. Ifemelu puts it bluntly in her blog post “In America, Race Is Class,”

It didn't matter to him [the carpet cleaner] how much money I [Ifemelu] had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Black" as a whole are often

⁴¹ Although, poverty, peer pressure and several other individual reasons, might well explain the culture of having sugar daddy, yet, in *Americanah*, this practice could among other reasons be blamed on the unjust political system and poverty in the novel.

lumped together with “Poor Whites.” Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed. (205)

Ifemelu identifies four (4) categories of tribalism—class, ideology, region, and race—in America, and all four categories, are conditioned by ‘class,’ and interestingly, each extremity represents a ranked class. However, class ranking is more salient in the ‘race category’— “whites” and blacks”— with “whites” representing the rich class and “blacks” representing the poor class; one reads,

“In America, tribalism is alive and well. There are four kinds—class, ideology, region, and race. First, class. Pretty easy. Rich folk and poor folk. Second, ideology. Liberals and conservatives. They don’t merely disagree on political issues, each side believes the other is evil. Intermarriage is discouraged [...] Third, region. The North and the South [...] The North looks down on the South while the South resents the North. Finally, race. There’s a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what’s in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you’re white, you’re all right; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re black, get back!) (*Americanah* 227).

With this type of class distinction, “justified” as Ifekwunigwe (2003) puts it, Laura, the sister of Kimberly—Ifemelu’s employer as a babysitter—often low-ranks Ifemelu and her ‘people’ in class terms. Whenever she talks to Ifemelu, Laura often alludes to poverty, hunger and how grateful African migrants should be to the United States (200; 207). In a research study on professional African women in the United States, Showers (2015)

concludes that the women she interviewed, “[...] strongly believed that being black women from Africa placed them at the bottom of stratified racial systems at work” (1817). Thus, racism works against African migrant women, and of course, against African migrant men as well to leave them at the bottom rank of the social class classification. Racism, consequently, perpetuates class differences, inequities and injustices in American host society. Yet, *Americanah* shows that African female migrants use their oppressors—race, gender, and class—to assert themselves in their host society. Thus, in regard to race, Ifemelu uses her position as a black to posit an insider look on issues of race in America and uses this means to make a living through her blogging on race and public talks on diversity in America.

In regard to class, Ifemelu’s gender and race help her to access upward class mobility in the United States. Ifemelu’s use of gender as an asset in its intersection with class is illustrated through her love relationship with Curt, a white man from the upper-class. Through this love relationship, Ifemelu has been able to easily access a life of luxury—characteristic of class consumption,

With Curt, she became, in her mind, a woman free of knots and cares, a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth. A “drink” became a part of the architecture of her life, mojitos and martinis, dry whites and fruity reds. She went hiking with him, kayaking, camping near his family’s vacation home, all things she would never have imagined herself doing before. She was lighter and leaner, she was Curt’s Girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favorite, flattering dress. (*Americanah* 241-242)

Thus, gender works as an asset in this context to intersect with class in Ifemelu's access to upward class mobility and she seems to navigate with ease the harsh and often difficult path of the American job market and the immigration system,

“I know some people my dad did business with, they might be able to help,” Curt said. And no long afterwards, he told her she had an interview at an office in downtown Baltimore, for a position in public relations. “All you need to do is ace the interview and it's yours,” he said. “So I know folks in this other bigger place, but the good thing about this one is they'll get you a visa *and* start your green card process [...] *here she was, a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top* (my emphasis), propelled by things outside of herself. She felt, in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to.” (*Americanah* 249-250)

In the above quotation, the narrator characterizes Ifemelu as “...a pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top,” characteristics that imply that gender—“pink” conceived as representative of the female gender in mainstream western culture— and class—“weightless, floating to the top,” an easy upward class mobility— intersect to put Ifemelu at a position that she wouldn't have had an easy access to. It is true as Ifemelu herself realizes that she is lucky, that not all African female migrants will have the luxurious life she has while dating Curt (*ibid.*). So, I concede that it could be problematic to conclude that gender has deliberately served as a tool of power in Ifemelu's class identity formation in *Americanah*. However, one may wonder if it is plausible to claim that, in *Americanah*, gender is double-edged—it is oppressive as well as a powerful tool—a way

for easy access to a life of luxury in the case of Ifemelu. Yet beyond these analyses, it might also be reasonable to claim that Ifemelu's experience with gender serving as a winning tool in counteracting class mobility discrimination is not unlikely to happen in real life and that men migrants are not excluded from this sort of relationship and luxurious life based on gender, even though in men's case, one may not necessary talk about turning an oppressor—their gender—into a winning tool. The example of Emenike with his white English wife in England is illustrative of this (*Americanah* 325-341). Beyond the complexity surrounding the intersection of gender with class in the identity formation of Ifemelu, it is undeniable that race and gender on a slight note, have served Ifemelu as tools to counteract class discrimination.

The class identity formation of Ifemelu also entails using her personal experiences with racial discrimination to assert herself and access upward class mobility. Thus, with her own experiences and those of others, Ifemelu blogs about racism in America and gives public talks about diversity and racism, all of which brought her fame and money—some of the markers essential for being categorized in a class category and essential for consuming and performing it as well. Kelly (2012) notes about class embodiment that gender and race act as factors that limit the access to upward class mobility of migrants in their host countries; yet as analyzed above, the female migrant Ifemelu works her way up by using the class oppressors of gender and race. Besides, as Ifemelu's personal experiences show, using a class oppressor such as gender or race to navigate the harsh class hierarchy in America and to make one's way up the class mobility also necessitates having '*une tete bien pleine*'—the education and intellectual skills and also being a hard worker with the desire to succeed. As Showers (2015) states, the women participants in

her study not only admit that their race and ethnicity as Africans and blacks work against them, but they also admit they use hard work and high education pursuit to assert themselves at their workplaces in order to work their way upward.

In conclusion, *Americanah* presents a new wave of female migrants determined to mark their time and their experiences in migration literature. This wave of female migrants, as exemplified through Ifemelu, brings to the shore characteristics that overturn or challenge previous conceptions of women and their class identity in migration. As gender, race and class constitute factors that intersect to mold the diasporic African female class identity, usually in ways that oppress and reduce her opportunities of climbing up class hierarchies, the diasporic female uses her very oppressors—gender, race—to construe her diasporic class identity. She reverses mainstream conception of African women’s identity in the host country, therefore reverses the stereotypical attributes that African women are loaded with in the host countries. As Adesayo Adelowo, Liz Smythe and Camille Nakhid (2016) contend, these stereotypical attributes are only true for a small group of African women migrants (53). As such, *Americanah* disrupts mainstream conception of class identity of the diasporic African female and how race and gender factors interplay in her class identity construction.

As argued throughout this dissertation, a new wave of feminists—namely the post-national feminists, as Ahmad (2010) refers to them—presents a new and fair representation of the experiences of African migrants, both women and men, hence, a new understanding of how gender relations work in migrant literature. This new wave of feminists remaps the position, the role, the contribution of African migrant women to local and global developmental ideologies, politics and economy. For instance, Dinah

Hannaford (2016) highlights that some feminist social scientists, Pessar and Mahler (817, 2003), whose research interests extend to the African migrant remittances “[...] have subsequently pushed for a gendered reading of remittances, encouraging social scientists to think of these transactions not as disembodied numbers, but as socially contextualized relations between human beings. They encourage researchers to pay attention to who sends and receives migrant remittances and the stipulations surrounding their use as a key to understanding how these exchanges are embedded within social and familial structures” (Hannaford 93). This exemplifies the focus that not only feminist fiction writers, but feminist social scientists, and undoubtedly other feminists across disciplines, give to female migrants, the latter’s class identities and experiences and obviously to their transnational class mobility—throughout their home nations and through the host nations in which they settle or share. In this regard, Adichie constructs her female characters and their class experiences and identities in a way that they create a rupture of the dominant African migrant literature that overlooked gendered class mobilities and effects. While Adichie reserves a fair amount of narratives to the class experiences and identities of African male characters in *Americanah*, she nevertheless questions the dominant migrant literature that gives all the attention to the class mobility of African male migrants. This interest in particularly African male migrants in migrant literature is alluded to in Adelowo, Smythe and Nakhid (2016)’s study of African women’s professional experiences in the diaspora,

[u]nlike the period when migration from Africa was dominated by men, the women shared stories of migration in order to secure educational and economic opportunities for their children, and to access opportunities for professional

development. The women presented themselves as active in decisions regarding their migration. Their narratives reflect a view of themselves as active agents, making choices to achieve the social, political, economic, and cultural survival of their community. (58)

The female migrants in *Americanah* also present themselves as active agents in their decision to migrate and, accordingly, write their own narrative of gender, racial and class identities. Thus, the reader witnesses a ‘gender difference in class mobility’ as well as a ‘gender difference in spatial class mobility’ of the female and male migrants in the novella.

Ifemelu’s experiences with class as an immigrant, similar to most female characters’ class experiences, is one that falls into the characteristics of what Philip Kelly (2012) refers to as the effects of spatial class mobility—how space affects the class mobility of migrants. Kelly (2012) concludes in the case of most Filipino migrants in Canada that the effect of space on class mobility of these migrants is a movement of upward to downward mobility in positional class hierarchies as viewed or understood by mainstream class conception. This classification in hierarchical class positions generally depends on the labor market jobs that the migrants have access to in their host places. The difference between the female and male class mobility experiences lies in the financial status and capabilities of the women and men in the novel. This is important to highlight and understand because, as I mentioned earlier, the types of jobs or professions the migrants occupy and exercise in their host countries have a very little effect if any, on how these migrants understand, assess and position themselves in class categories. Yet, in the difference between the female and male class mobility in *Americanah*, Adichie

positions some of her female characters in professions that are highly valued and classified in their host countries, or in professions that are highly remunerative, as in the case of Aunty Uju who becomes a family physician practitioner in the United States (145-146). Via this positioning in highly classed careers, Adichie calls attention to the higher positions that African educated migrants, not only women of course, can access and occupy in their host country, even if the road to get there is usually difficult and thorny.

In *Americanah*, the African female migrant experience with class begins when both Aunty Uju and Ifemelu leave respectively, an upper middle-class and low middle-class positions in Nigeria to start from point zero in the United States. As a migrant in the United States, Aunty Uju tells Ifemelu that she works up to three jobs in addition to being a single parent in her debuts in the United States; yet, her living condition was not one to envy (131). Besides this, Ifemelu recalls the poor condition of Aunty Uju car when the latter picked her up at the airport on Ifemelu's arrival in the United States, "[t]he sweltering heat alarmed her as did Aunty Uju's old Toyota hatchback, with a patch of rust on its side and peeling fabric on the seats" (127). The poor condition of Aunty Uju's apartment and the neighborhood in which she and her son were living at the time attest to her working class or low-class life in the United States. Recalling the 'old Aunty Uju—the upper middle-class Aunty Uju back in Nigeria'—Ifemelu thinks, "how the old Aunty Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids. She would never have tolerated the ingrown hair that grew like raisins on her chin, or worn trousers that gathered bulkily between her legs. America had subdued her" (135). In a slightly similar submissiveness to the host country, when Ifemelu first arrived in the United States to

attend college, she had to subdue her own identity and use another Nigerian woman, Ngozi Okonkwo's Social Security Number card in order to work. Despite using someone else's identity with the intent to be able to cover her financial needs such as, rent and the quarter (¼) balance of her tuition, Ifemelu is unable to get a job from the many positions she applied for. This leaves her in a situation that not only puts her in the lower-class rank in the United, but also leads to her severe depression—a severe depression caused by her obligation to accept to work as a “female personal assistant” for a man who takes advantage of financial needy ladies like Ifemelu to satisfy his *malicious* libido desires (188-195). Back home in Nigeria, Ifemelu never needed to look for a job and earn money for herself because her middle-class parents were taking care of her needs, tuition, feeding, clothes, housing, etc. She never needed to lay down with a strange man simply because she couldn't find a decent job but was in need of money to pay her rent and take care of other needs. However, when Ifemelu finally gets her first ‘decent’ job, it was a babysitting job. In Auntie Uju's case, the latter was working up to three menial jobs to fend for herself and her son in the United States. Even though Auntie Uju had a graduate degree in medical school in Nigeria and was living in a mansion with domestic maids and a driver, her debuts in the United States took her many steps back on the ladder of social class. Before Auntie Uju left Nigeria for the United States after the death of her ‘sugar-daddy’ the General, she was living a luxurious life equated to the life of an upper middle-class or even an upper-class individual. She had a driver, a gardener, two housemaids; she was living in a mansion, and had the choice to have her baby either in America or England and she chose to have it in America; as a customer, Auntie Uju was treated like a royalty, etc. (89-106). Conclusively, from a transnational movement viewpoint in terms

of class, the beginnings of Aunty Uju and Ifemelu in the United States have taken the trajectory form of upward to downward mobility. This illustrates Pratt's analysis of the migrant movement in class terms as he concludes that, "[i]t may be the case, for example, that the process of migration might remove a migrant from a domestic situation in which they have a maid or nanny, to one in which they are a maid or nanny, with all the possibilities for intensive exploitation which that implies (Pratt, 1999 qtd in Kelly 171, 2012).

Yet, even though Aunty Uju and Ifemelu have both experienced an upward to downward class mobility, their narrative shows that they have successfully worked their way up to a higher class in their host country—observed through their diasporic cultural capital's assessment and understanding of class. Aunty Uju takes courses, passes her family physician certificate in the United States, completes her residency program and practices a family physician profession (*Americanah* 145-146). She is then able to afford a better life for her and her son; she moves to a nicer neighborhood and even to a neighborhood with a predominantly white population, illustrating thus the assertion of some migration researchers that African or black immigrants assimilate whiteness with success and upward mobility⁴². As for Ifemelu, she becomes a notorious blogger, a speaker on diversity and race in the United States, all of which earn her enough money to buy a condo, employ a personal assistant and attend more to the needs and comfortability of her parents back home, etc. (*Americanah* 375-378). In my view, Chimamanda Ngozi

⁴² This is more illustrated in Fumilayo Showers (2015)'s article. For more information, refer to Bashi and McDaniel, 1997; Habecker, 2012; Kasinitz, 1992; Waters, 1990, 2001; Vickerman 1999 (qtd in Showers 1816). Yet, Uju's constant complaint about racial discriminations at work from her coworkers and patients negate the assertion of previous migration literature that concludes that ethnicity serves as shield for black immigrants against racial discriminations and downward mobility. In other words, black immigrants use their ethnicity to access upward mobility in their host places (Showers 1816).

Adichie's construction of class identity for Ifemelu and Auntie Uju challenges the assumption that female migrants migrate only as wives under the care and protection of their husbands. Thus, in line with Adelowo, Smythe and Nakhid (2016)'s conclusion, I argue that *Americanah*'s construction of the female migrant class identity challenges "[the traditional notion that] women [migrate] as family dependants [...] only to join their husbands," (52-53). This type of the female migrant class identity construction also establishes that recent African women migrants 'come in various shapes and shades.' In other words, these migrant women migrate either, as students, professionals, traders, or as asylum seekers. They can be legal or illegal, but most of them work hard to navigate their host country's immigration system and gain upward mobility, without necessarily relying on the income or class position and performance of their male counterparts.

However, compared to Uju and Ifemelu's class mobility experiences and some of the other women's in the novella, most of the African male migrants in *Americanah* experience a class mobility from upward to downward, in their host countries, with limited possibility to rise again in their class mobility. These male characters have thus a hard time gaining upward mobility. In a report of the APA (American Psychology Association) Presidential Task Force on Immigration, it is noted that "[many highly educated and skilled immigrant adults [...] find a dramatic decrease in employment opportunities when they immigrate (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008) and may experience unemployment, underemployment, and downward mobility (Davila, 2008; G. Lee & Westwood, 1996; Yost & Lucas, 2002). These issues are magnified for ethnic or racial minority adults (Catanzarite & Aguilera, 2002; Fernandez, 1998; M. C. Morales, 2009)" (qtd in "Crossroads: The Psychology of

Immigration in the New Century” 5, 2013). The experience of the male protagonist in *Americanah*, Obinze Maduewesi who lives in England as an illegal migrant, illustrates the downward mobility experience of many racial minority migrants, although one can refer to other male characters such as, Illoba and Nicholas’s cases, as their experiences are perfect examples of the downward class mobility. In his host country England, Obinze refers to himself as invisible (*Americanah* 281), the same invisibility that Ifemelu felt on her first days in the United States. This similar situation between both characters in the novel illustrates the identity erasure that most African migrants are compelled to experience upon arrival in their host country, especially when they have to deal with their standing in the host country, whether they are legal or illegal. Ifemelu was legal as she migrated with a student visa that was valid, yet she felt invisible in America due to the fact that she couldn’t work with her student visa, yet needed to work. For Obinze, he became illegal in England after his visa expired and so felt invisible because he couldn’t legally work in his host country. Yet, despite the similar experience of invisibility between the male migrant, Obinze, and the female migrant, Ifemelu, mostly due to the lack of job or good financial situation and the fact that both migrant characters moved from an upward class in their home country to a lower class in their debuts in their host places, the class mobility experience of Ifemelu moves from upward to downward and then back up to upward, while Obinze’s class mobility takes a different trajectory in the host country+ from upward to downward.

Thus, Obinze who comes from an upper middle-class in Nigeria lives an invisible and poor life in England, a life that categorizes him in a low-class even in circumstances where one would have to apply the Nigerian cultural class assessment and categorization

to his living and working situation in England. Obinze cleans toilets in England (*Americanah* 292), cleans a detergent-packing warehouse, works as a “laborer” for a kitchen delivery company and a warehouse (*Americanah* 292-312). He possesses no resources whether material or financial that can allow him to consume and perform a class life that will equate to a class category equal to or higher than his upper middle-class category in Nigeria. He wears clothes that his cousin Nicholas lends him; he borrows money from his former schoolmate Emenike to meet some of his needs because he has to pay a high percentage of his earnings to Vincent whose National Insurance (NI) number he works with. Moreover, he needed to save enough money to pay for a sham marriage he ventures into in order to regularize his situation in England. Nicholas advises Obinze, “If you come to England with a visa that does not allow you to work, [...] the first thing to look for is not food or water, it is an NI number so you can work. Take all the jobs you can. Spend nothing. Marry an EU citizen and get your papers. Then your life begin [sic]” (*Americanah* 295), yet unfortunately, Obinze’s life in England never knew a beginning. Obinze’s illegal situation compels him to a stagnant situation in terms of class. Working as Vincent Obi with Obi’s NI number and being compelled to pay him 35% of his earnings, conditions the stagnant situation of Obinze in a class position that leaves him not only poor but fragile. When Obinze ignores Vincent Obi’s request to increase the 35% to 45% (*Americanah* 323), Vincent betrays Obinze by calling Obinze’s boss Roy Snell and disclosing Obinze’s illegal status. The next thing that happened to Obinze is his detention and later his deportation to Nigeria for illegally residing in England (*Americanah* 343-344). Similar to Obinze’s struggle to construe his class identity in England, friends such as Nosa, Chidi, Wale and Iloba live in a situation that Nosa

describes as “a serious hustle.” Nosa responds to Obinze when the latter asks about where Nosa and the other Nigerian friends work, “[u]nderground. A serious hustle, but things will get better [...] Although Obinze knew he meant the tube, the word “underground” made him think of doomed tunnels that fed into the earth and went on forever, ending nowhere” (307).

Americanah presents not only a class mobility instance in which women mostly do better than men, but also instances where men live off well-to-do women, a characteristic that has traditionally been assigned to women migrants (Adelowo, Smythe and Nakhid 52-53, 2016). Nosa says of Emenike, “He’s doing very well and he lives in Islington, with his oyinbo wife who is old enough to be his mother. He has become posh o. He doesn’t talk to ordinary people anymore” (*Americanah* 307). Emenike is characterized as living off the wealth of his rich England wife and lawyer, Georgina (*Americanah* 335-341), and he becomes by association, an upper middle-class African male migrant. This is what in my opinion could be called, being ‘classed by association.’ The novel also presents Bartholomew, the “Igbo Massachusetts accountant”—as Ifemelu refers to him—as the man who uses his female partner—Aunty Uju’s salary to pay for his car and other needs while using his own money on the education of his children from his previous marriage. The difference between Emenike and Bartholomew is that the latter uses his money on his child from a previous marriage, yet does not contribute to expenses in his new household he shares with Uju and Dike. Bartholomew does not contribute anything to his household with Aunty Uju and Dike on the pretense that he cannot get a loan to start up his business due to reasons that he is being racially discriminated against (270). Though this situation, especially in Emenike’s case, has nothing extraordinary but

simply because Nigerian as a society raises men to feel like they are the only ones who have to be the financial providers and women, the beneficent (Adichie 26-27, 2014), Emenike and Bartholomew's examples in the novel emerge as non-conforming to the norm, thus making them worth discussing. Therefore, in compliance with Adichie's critique of Nigerian society's expectation of men to be the financial providers, one could assert that the depiction of Emenike and Bartholomew, particularly of Emenike, in *Americanah* could as well be interpreted as a critique and reverse of 'the norm' in order to instill a constructive radical change in how society sets its gender expectations. Beyond the characterization of some men who are classed by association with the class of their female partners, the difficult path that most male characters experience while constructing their class identities leave them very fragile and emotionally unstable.

Obinze's cousin Nicholas, even though financially stable, sees his ego bitterly suffer because of the difficulties he has had with navigating the immigration and class politics in England, his host country. Nicholas's wife, Ojiugo, tries to explain to Obinze the reasons why Nicholas is bitter and why he's had a change of attitude from how he used to be in Nigeria. As revealed by Ojiugo, Nicholas's bitter mood and change of attitude are due to the difficulties he had with obtaining his papers, how he had to work many jobs under other peoples' names and how his current job is only on contract with no guarantee of renewal (*Americanah* 297). In the process, Ojiugo mentions that on the other hand, she, Ojiugo, has easily obtained her papers because of the postgraduate study she did when she arrived in England, "[m]arriage changes things. But this country is not easy. I got my papers because I did postgraduate school here, but you know he [Nicholas] only got his papers two years ago and so for long he was living in fear, working under

other people's names. That thing can do wonders to your head, *eziokwu*" (ibid.). This difference in identity construction of Ojiugo and her husband, not only highlights the status of African women immigrants as not being only wives and mothers, but also as being highly educated even though some of them, as in the case of Ojiugo specifically, will resolve to becoming stay-home mothers and seem contented with their choice (301). This difference in Nicholas and Ojiugo's identity construction highlights the insecurities of Nicholas who seems to be living in fear of the unknown. To Obinze, it is simply surprising how Nicholas has changed from the big outrageous cousin in Nigeria to a quiet and indifferent cousin and husband in England, "Nicholas, husband and father, homeowner in England, spoke with a soberness so forbidding that it was almost comical. [...] On weekends, he walked around the house in a tense cloud of silence, nursing his worries" (295-296). In sum, the experience of most African men migrants with class mobility in *Americanah* takes a toll on their psyche, their masculinity and what their society expects from them.

In the midst of a difficult class mobility for Obinze, his illegal status due to immigration policies of his host country, his ultimate fate resumes to deportation to his home country where he has had to start from point zero. When Obinze is arrested for illegally residing in the United Kingdom and offered a representative lawyer, he simply declines and prefers to return to Nigeria and begin his life afresh (*Americanah* 345). Thus, after his migrant status, Obinze undertakes a move back to his home, or the "return migration" as most scholars label it. His return not only marks what the narrator describes as "[t]he last shard of his dignity [...] that he was desperate to retie," (345) but it also represents a 'reverse migration in class terms' or in other words, the 'reverse

transnational class mobility' which Adichie brings up in global migration discourse. Thus, Obinze's return to his home marks his class mobility movement from low-class in the United Kingdom to upper class in Nigeria. The trajectory of Obinze's class mobility in the novel goes thus from, upper-middle class in Nigeria to low-class in England and to upper-class in Nigeria. Obinze's return is also a call up to the African youth's consciousness about migration, its illusion and disillusion, a point that is discussed in the bonus chapter, entitled "From Illusion to Disillusion in Migration."

2-2-1- The Reverse Migration and Reverse Transnational Class Mobility in *Americanah*

The reverse transnational class mobility, as I may define it, is a change in how class mobility is discussed transnationally in global migration literature; it is in other terms, the concept of migration whereby a migrant with a low or working-class status in a developed country acquires a middle-class or upper-class status in a developing country. In explicit terms, this means that the low-class or working-class individual—whether diasporic or native—moves from downward to upward class mobility not simply because of the low cost of living in the developing country that affects their capital revenues but due to their access to resources and high paid jobs in the host developing country, allowing them to live a life that an upper-class individual would live in a developed country.

Thus, the narrative of Nigel, Obinze's co-worker in the delivery warehouse in England, is also worth discussing in this context of reverse transnational class mobility. In England, Nigel is presented with attributes that position him in a British working-class

category, the type of job⁴³ he has, his informal and on-street British English and even his physical appearance and the mockery he was subject to from his other workmates, etc. categorize him in a low social class in British culture (*Americanah* 312-315). Aside from his low-class markers, Nigel presents an attitude that shows him to be on equal plane with Obinze in England; yet, he is able to understand that in Nigerian setting Obinze is posh and from a high-class. He sees Obinze beyond the delivery man he is in London; he sees him as an African posh, “[o]nce Nigel said “male” and Obinze thought he said “mile,” and when Obinze finally understood what Nigel meant, Nigel laughed and said, ‘You talk kind of posh, don’t you? African posh’ (315). Unlike his white men coworkers, in the instance of Roy Snell who treats Obinze simultaneously in an affectionate and demeaning manner, Nigel treats Obinze with affection and consideration; he shares his tips with him and sees him as someone he can actually learn from, and also teach (*Americanah* 312-324). So, after their work hours, Nigel would take Obinze on tours of London. The above narrative opens avenues to reconsider class and class mobility discussion in global migration literature which has mainly revolved around the movement of migrants from developing countries to developed countries where they settle in search for better opportunities. These avenues are open in *Americanah* wherein Adichie creates a nuanced and ‘paradoxical⁴⁴’ situation of reverse migration and reverse class mobility. So, when Obinze returns to Nigeria, becomes very rich and works for Chief—one the wealthiest

⁴³ Philip Kelly (2012) argues that the types of jobs individuals have in developed countries affect their class ranking. For more information, read “Migration, Transnationalism, and the Spaces of Class Identity.”

⁴⁴ A ‘paradoxical’ situation in terms of how it is inconsistent with the representation and discussion of class mobility in global migration literature, for the discussion in this sense has always revolved around a movement of individuals from developing and poor countries towards developed and rich countries.

men in Nigeria—, Obinze calls for Nigel when Chief asked him to find a white man to be his General Manager,

Some years later in Lagos, after Chief told him [Obinze] to find a white man whom he could present as his General Manager, Obinze called Nigel. His Mobile number had not changed. “This is Vinny Boy.”

“Vincent! Are you all right, mate?”

“I’m fine, how are you?” Obinze said. Then, later, he said, “Vincent is not my real name, Nigel. My name is Obinze. I have a job offer for you in Nigeria.”

(Americanah 324)

With the reverse transnational class mobility, Nigel—the British low-class delivery man—becomes a General Manager for one of the wealthiest men in Nigeria. Nigel gets a job in Nigeria not because of merit, hard work, or higher education attainment—typical attributes and skills that migrants from a developing country to a developed country would be required to have, if they were to access upward class mobility and attain a position as good and juicy as Nigel’s in Nigeria. After all, no African migrant becomes a General Manager in their host country, be it in the United States or in the United Kingdom, simply because they are black. Yet, Nigel accesses upward class mobility in Nigeria for simply being a white person with no higher education level or the skills required to be a General Manager,

It amused Obinze, that Nigel had decided to move to Nigeria, instead of simply visiting whenever Obinze needed to present his white General Manager. The money was good, Nigel could now live the kind of life in Essex that he would never have imagined before, but he wanted to live in Lagos, at least for a while.

And so Obinze's gleeful waiting commenced, for Nigel to weary of pepper soup and nightclubs and drinking at the shacks in Kuramo Beach. But Nigel was staying put, in his flat in Ikoyi, with a live-in house help and his dog.

(Americanah 566-567)

Even though Nigel seems to have adapted to Nigerian social life and ways of looking at things, he nevertheless encounters some difficulties with grappling with his role as a General Manager and understanding how the market system works according to the taste and culture of Nigerian potential buyers,

Nigel, too, was irritating him [Obinze], suddenly talking about the town houses Obinze was planning to build, how exciting the new architect's design was. [...] "Fantastic plan inside, made me think of some of those pictures of fancy lofts in New York," Nigel said.

"Nigel, I'm not using that plan. An open kitchen plan will never work for Nigerians and we are targeting Nigerians because we are selling, not renting. Open kitchen plans are for expats and expats don't buy property here." He had already told Nigel many times that Nigerian cooking was not cosmetic, with all that pounding. It was sweaty and spicy and Nigerians preferred to present the final product, not the process. (568)

As mentioned above, Obinze's return to his home country prompts a conversation about Adichie's attempt to call attention to the transnational reverse class mobility in global migration literature; yet, it also marks a reverse class mobility in African migrants' conception and assessment of upward class mobility—a movement that is usually believed and understood in terms of an individual moving from their developing home

country to the West in search for better opportunities and access to upward class mobility. While the search for better opportunities in the West could be justified by some of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic situations in some developing countries, as the case of the Nigeria depicted in *Americanah*, the fact that the author Adichie chooses to have Obinze return to his home country before accomplishing his ambitions, dreams and obsessions that he has always had about America—the life abroad and the search for better opportunities—is an ostensibly sufficient reason to argue for a conscious reevaluation of migration dreams and ambitions that many Africans, especially the youth have. It is also a call up to assess the various risks that the African youth faces in the attempt and process of realizing their dreams, “What, you fell out of love?” “I [Obinze] realized I could buy America, and it lost its shine. When all I had was my passion for America, they didn’t give me a visa, but with my new bank account, getting a visa was very easy. I’ve visited a few times. I was looking into buying property in Miami” (*Americanah* 535-536). In this regard, to call up for the Nigerian youth consciousness and in the process its governmental politics and by extension a call to all African youth and their governments and socioeconomic politics, Adichie has Obinze become very rich to the point where his wealth overwhelms him and seems estrange to who he believes he is, “I sometimes feel as if the money I have isn’t really mine, as if I’m holding it for someone else for a while. After I bought my property in Dubai—it was my first property outside Nigeria—I felt almost frightened, and when I told Okwudiba how I felt, he said I was crazy and I should stop behaving as if life is one of the novels I read” (*Americanah* 533).

However, as Adichie makes of Obinze's successful life in Nigeria a point about the possibility of achieving one's dreams and accessing upward class mobility in Nigeria, or possibly in Africa, she nevertheless lays bare the appalling socio-cultural, economic and political conditions of Nigeria. Such conditions as they can be understood constitute some of the reasons that push the Nigerian/African youth in search for better opportunities in the West⁴⁵. Thus, through many of her characters such as Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and Dike, Adichie questions the sociopolitical and socioeconomic conditions in Nigeria. Uju blames her harsh experiences in the US on the former Nigerian heads of State "Buhari and Babangida and Abacha[']s]" (*Americanah* 271) politically corrupt rulings; Ifemelu and many of her schoolmates had to leave Nigeria to pursue their education abroad due to the never-ending strikes that guarantee no future to the youth (120-122); Dike complains about the crazy power cuts in Lagos, the heat, the mosquitoes' bites (522-524) when electric power is cut. In her blog which she sets up in Nigeria, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, Ifemelu critiques and questions some of the cultural, political and social life and practices of Nigerian people (519-522). All the above states and conditions of Nigeria and many African countries, push the youth on risky adventures to Europe, United States of America and to other developed countries. While the conditions are ripe to revisit the following concept, "the grass is always greener on the other side," the conditions are also ripe for African societies to give a better life and future to their people. The president of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo couldn't

⁴⁵ In their study on a group of West African women migrants in New Zealand, Adesayo Adelowo, Liz Smythe and Camille Nakhid (2016) account for the following five (5) main reasons that pushed these women to undertake an epic journey as migrants: "political instability, economic reasons, education, social and cultural reasons (family and friends), and the need for professional development" (55).

have put it better in a press conference, during a visit of the French president Emmanuel Macron,

Our [Africans] responsibility is to charter a path, which is about how we can develop our nations ourselves. [...] By now, we should be able to finance our basic needs ourselves. [...]. [T]his continent [Africa], with all that has happened is still the repository of at least 30% of the most important minerals of the world. It's the continent of vast arable and fertile lands. It has the youngest population of any of the continents in the world, so it has the energy and the dynamism; we have seen it, these young men who are showing so much resilience and ingenuity in crossing the Sahara, finding ways to go across, with rickety boots across the Mediterranean [...], *those energies, we want to have those energies working inside our countries, and we're going to have those energies working in our countries if we begin to build systems that tell the young people of our countries that there are hopes; their opportunities are right here, with us.* Migration in the movement of people, is being presented in a manner which suggests that somehow it is a new phenomenon; there is nothing new about it. It is as old as man, the movement of people, and it has always been linked to the same thing, the failure of where you are to provide you with an opportunity, so you move somewhere else. Those of you who are familiar with 19th century European history will know that the biggest wave of immigration in 19th century Europe [...] came from Ireland, then Italy, waves upon waves, generations of Italians and Irish left their countries to seek the American paradise, largely because Ireland was not working, Italy was not working. Today, you don't hear it. Italian young

people are in Italy; Irish young people are in Ireland. We want young Africans to stay in Africa [...] And it means that we have to get away from this mindset of dependence; this mindset about “what can France do for us?” France will do whatever it needs to do for its own sake, and when those coincide with ours, “tant mieux” as the French people say; but our main responsibility as leaders, as citizens, is what we need to do to grow our own countries, [to have] institutions that work, that will allow us to have good governance, to have accountable governance, to make sure that the moneys that are placed in the disposal of leaders are used for the interests of the state and not for those of the leaders, to have systems that allow for accountability, that allow for diversity, that allow for people to be able to express themselves and contribute to fashioning the public will in the public interest. [...] We can do it if we have the correct mindset to do so” (“Ghanaian President[‘s ...] Shocking Speech” 00:00:35-00:07:56) [*my emphasis*].

Conclusion:

A Gaze at the Future of African Constructive Radical Feminism

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979) and Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) are about shaping a feminist position for the contemporary African and African diasporic woman and this position, as argued throughout this dissertation, is a radical yet constructive approach that needs to be rethought in African feminism. The research project has taken a generational approach to studying the change and progress of the constructive radical African feminist in these novels. This study spans from the independence of most African countries—the second half of the twentieth century—to the contemporary century—the twenty-first century. Radicalism, as highlighted in this work, has been negatively portrayed in African worldview, especially when it applies to women. I have argued and proven through these novels that there is more to radicalism that African feminists as well as all Africans should acknowledge and embrace. It is worth recalling that radicalism is tied to change and the change in this context of our discussion is positive. Thus, whether qualified as radicals, these characters' choices and positions are constructive and individualized and meant not to destabilize the core value of their societies but to demand a fair society in which gender, race or class will not determine the value and consideration of either men or women, but their capacities, abilities, and interests. Consequently, I have established that the African female characters in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah* are radicals, yet their radicalness is about change; a change that is about fairness, justice, equality and equity. These novels call for a necessity to review the fundamental bases of society and create a fair world for all,

men, women, children, minorities, blacks, whites, etc., in sum, a fair world for all races and peoples.

Several women's writings show that it is quite impossible not to deal with politics when writing on women and dealing with social issues, such as, gender, race, class, discrimination, oppression, migration, etc. Thus, from a feminist perspective, the fictional works—*So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*—used in this project, depart from the societal basic relationship, family and, romance between women and men to engage in society's politics surrounding the African female identity constructions and complexities in terms of gender, class and race/ethnicity. Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* has been set in a romantic and family relationship from which most of her oppression and discrimination stem. Although Ifemelu's romantic relationships in *Americanah* do not cause any of her gender, race/ethnic or class oppression and discrimination, they have served on the one hand to develop the differences in her diasporic experiences and those of her lover, Obinze. On the other hand, they have served as the basis to establish Ifemelu's strong, free-spirit, radical and progressive outlook vis-à-vis societal gender institutions and expectations. Thus, we have seen Ifemelu question Obinze's rebuke of her fantasy of another boy. Similarly, we have seen Ifemelu reject the societal belief and conception that a woman is taken advantage of in her casual sexual encounter with a man and therefore loses while the man gains. In a nutshell, Aissatou and Ifemelu have been endowed with views, skills and choices that put in question the gender, class, racial/ethnic institutions of their societies.

In this dissertation, I have established that *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah* use education and migration as avenues for empowerment of their female characters, as these

characters embark on a journey of questioning gender, class and race/ethnicity and constructing their own identity. Because tradition and modernity play a role in the defining moments and decisions of these empowered constructive radical female characters as they make their choices and establish their own identities, this dissertation has also looked at how these two factors—tradition and modernity—shape the views, choices and positions of these constructive radical women and impact their identities in their community. I have also analyzed traditional and modern expectations and roles in regard to gender, race/ethnicity and class and established that these do overturn established institutions that affect the African woman and diasporic African woman's wellbeing and fulfillment and give them access to autonomy and societal benefits—the upward class mobility, etc.—and which society denies them because they are women, and or black.

My research has also traced the historical evolution of female representation in African and African diasporic writings and discussed the differences in the representation of women in male and female African writings. I have argued that women have been quite inexistent or unfairly represented in African diasporic literature, yet early African women writers, in the instance of Mariama Bâ, have been accused by male nationalists to positively represent the colonizer and western education in their writings. This accusation, I prove, is faulty because as I have argued, the oppression of women by male dominated and privileged institutions and culture has directed the interests of women toward western education to enhance their liberation and empowerment. These women have embraced western education for two reasons that are not anti-nationalists as their male counterpart have claimed but that are first, due to the fact that their interests were

different from their men's whose interests were mainly to lead and occupy political positions, and second, because these women sought to counteract the oppression they were subject to and claim a society that treats equally both men and women.

While it has been previously argued that most African women writers attempt to set a path or a pattern for women in their choice-making, I have argued that in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*, there is no set path for the African woman to follow and hence the complexity that these novels present not only in the African female identity construction but also in their choices. This complexity emphasizes an individualized approach in constructive radical African feminism to counteracting gender, race/ethnic and or class discrimination.

From a feminist perspective, my dissertation has taken interest in a comparative study of female and male re-presentations in contemporary African diasporic literature. Thus, it analyzed in *Americanah*, Adichie's enterprise in repositioning the place of the African diasporic female in African diasporic literature by constructing powerful, successful, intelligent females like Ifemelu who despite facing almost similar class and racial discriminations as the male character Obinze in the diaspora, has been able to socially position herself in her host country, unlike Obinze. Class mobility has also been discussed in *So Long a Letter* along with ethnic discrimination and classification of individuals in class groups that are believed to be inherited at birth. This has generated my analysis of class discrimination in Senegalese caste system and my argument that Aissatou has radically, yet constructively, overturned the Senegalese caste system as represented in the novel and this through her ascent to upper class society, unlike the class rank in which her community's belief in caste system has positioned her. Thus, I

posit that while *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah* raise a question about the class identity and class mobility of their female characters, *Americanah* takes a step forward in gender and class identities of its migrants and comparatively narrate the diasporic class identity and mobility of its female and male migrant characters and position its main female characters in successful and high social positions.

In light of the study of female empowerment enterprise this project undertook, I have established the view that migration and education add another dimension to women's social empowerment as represented in *So Long a Letter* and *Americanah*. As argued, Mariama Bâ and Chimamanda Adichie adopt an approach that I have qualified as, radical yet constructive, in the way they deal with oppressive and discriminative institutions that affect the lives of their female characters, whether, traditional, modern, racial, ethnic, class or gender. Aissatou from *So Long a Letter* and Ifemelu from *Americanah* have not only questioned societal norms of their community, but also challenged and reversed the oppressive and discriminative ones. Thus, though discriminatory and oppressive issues have sometimes taken a toll on the lives of these characters, pushing them to the edge, these female characters have gone against their societal expectations to assert themselves and redefine their identities. Thus, Aissatou questions and challenges the caste system of her community, divorces her husband, works her way up the social ladder and occupies an upper-class status that her mother-in-law has dreaded her for not being born into. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu questions imperialism and puts on equal plane her home country Nigeria and the United States; she challenges racial superiority and racism by questioning racial beliefs and attitudes of different races and by promoting racial diversity.

Similarly, Adichie questions the unilateral movement of class mobility as represented in mainstream global literature. In this, I have established that there is a phenomenon of reverse migration and reverse class mobility in *Americanah*. The character Nigel, exemplifies a low-class white English man who migrates to Nigeria to take a professional position of manager of a company owned by one of the wealthiest men in Nigeria simply because he is white. The reason for Nigel's migration to Nigeria creates a paradox in the narrative's plot on class mobility because while black skin is classified below the racial ranking in England as well as in the USA, white skin is highly viewed in Nigeria. This paradox in the narrative alludes to the brainwashing people like Chief, the wealthy company owner who asked Obinze to find him a white person to be his general manager, have been subject to. The brainwashing has made Chief believe that having a white man as his company manager will give more value and esteem to his company. Indirectly, Chief buys into this unfounded theory that 'white' is superior and wanted while 'black' is inferior and repulsed. The new position and upper class of Nigel in Nigeria permits him to live a wealthy life that otherwise would have been impossible for him in England. This establishes the reverse class mobility in migration that has been discussed in this work. Adichie thus, challenges mainstream global migration literature on class mobility, which has mainly been about the movement of people from developing countries, like Nigeria, migrating to developed countries like England and the United States.

Conclusively, this research project questions the African diasporic literature as well as the global migration literature for respectively, their misrepresentation of the African diasporic woman and their misrepresentation of the transnational movement of both developing countries' and developed countries' migrants in terms of class mobility

and access to class mobility. The literature produced in this research work challenges, as well, the African worldview of radical African feminists and fills in the African and African diasporic scholarship with the constructive African radical feminist theory, a theory that is needed in the approach of gender, class and race/ethnic institutions that create an imbalance in the relationship between men and women, blacks and whites, minorities and majorities.

While my main theory of radicalism focuses on the African and African diasporic feminist, there is high hope that it can well be applied to the scholarship across disciplines and subjects which, I hereby, invite to carry forth the theory of constructive radicalism in areas that will benefit from a positive and sustainable change in gender, class, race/ethnic politics and issues and beyond. It is high time we started to create platforms for constructive radical and sustainable changes in the relationship that exist between human beings, nations, countries and specifically African countries. Only unity will favor development and progress of people and countries and will also give hope to the youth, specifically the African youth who are undertaking risky and illegal trips across the Atlantic Ocean in search of hope and a bright future in the West. These African youngsters need to be given hope in their countries and be assured that there is a bright future in Africa, and so, they don't need to swim against tides in search of a bright future elsewhere, but in Africa.

Bonus Chapter

From Illusion to Disillusion in Migration

The following chapter is a public opinion piece, yet with ideas taken from the novel *Americanah* and Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), to address the illusion in migration. It also discusses the disillusion that most migrants experience after they set foot in their host countries. This section is also a call to African states, nations, as well as to African youth to ensure that we all work together to create a better Africa with a promising future to its citizens. While migration can serve as a means to escape oppressive institutions and non-promising governmental policies, it can also be a source of physical, psychological, economic, and cultural torment to its subjects. Migration is beneficial when its undertaker is equally exchanging with its host place. Therefore, the following section does not negate the benefits of migration, but it raises consciousness about the illusions in this human movement while at the same time calling upon both African countries and each African individual or group of Africans to work together for an Africa full of hopes and securities for a bright and successful future for its people!

On November 18, 2017, a massive protest march was held in Paris in denunciation of the sordid and inhumane “slave auctions” currently going on in Libya, where many black African youths—either fleeing conflicts or escaping the hard-economic and political conditions of their home countries—attempt an illegal immigration journey to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, using Libya as a crossing passage to access the sea. These refugees, political and or economic migrants are either in search for freedom, peace, or better economic, educational and professional opportunities

(Koser, 2003; Adelowo, Smythe and Nakhid, 2016), yet are held prisoners by Libyan smugglers and sold as merchandise (Elbagir, Razek, Platt and Jones, 2017). After several reports and denunciations on social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc. by a few native black Africans or African agencies (Zack Mwekassa; Alvick, AJFET-AFRIQUE) of this inhumane practice, CNN undertook an underground investigation on these “slave auctions” in Lybia (Elbagir, Razek, Platt and Jones, 2017). Thus, in a CNN report, the Libyan officials under pressure “denounce the migrant slave auctions” (Razek and Said-MoorHouse, 2017). Yet, the “United Nations-backed Libyan Government of National Accord, or GNA,” while calling for the world to help in resolving the Libyan situation states the following, “[w]e affirm again that the practical solution is to address the real reasons that drive people to leave their home countries, treat them and develop final solutions for them” (Ibid.). While this ongoing slave trade in Libya is outrageous, and one cannot even comprehend it, while the Libyan GNA’s statement about “the root of the problem”—i.e. the *reasons* that drive people to leave their home countries—should weigh heavily on African governments’ shoulders, the illusion that migration to the West creates in the mind of African youths is a contributing factor to the illegal and risky migration movement of these youths. The reality of life in developed countries such as the US and the UK, to limit myself to the two places the author Adichie has focused on in her narrative *Americanah*, is distorted in the mind of Africans back home and is full of illusions.

Yet, several research papers and debates on African immigration have sought to analyze the immigration of recent Africans as a positive decision, though not necessarily as an always positive experience. This positivity is translated in Jayne Ifekwunigwe

(2003)'s definition of the concept of diaspora—hence the migration enterprise and the migrant population and its culture—as “a [...] marketable millennial cultural currency [...] which re-casts [the diasporic/migrant's] recurrent homelessness as an asset rather than a deficit” (58). Furthermore, scholars such as Adesayo Adelowo, Liz Smythe and Camille Nakhid (2016) on the motives of Africans to migrate, conclude that their study subjects' decisions to migrate “reflected optimism and confidence in discussing the factors that motivated them [...]” (59). In the process, a few scholars such as, Adelowo et al. (2016), Koser (2003) and Bhugra (2003) have identified a few factors that they analyzed as the motives that push African migrants to migrate. Among these motives, they listed educational opportunities, economic opportunities, professional development, political exile, personal, familial, social as well as cultural factors. The motives of immigrants, in some cases, determine the category of immigrants these individuals are. Thus, in identifying different groups or categories of recent African migrants, Kahlid Koser (2003) acknowledges a group of “clandestine migrants” (3) who undertake an epic and risky voyage to the West. These clandestine migrants always risk everything, including their lives, for an adventure that oftentimes, they have no clue about what awaits them in the targeted country if they ever make it.

In *Americanah*, while the characters in the novel have not been presented as undertaking any clandestine migration to their host countries, Aisha, and Obinze, however, become illegal residents respectively in the United States and United Kingdom. For Obinze, for instance, working under someone else's name and making less than he needs to take care of all his needs, leaves him stressed out. When Obinze first meets up Emenike in England, the latter deceitfully says “[m]an, The Zed, you look well!” [...] his

words aflame with dishonesty. Of course, Obinze did not look well, shoulders hunched from stress, in clothes borrowed from his cousin” (326). Not only is the reality life stressful to most, if not to all African migrants, but it is stuffed with other ailments that only become apparent once the migrants set foot in their host countries. Consequently, one notes among other ailments that affect migrants, the socio-cultural, economic issues such as, racial and ethnic discrimination, gender discrimination, class discrimination, downward class mobility, difficulty accessing higher positions and decent jobs, depression and anxiety, etc. Racial and ethnic minority, particularly African migrants, experience these more in their host lands. Azara Santiago Rivera (2013) in The American Psychological Association (APA) report says that, “[m]any highly educated and skilled immigrant adults [...] find a dramatic decrease in employment opportunities when they immigrate [...] and may experience unemployment, underemployment, and downward mobility [...]. These issues are magnified for ethnic or racial minority adults” (5).

Likewise, he adds that,

In the current anti-immigrant climate, xenophobia and discrimination significantly impact the lives of immigrants in the United States (Deaux, 2006). Immigrant adults and their children may be identified by their accented English, “unusual” names, and manners of dress. Because native-born Americans sometimes view immigrants as taking away jobs (Transatlantic Trends, 2010) and bringing undesirable cultural practices (Zárate, Garcia, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004), many immigrants are discriminated against in the workplace (Dietz, 2010) and across a range of other microsystems, including their neighborhoods, service agencies, and schools (Rumbaut, 2005; Stone & Han, 2005). Immigrants who are racially

distinct from the majority are at greater risk for experiencing discrimination than those who are not (Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000)).

(ibid.)

In *Americanah*, the reader is a witness to instances of economic hardships, depression, gender, class, and racial discriminations that many of the characters have experienced. For example, Ifemelu suffers a severe depression and breakdown after several failed attempts to secure a job and her last decision to ‘use her body’ to pay for her rent and other needs. Aunty Uju is stressed out with her medical exams, her three jobs and with being a single parent to the point that she turns sour and becomes a reservoir of complaints. While it could be assumed that children of migrants might experience less migration stressors than their migrant parents, research has shown that migrant children whether born in their parents’ home countries or born in the host countries, mostly go through similar discrimination and xenophobia as their parents (Ifekwunigwe, 2003; Santiago, 2012). Thus, Dike goes through a stage of identity crisis and an attempted suicide. These few instances illustrate some of the predicaments migrants and their offspring are exposed to in their host places. Despite the too common illusions so many non-migrant Africans have about migration to the West, it is worth conceding that some of these Africans have some preliminary and theoretical understandings of migration and life as an immigrant. However, the salient observation is the illusion in the mind of our young brothers and sisters; these similar concerns have been represented in Adichie’s short stories, “The Thing Around Your Neck” and “The Arrangers of Marriage.”

In her short story “The Thing Around Your Neck” (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 2009), Adichie represents the illusionary mindset many Africans have of migration and

the reality they experience once they cross the Atlantic Ocean. Akunna, the female protagonist, migrates to the US on a dv-lottery visa. She and her family and friends are portrayed as having all sorts of beliefs and or superstitions about Americans and the American life. Yet, once in the US, faced with the harsh and cold reality of her host country, Akunna has come to see a different life and have a different understanding of America and its people (11-127). Akunna's life in America, before she meets Juan, the white rich American senior college student, is stressful, depressing and full of anxiety; the narrator renders it in the following, "[a]t night, something would wrap itself around your [Akunna's] neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep" (119). On a slightly similar note, in "The Arrangers of Marriage" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 2009), Adichie renders pretty well the illusion of most Africans that America guarantees its migrants a life in paradise. In "The Arrangers of Marriage," the female protagonist Chinaza Aghata Okafor is given in marriage to a Nigerian migrant, whose mother fears he will marry an American wife. The adoptive parents of Chinaza arranged for the union before they even informed Chinaza because they naively thought they were giving Chinaza a life in paradise by finding her a "perfect" husband who lives in America and who is a 'doctor.' Chinaza presents the scene,

Uncle Ike would probably smile [...] the same kind of smile that had loosened his face when he told me that the perfect husband had been found for me. [...]

"A doctor in America", he said, beaming.

"What could be better? [...] "What have we not done for you? We raised you as our own and then we find you an *ezigbo di!* A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" Aunty Ada said" (Adichie 168-174, 2009).

Yet, what Chinaza encounters in America is nothing close to having someone win a lottery for her. Chinaza, or the “new wife” as she is mostly referred to in the story, arrives in America before she truly gets to know her new husband—Ofodile Emeka Udenwa—his situation in America, the type of ‘house’ in which he lives, in brief, his social and economic conditions and even his socio-cultural beliefs and life in America. For instance, Chinaza discovers in America that her husband has changed his first name “Ofodile” to “Dave” and his last name “Udenwa” to “Bell” in order to make it easier for Americans who are unable to pronounce his name. In Ofodile’s own words, he did it “to be as mainstream as possible” (Adichie 167-186, 2009). This situation of finding out about an utterly different side of her husband in America after her arrival in the US is a perfect metaphor to coming to knowing and understanding a different side of America only after setting foot on its soil and living with its people—this is usually the time when the disillusion begins for most migrants.

As evidenced through the story of Chinaza, the disillusion of migration usually starts when the migrant sets foot on the soil of their host country. Thus, Chinaza, “the new wife” talks about the illusion of “the arrangers of marriage” and the disillusion that she has come to experience, “[t]hey did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. [...] no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats. [...] The arrangers of marriage only told you that doctors made a lot of money in America. They did not add that before doctors started to make a lot of money, they had to do an internship and a residency program, which my new husband had not completed. My new husband had told me this during our short in-flight conversation, right after we took off from Lagos, before he fell asleep” (Adichie 168-174, 2009).

Likewise, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu recounts her moments of disillusion in several scenes, such as her experience with the American educational system which she has come to find odd in comparison to the Nigerian system (164-166). Ifemelu's disillusion commences the same day she sets foot in America and then gradually as she settles in the culture. Subsequently, she sees the deteriorating status of Auntie Uju's car; sees a young boy urinating outside against the wall of a building in the Bronx; she sleeps on the floor the first night she spent in America; the skyscrapers in Manhattan were wonderful but not impressive anymore with the common life around them and dirt on their windows, "[t]he dazzling imperfection of it all calmed her. "It's wonderful but it's not heaven," she told Obinze" (145). As many have assumed, Ifemelu too has assumed when she was still in Nigeria that Auntie Uju's life was not too bad in the United States; yet, once in America, she realizes how wrong she was, "[s]he had assumed, from Auntie Uju's calls home, that things were not too bad, although she realized now that Auntie Uju had always been vague, mentioning "work" and "exam" without details" (135).

Even though the migration to the West could sometimes be a positive decision, and an alternative solution to the migrants' home countries' socio-cultural, economic and political climates, more often than not, it is *also* a reality that the migration process—i.e. the before and during stages of the movement to the host land—, its in-the-moment or actual moment, i.e. once the migrants settle in the host places—and its aftermath—i.e. when the harsh realities start to sink in, leading to the disillusionment held before migrating and even to the difficult decision to return to the home country or be deported in some cases, can all be devastating to the psychological, emotional, cultural, and economic states of the migrants or returnees. Because of the pre-mentioned problems

migrants oftentimes experience in the host country, I see it important for more research to be done on the illusion and disillusion of migration in order to make available, not only a literature that will educate the African youth on how to make an informed decision about migration, but also a literature that will call for and enhance the establishment of awareness programs that should reach out to the African youth. These programs may be designed to educate the public on the realities of migration and also offer the African youth creative and alternative ways to migration, such as entrepreneurship with opportunities of financing, in order to assist them in ensuring a better future for themselves whether in their home countries or abroad. While such programs will be geared towards laying emphasis on residing in one's home country and engaging in entrepreneurial works, they will also be open to working closely with the youth who decide to migrate for better educational and professional opportunities. I see it necessary for such programs to establish a network with all the youth that they work with, whether they are residing in their home countries or abroad, to keep ties with them and ensure continuous education, trainings and follow ups on the knowledge and tools with which they equip these young people. In this sense, computerized systems can be set up to keep records of not only those who decide to stay at home, but also of migrants and track their progress abroad. This may and *can* guarantee a successful implementation of the education/training these young people receive through such programs. It will also create an environment of 'knowledge and experience sharing' where the more advanced people in the programs will later serve as additional resources for the beginners. This sort of programs can start at a local level, move to a national level, then to African region level, and then move on to include all the diasporas. While such programs can target migrants

that live in the same geographical areas, they can also extend to incorporate all geographical areas in order to establish an international reach out to all Africans, regardless of their locations and interests. This can also be an opportunity to implement the youth explorations of all avenues and opportunities in the African region, and therefore contribute to the development of Africa.

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