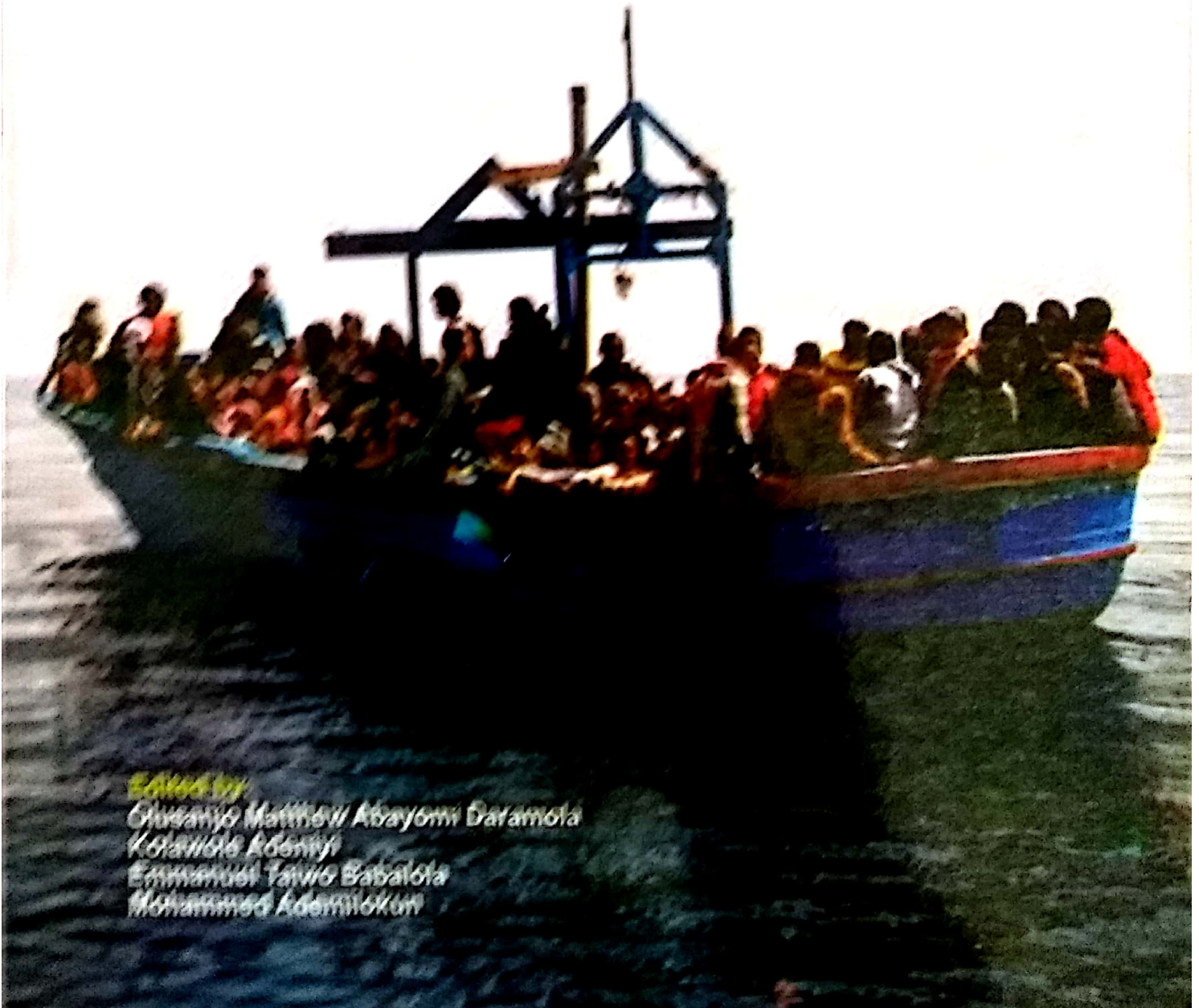


MIGRATION: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION



Edited by
Gloriano Matthew Abayomi Daramola
Kolawole Adeniyi
Emmanuel Taiwo Babalola
Mohammed Ademilokun

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SEX, SKIN AND SIN: TRIPARTITE ENCOUNTERS IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S TRAVEL LITERATURE

Muhammad Alkali

Department of English, IBB University, Lapai, Niger State

Halima Shehu

Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State

Christiana Oyiwodu Adakayi

Department of English, IBB University, Lapai, Niger State

Introduction

The 2020 media reports on George Floyd's catch phrase, "I can't breathe" – see for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/i-cant-breathe-george-floyds-words-reverberate-oppression>, set the tone for the renewed "mantra of oppression", granting a new impetus to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Didn't Ngugi wa Thiong'o say in his *Homecoming* that "profound change ... through trade or migration will make people organise themselves differently to meet the new set of circumstances"? (5). In this paper, the questions of sex and skin as eventual sins that permeate the lives of Africans in the diaspora can be argued to suggest a new version where men and women would step forward together, is interrogated. Female novelists often grapple with "I can't breathe" narrative of skin, gender bias, neo-colonialism, misrule, poverty, ethnic animosity, religious fundamentalism, famine, and misrepresentation and, in confronting these, they have created stories that seek to explore their unique condition.

The assumption that the African woman is more strangulated in different forms weighs on them and the proposition advanced by Ngozi Adichie offers a hybrid combining concerns for African and global liberation for man and woman. Gender bias and gender sensitisation cannot be handled in isolation since there are other major challenges that bedevil immigrants, among which is skin. A self-interpolative reading of Adichie's travel literature provides the lens for determining various structures of meanings entrenched in the text owing to the author's socio-political background. This is the reason why the human body is made up of sex organs as well as skin. These two make humans complete but if used wrongly, the priority is misplaced and misused thereby leading to sin.

Tyrone Beason's "*Americanah: Africans Struggle to Become American*" observes that the travel literature is pretty inspiring on matters of sinful segregation meted out to immigrants, noting that the narrative goes to great lengths in making immigrants come to terms with the challenging political, economic, and social circumstances while abroad. Beason says, "*Americanah* is both intellectually expansive and urgently intimate, a story about the crushing experience of finding your way in a new land and the physical and emotional lengths one goes to feel whole again" (2). Racial segregation is a damning challenge that needs to be massively checked. Perhaps, this is what gives Tavleen Kaur's total piece as a takeaway hope for immigrants that the construct of racism can be challenged and resisted.

Jennifer Muchiri in "The Elusive Search for the American Dream" on *Americanah* explores how America is over-glorified by immigrants and their parents. Some parents go to the extreme to raise sufficient funds to send their offspring abroad. She goes further to mention that despite all the trouble there is inundating disenchantment afterwards. She identifies the deafening impediments witnessed by immigrants in America and highlights the enduring love of Ifemelu and Obinze. The great love had been separated with the two lovers headed for different countries. She says:

But *Americanah* is also a love story that transcends three continents of Africa, Europe and America-and the final reunion between Ifemelu and Obinze, after years of separation perhaps symbolically, points to the writer's contention that while the West may offer better opportunities, one's home country is ultimately better than foreign lands (3).

Emily Rabateau refers to the challenges of being an immigrant, mentioning that the main challenge is that of going home. She further stresses that "Beyond race, the book is about the immigrants' quest: "self-intervention, which is the American subject. *Americanah* is unique among the booming canon of immigrant literature of the last generation..." (1). This review helps to stress the skin narrative both on the male and female characters in various ways.

Plot Summary

Americanah is the story of Ifemelu, a Nigerian girl who migrates to America on a student visa for university education. As teenagers in a Lagos secondary school, Ifemelu and Obinze fall in love. They plan to migrate abroad as their studies at Nsukka University are constantly interrupted by strike actions against the government. Ifemelu's story is one of a female African immigrant who lands in America and struggles to fit in. Upon arrival, she encounters cultural clash and financial constraints to skin pigmentation, which result in a total sense of alienation. She suffers defeats and triumphs, finds and loses relationships and friendships, all the while feeling the weight of something she never thought of back home: race. However, in the long run, she is integrated into the American

that is Halima- to get to go to America and that it was now possible for Halima's kids to have a better life. Ironically as a matter of fact, Halima's business is unstable in America just as it could happen in Africa. In addition to this, Kelsey questions Halima on whether in Nigeria women are allowed to vote insinuating that being an African country, Nigeria is yet to acquire democratic maturity in relation to granting African women the right to vote.

Furthermore, when Emenike, a Nigerian character, hosts his white friends, the talk centres on Africa and her backward state. They discuss how a charity based in Britain was trying to stop the government from hiring so many African health workers. According to them, there were simply no doctors and nurses left in the African continent following the influx to Britain. From their perspective, the reason for this migration is that these medical personnel want to practise where there is regular electricity and regular pay (273). Mark, who is a white doctor, argues against this by stating that though he is from a town named Grimsy in Britain, he does not want to work in a district hospital there. He therefore suggests that the choices the African doctors and nurses make are natural but this is vehemently opposed by Alexa when she says that it is not quite the same thing since "We are speaking of some of the world's poorest people" (273). This discussion on Africa is stereotyped for it is based on a generalisation that Africa is underdeveloped and has little to offer. That is why there are no medical practitioners left on the continent.

First, the statement is untrue in that it is an overstatement to claim that all medical personnel have left Africa and secondly the reasons for their relocation may be for greener pastures and not for lack of electricity. This type of stereotyping is so deep that Laura, an African-American lady and sister to Kimberley, who is Ifemelu's employer, centres her talk on stereotypes of Africa and Africans. For example, she draws Ifemelu's attention to a picture in a magazine which depicts Africa as a place that is economically deprived. The magazine features a celebrity who is described by Laura as one who "seems to be doing a good job" (162). This is in relation to her charity works. She is described as "a thin white woman, smiling at the camera, holding a dark-skinned African baby in her arms, and all around her, little dark-skinned African children were spread out like a rug" (162). This gives the impression of a continent ravaged by starvation. Further still, at a party at Kimberley's, the guests who gather base their discussions on Africa. Ifemelu says that a couple spoke about their safari to Africa and how they were paying for the education of the tour guide's first daughter. She also adds that two women spoke about their donations to a wonderful charity in Malawi that built wells, a wonderful orphanage in Botswana and a microfinance cooperative in Kenya (169). These guests appear as philanthropic white people who give back to society. However, a tinge of hypocrisy is hinted at when they hold their conversations on their contribution to charity and Ifemelu gazes at them wondering,

There was a certain luxury to charity that she could not identify with and did not have. To take "charity" for granted, to revel in this charity towards

people one did not know – perhaps it came from having had yesterday and having today and expecting to have tomorrow (169).

Based on stereotypes by whites that blacks are people in dire need of charity, Ifemelu dispels this by suggesting that whites led lavish lives and could afford to give out freely though it was not genuine but more of a show-off. Through Ifemelu, Adichie suggests that the white folks do not give out of love and sincerity but rather due to superfluous wealth and for publicity's sake. Auntie Uju who is a doctor by profession faces discrimination from a white patient. While this patient was lying in the examination room waiting for the doctor, Auntie Uju walks into the room to carry out the examination and the patient asks if the doctor is coming and when Auntie Uju tells her that she is the doctor, the patient's face changed to "fired clay" (182). The same afternoon, the patient called to transfer her file to another doctor's office. This kind of reaction is based on generalisations arising out of stereotypes that a black person is ill-trained to carry out proper treatment on a white person.

The projection of race as a complex matter is exposed through Kimberley who employs Ifemelu as her nanny. In her conversations she uses coated language so that instead of referring to black people by the colour of their skin, she calls them "beautiful" even if it is not so. By referring to every black person as beautiful, she tries to avoid the term black which is likely to be misinterpreted as 'othering'.

The most challenging issue for all the immigrants is the fourth mountain which proves to be race and racism. This matter is tackled from different perspectives by most of the immigrants. In order to break silences on racial discrimination faced by black people, Ifemelu sets up a blog. This becomes the most powerful tool in confronting issues of skin pigmentation since it acts as a form of resistance that rejects stereotyping of Africans. By posting blogs on white racist attitudes she makes a mockery of them through reversals in that the attention shifts from black to white. She subverts the order by 'othering' them not by stereotyping them as they do to Africans but in response to their racist attitude. The blog is used as a mode of communicating among black people urging them to resist stereotypes. It also acts as a platform for forming alliances that allow blacks to share their experience, which provides them with a sense of belonging and solidarity. The blog plays a therapeutic role in that the posts dissect and analyse experiences of skin factor. Ifemelu ends up gaining voice and speaking for people of African descent, especially women.

In addition to this, Chimamanda Adichie deconstructs the myth of African kinky hair and reconstructs new ideas. This Adichie does by using the character Wambui, a fellow African student and classmate to Ifemelu, to educate Ifemelu on taking pride in cropping natural hair. Wambui advises Ifemelu to cut her hair and go natural. She tells her;

Relaxing hair is like being in a prison. You are caged in. Your hair rules you... You are always battling your hair to do what it wasn't meant to do. If

you go natural and take good care of your hair; it won't fall like it's doing now. I can help you cut it right now. No need to think about it too much (208).

After Wambui cuts Ifemelu's hair and Ifemelu refuses to go to work because she cannot stand her new look, Wambui is at hand to encourage her. She introduces her to *HappilykinkyNappy.com*, a website that deals with black people's natural hair like dreadlocks, Afros and twists among others and promotes the use of natural products that do not contain preservatives. Eventually, Ifemelu gains confidence in her new look and later on when she sets up a blog she uses it to discuss natural hair as a way of making scathing attacks at the white world. Through the blog, she questions the American notion of beauty and the way it affects black people's self-worth. Here too, she frowns at straightening of hair and advocates for the need to wear Afros, braids and dreads. The fact that at the end she resorts to keeping natural hair acts as a marker of African identity and as a way of disregarding racial indoctrination.

Ifemelu also responds to work-related racial discrimination as one way of protesting for not being registered for a job at the school fair due to her immigrant status. By excelling in her studies, she ends up getting a fellowship at Princeton and emerges successful both in her profession and blog.

In response to stereotyping by female White Americans like Cristina Thomas, Ifemelu collapses the stereotype that speaking with a foreign accent means one cannot speak English. Ifemelu describes her initial encounter with Cristina Thomas as one that made her shrink. She says,

... When her eyes met Cristina Thomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf... she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent (135).

After practising an American accent and perfecting it, she started speaking with this fake American accent which resulted in her getting comments like "You sound totally American." (175) Ifemelu is filled with glee as she ponders that "she had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally" (175). For Ifemelu, she feels a sense of triumph for proving Cristina wrong. However, her sense of victory is taken a notch higher when she decides to drop the fake American accent and speak in her natural Nigerian English. This denotes the need to retain her identity. So by reverting to her natural Nigerian accent, Ifemelu responds to the challenges of being stereotyped.

Aunty Uju who is confronted by racism in her residence at Warrington and in her profession as a doctor also tackles it in two ways. First, she relocates with her son Dike

to a town named Willow. This move signifies an environment which is conducive in that it is described as a friendly neighbourhood. This is suggestive of residents who are not racists. Secondly, in regard to her profession, she joins Africa Doctors for Africa as a volunteer and would take two-week medical missions to places like Sudan. This is an indicator of a tie to Africa where her services are needed and appreciated.

Skin and Its Towering Racist Bias

Reilly et al.'s submission in their *Racism: A Global Reader* squarely variously points to "physical appearance" in being black skinned among which facial traits like hair, eyes and nose are determinative. Blacks "can't breathe". For Ifemelu, skin pigmentation makes blacks to breathe in America as it indicts a state of inclusion or exclusion. Anyone who is not white is shunned and excluded. In order to be included, some black-skinned strive their eyebrows waxed. When Ifemelu visits a beauty spa to have her eyebrows shaped, the female attendant declines to serve her with the excuse that "We don't do curly" (292) and only when her white boyfriend arrives to intervene does the attendant "transform into a solicitous coquette" apologising that "it was a misunderstanding" (291). Here "curly" is used to mean black or African. Hair too in *Americanah* is a controversial topic since it is used as a form of discrimination.

African women have been denied opportunities because of the colour or texture of their hair. For example, Auntie Uju has to take her braids out when she has to attend job interviews because she has been told she will be considered unprofessional should she wear them for the interview. This puzzles Ifemelu as she questions whether there are no doctors in America with braided hair. However, Auntie Uju cautions Ifemelu against questioning this since one is in a country which is not their own and one has to do what they have to do if they want to succeed (119).

In another incident, Ifemelu is forced to undo her braids and ends up scalding herself in the process of getting her hair relaxed in order to attend a job interview. This happens following advice from her friend, Ruth, who tells her before attending the job interview in Baltimore, "My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of thing but it matters. We want you to get that job." (202) Ifemelu's white boyfriend, Curt, discovers that she has replaced her braids in order to straighten her hair and he questions why, telling her that her braided hair was "gorgeous" and that her own hair was "even more gorgeous, so full and cool" when natural. In defence of this move, Ifemelu explains,

My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst spiral curls but never kinky (204).

Adichie uses hair too to make a political statement. She advocates for African women to maintain natural hair as a symbol of their pride in their African identity. She discourages and at the same time rejects the idea of relaxed hair which according to her is an indicator of conforming to the white or western norms. This message is interpreted in Ifemelu's blog posts and through the use of the character, Wambui, the President of the African Students Association in one of the blog posts titled, "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor". Ifemelu hits at the media for makeover shows which present black women with natural hair that is coarse, kinky or curly in the "before" picture as ugly and pretty in the "after" picture. But she makes fun that in the after picture, someone has taken a hot piece of metal and singed the hair straight. She ridicules blacks who would rather run naked in the street than be seen in public in their natural hair. She goes on to make a statement that she has natural kinky hair which she wears in cornrows, Afros or braids. She also says "I don't want relaxers in my hair – there are already enough sources of cancer in my life as it is" (297). Wambui also convinces her to crop her hair and tells her that relaxing one's hair is like being in a prison since it cages and rules a person and from there on, Ifemelu keeps natural hair.

This hints at racism intertwined with stereotyping. The racist nature of the statement is portrayed when Ifemelu says it is only the white kind of curly, loose curls or spiral curls that are accepted. Here white stands for inclusion while if one has kinky hair, it means exclusion. Kinky hair is representative of African hair which is considered coarse and difficult to manage. The stereotype is based on the argument that one's hairdo has nothing to do with their performance and emphasis not to wear braids as a professional is mainly placed on Africans only. Ifemelu's experience is comparable to that of the persona in Una Marson's poem "Kinky Hair Blues" in which the lady laments to God for creating her black with kinky hair since it has led to her exclusion in a racist society. As a result of this society's attitude towards her black colour and kinky hair, out of desperation to fit she budes to pressure and straightens her kinky hair like in Ifemelu's case in *Americanah*. Although the persona loves her hair all kinky the white society dictates that natural is ugly. The idea is that adapting to whiteness is the option and anything white should be universally embraced. That is, whiteness is superior and should be embraced by humanity.

Skin questions as presented in *Americanah* manifest through institutional and cultural racism. It is further seen through stereotypes of Africa and Africans. Moreover, the discriminatory attitude of foreigners in the West towards African women may show through language use.

Ifemelu encounters racism from white American women in regard to her relationship with her white boyfriend, Curt. These white women get surprised when Curt introduces her to them as his girlfriend. Ifemelu says they looked at her in surprise, "a surprise that some of them shielded and some of them did not and in their expression was the question "why her?" (290) These white female characters display a discriminatory attitude towards

Ifemelu implying that they are superior to black women. The idea is founded on a baseless notion that being a black woman, she is undeserving of a white man and that is why Ifemelu says "their faces clouded with the look of people confronting a great tribal loss" (290).

Bell Hooks explains the history behind this kind of relationship between black and white women,

Historically, many black women experienced white women as the white supremacist group who mostly exercised power over them, often in a manner more brutal than that of racist white men (48).

This relationship endangers sisterhood; it makes it elusive between black and white women since the whites have made it practically impossible for the two groups to unite for a common goal. Bell's viewpoint strengthens a feeling of hostility and superiority from white women towards Ifemelu when she is in the company of her white boyfriend, Curt.

Institutionalised racism is experienced by Ifemelu during the school career fair where she hopes to be recruited for a job. The contrary happens and her explanation for this is that the recruiters upon realisation that she is non-American but African end up being noncommittal. According to her, their main fear is that if they hire her, they would have to "descend into the dark tunnel of immigration" (201). This is a clear indication that the female African immigrant is placed in a precarious situation if processing her documents is viewed as a complicated process not worth undertaking. Additionally, through her blog posts, Ifemelu tackles the delicate issue of institutionalised skin factor. One of her posts reads, "...but racism is about power of a group; and in America it's the white folks who have the power. How? Well, white folks don't get treated like shit in upper-class" (327).

From this, it is clear that government organs are portrayed as totally biased in favour of whites. The judiciary and police, if headed by a black person, naturally regard the white as untouchable because of the power they wield. Top institutions like the banking sector are prejudiced towards blacks since they give loans and mortgages to white people only, ensuring blacks remain at the bottom of the hierarchy. The bottom of the hierarchy is reserved for lowly jobs as described in another blog post that reads, "Lots of folk today don't mind a black nanny or a black limo driver. But they sure as hell mind a black boss" (35).

Sin and the Need to Distance Oneself from it

If blacks "can't breathe" in America due to manifest sex and skin challenges, would that not eventually alienate them to a one-world project? As a result of the sexual encounter which by culture and religion is prohibited, it is a sinful act as premarital sex is, by all African religions, considered as sin.

Also, when Aunt Uju engages in a relationship with The General, a married man and father of four children, for her The General wields a lot of power and wealth which she enjoys basking in having lacked employment after graduating from university. The tendency to exploit women sexually by treating them as sex objects and possessions is displayed in The General's comments. He shamelessly tells Aunt Uju that she is brought up well since she is not like all the Lagos girls who sleep with him on the first night and the next morning give him a list of what they want him to buy (93). Aunt Uju proudly tells Ifemelu that she slept with The General on the first night but did not ask him for anything in cash or in kind. The General shows his male prowess through this discussion but Aunt Uju seems to subscribe to the picture of the stereotyped African woman who is portrayed as docile and submissive for she takes in this information unquestioningly. But judging critically, Aunt Uju is not portraying the right picture to Ifemelu and young ladies in the diaspora to live godly lives as she paints the picture of premarital sex as a godly act rather than sinful.

Further still, sin is painted by Adichie as she uses her characters to demonstrate the sad note they connote as soon as they are faced with issues that are unpleasant and connote sin from the cultural and religious points of view. Aunt Uju's pregnancy came like a sudden sound in a still night and that made her guilty before her family. "Ifemelu's mother burst into tears, loud dramatic cries, looking around, as though she could see anything around her, the splintered pieces of her own story. "My God, why have you forsaken me? ... I did not plan this, it happened" (102). Aunt Uju then said, "Brother, this is not what I hoped for myself either, but it has happened. I am sorry to disappoint you, after everything you have done for me, and I beg you to forgive me (103). This connotes that Aunt Uju recognises premarital sex as sin, as its end result is pregnancy, which by African tradition, culture, and religion is regarded as sinful. Aside this, African tradition also regards a child born out of wedlock as a bastard which explains why the family of The General after his death were not interested in Aunt Uju, neither were they interested in the baby.

In the same vein, Aunt Uju recognises sin and promises herself not to indulge in forms of sin that will make her lose her life anymore. Hence, she is at the verge of losing her life while in school. She vows never to indulge in the greatest form of sin anymore. This can be seen as Aunt Uju says,

I did not plan this, it happened. I fell pregnant for Olujimi in university. I had an abortion and I am not doing it again (102).

The above asserts that Aunt Uju recognises sin from all ramifications which includes the society's belief on abortion as sin, and at the mention of abortion, "... the word "abortion" blunt as it was, scared the room..." (102). Also, the use of emphasis with capital letters by the author simply means; it connotes sin in as much as Aunt Uju is not

married to the General in the novel. "AUNTU JUU'S PREGNANCY" came like a sudden sound in a still night," (102). The capital letters implies emphasis on sin as the pre-marital relationship of the General and Auntu Uju as recorded in the story is sinful because their marriage was never recorded and any pre-marital sexual relationship is fornication and fornication, as recorded by all religions in the diaspora, is sin.

In conclusion, pre-marital sex is recognised in the African tradition and in the diaspora as sin. Therefore, the author uses characters in the novel to showcase the effects and repercussions of pre-marital sex. "... and Auntu Uju told her to let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside" (70). Sin in the real sense of how it is used in the novel, implies that sin kills, destroys an individual's future, as well as destabilises an individual as it is seen in the novel when Ifemelu had sex with Obinze in their university days. Therefore, it is advised to avoid sin as it is prohibited by all religions in the diaspora. This chapter has analysed the challenges faced by characters that lead to sin in the diaspora and beyond. It has demonstrated how skin pigmentation alongside stereotyping, economic exploitation and male dominance are the major forms of oppression experienced by African immigrants and how the above enumerated transpires into sin.

Conclusion

Arguably, the tripartite encounter of sex, skin, and sin in Adichie's travel literature is not merely a chapter issue but the very moral fibre of the plot structure of the novel. It trails a complicated blend of racial chaos and racial contention that patterns whites and blacks in distinct revelation of a slippery racial environment. Particularly, female immigrants share a commonality with regards to sex, skin, and sin which does not allow them to breathe abroad. There are also glaring differences in the male experience as well when contrasted to the female experience. The female characters are portrayed as closely-knit; they bond by creating social networks to enable fellow female immigrants to navigate their way in the host country. The male African immigrant characters, on the other hand, lack this form of kinship. Their attitude towards the new arrivals is shadowed by hostility coupled with extortion and blackmail. It behoves all that there is greener pastures in Africa. So Africans in the diaspora can as well return home and get their glories and riches just as Obinze demonstrated in the novel.

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