

Re-Centering Black Pride In Americanah: A Psychoanalytic Approach To Diaspora And The Politics Of Black Hair

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Abstract

Hair is the most visible part of the Black body and different hairstyles suggest a varying degree of prominence in a particular society. Understanding Black feminine identity as antithetical to the white standards of feminine self, the relationship between the two embody a perceived difference on the basis of race. For African American women, hair symbolizes an artistic site where the politics of Black struggle is exercised. In their attempt to reconstruct the Black body as a central locus, the African diaspora generates a medium of creative expression highlighting the significance of Black hair as the site where the movement of resistance finds formulation. Adichie's critically acclaimed novel *Americanah* foregrounds the racial prejudice against Black immigrants in America and their dilemma of "double-consciousness". Her emphasis on the "kinky" "woolly" Black textured hair as against the white beauty ideals of straightened hair would be the point of discussion in the present research paper. The paper would invest into finding the connection between the politics of Black hair and Black feminine identity in the standard white culture of America especially in work spaces where definite codes function, thus, limiting the personal feminine vision for Black women. Hence, Susan Brownmiller's idea of Femininity would be employed to search for the connection between the two alongside defining what it means to be a Black immigrant in the West and what psychological changes take place in order to claim for being a "wonderful fit".

INTRODUCTION

Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Black Power politics of the era became the two mutually active classical periods. Corresponding with these political movements emerged the politics of Black hair that challenged the institutionalized notions of white beauty in favor of more

Afrocentric coiffure after stressing the climate of Black Pride (Walker, 2007). With the growth of more radical political propaganda of Black Power Movement (Wilson, 2013) through the 1970s, following the legislative changes and the right to equality for women, African American women saw this as the impetus to raise their concerns surrounding the legal

rights of the marginalized communities. Fighting for their education, health care, and their place in the workforce helped create a more accepting and all-inclusive American society (Giddings, 2006). The external appearance of the individual, like the clothing and hairstyles, were found overwhelmingly essential elements that would help make progress in a given society. As a consequence, strongly validated binaries like Black and White, Dark and Fair, good and bad, demonstrated human worth. During slavery, this racial hierarchy so generated used racial tools of skin color and hair texture, elements that gave Europeans every possible chance to relate to the African characteristics as negative and meaningless (Mercer, 1991). It was not until the abolition of slavery in America which liberated African-Americans from their subdued position. This enabled themselves to pay more attention to their appearance and transcend the hegemonic ideologies of beauty (Walker, 2007). What interests here is the acceptance and the eventual incorporation of African culture by the African-Americans in the society dominated by the white power of the times. One of the significant integrations, the central thematic concern of the present research paper, happens to be the easily altered part, more vulnerable of the Black body, that is, Black hair. The time period after the 1960s saw the rise in the popularity of wearing Black hair in its natural form worn by those of the African ancestry, hence, the recognition of a “Black-identified visual aesthetic” in the community of Blacks in America (Byrd and Tharps, 2014, p.51). This aesthetic of visualization garnered much attention towards what it is to be Black and different in terms of style, culture, African languages, different

African tastes and dress code adopted and embraced into a new society loaded with white beauty standards. Choosing Afrocentric beauty styles over systemically structured and normalized white beauty norms, African Americans led to the symbolic representation of self-advancement particularly in hairstyles they wore in the shape of cornrows, braids, Afros, print head scarves and wraps (Rooks, 1996). This powerful symbolism not only expanded the horizon of their understanding with respect to their self, it inspired changing political and ideological attitude among African-Americans. In the end, these Afrocentric hairstyles provided an alternative to chemically straightened hairstyles and a chance to accept unique African-American owned beauty (Rooks, 1996). Therefore, the conception of an equal society did not only help critically challenge the white beauty convictions of society, it allowed for more natural expression of self by African-Americans, a direct upshot of the opposite dominant white body. Media communications played much bigger part in highlighting the dominant nature of the standards of beauty in America. From fashion magazines to newspapers and television advertisements through popular culture, the slogan Black is Beautiful redefined the nature of the standards of beauty.

In sync with the novelist Jessie Faucet’s concession of the enhancement of racial pride among Blacks in America “to find our own beautiful and praiseworthy selves...content with its own type” (Giddings, 2006, p.186), Adichie’s emphasis in *Americanah* brings into focus the major concerns of the modern-day America still one-on-one with its age-old discussions on race and beauty

standardized in accordance with the norms of the hegemonic Western white society. Where white radical feminists sought sexual equality as the center of their propagated feminist ideology, Black women, more apprehensive about the dangers of racial intolerance within the majority white society, have been overwhelmed with the concerns of race rather than sex (Giddings, 2006, p.179). Similarly, Adichie showcases the significant implications of race in America overshadowing the equality of sex as the major tenet that white feminists highlight while neglecting the specificity of race, culture, and geographic situation of Afro-American women. Because the sexual equality that Black women scholarship seek in America, instead of yielding satisfying answers to the questions of equality, it sprouts more questions. Coming from a different cultural background, should African-Americans identify themselves as different from the American white counterparts solely based on the peculiarity they show with respect to their race and culture? Or, is their identity the amalgam of both the cultures, that is, the right to acculturate into the American white society. This dilemma is what Du Bois in his *Souls of Black Folk* refers to the “two-ness” or “double-consciousness” of the Blacks in America. This dilemma of double-consciousness gets explicated in the novel into consideration when Adichie questions and problematizes Black women identity in the American society replete with the beauty standards which everyone is expected to comply, and henceforth, fit into different social structures, especially into the areas of workforce. Institutes run with specific codes that define the environment of the space and in its correspondence with the human entity that

has entered the space, demands equally conducive results.

Language as a medium of expression has been implemented to ferret out the relationship between culture and psychology. Literature has become a platform where such a relationship has been exposed. The fact that culture and literature deal with humans and their reaction to various social concerns, these helps raise awareness about identity. Literature being “a record of human consciousness”, according to David Lodge, novel is the best form of literary expression that demonstrates “the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” (2002:10). Psychology, on the other hand, has been defined since times immemorial, from Aristotle to the present-day modern psychologists. It studies unseen thoughts, thus, referring to the essence of life. In the modern times, literature and psychology together have been explained by Wellek and Warren as

By ‘psychology of literature’, we may mean the psychological study of the writer, as type and as individual, or the study of the creative process, or the study of the psychological types and laws present within works of literature, or, finally, the effects of literature upon its readers (audience psychology). (1963:81)

Freud’s Psychoanalytic criticism finds connections between the creator and their creation like novels etc. In literature, there is a quest for author’s mind and what the mind reflects through the author’s imaginary characters (Freudian Imagery). As such, novel as a work of imagination points to the essential elements of their

relationship, that is, the text caters to the characters emotions and feelings. The select novel, as a literary text for the present study, would be analyzed in the light of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic criticism deals with various characters who act symbolically representing human life and human conditions. Similarly, black characters in their psychological analysis yield different yet unique personalities true to their Black African identity. Whether the African Psychology is a myth or reality, the knowledge generated in the continent becomes part of the universal knowledge systems (Moll, 2002, p. 11). African psychoanalytic theorist, Frantz Fanon and his psychoanalytic approach studies the impact of colonialism and racial oppression in the African continent. Thus, his political manifestos would be significant in the present research paper.

HAIR AS SYMBOL: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Black hair has known to be a marker for the aesthetics of Black cultural indications. From religious connotations to social and marital status, Black hair has come to denote various other status symbols as well. African hair transfers social messages not only in Africa but in their transatlantic movements through slave trade which did not put an end to the discharge of meaningful attributes of Black hair. The hairstyles conveyed numerous cultural and political messages in the image of Africa, in corporate logos and associates, to bring to the surface the multifaceted symbolism of Black hair which propagated a statement true to African spirituality. As a consequence of its integral function, it is an understatement to suggest only the cultural and political implications of Black hair. It forms an inherent part of Black identity

entangled with the Black hair politics. By knowing the complexity and the significance of Black hair, Europeans found every means, including shaving off their heads, to oppress the Black community through ripping them off from their identity, for which hair appeared to be the easiest malleable target very close to the African-Americans. Repressive frame of mind towards the Africans could not be a random act by the Europeans, it was a systematically symbolic removal of their cultural, traces of African identity, and an eventual dehumanization. Black identity has been carved around the discourses like beauty, skin tone and hair in order to normalize whiteness in the Western world. Constructing the distinct African cultural identity by African Americans came as a response to the European efforts at dehumanizing the African spirit through depriving them of the opportunities such as entering into the dominant spaces surrounded by beauty and appearance. Specific to a particular group, or, for that matter, to an individual, hair symbolizes a unique expression of self but that does not go untouched by the influence of the society at a particular time period (Rooks, 1996). Hair emphasizes one's style unique to an ethnic group, it expresses a political stand, sometimes assimilation or complete rejection of the fixed dominant beauty standards. In the situation of a Black life, hair symbolizes either negotiation within the mainstream or simply conforming to the idea of good hair as opposed to the "kinky" bad hair. Hair for the African-American women, contends Jacobs-Huey, meets

Profound implications for how African American women experience the world. Black women's hairstyle choices are

seldom just about aesthetics or personal choice, but are instead ever complicated by such issues as mate desire, mainstream standards of beauty, workplace standards of presentation, and ethnic/cultural pride. (2006, p.03)

Understanding the context of various coiffures embraced by the African Blacks in America, different hairstyles echo life choices such as personal choice or a political stand. Also, family obligations and the workforce become spaces informed by manipulation and socialization. Being the vulnerable part of the Black body, African hair is a highly symbolic figure that presents individual perception about self and the collective cultural adherence to the “means of representing themselves and negotiating their place in the world” (Jacobs-Huey, 2006, p.04). There is little dissent in the fact that the cultural domination of the White culture influences the “aesthetic stylization” as developed by the Black culture because this aesthetic has been outlined by the cultural values of the larger white society (Mercer, 1987, p.257). Different Black hairstyles, therefore, need to enrich the collective community of Blacks with an explanation for the complexity of ideologies encircling race and beauty. Black hair, being symbolic of political, social, economic and psychological implications, has remained intertwined in the specific experiences of a group within the human continuum. With emotive and symbolic significance of Black hair, it becomes an inseparable part of the Black identity.

BLACK BEAUTY TRENDS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

For the purpose of moving beyond the discrimination and oppression of the dominant sources, African-Americans evolved with strategies implemented during the turn of the twentieth century (Gill, 2001). The challenge to prove themselves as fit candidates of the white society, African-American women adopted western beauty standards such as the modification of Black hair with kinky curls into more acceptable straightened hairstyle, and lightening of their skin color to raise the status of their social life, hence, imitating those of the whites (Walker, 2007). Black women’s adherence to the dominant beauty standards compelled the majority of Black beauty companies to focus on the alteration of Black features concerning skin and hair. The reason behind their insignificant social position in the Western White world had been attributed to their physical features, features that instead of assisting in emancipation had trapped Black community “by its circumstances and imprisoned by its features” (Byrd and Tharps, 2014, p.35). Most of the beauty products marketed had been preoccupied with the idea of Black hair as something conjuring negative aspects of the race, thereby, playing on the racist overtones. The promotion of products through advertisement insinuated the lack of racial pride and the reason to alter African features. Devaluation of racial pride did not occur overnight; it came as a result of centuries old persecution and suppression of Blacks in white societies due to the difference in their skin color and their natural hair. This made the African-Americans believe that the lighter skin tone and straightened hair would help them in their social and economic mobility.

During the time, the white beauty industries, no doubt, shifted its focus on the white ideals of society, many African-American entrepreneurs lifted themselves to get ready to challenge the rejection of African features through the negative portrayal of their natural body in the white beauty industry. Black women, specifically, proved instrumental in constructing a space in the White public sphere to display more acceptable image of Black beauty through various interconnected tools such as “economic opportunity, reality, political values, beauty and hair” (Rooks, 1996, p.16). Against the assimilative rhetoric of the white beauty industry, Black-owned beauty companies stressed on the creation of a new vision in society that would directly benefit Black women in their choices of economic independence, and their personal aesthetics of beauty. Black beauty rhetoric saw the establishment of a new definition of beauty in the Black community because their message echoed what had been happening in the community, thus, portraying through media representation the positive image of Black women earlier inundated with many physical distortions of the time. Madame C. J. Walker of The Manufacturing Company, Annie Trumbo Malone of Poro Company, and Sara Spencer Washington of the Apex Beauty Company bear the title of the three leading women entrepreneurs of the Black beauty industry. Well acquainted with the issues and complications faced by the Black women with their body and other hair care routine, these women invented beauty formulae for hair as well as for skin suitable to their type. Not only did they cater to their physical problems, they created job opportunities for women, educated women about their race and the positive perception towards African beauty culture, finally,

promoting the idea of a new Black woman (Gill, 2001). Until the 1960s, the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the role of these beauticians did not disappear in its significance, rather it has penetrated into the African-American beauty tradition of the twenty-first century (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). Higher studies in education coupled with their expectations of rising to higher social status, African-American women oftentimes observe practices of hairstyles that mimic those of the white society (Hohle, 2013). These desires of integration through political integrationist policy after ruling *Brown vs Board of Education* in favor of integrationist vision of the American Black community, the eagerness to join the white society came primarily from the white beauty ideals following straightened hair and light skin complexion. For Black integrationists, it was fine to take stand for their rights, to rise up and resist White persecution, even if it would cost them the alteration of their visual appearance which would help them in their mobility into the White society (Byrd and Tharps, 2014, p.48). This way, the dominant authoritative narrative of white beauty continued even in the image of the prominent Black leaders, what C. J. Walker believes happened through advertisement industry and other media communications. Thus, little challenge was initiated against such beauty norms. Black experiences, their common interests, and solidarity, led the Civil Rights Movement achieve immense recognition giving birth to the collective identity in the shape of Black hairstyles drawn from the African cultural aesthetic (Taylor and Whittier, 1992, p.105). By the efforts of the Black women entrepreneurs, the Black beauty industry flourished by means of taking direct

inspiration from the culture-specific perceptions of Black lifestyle.

For Black Americans before the Civil Rights Movement, receiving beauty services was not a ritual because they did not recognize it to be a requirement, hence, styled outside of the formal setting. Immediately after maintaining its mainstream position, natural hairstyles began appealing to the beauticians and it was agreed that natural looks too needed attention. Along these lines, ideas like Black pride, self-help and self-defense received emphasis from the militant Black civil rights groups. With this move came economic and political independence as proclaimed by Malcolm X; “Blacks needed to reclaim control of their bodies in order to shape an ‘authentic’ Black identity” (Hohle, 2013, p.02). Where Malcolm X focused on the creation of a separate community of Blacks and inhibiting the Black masses of the idea of integration, he himself started by fully taking the responsibility of his natural hairstyle, the conks, he suggested to wear as the first step towards self-recognition. This recognition of self-worth meant an enhancement in the traditional African culture as a source of strength and pride. In their efforts to challenge white hegemony and commitment towards racial equality, Blacks in America incorporated the idea of natural expression of hair, thus, speaking for the collective group identity. This transformation into collective identity complemented and strengthened the movement for political change (Hunt and Benford, 2004). In the words of Kuumba and Ajanaku, it is the collective group effort of the like-minded Black people that the resistance movement gets pushed forward, simultaneously, internalizing the collective

sense. To their understanding of the collective meaning of resistance, they insisted on adopting ‘natural’ as “culturally contextualized everyday resistance” (Kuumba and Ajanaku, 1998, p.227). The idea of wearing natural or Afro hairstyle indicated the symbolic representation of hair embedded in cultural identity. It symbolized political stance, Black pride and power. During the Black Power Movement, these radical trends in Black hairstyles became highly charged as appearance and politics intertwined with each other interpreting “beauty and fashion” “predictors of one’s propensity to engage in radical ... behavior” (Johnson, 2012, p.86). On one hand, the white counterparts saw this radical change as simply the visual continuation of styles from straightened to natural, whereas, for many, it symbolized a bond to African heritage. In any of these situations, what appears certain is the utilization of wearing natural as a principal element of the movement of resistance through embracing everything Black and recovering African heritage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The novel, *Americanah*, taken into consideration for the present research paper would approach Femininity in the light of the areas it involves with African Black beauty as against the normalized version of the white beauty standards. The protagonists “strategy of survival” (Brownmiller, 2013, p.19) based on her conformity to the imposed restriction on her Black body, simultaneously, her damnation of these restrictions by accepting her Black body as true to herself and her African ancestry, the text deserves a substantial amount of attention to find out what is lost

and what is gained in the process of becoming. In the context of neo-colonialism, the psychology of racial oppression on Black immigrants in America would be read by implementing Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic approach towards the experiences of African diaspora.

METHODOLOGY

The research design selected for the paper would be qualitative in nature relying on the data of words appropriating the textual approach. In depth reading of the text would be employed studying the vivid description of the account of situation being read in its analysis. The research subject in the present study includes the novel, *Americanah*, written in English by American-based Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Her dealings with the issues of race in America, racial prejudice against Black Americans and African migrants in America alludes to the theme of race as well as the beauty standards that the Blacks in America are forced to comply to in order to fit within the white supremacist framework. Hence, the strategy of close reading of the text would be employed to further highlight the prominent thematic thread concerning the research paper, that is, the politics of Black hair in the western white society and the eventual psychological impact. Secondary sources that facilitate further investigation of the research question would include the texts that form the framework of the study within which the text would be placed to mark the final comment on the findings so furnished.

POLITICS OF HAIR IN AMERICANAH: A METAPHOR OF IDENTITY

I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America.

(Adichie, 2013, p.290)

"Black is Beautiful." The significance of the phrase lies in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Pride Movement of the 1970s and 1970s, motivated to demolish the racial discrimination on American Blacks. The major premise on which it was coined was to drift away from the superior notions of white beauty in favor of Black Negroid identity. Blacks in America have always been assessed on the basis of their skin color, a significant part in search for their identity during the civil rights movement. Despite engendering the idea of Black pride and an appreciation for dark skin, the racial bias continued (Lincoln, 1967, p.529). In a way, the interpretation of identity for Blacks, in such racial circumstances in America, becomes crucial. What is worse is the discrimination that the Blacks suffer within their community where light-skinned negro is favored as superior over dark-skinned African-American. When it comes to African-American women, the situation is far worse because attractiveness is linked with light skin which in turn associates with sexual and racial bias among blacks. White-skinned women being considered more beautiful are preferred by dark-skinned men whose self-perception of their physical and sexual attractiveness rates much higher than the white male counterparts. Hence, African-American men are preferred by white women on the basis of sexual maturity. Dark-skinned women in America, however, continue to juxtapose their beauty with the

beauty standards of fair-skinned women to mark a sense of presence.

It's not surprising that Black women globally are featuring on the covers of highly sophisticated fashion magazines. They, no doubt, have marked their Black beauty and Black body gracefully on these spaces of efficiency. Therefore, a shift could be seen in the understanding of what is beautiful and attractive in terms of skin color. The definition of beauty has moved beyond the clichéd evaluation of centuries old white skin, blonde hair, and blue-eyed standards of white beauty culture. Black assets could equally provide and expand for the definition of what is beautiful. Being caricatured in the media for so long, dark-skinned African-Americans today are recognized and glorified for their unique features, their dark skin, fuller lips, curved body, and short afro hairstyle. However, reports have revealed that many beauty and fashion magazines try to emphasize the Eurocentric beauty standards, through their Black models, by neglecting the degree of variations found in the African-American ethnicity; their hair, hair color, skin tone, body features. These fashion magazines employ "whiteness" as the framework for their project. Dyer, in his report has mentioned that "whiteness surpasses just skin tone to include body shape, nose shape, eye shape, lips and hair type" (Akinro and Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019, p.310). Hence, slim body or thinness is favored over body with curves, light skin tone favored over dark complexion, long straight hair over curly kinky hair, small straight nose favored over bigger size nose, thin lips over fuller lips. These standards of whiteness are emphasized in media representation leading to the unhealthy homogenization of the culture of beauty. Although, the process of globalization has

led to the mixing of South in the North, but the homogenization in beauty standards has also resulted in the non-white cultures in the west to start hating their bodies. The reinforcement of such hegemonic beauty ideals emphasizes negative psychological impact on the common masses for they evaluate their beauty and appearance in relation to what is presented to them as more beautiful and attractive.

In essence, Blacks in America become aware of their looks and other external bodily features, different from the mainstream concepts of beauty. This mainly comes through the excruciating scrutiny of the prejudiced lens the white dominant society in America employ on the Black immigrants. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's predicament states the similar concern in the novel. She realizes how insensitive the society like America could be to the community that is different on the level of race that directly links them to their skin color and hair texture, thus, finding unacceptance within the standards of white beauty. Hair politics, thus, becomes the point of discussion here as it lends the researcher in one of the aspects of racial politics against the Blacks in America. Adichie's protagonist's journey right from her hometown in Nigeria to the place she reckons to alter her identity, though in a positive sense, into a person she could not become in the University in Nigeria, draws a kaleidoscopic picture of her transformation. This transformation comes through the revelation of varying but interconnected elements of prejudice in their interaction with socio-economic structural pattern of the space. It is also significant to note that such concepts of beauty do not feature in the domestic or professional lives of Blacks in spaces like America or Europe alone, rather, these

already have penetrated into the Black identity even before joining the First World people through their transnational movements. This possibility is corroborated by the description that Ifemelu gives of her mother when she cuts off her 'crown of glory' (Adichie, 2013, p.41) for the sake of Christianity that requires abandoning worldly desires. Although, this action on the part of her mother emphasizes the religious doctrine of Christianity which Mercer (Mercer, 1987, p.101) also believes is the practice that results from the renunciation of anything worldly possession giving further credence of her mother's action. What interests here is Ifemelu's enthusiastic acknowledgement of processed and relaxed hair with chemicals on Black people which she finds beautiful as compared to the natural 'kinky' 'woolly' hair "so thick, it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon. So full, it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from the pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration" (Adichie, 2013, p.41). This excerpt is what defines the standard of beauty, complementing the idea that dominant ideologies around beauty is a racial construct. It totalizes the concept of racial bias, thus, finding its unique place in the everyday commonplace activities of Black lives. Also, her understanding of Black hair relaxed with chemicals in Nigerian salons is drastically different from the perception of the same processed hair in American salons where such bushy textured hair is recognized as 'bad' hair, a sensitive topic Adichie dares to deal with. Mercer contends that 'good' hair on a Black body could be described in positive terms when it meets the standards of the established beauty, that is, European in texture, straight, not kinky or curly

(Mercer, 1987, p.101). Failing to fall into this category, Black people find it hard to land themselves in any multinational company overseas where such standards of beauty are followed religiously with no scope for deviation. Ifemelu and others not only realize this but learn to live the painful reality after they become conscious of their situation in a new space. As soon as they arrive to their conceived land of opportunities, the first thing they found themselves pitted against was the ingrained knowledge among locals about the idea of racial difference, the uncensored racial oppression in America. Appearance for a Black woman in America has always been a matter of concern. In order to find her acceptance within the mainstream white society, her biological or natural femininity is not enough to land a place for herself into the mainstream. Rather, she has to undergo many alterations which does not exclude her hair, the easily altered part of the Black body. Her hair becomes an easy target, a political site where racial oppression finds expression. Hair politics on Black body is a product of racism which Gilroy believes is not a natural phenomenon. Gilroy asserts that the historical conflict between the two oppositional groups makes the identity of the groups definite and uniform (Gilroy, 2010, p.03), that is, whiteness becomes normalized and Blackness depicts the state of exclusion. The conflict condemns the Black as ugly when compared with the white beauty. There is a strange sense of realization on the part of the protagonist, Ifemelu, when in a sudden change of her status from being a 'bourgie Nigerian' in Nigeria, an upper middle-class woman, a university educated, she becomes an under-privileged Black migrant student in America. Because of her race and appearance, she comes under extreme

criticism as America's 'Other' that she had never expected or experienced before. She has entered a territory where her predicament is decided not by being Black, but being Black in relation to the white society (Fanon, 2008, p.89-90). Through his texts, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of The Earth*, as his political manifestos, Fanon describes the relation between the north and the south as normalized psychological control of one over the other. Ifemelu's first encounter with racism as normalized psychological control against Blacks in America comes when Ifemelu asks a white female attendant at a spa to do her eyebrows. The attendant's response comes as a shock to Ifemelu when she turns down her request arguing that they do not do natural curly textured eyebrows. It took her blue-eyed white boyfriend Curt's anguished intercession into the matter which transformed the attendant's earlier demeanor of dismissal "into a smiling, solicitous coquette" apologizing that it was just a 'misunderstanding' (Adichie, 2013, p.213). The attendant's pointing at the 'curly' texture of Black hair indicates how socially deprived the position of the Blacks has been under racial oppression in America. Black hair as a location for racial discrimination comes across at another instance in the novel, that is, Aunt Uju's taking off her braids and relaxing her hair before she enters into her job interview. This forces Ifemelu question her Black identity least realizing that she herself would be doing the same when Ruth advises her to "lose the braids and straighten your hair" (Adichie, 2013, p.202) in order to land herself into a good job. Fanon calls it a "massive psychoexistential complex" (2008, p. 14) among African people, thus alienating an African from himself. However, these

suggestions do not come in a vacuum. Aunt Uju and Ruth have full experience of what it means to be a Black in America and how life should be conducted in an environment that is drastically different and equally demanding. Here, workspaces become the prime examples where Black women are exploited psychologically. They are robbed of their Black cultural specificity leading the character like Ifemelu accept the standards of white superiority as more professional and rejecting anything that links her to African roots. Hence, chemically relaxing her hair becomes the only option she thinks she has to learn to look professional and more accepting, because the first thing the migrants dream of is to fit in. Psychology of racism creates a collective state of mind that blinds Ifemelu and others to their black identity and unconsciously, subject them to a universal white norm. In Fanon's words, they acquire a white mask.

Black hair is a powerful cultural symbol and the historical stigmatization of the concept of Black hair as unattractive firmly constituted its idea in the white-bias against the Black race. Hair acts as an aspect of social structure where one's socio-economic location could be designated by his/her hair texture. Hence, physiological aspects intertwined with cultural elements of the society decide the social hierarchy of a particular group or community. The connection symbolizes a person's social position on the ethnic scale. The mobility from the lower social status to higher social strata demands negotiation. The negotiation happens through psychological internalization of set social structures. The natural 'wooly curls' easy to reshape and reorient by practices of straightening becomes the most susceptible

part of the Black body, yet the most expressive of all. The interesting conversation that erupts between Ifemelu and her boyfriend, Curt, when he disapprovingly questions about her straightened hairstyle in favor of her usual 'cool' and 'gorgeous' braids, Ifemelu's response takes all the limelight with her true analysis of the American society or the social workforce her boyfriend seems unaware about. It takes an objective perspective of an outsider to make a critical comment on the current situation of society's biased view on the 'Other'. Also, in the process of the 'epidermalization' of 'inferiority complex' Ifemelu displays her psychic complexity.

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, worst spiral curls but never kinky (Adichie, 2013, p.204).

Beneath this criticism lies "psychic inferiorization" (Fanon, 2008, p.103), a symptom among many Blacks living outside of their culture. There is a thing called self-devaluation or devaluation of Blackness by Blacks themselves in an environment where a code system is to be followed in order to enter into the mainstream dialogue. Hence, Femininity comes into play, in essence a "romantic sentiment" of "imposed limitations" (Brownmiller, 2013, p.14). Social structure of a particular society does not work without a proper code system, especially, for its womenfolk whose natural or biological feminine self seeks more maturity. Society so constructed demands

more in terms of appearance which is fixed by some systematically codified construction of do's and don't-do's (Brownmiller, 2013, p.14). Susan Brownmiller uses the analysis to give a detailed description of the society's gender bias towards women in general. Women, she figures out, are made to believe that their incomplete biological self cannot be put to work unless they alter their appearance in accordance with the defined system. What strikes one with such analysis is the bias of both white men and white women, and Black men towards Black women in terms of beauty and appearance. Hence, Black women find themselves doubly marginalized. Firstly, by not being white enough to match the standards of white beauty, and secondly, by not being Black enough to appeal to Black men of the community. Although, Ifemelu's decision of changing her hair texture does come with a sense of loss when she feels something being taken away from her during the process of chemical relaxing. Fanon explains this reaction as a socially-produced madness. Metaphorically, she favors her reaction with a sense of gratification because this would profess her professional attitude. However, her identity as an African Black in America tremendously changes to the extent that she fails to recognize herself in the mirror after the treatment. She resembles not much with an African Black girl, rather, attains a "white-girl swing". Her identity as an African begins to tremble leading her to identity crisis, her 'two-ness'. Being a Black girl, she not only has to conform to the idea of femininity, she ought to find ways to fit within the defined paradigms of the white beauty, if not white but close to whiteness. She laughs away the scabs and oozing pus on her scalp with the thought of

occupying a 'wonderful fit'. This is explained by her unconsciously colonized mind and her feelings of inferiority which seeks entry into the white society. In her blog, Ifemelu questions the American system for non-American Blacks, wondering:

[If] whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course, but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness. (Adichie, 2013, p.152)

On one hand, if American Blacks conform to the idea of feminine body in the wake of integrating within the white society for economic and social identification, their resentment against the system did not diminish. The pursuit of this "exquisite aesthetic" (Brownmiller, 2013, p.15) promises survival, consequently, personal triumph, but at the cost of her willingness to accept restrictions what Susan Brownmiller calls "limiting one's sights" in the interest of the little privileges and minor courtesies showered on her. This analysis of the feminine, especially in the lives of Black women, for they represent a different body of aesthetic interest, highlights the psychological impact of the expression at feminine ideals. It apparently seems significant; however, her femaleness is consistently seen as composed of raw material that lacks shaping and polishing into a desired body of aesthetic appeal.

To be feminine and a Black in a systemic manner, oriented in the social and economic structures of the white society, is to accept the subhuman position controlled by certain specific codes that rules the body of a Black female. Black hair, therefore,

represents the surface on which this control takes place. Relaxing hair is like "being in a prison" (Adichie, 2013, p.154) where the psychological perception of white beauty rules the body. Asking for an affirmation on her new hairstyle from the people around, Ifemelu again and again shows her lack of incitement to come to terms with her 'double-consciousness'. Other's opinion defines her self-worth. For instance, her conversation with Wambui whose insistence on cutting her hair to go natural, Ifemelu finds herself struggling with her conflicting thoughts. Her uneasy demeanor at Wambui's suggestion shows how anxious and discontent she could be in her decision till she finally despises her 'ugly' and 'unfinished' look on her face after Wambui chops off her damaged hair. Ironically, she could not recognize her new close-to-white look when she relaxed her hair in the beginning, she does not want to recognize her Black self when she goes natural. She finds herself a laughing stock for her white boyfriend whose "veiled amusement" beneath his confident acknowledgement of her brave look Ifemelu did not miss:

In the bathroom mirror, her hair had startled her, dull and shrunken from sleep, like a mop of wool sitting on her head. She reached for her phone and sent Wambui a text: I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today. (Adichie, 2013, p.155)

Ifemelu's hatred for her hair suggests her self-hatred for her natural Blackness. Drawing from the psychoanalyst Lacan's "mirror phase", Ifemelu's self-hatred mirrors racial violence against blacks, the evil other for the white man. Discontentment with self does not come without a reason for Ifemelu.

She knows how insignificant she could prove to the American society which runs on a specific pattern for Black women. The whole American society operates on a glamour industry taking inspiration from the advertisements, newspapers, journals, and beauty magazines where models are built to address the masses who are in turn supposed to imitate them. This gives space to the competitive aspect of femininity accounting for more contradictory messages of feminine identity (Brownmiller, 2013, p.18). This part of realization is corroborated in the love life of Ifemelu overshadowed by the sudden revelation of her white boyfriend cheating on her with his white ex-girlfriend. It's quite interesting to note how Adichie gives a vivid description of the beauty of that girl while remembering how significant the role her hair would play: "hair dyed a brassy blond, eyes burdened by too much blue makeup, to too low-cut... His white ex-girlfriend had been fresh-faced and preppy" (Adichie, 2013, p.156). Ifemelu got awestruck not much by how beautiful she looked but how "her long hair flowing behind her" complicated the significance of Black hair for mate desire. This discovery gives much credence to what she thought was her ugly boyish look that made her feel even more small (Adichie 2013:156).

The 1960s and the 1970s Black Power Movement played a major role in the lives of Blacks in America who were inspired by their African ancestral heritage, principles of racial pride, freedom, and self-determination. Black hair in its natural form with kinks and woolly texture took the image of a political perception when Blacks started wearing their hair natural. This was to impress upon the fact that these images would display self-

affirmation of Black body/roots reaching back to Africa, and the eventual rejection of imposed categories of standards that they never would fit in. Ifemelu's calling sick for three days depicts her knowledge of the American society's refusal to entertain people with deviations from naturalized standards of white body perception. Adichie's bravery comes in when she symbolizes such different people of Black race with Ifemelu's "overly oiled Afro" hairstyle as determining either the political stance of some sort or a characteristic of homosexuality. These two possibilities shown with the Black "crown of glory" reduces the possibility that going natural with Afro hairstyle would anytime suggest the commonplace activity of the race with specific aesthetic appeal. Rather, it disapprovingly questions them whether they could place themselves within the continuum of human expectations. The answer simply is not affirmative, for sure. Hair for Blacks has been a problem and Ifemelu's resigning from the position demonstrates her awareness of the system which is unwelcome to the different 'other'. Ifemelu's action also displays the loss in her inherent vision of the Black feminine self by presenting herself as an imperfect woman who could never fit in.

The Black woman's self-worth and self-consciousness in such political and social context grows to the length of rebellious attitude against the defined system of femininity. Biological femaleness, though, completely defined at physical, chromosomal, or hormonal levels, demands more as it is not enough to make her identity to the fullness of its expression. It requires constant aberrations to meet the demands of the audience (Brownmiller, 2013, p.15). The disapproval though

inherent had no voice due to the lack of any powerful Black social mobility against the dismissal of the Black body of different features. For Ifemelu, the Black social mobility comes in the form of an online Black natural hair community portal by the title HappilyKinkyNappy.com. The portal displays pictures of Black women with varied hairstyles ranging from dreadlocks to braids and Afros with massive curls and coils. The women appeared to be brave enough to flaunt their hair in natural order, thus, inspiring other Black women fed up with artificial appearances, who wanted to be more natural and Afro-centric. The online community, so sculpted, provided a “virtual world” or the cyber world for these women who could not find reality in what lied outside to this construction. It represents a ‘woman’s space’ or a ‘Black space’ owned and visited by Black women. It has been structured to signify a space where Black woman’s body feels safe, respected and looked after. Seeing their coily woolly hair exhibited with extreme confidence, Ifemelu fell into the world of virtual existence “with a tumbling gratitude” (Adichie, 2013, p. 157). For the first time she felt she belonged to somewhere because her short Afro-styled hair had a name they called it Teeny Weeny Afro. The community offered her many instructions regarding what it means to look after Black textured hair. Only Black women with such natural hair knew the texture first hand, and no one but themselves would understand how to take care of their hair. They offered awareness about shampoos with silicones as being poisonous, using conditioners on wet hair, and use of satin scarves during the night time. There were homemade recipes for hair shared by many women and shipping of such recipes made possible. The portal

fascinated Ifemelu to the point that she got inspired to buy the hair care stuff for herself. She came to the realization that her short Teeny-Weeny Afro could be extended as something she would be comfortable in. Although, occasionally, she felt dispirited considering the doubts that would cast on her decision to go natural. In spite of that, Ifemelu drops the idea of buying wigs from the store on one occasion when the motivation behind the online Black hair community portal comes rushing to her rescue. She ends up thanking Jamilah1977, one of the followers of the community, who had written in her latest post,

I love the sistas who love their straight weaves, but I’m never putting horse hair on my head again. (Adichie, 2013, p. 158)

Femininity is usually seen as dominated by the emotions of sentiment and fear that is thought to lie outside of the success impulse (Brownmiller, 2013, p. 16). This failure in constructing an unchallenged space for a Black woman like Ifemelu with regard to her competence in society coupled with her fear of rejection by the same society, the Black man’s offensive demeanor in the novel utters a sense of discomfort to Ifemelu which leads her to nearly swerve from the online Black community’s objectives of standing tall and positive in one’s natural body. Nonetheless, Jamilah1977’s post had sink so deep in her Black conscience that instead of picking one of the wigs at the store, she rushes back, logs in to the community website, writing a response to Jamilah1977’s post,

Jamilah’s words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me. (Adichie, 2013, p. 158)

The overwhelming responses to these words gave her not just the sense of approval from others but it also revived her sense of being in the world. Ifemelu's exposition embraced her true self with no signs of doubt, as doubt had transfigured into the feeling of love that she identified with her hair. Reacting to Aunt Uju's strong disinclination towards her natural jute-like Afro hair, Ifemelu's casual shrugging off of such observation's further points to her unassailable convictions about her natural hair as not scruffy or untidy. Representing a university-educated Black African living in America, Ifemelu knew the racial tension does not limit to the politics surrounding Black hair, rather it penetrates into other aspects of Black life. These locations of political domination over Blacks too exhibit how antagonistic the Black features have been made to believe to the presumably perfect society of white ideals. Hence, merely possessing the knowledge about the racial indifference towards Blacks would not be enough in the best of Ifemelu's interests. Sharing such concerns with only her close friend, Wambui, who understands her perception about the whole situation, she would keep on "digging, questioning, unearthing" till the raw truth reaches to more Black Americans. To diversify her critical observations of the American society, Ifemelu starts a personal blog that manifests her longing to share her stories, her longing for more listeners as Wambui did not prove enough for her emotional purgation. Her blog, yet another virtual world, opened a platform where speech was chosen over silence, where "Romantic love" not Friendship would be given importance

between American Blacks and American whites (Adichie, 2013, p. 216).

CONCLUSION

The rhetoric is clear that blacks' hair in a 'natural' state is undesirable. It needs to be 'tamed' as if blackness is wild and animalistic, and whiteness is tamed and civilized.

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In the past, Black hair has played a significant part in deciding the identity of African-Americans and continues through into the twenty-first century. It signifies continuing racial and gender bias both within and outside Black cultural experiences. Adichie deals with such sensitive issues of race within the novel with such audacity that, being an African immigrant in America herself, she fully comprehends the emotional and the psychological significance hair has achieved in Black culture over the years of conflict and debate within the two contrasting traditions. The commercialization of Black body and Black identity in the America does not go untouched under the shrewd criticism of Adichie. The Nigerian Black author, through her characterization of the immigrant female character, Ifemelu, foregrounds the established Black stereotypes in the white material culture and questions how this minority community becomes an easy target at the hands of white idealistic philosophy of beauty by maintaining Black servitude through the symbol of hair. The idea of appropriating white standards of aesthetics

into culturally different race debunks the concept of integrationist phenomenon, rather, underscores the repetitive practices of psychological suppression. Therefore, the adoption of Black hair in its natural state or in its varied styles, trendy in the popular culture, like corn rows and dreadlocks, were cultivated to promote self-love and reclamation of Black identity. Dressing hair in its natural form, Africa-American women manifest the sense of Black identity, beauty, power, and consciousness. The historian, Kobena Mercer rightly puts it when sharing his remarks on the political aspect of Black hair as specified in the 1960s

[hairstyles] were never just natural, waiting to be found: they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness. (Mercer, 1987, p. 40)

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