

Decolonial Feminism and Racial Resistance: Ifemelu's Writing in *Americanah*

Feminismo decolonial e resistência racial: a escrita de Ifemelu em *Americanah*

Naiana Galvao

Universidade Federal do Norte do Tocantins (UFNT)

naiana.galvao@ufnt.edu.br

Luciana da Silva Reis

Universidade Federal do Norte do Tocantins (UFNT)

reiscruz.luciana@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5320-0690>

ABSTRACT: This article offers a critical analysis of the trajectory of Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, from the perspective of gender theory, aiming to highlight the practices of resistance present in her diasporic experiences. The theoretical framework is grounded in decolonial feminist studies, articulating the categories of race, class, and gender. The analysis of the corpus reveals that Ifemelu re-signifies structural oppressions through her critical writing in the blog *Raceteenth*, challenging conservative patterns within both social and academic spheres in the United States. The study concludes that the protagonist transforms patriarchal and racialized discourses into insurgent narratives, critically exposing the confrontation with structural sexism in contemporary societies.

KEYWORDS: Decoloniality; Feminism; Afro-Diasporic Literature.

RESUMO: O presente artigo propõe uma análise crítica da trajetória de Ifemelu, protagonista do romance *Americanah*, sob a perspectiva da teoria de gênero, com o objetivo de evidenciar as práticas de resistência presentes em suas experiências diaspóricas. A fundamentação teórica baseia-se nos estudos do feminismo decolonial, articulando as categorias de raça, classe e gênero. A análise do corpus revela que Ifemelu ressignifica as opressões estruturais por meio de sua escrita crítica no blog *Raceteenth*, desafiando padrões conservadores nas esferas social e acadêmica dos Estados Unidos. Conclui-se que a protagonista transforma os discursos patriarcais e racializados em narrativas insurgentes, expondo de forma crítica o enfrentamento ao sexismo estrutural nas sociedades contemporâneas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Decolonialidade; Feminismo; Literatura Afro-diaspórica.

Introduction

Gender-based violence constitutes one of the most significant manifestations of the disparity between the sexes, whose roots are historical and ideological, as described by Lola Aronovich in the preface to *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* by Gerda Lerner. She explains that patriarchy is grounded in the belief that men and women are radically different, and that men are “naturally superior” (Lerner, 2022). Despite feminist advances throughout the twentieth century, gender-based violence—including physical abuse, harassment, and femicide—continues to reflect the asymmetry of power between the sexes. bell hooks, in *Feminism is for Everybody* (2022), argues that the feminist struggle is a constant challenge to patriarchy, which has only grown stronger in recent decades. Thus, transforming this system requires continuous action, both individual and collective, across diverse social spheres, including education, culture, and politics.

Dayse Muniz (2020) emphasizes that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has distinguished herself through her outspoken positions in public lectures, particularly in the well-known conferences *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009) and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2012), both delivered on the TED Talks platform. Beyond her public interventions, Adichie is the author of novels, short stories, poems, a play, and two manifestos. The Nigerian writer has become one of the most influential voices in contemporary literature. Her literary production is marked by a critical and reflective approach, garnering a wide international readership. Among her most acclaimed novels are *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2008), which won the Orange Prize, *Purple Hibiscus* (2011), and *Americanah* (2014), all published in Brazil by Companhia das Letras. Adichie is also the author of the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Her works have been published in renowned literary magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Granta* and translated into more than thirty languages. She has also received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

But what makes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s work so relevant to contemporary literature? Adichie’s fiction stands out for its profound humanity and social consciousness. Through her short stories and novels, she constructs deeply nuanced characters who embody the struggles and aspirations of modern life. Her writing explores central themes such as social justice, love, identity, and the sense of belonging within Black communities. By giving voice to African characters and shedding light on everyday realities in Nigeria, Adichie bridges the local and the global, inviting readers to engage with diverse cultural perspectives. Furthermore, as a feminist writer, she plays a crucial role in advancing the discussion about the

place of Black women in contemporary society. Her acclaimed novel *Americanah* chronicles the journey of a young Nigerian woman who migrates to the United States, where she faces the intertwined complexities of racism, sexism, and cultural displacement. Throughout her overview, Adichie underscores the transformative power of cultural diversity in literature. By amplifying stories and experiences that have often been ignored or marginalized, she expands the boundaries of social critique and sociocultural inclusion in today's literary landscape.

The coloniality of gender, in turn, manifests in the manipulation of discourses and social practices that perpetuate violence against women, particularly at the intersections of class and race. The analysis of excerpts from *Americanah* focuses on how Ifemelu, while experiencing the oppressions of the coloniality/modernity regime in the United States, re-signifies certain racist and sexist practices through her decolonial writing, expressed in her blog *Raceteenth*. From this perspective, the study seeks to understand how indifference toward feminine is naturalized within modern society yet remains sustained by conservative and oppressive norms. In this context, the character challenges the social norms and oppressive stigmas that shape her identity, race, and womanhood.

The choice of theoretical references and the methodological approach employed in this study stem from a perspective that values insurgent narratives arising from colonized contexts and aims to re-signify historical experiences of oppression. The relevance of this theme lies in its engagement with Feminism and the ongoing struggle against patriarchy, racism, and misogyny, which perpetuate violence, harassment, and the deaths of countless women worldwide. The cost of this violence is immeasurable, for women are fundamental to the development of future generations and to the preservation of culture and care in every form of community.

The Black Woman and Her Voice of Resistance: An Approach to Feminist Thought

Women of Color Feminism emerged as a response to the exclusion and marginalization of black women and other racialized women within the hegemonic feminist movement, which was predominantly white. As Patricia Hill Collins (2012) observes in *Black Feminist Thought: A Reader*, traditional feminism was historically initiated and led by white women with greater access to social privileges, in contrast to those who, due to their racial and class positions, experienced more intense forms of oppression. In response to this gap, black intellectuals began to develop an intersectional approach capable of articulating the dimensions of race, gender, class, and other structures of domination, to understand the multiple layers of subordination faced by black women since the colonial period. In this

sense, women of color feminism proposes a critical analysis of power relations, advancing an activist response aimed at empowering subjects historically rendered invisible by dominant feminist narratives, as Collins points out:

Black feminism remains important because African American women constitute an oppressed group. As a collectivity, they participate in a dialectical relationship that links their oppression to activism. Such dialectical relationships mean that two groups are opposed and contradictory. As long as Black women's subordination within the interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism will remain essential as an activist response to that oppression (Collins, 2012, p. 101).

Within the feminist movement, Women of Color Feminist Thought is configured as a critical perspective centered on the historical, social, and cultural experiences of black women and other racialized women. This approach recognizes that these women face specific forms of intersectional oppression—distinct both from those experienced by white women and by black men—and proposes a simultaneous confrontation of structures of domination based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and other social markers. Women of color feminism, therefore, seeks to articulate both individual and collective struggles for social justice, while valuing the role of culture, history, and identity in the construction of these women's subjectivities.

Collins emphasizes the role of black women's agency in the fight against oppression, proposing a critical analysis of global structures of power—such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—that perpetuate intersectional marginalization. Critical consciousness and collective transnational action, involving both women and men, are indispensable for social transformation and for confronting structural sexism.

Angela Davis (2012), in turn, asserts that Black feminism is both a political framework and a practice of liberation aimed at combating multiple forms of oppression, such as racism, homophobia, and poverty. The author argues that the feminist struggle must necessarily be intersectional, that is, it must consider the complexity of oppressions affecting female bodies, particularly Black bodies. Davis critiques the liberal notion of formal equality and defends the need to transform social and economic structures that sustain gender inequalities, observing: “from the 1970s onward, women began speaking publicly about beatings, rapes, and restrictions on their reproductive rights” (Davis, 2012, p. 164), thus breaking the silence imposed on domestic violence.

Furthermore, Davis recognizes the blues as an important form of aesthetic and political expression, in which black women denounce patriarchal and racial violence, bringing these experiences out of the “shadows of domestic life,” where they have historically been concealed. In this context, the blues represents a form of cultural and symbolic resistance that reinforces the transformative power of black feminism, as she notes:

The realism of the blues is not limited to literal interpretations. On the contrary, the blues contains many readings and possesses surprising complexity and depth. Precisely because the blues confronts emotional and sexual issues in their raw state, associated with a very specific historical reality, it expresses elements that transcend the particularity of its origins. There is a core of meaning in the texts of classic women’s blues that, although pre-feminist in a historical sense, reveals that Black women of that era recognized and addressed central issues of contemporary feminist discourse (Davis, 2012, p. 164).

Maria Lugones, a decolonial feminist philosopher, has played a fundamental role in expanding the understanding of power dynamics and oppression in Latin America. Her perspective proposes a shift from the hegemonic gaze, suggesting that analysis should be grounded in the experiences of colonized subjects rather than the parameters established by the colonizer. In this sense, Lugones advances an intersectional approach that considers, in an articulated manner, the categories of gender, race, and class as constitutive of the oppressions experienced by racialized women in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

In Latin America, the coloniality of gender—a central concept in her work—manifests through the imposition of Eurocentric standards of beauty, structural violence against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and the devaluation of non-Western knowledge and cultural practices. From this critique, Lugones advocates the need to question the theoretical and epistemic foundations that sustain dominant views, in order to promote new worldviews on gender and race. This entails not only the deconstruction of hegemonic ideas but also the valorization of insurgent narratives that emerge from colonized contexts and seek to re-signify historical experiences of oppression.

In *Feminist Thoughts Today: Decolonial Perspectives* (2020), Lugones offers a critical reading of Aníbal Quijano’s theory of the coloniality of power. According to the author, although Quijano’s model provides important contributions for understanding racialized structures of power, it fails to account for the plurality of gender identities and the ways in which these identities are racialized and hierarchically organized within the global capitalist system. Lugones argues that it

is necessary to “complicate Quijano’s model” by incorporating a more profound and multifaceted analysis of gendered oppression, as she states: “In this initial essay, I present and complicate Quijano’s model, because it provides us, with the logic of structural axes, a solid foundation for understanding the processes of entanglement and production of race and gender” (Lugones, 2020, p. 55)¹.

In this regard, Lugones (2020) describes the modern-colonial gender system as a structure of intersectional oppression, sustained by racial and gender hierarchies. She argues that this system is global and relies on both the historical and contemporary exploitation of colonized and racialized women. For the author, understanding this system is essential for women of color feminism, as it allows for a more precise explanation of the specific forms of oppression experienced by these women, which differ from the experiences of white women. Accordingly, Lugones asserts that women of color feminism must consider the multiple forms of intersectional oppression faced by women and advocates the construction of practical solidarity among subjects historically marginalized by coloniality. From this critical understanding, it becomes possible to advance the struggle for a more just and equitable world.

From this perspective, bell hooks, writer, scholar, and black feminist activist, also makes a significant contribution to women of color feminist thought, particularly by articulating race, gender, and class in her analyses. In her extensive work, hooks emphasizes the importance of intersectionality as a fundamental principle of feminism, arguing that the struggle for gender equality must be intrinsically linked to the fight against racism, homophobia, and economic inequalities. Moreover, she highlights the relevance of education and critical consciousness as instruments for social transformation and for the construction of a more just, equitable, and compassionate society.

hooks (2022) critiques the limitations of middle-class white feminism, which frequently ignores the experiences of black women and other racialized women. According to her, feminism must be inclusive and committed to listening to and valuing historically silenced voices. By asserting that “it is unlikely that white women were the first to rebel against male domination, because the first people on the planet were not white” (hooks, 2022, p. 75), the author reinforces the

¹ The concept of the “coloniality of power, being, and knowledge,” developed by Anibal Quijano, refers to the enduring patterns of domination that emerged from colonialism and continue to structure modern societies. Coloniality of power denotes the global hierarchies of race, labor, and authority established during colonization; coloniality of being addresses the dehumanization and ontological subjugation of colonized peoples; and coloniality of knowledge exposes how Eurocentric epistemologies marginalize other ways of knowing and producing knowledge. For further information read: QUIJANO, Anibal. Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*, v. 1, n. 3, p. 533–580, 2000.

centrality of black women in the historical struggle against patriarchy and other forms of domination.

In addressing gender-based violence, feminism—particularly women of color feminism—aims to confront not only domestic and sexual violence but also moral, psychological, and institutional harassment, which disproportionately affects Black women, Indigenous women, and women from other marginalized ethnic groups. By acknowledging the unique experiences of these women, women of color feminism proposes a more effective and inclusive approach in the struggle against multiple forms of oppression:

Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. I love this definition, which I first presented over ten years ago in my book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. I love it because it very clearly states that the movement is not about being anti-men. It makes clear that the problem is sexism. And this clarity helps us remember that all of us, women and men, have been socialized from birth to accept sexist thoughts and actions. As a result, women can be as sexist as men. This does not excuse or justify male domination; it means that it would be naive and mistaken for feminist thinkers to simplify feminism and see it as a movement of women against men (hooks, 2022, p. 13).

Thus, the strengthening of black feminist thought proves essential for overcoming the multiple forms of oppression that affect black women and other racialized women. By articulating race, class, gender, and other social categories from an intersectional perspective, women of color feminism broaden the horizons of the feminist struggle, offering a sharp critique of hegemonic power structures that have historically marginalized these voices. Valuing the experiences, knowledge, and resistances of these women not only enriches the theoretical and political field of feminism but also provides concrete pathways for social transformation. Understanding, recognizing, and disseminating contemporary Black feminist thought is, therefore, not only an exercise in epistemic justice but also a crucial step toward constructing a truly inclusive, plural, and equity-driven emancipatory project.

Ifemelu's Decolonial Feminist Insights in the Diasporic Experience

Ifemelu is a young woman aspiring to an academic life in the United States, believing that this experience could offer better living conditions compared to Nigeria, as well as an opportunity to improve her English. For her, living in the land of

the Yankees represents a gateway to personal and professional development. However, faced with the opportunity to study abroad, she encounters a dilemma: choosing between her love for Obinze and her academic career. Her documents are accepted by an American university, but Obinze's are not, leading to the couple's separation. The distance ultimately weakens their bond, and Ifemelu decides to immerse herself in North American culture, even if subtly, as being physically present in that context prompts her to reflect on how, in Nigeria, the color of her skin had never been such a salient social marker—nor were racial issues perceived with such clarity.

As the narrative progresses, Ifemelu experiences episodes of depression and becomes involved in an abusive relationship with a tennis player, who begins paying her to engage in sexual relations. This moment in the plot, narrated by an omniscient narrator, helps elucidate why she starts ignoring Obinze's calls and emails. Meanwhile, Obinze seeks a visa to the United Kingdom, where he restarts his life, marries, and establishes a family.

During this time, Ifemelu experiences other romantic relationships but begins to reflect deeply on her status as a student, immigrant, and black woman in the United States. It is in this context that her blog becomes a tool for refuge and reflection. Through it, she questions behaviors naturalized by the coloniality-based system of domination, employing a sharp, direct, engaged, and critical decolonial writing style, through which she channels her frustrations and expresses her thoughts in a critical and decolonial manner.

The character Ifemelu can be understood as an emblematic representation of the transcultural, diasporic, and fragmented subject, as theorized by recent postmodern currents. She embodies an individual in constant discord with herself and the world around her, experiencing a profound sense of displacement: "Everything had become thicker. She had been swallowed, lost in a viscous fog, enveloped in a soup of nothing. There was an abyss between her and what she was supposed to feel" (Adichie, 2014, p. 171-172).

Once in the United States, Ifemelu encounters multiple barriers, with racism being one of the most evident. However, another form of discrimination that emerges from the outset is linguistic prejudice. In one passage of the novel, the university receptionist addresses her in English, but in a slow and exaggeratedly articulated manner, as if Ifemelu were incapable of understanding the "own language." This episode illustrates not only the stigmatized perception of the immigrant but also the devaluation of alternative pronunciations and linguistic identities in the North American context.

Ifemelu understood that the girl was speaking that way because of her, because of her accent, and for a moment she felt like a small child, arms and legs limp, drooling. “I speak English,” Ifemelu said. “I bet you do,” said Cristina Tomas. “I just don’t know if you speak it well.” Ifemelu shrank. In that brief, difficult silence as she looked into Cristina Tomas’s eyes before taking the forms, she shrank. Like a dead leaf. She had been speaking English since she was little, had been captain of the debate team in high school, and had always found Americans’ nasal pronunciation somewhat crude; she shouldn’t have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And, in the following weeks, as the autumn cold set in, she began practicing an American accent (Adichie, 2014, p. 147).

Adichie (2015), in *We Should All Be Feminists*, argues that, from childhood, girls are taught to diminish themselves, control their ambitions, and moderate their achievements so as not to threaten male authority. They are expected to prioritize marriage as the central life goal, whereas boys do not face the same pressures or constraints. From an early age, girls are conditioned to compete with one another for male approval. According to the author, being a feminist means advocating for gender equality and actively questioning the naturalized behaviors that sustain gender inequality.

In *Americanah*, Adichie expands this critique by addressing themes such as race, identity, love, and belonging, particularly in the context of African immigrants in the United States and Europe. Through Ifemelu’s trajectory, the author demonstrates how the migratory experience can be simultaneously liberating and alienating. The novel highlights the difficulties faced by those seeking to assert their identity in societies that often devalue cultural and racial diversity. Issues of gender, class, and politics permeate the narrative, composing a sharp critique of contemporary American society, as illustrated in the following passage:

Amid the excitement of others, Ifemelu suddenly began to feel fragile and frightened. “Maybe I should stay and finish college here,” she said to Obinze. “No, Ifem, you must go. Besides, you don’t even like geology. You can study something else in the United States.” “But the scholarship is partial. Where will I get the money to pay the rest? I can’t work on a student visa.” “You can get a part-time job through the university. You’ll manage. A scholarship that covers seventy-five percent of tuition is a lot.” Ifemelu nodded, letting herself be carried away by his wave of faith. She visited Obinze’s mother to say goodbye (Adichie, 2014, p. 111-112).

The character Ifemelu exemplifies the complexity of racial identity in the United States, where individuals are often categorized based on appearance and ethnic origin. She observes that, although race is a social construct, its effects are

concrete and profound, especially in the lives of minorities. Ifemelu challenges the notion that race is no longer relevant and that only social class defines individual experience in contemporary society. Such a perspective, she argues, is simplistic and disregards the racial dynamics that remain operative. Throughout the novel, Adichie addresses issues such as prejudice, stereotypes, and structural racism, revealing how these elements impact the characters' trajectories. This critique is articulated incisively in one of Ifemelu's blog posts, titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What 'Hispanic' Means" (Adichie, 2014, p. 116).

Hispanics frequently accompany African Americans in poverty statistics, a small step above them in the country's racial hierarchy. The category of race includes the chocolate-skinned woman from Peru; the Indigenous peoples of Mexico; people with mestizo features from the Dominican Republic; lighter-skinned people from Puerto Rico; and the blond, blue-eyed man from Argentina. You just need to speak Spanish and not be from Spain, and voilà, you belong to a race called Hispanic (Adichie, 2014, p. 116).

Maria Lugones (2020) discusses the classification of racial identities as "the deepest and most enduring expression of colonial domination" (Lugones, 2020, p. 57). According to the author, such categorization constitutes a form of oppression imposed on colonized populations, the effects of which persist to the present day. Furthermore, Lugones analyzes the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality, highlighting, in particular, men's neglect of the multiple forms of violence experienced by women of color.

The indifference of men to the violence suffered by women of color—non-white women who are victims of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of gender—leads Maria Lugones (2020) to develop an investigation into the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In this analysis, she establishes a connection between two theoretical frameworks: the first relates to feminist studies on gender, race, and colonization; the second to the principles of the "coloniality of power," a concept developed by Anibal Quijano. Quijano understands gender and race as distinct categories; however, as Lugones argues, "only by perceiving gender and race as intricately woven or indissolubly fused can we truly see women of color" (Lugones, 2020, p. 60).

This issue becomes evident in the novel *Americanah*, whose narrative begins in Lagos, Nigeria, in the 1990s. Ifemelu and Obinze are two young lovers, full of dreams and hopes for the future. However, they live in a context of social and political instability, marked by a military regime that led to the closure of universities due to dissatisfaction among professors and students with the educational system.

Meanwhile, Ifemelu's aunt, "Aunt Uju," as she is called by her niece, decides to migrate to the United States in search of better living conditions for herself and her child. In Nigeria, Uju faced numerous difficulties, including an abusive relationship with an older and influential man who made her his second wife. In the United States, she becomes a victim of sexist and racist aggression in her workplace, despite having a respectable career as a physician. The following excerpt from the novel illustrates these confrontations:

"I practically went through it all." Aunt Uju spoke in a defiant, almost petulant tone, emphasizing her own version of events with a clenched fist. She told Dike that his father had been a member of the military government, that she was his second wife, and that they had used their surname to protect him, because some people in the government, though not his father, had done bad things (Adichie, 2014, p. 186-187).

At another point in the novel, Aunt Uju shares with Ifemelu the sense of devaluation she experiences in her profession as a physician in the United States. Despite her qualifications, she perceives that her racial identity overrides her professional competence in the eyes of American society. In recounting this experience, Uju states that, although she is a doctor, she is seen merely as "a black woman" and is therefore not recognized as she should be. The following passage illustrates this identity tension: "So there are no doctors with braided hair in the United States?" Ifemelu asked. "I said what I was told. You are in a country that is not yours. Do what you need to do if you want to succeed" (Adichie, 2014, p. 130-131).

Ifemelu Faces the Linguistic Prejudice and American Xenophobia

In this context, Ifemelu secures a partial scholarship to study at a university in the United States and reunites with her aunt on American soil. Obinze, on the other hand, remains in Nigeria with the intention of completing his university studies, but circumstances divert his initial plans. As the narrative reveals: "The plan became this: Obinze would go to the United States the minute he graduated. He would find a way to get a visa" (Adichie, 2014, p. 112). However, he encounters multiple obstacles in completing his course. With the worsening health of his mother, Obinze assumes her care and is consequently forced to interrupt his studies. After being denied an American visa three times, he eventually migrates to London with his mother's assistance.

In the United States, Ifemelu begins working as a nanny to supplement her scholarship and support herself in the "American Dream" country. Throughout

her journey, the racist behaviors she faces daily are evident. Many people, when interacting with her, speak more loudly and slowly, assuming that, as a black immigrant woman, she would not master the English language. This prejudice becomes even more impactful in academic environments, as illustrated in the episode when Ifemelu goes to the university to enroll and is surprised by the receptionist's behavior, despite speaking fluent English. The narrative emphasizes this cultural and linguistic shock as a reflection of the structural prejudice present in American society.

"Good afternoon. Is this where you enroll?" she asked Cristina Tomas, whose name she did not yet know. 'Yes. You. Are. A. Foreign. Student?' 'I am.' 'You. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International Students Department.' Ifemelu gave a half-smile of pity, because Cristina Tomas certainly had some kind of illness that made her speak so slowly, with lips pursed in a little pout to show the way to the international students department. But when she returned with the letter, Cristina Tomas said, 'I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. Some. Forms' (Adichie, 2014, p. 146).

The imposition of Eurocentric aesthetic standards becomes evident when Ifemelu receives suggestions regarding her appearance, particularly her hair. In a notable episode, she is advised to remove her braids—mistakenly referred to as "dreadlocks"—and undergo hair straightening, known as a "Brazilian blowout," to become "more presentable" and thereby increase her chances of entering the formal labor market. This requirement exemplifies an incisive form of conformity to the Western hegemonic standard, imposing on black women the adaptation of their bodies and identities to white aesthetic norms.

In Ifemelu's case, her natural hair, which represents her ancestry, identity, and unique biological structure, is deemed inadequate under Euro-normative logic. The requirement of hair straightening, in this context, constitutes a form of symbolic and physical violence, as illustrated in the following passage: "When she spoke about the interview in Baltimore, Ruth said: 'My advice? Take out those braids and straighten your hair. Nobody talks about these things, but they matter. We want you to get the job'" (Adichie, 2014, p. 220).

Although she does not wish to submit to imposed norms, Ifemelu feels compelled to straighten her hair to ensure her stay in the United States and continue her studies. The procedure, however, causes her physical pain—burning and scalp injuries—as well as permanent damage, such as progressive hair loss, a consequence of the chemical aggression inflicted on her hair.

Ifemelu and Aesthetic Racism

Another revealing situation of aesthetic racism occurs when Ifemelu attempts to have her eyebrows waxed at a beauty salon. Upon requesting the service, she is promptly refused on the grounds that the establishment “does not work with curly hair,” even though it was not about hair but eyebrows. This scene demonstrates how prejudice against Afro-descendant phenotypic traits extends beyond hair and assumes broader contours of exclusion: “Hi, I’d like to have my eyebrows waxed.” ‘We don’t work with curly hair,’ said the woman. ‘You don’t work with curly hair?’ ‘No. Sorry’ (Adichie, 2014, p. 316).

Angela Davis (2012) argues that Black feminism is, above all, a politics of confrontation and liberation. It is an approach that denounces and combats multiple forms of oppression faced daily by Black and non-white women. For Davis, feminist struggle must be intersectional, simultaneously considering the effects of racism, poverty, and misogyny on these women. She also critiques the notion that formal equality is sufficient for female emancipation, advocating for the transformation of social structures that perpetuate inequalities. In this sense, aesthetic oppression stands out, as the imposition of beauty standards disproportionately affects black women, restricting their freedom and violating their identities.

The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be instead of recognizing how we are. We would be much happier, freer to be who we truly are, if we did not bear the weight of gender expectations. Boys and girls are undeniably different biologically, but socialization exaggerates these differences (Adichie, 2015, p. 11).

In *Americanah*, the protagonist criticizes women’s magazines for promoting images of white, thin women as beauty standards, which leads women of diverse ethnicities and origins to attempt to conform to these stereotypes. Curiously, she states that she continues to read these magazines, comparing it to smoking both are harmful to health. Similarly, she considers consuming these magazines, which depict thin, pale women with lifeless, straight hair, to be damaging. This critique of the fashion and beauty industry constitutes a feminist approach that challenges Eurocentric aesthetic standards and the pressure for racialized women to “match” white women. As exemplified in the following passage: “Then she stretched out her arm and pushed the magazine into the seatback bag, saying, with an air of contempt, how absurd it was that women’s magazines forced images of white women, with small bones and small breasts” (Adichie, 2014, p. 194).

However, these racial and ideological divergences persist in American society, demonstrating how power relations continue to affect people, even in a society that considers itself “post-racial.” This reality aligns with Lugones’ decolonial perspective, which argues that colonial power relations continue to influence people’s lives today. She emphasizes that it is essential to recognize the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality to fully understand the ongoing oppression faced by women of color.

What I mean is that ‘Creole’ is a word that exists. People use it; it is part of the United States. It has already caused much pain to people, and I think it is an insult to censor it.” “Well,” said Professor Moore, looking around as if seeking help. Help came from a raspy voice in the middle of the classroom. “Well, it is because of the pain this word has caused that it should not be used!” That one did not take flight with harshness, coming from the mouth of an African American woman wearing bamboo hoop earrings. “The thing is that every time you say that word, it hurts African Americans,” said a pale boy with messy hair in the front of the class (Adichie, 2014, p. 151).

In this context, Ifemelu demonstrates frustration at not being able to immediately grasp all aspects of life in the United States and at having to rely on the goodwill of others. This frustration takes on a feminist character as she questions the social expectation that women must always be courteous and polite, revealing how they are frequently discouraged from seeking knowledge and independence. As the narrative notes, “Ifemelu longed to understand everything about the United States, to immediately be in the know to root for a team in the Super Bowl, to understand what a Twinkie was, and what a lockout in the sports season meant” (Adichie, 2014, p. 148).

Insurgent Narratives and The Struggle Against Structural Sexism: Ifemelu as a Collective Voice for Women of Color

In *We Should All Be Feminists* (2015), Adichie critiques the notion that men are exempt from these social demands, while women are expected to remain always “likable” and agreeable. According to the author, such expectations are unjust and limiting, as they prevent women from freely expressing their feelings and opinions, especially when it comes to showing anger or disapproval. She observes: “And we raise girls in a rather pernicious way, because we teach them to care for the fragile ego of the male sex. We teach girls to shrink, to make themselves

smaller, telling them: ‘You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim for success, but not too much’” (Adichie, 2015, p. 9).

Thus, Ifemelu reflects on intersectionality and oppression as manifestations of her decolonial feminist consciousness. She recognizes that Black women experience multiple forms of oppression—whether through sexism or racism—and that these dimensions are deeply interconnected due to the historically biased construction of the dominant narrative, shaped by Western hegemony. This perspective aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) notion of intersectionality, which highlights that experiences of discrimination cannot be understood in isolation but rather at the intersection of categories such as gender, race, and class. Patricia Hill Collins (2016) also contributes by emphasizing that the oppression of Black women operates within an “intersectional system” that perpetuates structural inequalities.

Consequently, a profound division between black and white people in American society becomes evident, a perception that Ifemelu experiences in her everyday life as a Black immigrant woman. When questioning why she must travel across the city to Trenton to have her hair braided, the character highlights cultural marginalization: “But Ifemelu did not like having to go to Trenton to get her hair braided. It was not surprising that there was no specialized salon in Princeton—the few Black people she had seen there had such light skin and straight hair that it was hard to imagine them wearing braids” (Adichie, 2014, p. 10).

In another perspective, the identity of black women—especially African women—is constantly questioned when they feel pressured to modify aspects of their appearance, such as hair and clothing, to conform to North American standards. This raises the following concern: when a Black or Indigenous person alters elements of their body, attire, or speech, erasing traces of accent, are they necessarily experiencing a process of cultural erasure or total acculturation of the self? These tensions resonate with Stuart Hall’s (2003) perspective, which posits that cultural identities are not fixed but are instead constructed within historical, social, and political processes, often traversed by the experience of the diaspora. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that subjects in colonial or postcolonial contexts inhabit a space of cultural hybridity, in which elements of both the culture of origin and the dominant culture merge, producing both resistance and new forms of subjectivity.

Ifemelu’s reflections become even more evident when she interacts with a taxi driver who insists on warning her about the dangers she faces in the United States, as illustrated in the following passage:

The Ethiopian driver said, “I can’t figure out where your accent is from. Where are you from?” “Nigeria.” “Nigeria? You don’t sound African, not at all.” “Why don’t I sound African?” “Because your blouse is too tight.” “It isn’t.” “I thought you were from Trinidad or somewhere like that” (Adichie, 2014, p. 224–225).

As this excerpt indicates, Ifemelu is not defined as African merely by fitting—or not fitting—a socially constructed stereotype of how people from the African continent should look. The Ethiopian driver’s comments regarding her appearance and accent highlight how stereotypical expectations about how Africans “should” speak or present themselves continue to structure discriminatory practices. Such expectations, often based on misinformation and prejudice, frequently translate into offensive and racist remarks, as experienced by the protagonist. In this context, appearance or accent cannot be legitimate criteria for determining someone’s origin or identity; it is crucial to respect everyone’s right to self-definition and self-affirmation based on their lived experience. This issue resonates with Frantz Fanon’s (2008) analysis, which asserts that Black identity is constantly shaped by the gaze of the Other, who crystallizes stereotypes and imposes masks as a form of symbolic control.

Thus, Ifemelu emphasizes the necessity of valuing and trusting the experiences of racialized individuals, rejecting any attempt to minimize or deny racism. This stance emerges, for instance, when she challenges the narrative of a white woman regarding her own experience of discrimination: “By that time, Ifemelu had already understood that people like that woman said what they said to keep others comfortable and to show that they were grateful for ‘How Far We’ve Come’” (Adichie, 2014, p. 314-315). In another passage, the reflection “There were things that existed for him that she did not know how to penetrate” (Adichie, 2014, p. 339) reveals how Ifemelu’s identity, marked by her condition as an African immigrant, limited her capacity for full inclusion within Blaine’s circle of friends, which was composed predominantly of North Americans with different worldviews. Thus, *Americanah* compellingly demonstrates how race, identity, and immigration are intertwined, especially regarding the experiences of Africans living in the United States.

In this context, by understanding how women of color are affected by the system of domination, Lugones’ (2007) decolonial feminist theory can be applied across multiple fields of practice. However, it is essential that education be accessible and that knowledge about feminisms in their multiple forms be promoted, enabling continuous efforts toward collective well-being, including that of men. By recognizing that these oppressions are intersectional, it becomes evident that

they manifest differently for white women and women of color. Moreover, it reinforces the notion that the struggle against oppression can be strengthened by breaking imposed bonds of solidarity among the victims of coloniality and exploitation. These points are clearly illustrated in Ifemelu's statement:

Yes, but I'm afraid of finishing graduate school and losing the ability to speak English. I know a woman doing her postgraduate studies, a friend of a friend, and just hearing her speak frightens me. The semiotic dialectic of intertextual modernity. It makes no sense. Sometimes, I think they live in a parallel academic universe, speaking academese instead of English, without knowing what's happening in the real world (Adichie, 2014, p. 152).

As an illustration, one can observe the critique hooks (2022) makes regarding the concepts of identity and culture. Ifemelu feels ashamed for having sought social acceptance and validation, adopting a tone of voice and behaviors that were not authentic to her. This search for authenticity and cultural identity can be interpreted as a trap that hinders the full expression of individual freedom and genuineness. For hooks, rather than conforming to a dominant cultural identity or worldview, feminism should be an inclusive movement that values diversity and difference, both among women and men, as, in her words, feminism is for everybody. Complementarily, Ifemelu's experience emphasizes the importance of developing self-confidence and not allowing oneself to be constrained by narrow conceptions of identity or cultural heritage. In this sense, the quest for recognition can paradoxically function as a form of oppression, restricting creative freedom and authentic self-expression.

Only after hanging up did Ifemelu begin to feel the stain of a growing shame spreading over her, for having thanked the young man, for having transformed his words, 'You sound like an American speaking,' into a garland she placed around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an achievement, to sound like an American? [...] Her fleeting victory had created a huge empty space, because she had assumed, for too long, a tone of voice and a way of being that were not hers (Adichie, 2014, p. 191).

On the other hand, Ifemelu's experience can be analyzed considering Collins' (2012) intersectional theory, which addresses domination through a complex matrix of oppressions. In this sense, Ifemelu, as a Black immigrant woman, faces intersectional oppression based on race, gender, and nationality. She must adapt to a dominant culture that values cultural assimilation and an American accent while simultaneously confronting racism and xenophobia. The protagonist's experience

highlights the central role of Black women in the struggle against oppression and underscores the importance of transnational solidarity among women of color, strengthening networks of resistance and collective empowerment strategies.

Ifemelu decided to stop pretending to have an American accent on a sunny July day, the same day she met Blaine. It was a convincing accent. She had perfected it by carefully listening to friends and news anchors—the contracted “t,” the deep rolled “r,” phrases starting with “so” and the ready response, “really?”—but the accent had cracks; it was conscious and had to be remembered. It required effort, the twisted lips, the turns of the tongue. If Ifemelu were in a panic, terrified, or suddenly woken in the middle of a fire, she would not have remembered how to produce those American sounds (Adichie, 2014, p. 189).

In *Americanah*, there is a scene where Ifemelu meets a man who shares his perception of racial issues. He asserts that the situation is exaggerated nowadays and that Black people should not be concerned, believing it to be a matter of social class between oppressors and the oppressed: “Not all white dread guys are on our side” (Adichie, 2014, p. 10). This comment inspired the title of one of Ifemelu’s blog posts.

Furthermore, the protagonist recounts another encounter with a man from Ohio, identified as an administrative manager. Although Ifemelu expected a defensive reaction after describing the content of her blog, he expressed interest in other topics, asking if she had ever written about adoption. These experiences demonstrate how Ifemelu interacts with different people and situations during her life in the United States, exploring issues of race and social class through her blog while confronting multiple perspectives:

There was also the time with the man from Ohio, squeezed next to her on a flight. Some kind of administrative manager, Ifemelu was sure, seeing his overly large suit and brightly colored shirt with a white collar. He asked what Ifemelu meant by ‘behavior blog,’ and she explained, expecting him to withdraw or end the conversation with a defensive, inconsequential remark like ‘The only race that matters is the human race.’ But he said: ‘Have you written about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I’m not talking about mulattos, but black babies. Even black families don’t want to adopt’ (Adichie, 2014, p. 11).

The phrase “The only race that matters is the human race” (Adichie, 2014, p. 11) is frequently used to minimize the relevance of race and promote the idea of universal equality among human beings. However, feminists and other activists argue that race is an essential component of human experience and identity, criticizing this statement for ignoring the structural inequalities faced by different

groups. Race constitutes a central dimension in feminist analysis because women of different racial backgrounds experience specific forms of oppression.

In the United States, for instance, black women are more vulnerable to police violence, maternal mortality, and high poverty rates compared to white women. In various countries, Indigenous women face sexual violence and enforced disappearances, while Asian women are often stereotyped as submissive and exotic, reflecting intersections between racism and sexism.

Thus, feminists argue that race must be recognized as a fundamental element of human experience and identity, since the histories and cultures of different groups shape their perspectives and experiences. Denying the importance of race is equivalent to disregarding these specific experiences. Therefore, the struggle against racism is inseparable from the fight for gender equality and is crucial for understanding the multiple forms of oppression faced by women of all racial backgrounds.

Final Considerations

The study of the representation of decolonial feminism in the character Ifemelu, from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, primarily aimed to understand how the author addresses central issues related to female and Black experiences in contemporary society. Literary analysis allowed for an investigation of how the character reveals decolonial feminist attitudes and how indifference toward the female gender is normalized in a society considered modern.

Ifemelu reveals her frustration at not immediately knowing all aspects of life in the United States and at having to rely on the goodwill of others. This frustration reflects a decolonial feminist perspective, questioning the expectation that women should always be well-behaved and pleasant, demonstrating how they are often discouraged from seeking knowledge and independence.

Ifemelu's experience highlights the intersectionality of oppression. Black women face multiple inequalities, combining racism and sexism, within a historical context marked by the colonality of power. She perceives these tensions in everyday situations, such as the difficulty of finding specialized salons for braiding her hair. Encounters with racist and discriminatory practices are also evident in broader interactions, such as the differential treatment between white and black people, reinforcing awareness of the intersectional oppression faced by racialized individuals.

She reflects on the process of acculturation, questioning whether changes in hair, speech, or clothing constitute cultural erasure. This analysis resonates with

Fanon, who argues that Black identity is constantly shaped by the gaze of the other, crystallizing stereotypes and imposing symbolic masks.

Moreover, Lugones' theory of decolonial feminism allows for an understanding of how women of color confront intersectional systems of domination and the importance of accessible education to recognize the plurality of feminisms. Ifemelu's experience illustrates the necessity of breaking oppressive relationships and reinforcing transnational solidarities among women of color, strengthening networks of resistance and collective empowerment.

Ifemelu's social encounters and everyday interactions also reveal different perspectives on race and class. She observes how some people minimize the importance of racial issues, while others show interest in diverse topics, highlighting the multiplicity of experiences and perceptions that constitute life in the United States. This diversity of interactions reinforces the need to consider intersectionality and the plurality of voices in the analysis of oppression.

Critiques of the denial of race's importance demonstrate that, although one may assert that "we are all of the human race," women of different races face specific forms of oppression. In the United States, black women are more vulnerable to police violence, maternal mortality, and poverty; Indigenous women face sexual violence and enforced disappearances; and Asian women are often stereotyped as submissive and exotic. For feminists, the fight against racism is inseparable from the struggle for gender equality, as race profoundly shapes women's experiences and perspectives.

This study constitutes a starting point for the discussion of decolonial feminism and the representation of black women in contemporary literature. It is expected that universities and schools decolonize curricula and promote literature of resistance, recognizing that history cannot be interpreted from a single point of view. It is necessary to value diverse experiences to build a more inclusive and just society. In this context, literature acts as a window to knowledge, cultural diversity, and critical reflection, humanizing the subject and broadening perspectives, as emphasized by Antonio Candido (2002). Based on this liberating and decolonial thought, this study presents its reflections, while acknowledging that there are still many paths to follow in building an inclusive society and promoting decolonial feminism.

REFERENCES

ADICHIE, Chimamanda N. *Americanah*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.

ADICHIE, Chimamanda N. *The Danger of a Single Story*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2019.

- ADICHIE, Chimamanda N. *We Should All Be Feminists*. London: Fourth Estate, 2015.
- BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- CANDIDO, Antonio. *O direito à literatura*. 12. ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2002.
- COLLINS, Patricia Hill. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- COLLINS, Patricia. Distinctive Features of Black Feminist Thought. In: JARBADO, Mercedes (ed.). *Black Feminisms: An Anthology*. Madrid: Taticante de Sonhos, 2012. p. 99-134.
- CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, v. 1989, n. 1, p. 139-167, 1989.
- DAVIS, Angela. I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity. In: JARBADO, Mercedes (ed.). *Black Feminisms: An Anthology*. Madrid: Taticante de Sonhos, 2012. p. 135-185.
- FANON, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
- HALL, Stuart. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003.
- HOOKS, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2022.
- HOOKS, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 2019.
- LERNER, Gerda. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- LERNER, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy: The History of the Oppression of Women by Men*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- LUGONES, María. Coloniality and Gender. In: HOLLANDA, Heloísa Buarque (ed.). *Feminist Thought Today: Decolonial Perspectives*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020. p. 52-83.
- LUGONES, María. Coloniality and Gender: Toward a Decolonial Feminism. In: MIGNOLO, Walter (ed.). *Gender and Decoloniality*. Buenos Aires: Del Signo, 2008. p. 13-54.
- MUNIZ, Dayse Rayane e Silva. Decolonial Resistance and Identity Rearticulations in Americanah, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Entre Parênteses*, 2020. Available at: <https://publicacoes.unifal-mg.edu.br/revistas/index.php/entrepareses/article/view/1212>. Accessed on: July 23, 2025.
- OPEN ROAD INTEGRATED MEDIA. *Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Summary and Analysis*. New York: Worth Books, 2017.

Recebido em: 16/09/2025

Aceito em: 01/11/2025

