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The Politics of Race and Beauty: A Study of Alternative Aesthetics in Adichie's *Americanah*

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the social pressure upon the black immigrants to adopt the white standard of beauty and their resistance to such racist pressures, which is depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah. The discourses and practices of beauty have been colonized by the racist attitude of white supremacy in the US. This cultural colonization has exerted the social pressure upon the black immigrants to regulate their bodily features to comply with the white standard of the beauty for social acceptability and professional growth. They suffer physically and emotionally in this process. Ifemelus, the protagonist of Americanah, gradually develops her critical consciousness after going through emotional and physical suffering while straightening her hair. Her resistance process is analyzed in the critical frame of David Jeferess transformative resistance model. She resists the white standard of beauty by proposing an alternative form of aesthetics on the basis of bodily features of the black in her blog posts. She explores her origin, uses power of media, urges for collective resistance, and glamorizes the features of the black in order to propose an alternative form of aesthetics.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, immigrant, race, resistance, white racism

INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a writer of Nigerian origin explores the domestic situation of her home country and the experience of the black immigrants in the West in her fictions. Disillusioned by the domestic political and social milieu of their home country Nigeria, her characters embark into the journey to the West with the expectation of the better future prospects which is often shattered by the social discrimination to the black immigrants in the Western diaspora. She explores the diverse adversities experienced by the black immigrants in both their home and host country in her fictions. Her novel *Americanah* (2013) portrays the social obligation upon the black immigrants to comply with the white cultural values and practices of aesthetics and their gradual resistance by proposing an alternative form beauty.

Americanah basically depicts the journey of a young girl Ifemelu, the protagonist, from her home country Nigeria to the US and back to Nigeria. In the US, she experiences the racism and its adverse consequences particularly in the norms of aesthetics and attractiveness. Like other black immigrants, she faces various social pressures to comply

with the Western notion of beauty particularly straightening her curly hair for her social mobility and professional prospects. Initially, she gives in to the hegemonic Western notion of the beauty and tolerates the physical and emotion pain of straightening her kinky hair. However, she gradually develops her critical consciousness about such racist practices and begins to resist the white notion of aesthetics by proposing an alternative standard of beauty on the basis of the physical features of the black. This article analyzes the connection of beauty and race, and the resistance of the black immigrants by proposing an alternative standard of beauty through the David Jefferess' postulation of transformative model of postcolonial resistance which focuses on the transformation of the social reality, perception and human relationship.

Jefferess (2008) emphasizes both on new type of human relationship and change in material condition in his transformative resistance by analyzing Mahatma Gandhi's resistance of colonial power in India and South African reconciliation initiatives as case studies to postulate his transformative model of resistance. Resistance, in Gandhian model, "does not signify the insurgency of the 'oppressed' against the 'oppressor' but the transformation of the material and discursive structures that maintain oppression" (p. 134). He advocates the social changes which includes "a broad social, cultural and material transformation of society that went beyond deconstruction of the narrow parameters of colonial power, authority and identity politics" (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 227). His political resistance also includes the spiritual transformation of the self which, "he experimented with a lived subjectivity of 'truth' rooted in concepts of self-government, the welfare of all, and non-violence derived from Christian and Hindu traditions" (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 227). For Gandhi, "the transformation of the material and discursive structures that maintain oppression, and a 'new humanism' *is* resistance rather than its after-effect or aim" (Jefferess, 2008, p.134). He focuses on new humanism deconstructing the binary of the self and the other, the social structures of producing inequality and conflict, along with exploitative colonial power in his resistance process. Jefferess also finds space for new human relationship in South Africa peace process led by Nelson Mandela.

Jefferess takes the South African post-apartheid reconciliation process as his second example of transformative model of resistance. This process is linked to material and social transformation, depending not on antagonistic relationship, but the production of a discourse of mutual responsibility which "deconstruct the antagonistic discourse of apartheid power" (Jefferess, 2008, p.172). He argues that "this project of reconciliation deconstructs colonial knowledge and produces an alternative discourse demanding an alternative structure of relations through recognition, redistribution, and connection" (Jefferess, 2008, as cited in Shahjahan, 2011). This process attempts to change the colonial discourse of knowledge and meaning, not for the past, but for the present and the future. In this process, it also aims to propose an alternative structure of relation for mutual harmony by acknowledging the past. So, this process provides "space for the memories of the past and acknowledges the abuse, violence and ideology of apartheid" (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 228). By acknowledging the past, this process attempts to foster new human relationship on the basis of the new discourse which has been jeopardized by apartheid policies. This process has "great transformative potential because it does not merely say 'no' to power; rather, it moves outside of the antagonistic binaries central to colonial ideology towards an ethics and politics of connection" (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 228). So, it is a constant process of transformation of both the narratives within which people make sense of their experience and the material and social structure produced by these narratives.

Analyzing Gandian resistance and South African reconciliation practice, Jefferess argues that resistance is "multi-faceted and involves the transformation of relationships, material reality, and perception of both self and other" (Jefferess, 2008, p. 22). He reframes resistance as an attempt to propose new form of human relationship and to transform the exploitative narratives and material structures. It is not simply a reactive movement of opposing and subverting the colonial rule. Rather it is a matter of personal and social transformation which are inextricably tied together. This model focuses on the creation of new humanism, new ways of being based on mutual interdependence and transformative social structure by deconstructing the binary opposition. With such theoretical frame, this article analyzes the resistance of the black immigrant characters to the colonial discourse of beauty, and its repercussion on their personal relationship and material condition in American geo-cultural space in Adichie's *Americanah*.

THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND BEAUTY

The intersection of race and beauty adversely affects the black immigrants restricting the prospects of opportunities and annihilating their self-identity in the US. Although slavery and racist legal provisions have been formally abolished, the racist hierarchy of the white supremacy influences the discourse and practices of beauty and imposes social obligation to the black immigrants to alter their physical features. Even the media and other social practices are propagating such ideas and reinforcing white supremacy. The black immigrants are under pressure of changing their kinky hair, dark skin colour, and huge body structure to comply with the white standard of beauty for their professional prospects and social mobility. However, changing these bodily features renders physical and emotional pain in them. Unlike their home country, these black immigrants face such negative repercussions of their black racial identity in their host country America.

The black immigrants face the issue of race only coming to America. The Nigerian immigrant Ifemelus reveals that "When you make the choice to come to America, you become black" (Adichie, 2013, p. 220). They do not face any issue relating to their skin colour and race in their native country. Ifemelu contrasts the situation between her home and host countries: "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). Apparently, race is a social construction on the basis of biological features. The American social construction of the black race differs from than that of African countries. So, Ifemelu stresses in her blog post, "To My Fellow Non- American Blacks: In America Your Are Black, Baby" (Adichie, 2013, p. 121). She further comments about racist attitude of American: "Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't black in your country? You're in America now" (Adichie, 2013, p. 121). The dominant white Americans homogenize all the black immigrants irrespective of their heterogeneities and impose the discriminatory practices and discourse of beauty upon them.

The aesthetics values propagated by media also reinforce the racist attitude of white supremacy. They indirectly impose pressure on the black female to imitate the white standard of the beauty which means changing their natural features of their body. One of Ifemelu's blog posts reveals this fact by referring to a TV show which presents a black woman with natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky) as ugly "before" and pretty "after" her hair is straightened (Adichie, 2013, p. 299). This is "an indirect way of compelling black women to strive for 'beautiful,' 'professional,' and 'normal' hair" (Dasi, 2019, p. 144). In America, "straight and sleek hair is… synonymous to beautiful and professional hair" (Dasi, 2019, p. 144) and the black women either change their natural hair to look

beautiful and professional or remain ugly and unprofessional with their natural hair. Such message is directly or indirectly circulated by various media.

Ifemelu notices the exclusion of the black in the practices and discourse of the beauty in women's magazines in America. While discussing about racial representation in the beauty magazines, she takes her boyfriend Curt to a bookstore and shows him all women's magazines: "So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women's magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me [Ifemelu]" (Adichie, 2013, p. 295). She explains how these magazines are propagating the white notion of the beauty only although they pretend to be written for all women: "This tells you about different hair products for *everyone* – and 'everyone' means blondes, brunettes and redheads. I am none of those. And this tells you about the best conditioners – for straight, wavy and curly. Not kinky" (Adichie 2013, p. 295). There is no beauty tip for the black women like Ifemelu. In fact, "the media, Hollywood and pop culture all help in reinforcing the Anglo-American concept of beauty and suppressing the black minority. This encourages cultural prejudices and exposes the social implications of race" (Dasi, 2019, p. 142). As a result, the notion of the beauty imposes pressure on the black women to look like the white to be beautiful. Out of other physical features, the kinky and black hair of the black women has become most contested marker of beauty.

For the black immigrants, hair is an essential component of beauty and a contested territory of the intersection of race and beauty. In the US, "the binary opposite "good/bad" hair has for centuries been an epistemological tool used to juxtapose western and Black beauty, devaluing the status of the latter, and reinforcing a eurocentric aesthetics" (Cruz-Gutierrz, 2018, p. 66). The white women's straight and silk hair is considered as standard of beauty from which the kinky and curly hair of the black women is negatively contrasted and considered marker of ugliness. Moreover, the racist hierarchy of the black and white is further reinforced by the beauty industry. From a very young age, "black females are taught how to perform femininity through the media, often with a focus on or preference for whiteness" (Sneddon, 2018, p. 3). As a result, the black women are under pressure of hair-straightening as "a camouflage or mimicry strategy" (Cruz-Gutierrz, 2018, p. 67) of their assimilation process to the white notion of beauty. They also face such pressure in their professional and social life.

The racist perspectives of beauty impose a social obligation to the black immigrants to go through beauty treatment of their African kinky hair for their professionalism and social mobility. When Ifemelu is called for the job of a public relations officer in Baltimore, her friend Ruth advises her to straighten Afro hair because "Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job" (Adichie, 2013, p. 202). Ifemelu also affirms such racist views: "straight is best but if it's going to be curly, then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or at worst, spiral curls but never kinky" (Adichie, 2013, p. 206). So, she straightens her hair by bearing the burns of the relaxer. Looking at her new hair, the hair dresser seems very satisfied as she comments, "Wow, girl, you've got the white girl swing!" (Adichie, 2013, p. 205). Such instances exemplify the practices of institutionalized racism which puts pressure on the black to ascribe the white standard of beauty to get good professional status. Consequently, the black women are forced to alter their hair by using relaxers and hot combs to suit white standard of beauty.

Ifemelu's aunt Uju also faces similar pressure while facing United States Medical Licensing Examination. To get a license of medical professional, she needs to refashion her natural African hair to meet the American standard of beauty. She is expected to undo

her braids and relax her hair to look more professional and normal as "straight and sleek hair is therefore synonymous to beautiful and professional hair (Dasi, 2019, p. 144). Uju expresses that "I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional" (Adichie, 2013, p. 92). To such racist attitude, Ifemelu retorts, "So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" to which Uju answers, "I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (Adichie, 2013, p. 146). Uju's answer clearly reflects that the success and professionalism are associated with straight hair like that of white women in America unlike their home country Nigeria. Such racist attitude imposes pressure to the black women to ascribe to the white standard of beauty to get success in America.

Ifemelu is quite aware about the connection of the career prospects and types of hair in American society. The black immigrants either should be satisfied with traditional manual and low ranking jobs or should mimic the white standard of the beauty particularly the hair to enhance the prospects of getting the better job. She reveals this aspect in her conversation with her white boyfriend Curt when he asks her why she has to straighten her "full and cool" (Adichie, 2013, p. 204) hair. She explains:

> My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky. (Adichie, 2013, p. 204)

Ifemelu reveals why a black woman immigrant has to straighten her hair to look like a white in American society. She does not straighten her hair for sake of beautification. Rather, she attempts to look like a white girl because her natural kinky black hair restricts her job opportunities in America. In this sense, the prospects of good profession, beauty, and whiteness have intrinsic connections in America.

Besides, hair texture, the connection of beauty and race reflects in the colour of skin in America. The racist standard of beauty defines the dark skin of the black people as "a sign of lack of intelligence, ugliness and evil" as opposed to white skin which represented "purity, civilization and beauty" (Keith, 2009, p. 32). The negative implications of the black skin lead the black immigrants to chemical alteration of their physical features. For instance, Bartholomew, a black immigrant and boyfriend of aunt Uju uses skin-bleaching products to make his complexion fair. But, the result is a farce; his face turns on a greenish-yellow instead of fair one. On his absence, Ifemelu remarks: "His face is a funny colour. He must be using the cheap ones with no sunscreen. What kind of man bleaches his skin, *biko*? Aunty Uju shrugged, as though she had not noticed the greenish yellow tone of the man's face, worse at his temples" (Adichie, 2013, pp. 117-118). The attempt of Bartholomew reflects that not only the black women but also the black men are suffering from the racist white notion of beauty. The racist notion of beauty also put pressure on the black immigrants to regulate the size and shape of body structure along with hair and skin colour.

The body structure is another important marker of beauty along with hair texture and skin colour in an American beauty discourse. The racist American standard dehumanizes the fat and huge body structure of the black women. Consequently, the black women feel pressure of losing their weight to reshape their body to meet the white notion of beauty. Ginika, a friend of Ifemelu who has come to America earlier, feels pressure of losing her weight when her American high school peers start teasing her as pork. But in Nigeria, Ginika, has annually been voted "Prettiest Girl" (Adichie, 2013, p. 56) in high school due to her "caramel skin and wavy hair that, when unbraided, fell down on her neck instead

of standing Afro like" (Adichie, 2013, pp. 55-56), and whose big bottoms Ifemelu had always envied (Adichie, 2013, p. 124). But these features are markers of ugliness in America and Ginika loses her weight which Adichie, the novelist describes; "her head looked bigger, balanced on a long neck that brought to mind a vague exotic animal, and she gets close to anorexia". In Ifemelu's eyes, she looks like "a dried stock fish" (Adichie, 2013, p. 123). The use of animal imagery to depict Ginika's physical change reveals "the dehumanization that accompanies cultural assimilation" (Dasi, 2019, p. 145). In this sense, meeting the standard of white beauty renders physical and mental sufferings in the black immigrants.

The black immigrants suffer both physically and emotionally while mimicking the white standard of beauty by altering their bodily appearance. While straightening her hair, Ifemelu's initial enthusiasm of "new adventure" (Adichie, 2013, p. 203) does not last long in the hurtful procedure. At first, she attempts at relaxing her hair at her home internalizing her friend's advice, "lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters (Adichie, 2013, p. 205). However, she cannot do it with store-bought relaxer at home. Then, she goes to a hair salon. At the salon, she "felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu's head bent backward against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head" (Adichie, 2013, p. 203) After going through such painful process, she feels alienated and a sense of loss with her new look after straightening her hair: "the verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully" (Adichie, 2013, p. 203). With burning pain in both on her head and in her heart, Ifemelu leaves the salon. The burns that "Ifemelu has on her scalp after the relaxer treatment add a layer of physical trauma to the struggle for "good" hair" (Sneddon, 2018, p. 6). Such act of mimicry does not function as a form of resistance as theorized by Homi Bhabha. Conversely, it is a self-destructive act of transforming non-white female's body into the white one. This can be considered as an act of violence committed by the internalized sense of the white supremacy which causes both bodily and emotional pain to the black females.

The white standard of beauty annihilates the self-identity and enacts as a measure of oppression on the black women. The reaffirmation of the white standard of beauty by straightening hair renders the problem of identity in Ifemelu. After the hair straightening, the narrator in the novel describes Ifemelu's perplexity:

> Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. […] She did not recognize herself. She left the salon mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died had made her feel a sense of loss. (Adichie, 2013, p. 203)

With her straight hair, Ifemelu fails to identify herself as kinky hair is her natural identity. The phrase "something organic dying" symbolizes the dying of her organic black identity in the process of straightening her hair. So she suffers 'a sense of loss' with her new look. Moreover, her friend Wambui explains the physical and mental trauma of relaxing black hair: "Relaxing your hair is like being in a prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you" (Adichie, 2013, p. 205). In this sense, straightening "hair is a form of oppression that is covert in nature (Sneddon, 2018, p. 6) imposed by the white standard of beauty to the black women.

The process and repercussion of straightening hair lead to traumatic experience to Ifemelu. She tolerates the physical pain during the straightening process with the expectation of social acceptability and prospects of the jobs. However, she suffers the problem of falling hair after her hair treatment. She shares this problem with her friend

Wambui who explains that the use of relaxers cause the loss of hair and suggests her to cut her hair: "Do you know what's in a relaxer? That stuff can kill you. You need to cut your hair and go natural" (Adichie, 2013, p. 208). Despite her initial reluctance, she cuts her straightened hair very short and finds herself "ugly" (Adichie, 2013, p. 208). She compares herself with a boy and an insect: "She was all big eyes and big head. At best, she looked like a boy; at worst, like an insect" (Adichie, 2013, p. 208). On the next day, she finds her hair "like a mob of wool sitting on her head" (Adichie, 2013, p. 209) when she looks at mirror. Then, she refuges in seclusion and sends a text message her friend Wambui: "I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today" (Adichie, 2013, p. 209). Ifemelu dehumanizes herself after cutting her hair and suffers a traumatic experience. Her suffering is the result of her internalization of white standard of beauty and attractiveness which demands for long and straight hair.

Ifemelu's realization of ugliness and less feminine because of her short black hair reveals underlying connection of beauty and femininity with whiteness. In America, women's beauty and attractiveness are equated with features of white females. Among other features, long straight hair of white women is an important marker of beauty. In *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power and Black Women's Consciousness,* Banks (2000) explicates: "The desire to have long hair relates to perceptions of what is considered feminine, and those traits are associated with white women" (p. 91). He further explains how the blacks are excluded in the discourse of the beauty:

> What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blond), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women's hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. […] Even if hair is only one of many markers of femininity, or lack thereof, it is definitely one of the most powerful. (Bank, 2000, p. 93)

The white racist standard of beauty associates the natural hair of black women with unattractiveness and inferiority. Ifemelu's association of her short black hair with insects and ugliness reflects the continuation of the white racist stereotypes.

Precisely, the American notion of beauty has been shaped by the racist ideology of the white supremacy and defines the features of the black people as primitive and ugly. Media and social practices are also promoting such notion. This connection of race and beauty render social pressure on the black immigrants to alter their physical features to comply with the white standard of beauty. As a result, the black immigrants mainly the female undergo in the process of physical alteration such as straightening hair and losing weight to enhance their prospects of good job and social mobility. However, they suffer emotional and physical pain while undergoing such processes. Disillusioned by such discriminatory social practices, some of the black immigrants develop critical consciousness about the racist ideology of American beauty and resist such practices by reclaiming their own alternative standard of beauty on the basis of their racial features.

ALTERNATIVE AESTHETICS OF BEAUTY

Ifemelu's resistance process involves developing critical consciousness to asserting an alternative form of beauty exploiting the virtual space. Initially, the virtual community "HappilykinkyNappy.com" gives her emotional and psychological strength. Actually, the "HappilykinkyNappy.com" is an online community of the black females who post their natural black hair by glorifying the black beauty. Interacting in this websites with other black women, she develops her critical consciousness and supports the discussion on the alternative form of beauty that no longer deglamourizes the black hair. With her constant interaction with this virtual community, she gradually transforms herself from a

submissive girl to white supremacy to an activist of resisting the white racist beauty. Then, she initiates her own blog titled "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America" to counter the hegemonic white norms of aesthetics. In the participatory open space of her blog, she encourages all the black women to break their silence and collectively resist the suppression of the white racism. Moreover, she appeals all the black that standard of beauty is simply a matter of social construction which differs in different cultural and historical contexts, and encourages all the black women to follow their own black standard of beauty which has social and political implications in America. She proposes an alternative form of beauty by resisting the white hegemony by exploiting the virtual space.

In order to resist the colonial white notion of beauty, the black females exploit the power of media in shaping the black women's perception about their natural black hair. In fact, the white utilizes media as; "agents of cultural imperialism—promoting western values that undermine local cultures and resources on which alternative development strategies could be built" (Kiely, 2009, p. 122). The black females also use the same weapon to resist the white cultural imperialism in practices and discourses of beauty. They initiate a website, HappliyKinkyNappy.com to promote the aesthetic value of black kinky hair. The black women post different pictures of natural black hair and tips for looking after it. Joining with this virtual group of black women, Ifemelu overcomes the suffering of cutting her hair short and begins to love her natural black hair. With this changing perception, she fosters self-confidence of countering the white notion of beauty by initiating own blog about race and beauty. In her blog posts, she encourages other black women to share their experience of racism and exposes various racist practices in America. The black females capitalize, "opportunities offered by technological globalisation to voice their own concerns and move towards global centres" (Dais, 2019, p. 150). Interaction in these virtual spaces, Ifemelu develops her self-awareness about her own natural features which encourage her to resist the colonial white notion of beauty.

Ifemelu gets an impetus to overcome of her suffering and self-annihilation of following the white standard of beauty by joining to a virtual community known as "HappilykinkyNappy.com" of the black females who take pride on their natural hair. Earlier, she has felt embarrassment with her short hair which she has cut after suffering from the problem of hair fall due to the chemical effect of hair straightening process. However, the online community which consists of posts of black females with different types of their natural hair encourages her to take pride on her natural heritage and resist the white standard of beauty. Adichie (2013) explains the virtual space:

> HAPPILYKINKYNAPPY.COM had a bright yellow background, message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big, Afros, twist, braids, massive raucous curls and coils…. They complimented each other's photo and ended comments with "hugs". They complained about black magazines never having natural haired women in their pages, about drugstore products so poisoned by mineral oil that they could not moisturize natural hair. (p. 212)

Moreover, it "allows alternative media to grant women more autonomy, visibility and a common space where voices can be heard both individually and collectively" (Cruz-Gutierrz, 2018, p. 9). The users in the site not only share their knowledge of taking care of their natural hair, but also their experience and feeling with each other which boost up the confidence of other females. This virtual community of the black women proposes an alternative form of beauty by revalorizing the natural hair of the black people.

The website "HappilykinkyNappy.com" initiates a counter discourse on alternative form of beauty challenging the dominant white standard. In the US, the social expectation

reinforced by beauty magazines imposes the black females like Ifemelu to adopt the white standard of beauty. The narrator explains:

> She [Ifemelu] reached forward and pushed the magazine into the pouch in front of her and said, with a slight sniff, that is was absurd how women's magazines forced images of small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate. (Adichie, 2013, p. 178)

In such social context, where the norms of white beauty is universalized and imposed on the black women, the website proposes an alternative form of beauty. This virtual community "uses natural hair- a signifier of black femininity- to re-assemble black female bodies as desirable and attractive through its untangling and challenging of racial histories that find expression in the valuation of hair" (Ndaka, 2017, p. 114). This website attempts to transform the physical features basically the hair of the black from racist perception as ugliness and primitivism to desirable and attractive features. In their dissident practice and advocacy, the black women show the multiplicities in the norms of aesthetics and beauties challenging the privileges position of white beauty.

Resisting the social pressure, Ifemelu begins to love her natural kinky hair after her social interactions in the "HapplilyKinkyNappy.com". The virtual space counters the social practices of American society which regards the natural black hair as 'unprofessional' and 'uncivilized', and appreciates the kinky black hair of the black women. She remembers a post by Jamilah1977: "*I love the sistas who love their straight weaves, but I'm never putting horse hair on my head again*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). This post turns to be an epiphanic moment to Ifemelu who declares in her comment that "*Jamilah's words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me*" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). The phrase 'God gave me' obviously refers to her natural black hair which she considers 'beautiful'. Other black females also support her opinion and, "wrote responses, posting thumps-up sign, telling her how they like the photo she had put up" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). With this changing perception, she begins to love her natural hair: "[S]he looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair" (Adichie, 2013, p. 213). Loving her natural hair, she begins to counter the hegemony of the white standard of beauty. About loving own natural features, bell Hooks (1992) argues that the "black folks who 'love blackness'…have decolonized our minds and broken with the kind of white supremacist thinking that suggests we are inferior, inadequate, marked by victimization" (p. 17). In this sense, loving her own natural black hair, Ifemelu involves in the process of resistance of the white standard of beauty.

Ifemelu's contact with the online community becomes a transitional phase of developing her self-awareness and critical consciousness. The nurturing social networking of "HappilykinkyNappy.com" encourages her to begin her own blog which offers her an open and participatory space of discussing the issues of race, gender and beauty. Her blog; Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America (Adichie, 2013, p. 296) enables her to reach out with others as: "[S]he longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America?" (Adichie, 2013, p. 296). Writing blog, she wants to reach out with other black immigrants and lend them a space to break their silence about racist prejudices of the white in the US. This act of writing blog marks the growth of her subjectivity from the passive recipient of the white notion of beauty to an activist of encouraging other to express their experience of racism. Moreover, she also starts using Nigerian accent marks on the blog which shows her attempt of exploring her cultural root. In this sense, the blog

offers her an open space of negotiating her experience of racism with others which help defy the white notion of aesthetics.

Ifemelu's decision of initiating a blog reflects her growing subjectivity and an act of liberation as she coincidently starts it immediately after her break up with her white boyfriend Curt. Unlike in the American society which marginalizes the black, her blog exemplifies the participatory and democratic culture without any racial hierarchy. Her blog embodies a "participatory culture; although now she is not an external participant but the moderator, responsible for allowing the participatory- cultural features to operate. She builds her very own safe space, aiming to voice racial issues and help others who manifest similar desires and anxieties" (Cruz-Gutierrz, 2018, p. 10). She enjoys greater freedom and a more prominent role in the virtual space of blog which she exploits as an advocacy tool for her social campaign of exposing the inherent racism in America. She explains why she gets back to her natural hair by rejecting the white notion of beauty which also encourages other black females to involve in the critical discussion of race and beauty. There are lots of comments from viewers either supposing or opposing her perspectives. In this sense, her blog initiates an open discussion about race and beauty which helps develop critical awareness of the black women. The critical awareness is quite significant in resisting the social pressure of the white norms of beauty which she urges all the black to resist collectively.

In her resistance process, Ifemelu appeals all the black immigrants to form an alliance for their collective concerns; to challenge the white racism irrespective of their regional and cultural heterogeneities. In one of her blog posts, she appeals:

> Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. And admit it—you say "I'm not black" only because you know black is at the bottom of America's race ladder. (Adichie, 2013, p. 220)

Ifemelu explains that her black colour matters only coming to America as the derogative terms "watermelon", "racist slur" and "tar Baby" are used to offend black people (Adichie, 2013, p. 221). The black immigrants suffer the common problem of white racism which keeps the blacks "at the bottom of America's race ladder" regardless of their various origins. So, she writes her blogs in English so that she can reach to all the blacks who have different native languages. She urges to all the blacks to speak up by breaking their silence to counter to such racial discrimination in collective manner.

In her blog, Ifemelu expresses freely and encourages other black to break their silence without any fear of racial prejudices. She wants the black immigrants to exploit this virtual platform to make their voice heard and make them visible in American society. In one of her blogs, "Open thread for all the zipped up Negroes," she encourages other blacks:

> This is for the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space. (Adichie, 2013, p. 307)

She realizes the tendencies of blacks who prefer either silent opposition or submitting to the white supremacy unquestioningly to raising their voices for their concerns. So, she appeals the blacks to "unzip" their silence in the blog as it is "a safe space". Her appeals in the blog get good responses; "The blog had unveiled itself and shed its milk teeth; by

turns, it surprised her, pleased her, left her behind. Its readers increased, by the thousands from all over the world" (Adichie, 2013, p. 303). She also receives requests to lead diversity workshop, to lecture and to be hosted on programs to talk about race (Adichie, 2013, p. 304). Gradually, her blog encourages the blacks to question and challenge the dominant discourse of white supremacy in the practices and discourses of aesthetics. By questioning the dominant white norms of beauty, the black females gradually transforms themselves from compliant beings to self-confident ones.

In her resistance process, Ifemelu transforms herself from a timid and submissive girl to an assertive one which is apparent in her move from straight hair to her afro braids and natural hair. She no longer thinks that only straight and silky hair is beautiful and kinky hair is ugly. This rejection is "followed by the strength to transform the feeling of ugliness, hair-hiding and hate that she internalizes, to one of beauty, pride and love as she regains confidence in her natural dense, soft and tightly coiled hair texture" (Dasi, 2019, p. 150). Evidently, her perception transforms from "I hate my hair. I couldn't go to work today" (Adichie, 2013, p. 211) to "I like my hair the way God made it" (Adichie, 2013, p. 2). Her assertion to natural hair while discussing with her hairdresser Aisha also makes her transformation apparent:

> 'Color four.'
> 'Not good color,' Aisha said promptly.
> 'That's what I use.'
> 'It looks dirty. You don't want color one?'
> 'Color one is too black, it looks fake,' Ifemelu said, loosening her head wrap. 'Sometimes I use color two but color four is closest to my natural color.'…
> She touched Ifemelu's hair. 'Why you don't have relaxer?'
> 'I like my hair the way God made it.' (Adichie, 2013, p. 13)

Ifemelu transforms herself acknowledging and accepting her natural hair. In this process, she accepts the differences between her natural kinky hair and straight and silk hair of the white people. Recognizing the differences is the one of the strategies of the black immigrant to work out against the hegemonic white standard of beauty. Moreover, she realizes that beauty is the matter of social construction.

In her resistance process, Ifemelu also encourages other black females to be critical about the hegemonic practices of beauty which is nothing more than a social construction. She thinks that there is not natural and universal standard of beauty for all human beings. The notions of beautiful and ugly are the matter of social construction reinforced by various social apparatus by the dominant group. Then, she critically engages with the white notion of beauty. This is apparent in her conversation with her aunt Uju. When her aunt Uju says that her natural hair "scuffy and untidy" (Adichie, 2013, p. 216) and compares it with "jute" (Adichie, 2013, p. 216), she counters: "What if every magazine you opened and every film you watched had beautiful women with hair like jute? You would be admiring my hair now" (Adichie, 2013, p. 216). Apparently, she exposes how the movies and media reinforce the white standard and brainwash the black immigrants. The persistent exposures of the white standard of beauty attempt to universalize the same and undermine heterogeneous forms of various ethnic minorities. she critically looks at this process and asks if the movies and media circulate the image of the black women as beautiful, people will no longer think the natural black hair as ugly and untidy. Rather, the black hair will be considered as standard of beauty. So, she persuades even other females to look at critically to the dominant practices of beauty and love their natural hair.

Ifemelu's transformation from straightened hair to natural hair reflects her evolving subjectivity with political and social implications. This "deviation from the norm also

means that she has to accept the consequences, which in this case come in the form of comments concerning her political and sexual orientation. Her hairstyle is read as a political statement eliciting certain reactions from her co-workers" (Feldner, 2019, p.188). This is apparent in the hesitant questions and comments she receives from her colleagues: "'You look different,' her co-workers said, all of them a little tentative. 'Does it mean anything? Like, something political?' Amy asked. Miss Margaret …asked, 'why did you cut your hair, hon? Are you a lesbian?'" (Adichie, 2013, p. 211). Such remarks reveal that her decision of going to the natural hair violates the social expectation. It is not only matter of refashioning her hair style. This is substantiated on her colleague Margaret's remarks on her decision of leaving America, ""you leaving?"… "Sorry hon, they need to treat folk better around here. You think your hair was part of the problem?"" (Adichie, 2013, p. 211). obviously, hair of black women embodies the nexus of race and beauty and going for a natural hair is a political statement of resisting white standard of beauty.On the whole, her resistance process involves developing critical consciousness to white standard of beauty, loving natural black hair and proposing an alternative discourse of beauty for the black with the assistance of the power offered by the social networking sites of internet.

CONCLUSION

In recapitulation, Ifemelu, the protagonist of Adichie's *Americanah* along with her black compatriots resists the social pressure of the hegemonic white notion of the beauty by proposing an alternative notion of aesthetics. Initially, they suffer socially, emotionally and psychologically by the Western standard of beauty which has been based on racist attitudes of white supremacy. They are under constant social pressure of straightening their kinky hair, whitening black skin and reducing fat body structure. Various social practices including media have been explicitly and implicitly creating such pressure on them. As a result, Ifemelu undergoes the process of straightening her kinky in order to comply with the white notion of beauty so that she can have better career prospects and social acceptability. However, she gradually involves in resistance process of such racist norms of aesthetics by developing her critical consciousness. She begins to resist the both discourses and practices of the white standard of beauty by exploiting the power of media especially the blogs and websites in the internet to reach out to global audience. Using the open and participatory cyber space, she with other black immigrants begins to advocate the aesthetics of their natural kinky hair and other physical features as an alternative form of aesthetics. Such advocacy gives emotional and psychological impetus to other black immigrants to counter the social pressure of altering their bodily features to comply with the white standard of beauty. Besides, glorifying their natural features, they also underlie the significance of collective resistance and urge all the black to join together to counter the hegemonic notion of white beauty. With their counter discourse of aesthetics and unity, they emphasize on the transformation in subjectivities and material condition of the marginalized black immigrants. Precisely, the black immigrants decolonize the notion of beauty by proposing an alternative discourse of beauty on the basis of own natural features.

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