

**The Past in the Present: Race, Gender and Transnationalism in Zoë Wicomb's *October*
and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah***

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Abstract

This thesis will interrogate the ways in which the most recent novels of Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (namely *October* and *Americanah*) explore race, gender and transnational issues. Wicomb and Adichie share an interest in representing the lives of people who have been historically marginalised by racial and gender classifications. This thesis will argue that historical and stereotypical ways of looking at people, particularly African people, are still prevalent in the twenty-first century. Wicomb's interest is in the coloured community and the impact that apartheid ideology has had on it. She shows, as this thesis will argue, that notions of shame and respectability still influence the coloured community, post-1994, in the same ways they did under apartheid. Furthermore, the thesis will show that religion, which was used to justify apartheid, has been instrumental in maintaining racist and sexist norms in the coloured community in post-apartheid South Africa.

Adichie's novel, on the other hand, shows the impact of gender norms in Nigeria on her female characters. Unlike characters in Wicomb's novel, Adichie's mostly experience racial bias when they move to Western countries. This thesis will argue that many Western countries, which were the main beneficiaries of colonialism, continue to 'other' Africans, in spite of their claims to respect all human beings.

Wicomb's and Adichie's novels depict characters that are moving between different continents, along with the impact that this has on them. In the twenty-first century, more people are moving between different spaces and, as a result, interacting with different cultures. These migrations, as this thesis will show, give rise to paradoxical circumstances: people are still being judged according to their race and gender, in spite of the freedom that these moves are supposed to lead to. Of central importance to both novels then is the question of home and belonging. Since people are moving between different continents, is it still possible to belong to one place? Is it in fact possible to belong at all? These are some of the questions that will be raised and answered in this thesis.

Lastly, the thesis will look at the thematic representations of reading and writing in the novels under consideration. This is most evident in Adichie's novel where her main character starts blogging as a way to express her dissatisfaction with the racist and sexist environment she encounters in the United States of America. The thesis will explore how Adichie examines blogging as a mode of communication that is unique to the twenty-first century. It will argue that it is perhaps through new media that historically subjugated subjects, such as African

people and women, will be able to express themselves. Less hackneyed modes of communication might provide the necessary channels for those who have historically been denied voice to finally find it.

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Introduction

We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

(Bhabha *The Location of Culture* 3)

Homi Bhabha's book, *The Location of Culture*, has had an indelible influence on me over the last six years at university. This influence, I suspect, was a result of my growing awareness that the world around me was changing and I could no longer rely on my established notions of identity and belonging. Most of the changes to which I refer are a result of the technological advances of the twentieth century and the seismic shifts they have provoked in the twenty-first century. We have witnessed an extraordinary revolution in how we travel and communicate, and consequently, in how we relate to each other. These changes, it seems to me, are also changing notions of what it means to be a human being.

What interests me in Bhabha's work is his acute awareness of these changes and how they relate to the history of colonised countries and Western countries, and the interactions that occur between cultures due to technological advancements. As this chapter's epigraph points out, we now inhabit a world where "space and time cross to produce complex figures," and we can therefore no longer think about identity and belonging in essentialist terms. As Bhabha is aware, and as I will argue throughout this thesis, the present is profoundly disorientating, and new ways of thinking about what it means to belong and to find a home are needed. This state of affairs can be traumatic since humans, as Julia Kristeva argues, want to belong, or at least feel they can attain a sense of belonging (2).

Colonialism and its legacy within both the colonising and colonised countries has had a significant influence on the way we think about belonging in the contemporary world. Colonialism was a system based on the belief that European countries were civilised and had a duty to colonise and civilise those who they saw as barbaric. It was because of these beliefs that Africa was divided into different countries by Europe in 1884 at the Berlin Conference. The intention was to colonise and civilise the continent. This mission to 'civilise' was also motivated by the desire to economically exploit African resources. African countries received minimal development from the 'civilising' mission, and most of the resources were diverted to develop the colonising countries. When African countries attained independence in the 1950s, a lot of damage had already been done and it was impossible for countries to return to their

precolonial state, as their economic, political, and social functioning had become entangled with that of the countries that colonised them.

My interest in the work of Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stems from these writers' awareness of this history and the plethora of ways it continues to play out in the twenty-first century. In line with Bhabha's views on the complexity of the present, Wicomb and Adichie are aware that people no longer solely belong to their countries of birth. People have been forced into exile because of political instability within their own countries, or are moving to other places in search of better opportunities. This means that they are intermingling with different cultures and inevitably constructing new identities. Furthermore, it means that although essentialist notions of thinking about identity and belonging persist in the twenty-first century, they are inaccurate as most people, as Bhabha states, occupy an "in-between space" (2).

Although Bhabha seems to suggest that this contemporary space should be seen as an advantage, other critics, such as Edward Said, have been sceptical of the ways in which movements of the twentieth century have been represented in literature. Said argues, for instance, that "exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible; at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience at first hand" (138). Said's description of exile is apt as some of the experiences depicted in the novels show the deprivations experienced by migrants who move from one continent to another. These characters could not be expected to appreciate Bhabha's notion of the "in-between space." This thesis will therefore give a complex and nuanced analysis of the impact of exile, and of moving between continents, on the characters that will be studied.

While Wicomb and Adichie are aware of the need to reconstruct notions of identity in the contemporary world, this thesis will argue that their novels are nevertheless mindful of how hegemonic Western constructions of identity continue to dictate and inform acceptable ways of living. Wicomb's *October* and Adichie's *Americanah* are both concerned with the ways in which this hegemony impacts lives that have been marginalised by colonialism and neo-colonialism. This thesis will contend that the writers' representations of these hegemonies demonstrate how the past continues to pervade the present.

The intersections between race and gender play an important role in Wicomb's and Adichie's work. Chapter One of this thesis will contextualise the novels by looking into how race and gender hierarchies were constructed in the nineteenth century and their continued impact in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A lot of literature has been written that attempts to make sense of these racial and gender classifications such as Frantz Fanon's *Black*

Skin, *White Masks*, Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*, Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* and bell hooks's *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. This chapter will give a broad historical and theoretical overview of racial and gendered constructions of identity and the numerous debates they have generated.

Since this thesis is looking at two African female novelists, it will look at the emergence of postcolonial African literature and how female characters were initially represented in it. The explosion of African feminism, much of which emerged in postcolonial Africa, sprung out of the criticism that was levelled against African male writers and their marginalising representation of female characters in their work. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi argues that "the study of African Literature has long been the preserve of male writers" and that this has happened "despite the enviable position women have occupied as oral artists" (2). It was because of this marginal position, she asserts, that black feminists defined the position of black women as one characterised by multiple struggles and because of this sought to engage in their own representation of their experiences (1). This thesis will argue that Wicomb's and Adichie's novels continue in this tradition as they provide a broad and complex representation of African women, produced by African women.

Instead of conducting a direct comparison of the two novels, I have decided to give each novel its own chapter so as to enable a more detailed analysis of each novel. This is because although I found most of the themes in the novels similar, there are significant divergences in how these themes and concerns are dealt with. In Chapter Two, I start by looking at Wicomb's novel *October*. It will be clear that this chapter follows directly from the arguments that have been presented in Chapter One. The chapter looks in detail at the construction of coloured identity, the ways in which characters are affected by patriarchy, and the difficulty the protagonist has in attempting to adapt the notion of home to the contemporary world. I will demonstrate that Wicomb's novel, much more so than Adichie's, is sceptical of the notion of home. Even at the end of Wicomb's novel, it is unclear whether the protagonist will find a place that she can call home.

Chapter Three will turn to Adichie's novel *Americanah*. It will give a critical analysis of the representation of race and gender and the ways they intersect in the transnational lives of the characters. While Wicomb's novel is set between South Africa and Scotland, Adichie's novel is set between Nigeria, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The novel therefore shows the way in which race and gender function across three countries and therefore casts a broader transnational net than Wicomb's novel. Adichie mostly represents her protagonists as young adults, and she is clearly interested in depicting the challenges that young

people face when they are trying to make it in the world. In doing this, Adichie's novel shows the complex ethical choices that characters often have to make in order to survive in the places where they live.

It is in Chapter Four, the final chapter, that a direct comparison will be made between the two novels. This is because both of these novels show a keen interest in the representation of reading and writing. Both the protagonists of the novels are engaged in these activities. The thesis will argue that Wicomb's and Adichie's representation of their characters' literary engagement resonates with the larger thematic concerns of race and belonging that are depicted in the novels. Furthermore, it will argue that these representations contribute to contemporary debates about the importance of reading and writing and the shifts that have occurred in how these activities are done due to technological advancements.

The influence of these advancements on the practice of reading and writing is especially evident in Adichie's novel, as her protagonist starts a blog that enables her to express herself in ways she would not have been able to do in traditional media platforms. Adichie's representation of blogging observes how communication is taking place in the twenty-first century. However, despite the novel's positive depiction of this new mode of communication, it is cognisant of its limitations, as racist and sexist stereotypes are still pervasive in these new social media platforms.

In *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, Njabulo Ndebele writes that much of the literature that was written under apartheid (and I would argue in other places, such as Nigeria under colonialism) was a literature of the spectacle. Ndebele argues that this inevitable obsession with the spectacle resulted in a literature where there was "very little attempt to delve into intricacies of motive or social processes" as people and situations were seen as "either very good or very bad" (33). This, he maintains, was a result of apartheid and has consequently created a society of "posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation" as reflected in much of the literature that was produced during apartheid (42).

Ndebele further argues that if post-apartheid South Africa will have a different kind of literature, it should be one "based on a direct concern with the way people actually live. That means a range of complex ethical issues involving man-man, man-women, women-man, man-nature, man-society relationships" and this kind of interrogation, he asserts, will make literature "more complex and rich" (52). It is my intention to show that Wicomb and Adichie's novels are deeply concerned with representing the complex ways in which their characters experience

life. Although their novels are concerned with the pervasive hold of the past in the present, the two writers still depict characters, as well as the situations they find themselves in, in complex and nuanced forms. This differentiates their work from what Ndebele terms a literature of the spectacle. I should perhaps note here that because these novels are both recent, *October* having been published in 2014 and *Americanah* in 2013, they are yet to receive much critical attention. This means I have been solely responsible for much of the analysis that is contained in this thesis. While this presented a daunting challenge, I also took great pleasure in it.

Chapter One: Introduction to Context and Theory

I: Introduction to African Postcolonial Literature

When African countries started gaining independence in the 1950s, it was anticipated that new forms of knowledge production and epistemologies which reflected African experiences would emerge and gain prominence within African academic institutions. One of the scholars to make this argument was Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who saw the end of colonialism as an opportunity for African scholars to privilege African knowledge in institutions of higher learning. This, however, was not the case as many African universities continued to privilege Western theoretical frameworks, including Western literature, over African epistemologies and literature in their curricula.

In 1993, when writing his book *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, wa Thiong'o contested that disproportionate focus on Western knowledge was a problem since Western literature tended to be silent on important historical events such as the slave trade, colonialism and contemporary issues such as neo-colonialism and globalisation and their effects on developing countries. This literature, according to him, could not "avoid being affected by the Eurocentric biases of its world view or global vision, and most of it, even when sympathetic, could not altogether escape from the racism inherent in Western enterprise in the rest of the world" (14).

Wa Thiong'o therefore advocated for innovation of knowledge in African universities, and maintained that this knowledge should reflect the daily experiences of students in order to help them attend to their struggles as citizens living in postcolonial societies. As a literary scholar, wa Thiong'o was particularly interested in the kind of literature that was being taught in universities. He called for the inclusion and dominance of African literature in English departments in African countries, which could reflect the locations of the universities and make students conscious of the challenges that were particular to them (45).

The privileging of Western literature within the academy would indeed change in some institutions, as writers and critics such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Es'kia Mphahlele, Njabulo Ndebele and others would produce works of literature and literary criticism that would rewrite national narratives and provide knowledge historically excluded from colonial representations of Africa, and this work would be included in some departments of literary studies. It was in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which has come to be regarded as Africa's most important early postcolonial novel, that showed that African people were complex human

beings who had their own ways of living which were different to settler representations of their lives. Achebe's representation was a counter discourse to the imperialist idea that colonialism could be justified on the basis of its civilising mission. He sought to show that the Igbo culture, similar to other African cultures, had been civilised in its own ways and that contrary to Western discourse, it was actually corrupted and denigrated by the advent of imperialism. Kirsten Holst Petersen writes that this new wave of postcolonial writing aimed to "show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether worthy of a heritage" (253).

These literary texts played an important role, and continue to do so, in resisting denigrating colonialist discourse. They have however come to be criticised by African female scholars, particularly literary scholars and novelists, for either neglecting or misrepresenting the role that women have played in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial societies. African female scholars argue that many of these male-authored texts, produced in the period after independence, portray women as having played a minor role in the struggle for independence and of continuing to be submissive to men in the postcolonial era and not questioning the patriarchal structures that subordinate them. Holst Petersen observes that in the rewriting of national narratives, "the women's issue was not only ignored – it was conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence" (253). As a result of this effacement of their contributions, women have only been represented as "passive, as always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and therefore completely dependent on their husbands" (Nfah-Abbenyi 4). This means that the patriarchal structures that had existed in pre-colonial Africa and during colonialism were kept intact and not questioned in the literature produced by the early postcolonial male writers.

In *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, Elleke Boehmer argues that the construction of the nation has historically only been imagined through sexual binaries of male and female. In African countries, where it was arguably necessary to have nationalistic ideas about place because of the fight against colonialism, this meant a deep inscription of these gendered roles. As a result, there have been "specific symbolic roles for male and female historical actors" which has meant that "national difference, like other forms of difference, is constituted through the medium of the sexual binary, using the figure of the women as a primary vehicle" (Boehmer 5). Women become these primary vehicles of their nations because of how they have been associated with ideas of the "soil, earth, home, and family," (27) and imbedded in these ideas are notions of motherhood which invite associations with:

origins – birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord – and rests upon the frequent, and some might say ‘natural’, identification of the mother with the beloved earth, the national territory and the first-spoken language, the national tongue.

(27)

Boehmer argues that whether one looks at the nation from an iconographic perspective, or at administrative structures and policies, what one will find is that:

the new postcolonial nation is historically a male constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as bearers of tradition.

(27)

A literary representation of male hegemony can be found in Wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*. The novel is a portrayal of Kenya’s struggle for independence, and the heroes of the novel are two males, Kihika and Mugo, while the roles played by women are only those of wives and mothers (22). Like much of the early postcolonial African literature, Wa Thiong’o’s novel does not represent women as having been actively engaged in the struggle against colonialism.

Even though nations, as Boehmer asserts, have been constructed through these sexual binaries, African female scholars and novelists have demanded a rethinking of these constructions. Many scholars have argued for new modes of representation that take into account the complexities of African women’s lives. In her assessment of the state of African literature, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie notes that common stereotypes often portray women as the sweet mother, self-sacrificing, Mother Africa, and someone of eternal and abstract beauty (27).

This kind of representation can be seen in the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor who, in his famous poem, “Femme noire,” portrayed the African woman from pre-colonial times as a symbol of the Earth, of the Nation and as Mother Africa (Nfah-Abbenyi 5). Senghor stated that “contrary to what is often thought to-day, the African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years” (Ogundipe-Leslie 28). This means that for Senghor, and many other men, the position of women as constructed by nationalistic discourse entails being subservient to men and not questioning the discursive ways in which gender has been constructed. This is why Ogundipe-Leslie argues in her paper “The Female Writer and her Commitment” that African female writers have a responsibility to “correct the false images of women in Africa” and can only do so if they understand the “reality of the African woman (61). Ogundipe-Leslie is however aware that the concept ‘woman’ varies and is dependent on

the “institution within which she is being considered; political, marital, professional or economic” (61).

For Ogunjipe-Leslie, the importance of reimagining representations of African women stems from the fact that for a long time African people in general have been misrepresented as not having a ‘self’ by travellers and settlers who became the “spokespersons for indigenous peoples” (2). As a result of these colonial inscriptions, the term ‘People,’ come to stand for ‘white people,’ and ‘Natives,’ designated people who are not white, and at the bottom of this ladder are African women, who have been rendered voiceless because of these social constructions (3). How then do the positions of women change in the postcolonial world, and what role has scholarship by African women played in highlighting the challenges that are faced by African women? The next section will deal with the development of what has come to be known as Postcolonial African Feminism and the different schools of thoughts that have emanated from it.

II: Postcolonial African Feminism

In order to understand the different strands of African feminist thinking, it is important to first look at the context from which they emerged. In the 1950s and 60s, there arose what came to be known as Second Wave Feminism in the West (particularly in North America and Western Europe). This movement, which was mostly informed by theoretical frameworks from white feminist scholars such as Kate Millett, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Mary Ellmann and Michelle Barrett, challenged patriarchal structures and fought for the rights of women to participate in the economic and political structures of their societies. In her famous book, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir argued that “one is not born a woman but becomes a woman” (17). In revealing the constructed nature of identity and debunking essentialist ideas of gender, she exposed the contrived ways in which patriarchy had legitimated itself. The Second Wave feminist movement saw itself as representing and speaking for *all* women, regardless of their race and social class. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a postcolonial feminist scholar, argued however that this was a fundamental flaw in Western feminist thinking as it conflated sexual difference with men to indicate sameness of experience in women’s lives. She writes that:

The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally.

Mohanty maintains that the basis for the assumption that feminist ideas can be applied universally comes from the conflation of “women as a discursively constructed group and ‘women’ as material subjects of their own history” which results in an “assumption of women as an always-already constituted group, one which has been labelled ‘powerless,’ ‘exploited,’ ‘sexually harassed,’ etc. by feminist scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses” (262). The consequences of this conflation are that women from different countries, classes, races and ethnicities are not given the opportunity to articulate their own experiences in order to deal with challenges they are faced with.

It is out of this oversight of Western feminist thinking, and the dominance of male voices in African literature, that African feminist thinking emerged and sought to develop theoretical frameworks that speak to the everyday lived experiences of African women. It is important to note that many female African critics and novelists have had a problem with accepting the mainstream Western feminist movement, and with the use of the term ‘feminism,’ as they have felt that it is not representative of their experiences. One reason for this, Ogun-dipe-Leslie suggests, is that many African women do not want to be cast as ‘angry women’ and depicted as promoting lesbianism. Rather, they have accepted the designated roles of being good and faithful women who respect their “cultures and heritage” and are therefore submissive to their husbands as they see their positions as destined and God-given (12).

Another reason for this disavowal is that the term ‘feminism’ has Western origins and is therefore taken to be automatically exclusionary. Nfah-Abbenyi writes that the refusal by some African novelists and scholars, such as Buchi Emecheta (whose novels exhibit a preoccupation with the lives and struggles of ordinary African women), to accept being labelled ‘feminist’ stems from the fact that they feel that they have always “theorised and practiced what for them was crucial to the development of women, although no terminology was used to describe what these women were actively doing, and are still practicing, on a day-to-day basis” (10).

Despite the resentments of the origins of feminism in many post-independent African countries, different strands of feminism have nevertheless emerged from female scholars and novelists who attempt to represent the experiences of African women. Even though some of these theories try to distance themselves from Western feminism, Susan Arndt remarks that African feminist concepts do not only have their roots in African epistemologies as this would “completely neglect the catalytic effect which the already-existing feminism – White Western

and African American – had upon African feminism” (31). This point is substantiated by the fact that the feminist ideas which most influenced conceptualisations of African feminism came from the African American writer and critic Alice Walker.

Walker coined the term ‘Womanism’ to depict the struggles that black women in America and other parts of the world experienced, and she sought to find possibilities for the emancipation of these women. She highlighted the need for black women to work together with black men in order to challenge the racial and gender prejudices they were all faced with (Arndt 38). Walker, however, was not the only person to make use of the term Womanism. In 1985, the Nigerian scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi used the term Womanism, which she asserted she arrived at independently. Ogunyemi classified her brand of Womanism as African Womanism. She argued that black females, particularly black female novelists, “cannot wholeheartedly join forces with white feminists to fight a battle against patriarchy that, given her understanding and experience, is absurd. She is a womanist because of her racial and sexual predicament” (Arndt 47). What links these strands of feminism is the need for African women to work together with black men in order to fight systems of racial and gender oppression.

One of the significant features of Ogunyemi’s African Womanism is the importance that she places on motherhood in the lives of African women. She argues that because many African women want to have children, it is vital when theorising about their experiences to account for the importance, and need, that they have to be mothers (Arndt 43). Even though Ogunyemi’s conception of motherhood can be accused of being underpinned by essentialist notions of womanhood, it is important to note that in the everyday lived experiences of African women, becoming a mother is an important aspect of life as it is often considered an indicator of their fulfilment and satisfaction. For instance, in Zoë Wicomb’s *October*, Mercia, a postcolonial literary scholar, has decided not to have children because of her feminist inclinations, and yet for Sylvie, a working class woman who lives in the rural parts of South Africa, her child, Nicky, plays an important role in giving meaning to her life.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie coined the term ‘Stiwanism,’ which stands for ‘Social Transformation Including Women in Africa.’ Ogundipe-Leslie’s term is informed by a Marxist perspective which stresses the need to give women equal opportunity in society. In an interview with the feminist scholar Desiree Lewis, she states that:

“Stiwa” means ‘Social Transformation’ including Women of Africa! I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It’s not about warring with the men, the reversal of roles, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a

harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest.

(14)

This perspective is in many ways similar to Womanism, which stresses the need for women to work in cooperation with men in order to undo the injustices of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

It is important to note that there are many strands of African feminism. The ones highlighted here have been included because they are some of the most influential in African literary studies and have generated huge debates. What is central to most African feminist thought is the importance of recognising the ways in which African women have been marginalised by their race and gender, and the need for them to engage in political and intellectual work that recognises and aims to transform these marginalities.

While African feminist theories have played and continue to play an important role in the liberation of women, this strand of thinking, similar to other forms of feminism, has been challenged by Poststructuralism and Intersectionality and the arguments they make about the ways in which identities are constructed. The next section will consider these two movements and the contributions they have made in the struggle against the oppression of marginalised people.

III: Poststructuralism and Intersectionality

Poststructuralism is a movement that developed in the 1960s and 70s and challenged the ways in which Structuralism conceived of the world and the way human sciences were studied at the time. Structuralism hinged on the premise that the world could be understood through the study of relations that structure human life as opposed to engaging in abstract ideas that seemed removed from that world (Lavers 7). Poststructuralism, on the other hand, argued that this was impossible since structures were always implicated in the ways in which the world was studied. Poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Judith Butler have emphasised the need to be critical of Western metaphysics and its obsession with binary forms of thinking that have created hierarchies in how we perceive the world (Butler 14).

Foucault argues that “regimes of power” are imbedded in discourse – in language – which control human behaviour, including acceptable genders, sexual orientations and sexual acts. This, for Foucault, is always done to benefit dominant heteronormative power structures and to subordinate forms of living which challenge the status quo (34). These “regimes of power,” Foucault argues, “produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent” and this means that political life is regulated in purely negative terms as there is constantly “the limitation, prohibition, regulation, and control and even ‘protection’ of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice” (1).

It is from this understanding of language and power that Butler challenges the ways in which feminist movements operate where they seem to have accepted essentialist notions of being a woman without critiquing the construction itself. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues that feminist theories have assumed that there is an identity and category that not only “initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (xii). This subject, woman, is taken to be unified and coherent and the same all over the world and is thus representable. A challenge then emerges when there is a need to fight against patriarchal forms of representation that have constructed the figure of the woman, while resisting the “normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women” (xii). This is because for Butler (and as African feminists have argued) the category of women that has been historically constructed is not experienced as the same by all people, as there are other intersecting factors such as one’s “race, class, ethnic, sexual orientation, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” that inform one’s experience of the world (3).

This understanding of identity formation challenges most feminist theoretical frameworks and forms of activism that have relied on a stable and coherent identity of what it means to be a woman: an identity that has largely relied on biological features, which, ironically, have informed its construction. The fallacy of innate genders means that there would be “charges of gross misrepresentation” if feminist scholarship and activism relied on this supposedly stable category, as people who are part of a sexual minority such as lesbians, transgenders and transsexuals, would be excluded from the dominant characterisation of the category of women (4).

Butler nevertheless advocates a position that does not resist representational politics as that would be impossible since the “juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power,” meaning that there is no position to take outside the one that constitutes contemporary politics (5). The task becomes one of engaging in a critical genealogy of the legitimating practices of the present times and critiquing “the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalise, and immobilise” (5). This position means that it is necessary to have an essentialist representation of women in order to overcome the subjugation that still persists in the contemporary world, but at the same time refuses a single classification of what constitutes a woman as that would exclude those who do not fit the dominant construction.

Butler’s, Foucault’s and Derrida’s understanding of language and the role it plays in constructing dominant and marginal identities challenges the ways in which historically subjugated subjects conceive of their identities and the kind of political and intellectual work that is necessary in undoing historical injustices. If ‘women’ and ‘black’ are socially constructed categories that have been used as a form of subjugation, it is important to be aware of their non-essential natures and therefore of the ways in which they are always experienced differently.

One of the ways in which these experiences can be represented differently is through a concept called Intersectionality, which was developed by Patricia Hill Collins. This concept has played an important role in recognising the multiple intersections that exist in people’s experiences of the world. Collins argues that just as most black people are connected through a history of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid and other forms of racial oppression, women share a “history of patriarchal oppression through the political economy of the material conditions of sexuality and reproduction” (756). These similarities and differences in women’s experiences expose the ways in which people can be members of a group and be simultaneously excluded from it. This, according to her argument, exposes the complex ways in which power and subordination work. Her argument refutes epistemologies that seek to claim that “black women have a more accurate view of oppression than do other groups” (757), and this is because factors such as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and geography play a role in people’s experiences of the world.

Kathy Davis argues, drawing on the work of Anne Phoenix, that intersectionality is a “hardy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple

positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it” (70). An intersectional way of perceiving power relations and the marginalisation of women would be inclusive of all women as they would all have to consider the intersections that exist in their particular lives. Davis states that one way “to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination,” using M. J. Matsuda’s formula, would be:

through a method I call ‘ask the other question.’ When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’

(70)

This theory’s strength is in its flexibility: it can be enhanced and added to simply by asking other questions that complicate perceived understandings of domination and subordination. This pliability ensures that all groups and forms of marginalisation can be included. Another advantage of intersectionality is its ability to connect poststructuralist and postcolonial epistemologies about difference and diversity while simultaneously recognising issues of gender.

Intersectionality is important for this study as characters in Wicomb’s and Adichie’s texts occupy different power positions within their respective social milieus. Adichie’s protagonist, Ifemelu, experiences upward class mobility when she moves to America, an experience that differs from that of other immigrants who do not have passports and have to work in the ghettos of America in order to make a living. This is also evident in Wicomb’s novel where the protagonist, Mercia, is a postcolonial literary scholar who finds it difficult to communicate with Sylvie, a working class rural woman. Both authors are interested in the ways in which gender, race and class intersect and inform their character’s experiences of the world.

bell hooks’s work has consistently shown the intersections that exist in women’s lives. In her books, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, and *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, hooks argues that because of socialisation, women and men have been conditioned to accept the gendered hierarchies they are born into. This has resulted in men assuming that they are superior to females and because of this should dominate their lives. This, hooks argues, has come at a price because “in return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress us, using violence if they must keep patriarchy intact” (ix). Her

work as a black feminist scholar is aimed at exploring and exposing the intersectional ways in which black women are oppressed because of their gender, race and class.

hooks's work will be important in this study as Wicomb's and Adichie's female characters occupy intersectional spaces that are deeply gendered and racialised, and as a result, certain expectations are placed on characters' bodies because the positions they occupy. The next section of this chapter will consider the historical constructions of race and its entanglement with gender constructions and the role race and gender play in the contemporary world.

IV: Black Bodies

The emergence of African feminist thinking was, among other things, a reaction to the ways in which the black body, particularly the black female body, was written about in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific and literary representations. It was also, as indicated previously, a reaction to the exclusion African women experienced from white feminist discourse. In the nineteenth century, the medical profession engaged in scientific studies with the aim of distinguishing bodies in racial and sexual terms. The purpose of these differentiations was to support the dominant European perspective that the white (particularly male) body is superior and is the antithesis of the black body. Sander L. Gilman writes that it was during this time that the black female Hottentot came to represent black people and was seen as the "lowest rung on the great chain of being" (212). This physical representation of the black female body was closely tied to the scientific constructions of the white female prostitute and both were used in research to validate the sexual dysfunctionality of black and white prostitute bodies, in that they were constructed as anomalies and as the "antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty" (212).

One of the most influential scientists and travellers to spread these views was Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, who wrote on the "lascivious, apelike sexual appetite of the black" citing their supposed animal-like sexual appetites which "went so far as to lead black women to copulate with apes" (Gilman 212). Buffon influenced Georges Cuvier, who argued that the difference of the black female body was its physiognomy, skin colour and the form of its genitalia, which made it "inherently

different,” and characterised this body as possessing a “primitive sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – ‘primitive’ genitalia” (213).

These conjectures on the sexual difference of African people led to the exhibition of Sarah Baartman, who was taken from South Africa at the age of twenty and exhibited in different parts of Europe. The exhibition was used to confirm scientists’ views, as well as those of the general masses, that black bodies were inferior. Promised employment upon her arrival in Europe, Baartman did not know that her naked body would be displayed all over Europe to confirm racist assumptions. Gilman writes that Baartman’s body was not only used to represent the genitalia of the black body, as it was already ‘known’ at the time, but was also used to present another “anomaly which the European audience found riveting” and that was her “steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, the other physical characteristic of the Hottentot which captured the eye of early European travellers” (212). Baartman’s sexual parts came to serve as the “central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century” (214). After her death, at the age of twenty-five, Cuvier dissected her genitalia and those who still wanted to see it could do so as it was made available for public viewing in a museum (214).

These ‘scientific’ representations were part of what motivated the colonisation of African countries. If the black body was the ‘Other,’ and the inferior body, then Europe could justify its colonisation on the basis that it was on a civilising mission. These racist assumptions have had huge and long lasting repercussions on those who were colonised. A lot of novels, such as Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* (2007), Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Condition* (1988), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1962), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *God Help the Child* (2015), are all about the consequences that colonial thinking has had on people, particularly on black female characters. This history has ultimately led, as Frantz Fanon argued, in the fragmentation of the black subject and how it saw itself in relation to the white body. Wicomb’s *October* and Adichie’s *Americanah* are also interested in how this history continues to shape how people experience the present.

V: Fanon and Biko

The historical extrapolation provided above is pertinent because the two novels that will be studied grapple with the contemporary manifestations of these historical constructions of race and gender. Wicomb's characters struggle with the historical inscription of coloured identity during and after apartheid in South Africa, while Adichie's characters have to confront racial classifications when they move to the United States of America. Both novels show that the challenges confronting the characters are a result of the legacy of nineteenth-century racial and sexual classifications. In both novels, characters have to contend with the ramifications of that discourse and the effects it has on how they perceive themselves in the twenty-first century.

It is because of these dominant discourses that Franz Fanon was interested in how colonialism caused black people to have fragmented personalities. He writes that in the white world, "the man of colour encounters difficulty in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness" (84). This leads to the black subject developing feelings of inferiority in relation to the white world, because the subject is not offered any agency from which it can look at itself 'objectively.' It always has to look at itself from the perspective of the third person: the white person.

As a result of this elision, the black subject emulates the behaviour of the white man so that it can assert its own humanity. Fanon writes that in attempting to emulate white identity, the black person will learn the language of the colonial master because "the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionally whiter-that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (8). This means that the worth of the black subject only exists through an affirming relation with the white world and the colonised subject can only be "elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adaptation of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (9). These attempts to renounce 'blackness' are evident in both Wicomb's and Adichie's novels as some of their characters emulate 'white' behaviour in an attempt to countermand how they are perceived.

In responding to these racial classifications under apartheid in South Africa, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was established in the 1960s. Its aim was to

undo the mental harm that had been caused by racist ideologies of the apartheid regime on black people. This movement, which was pioneered by the anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, argued that white racist thinking and the misrepresentation of black people had penetrated into black subject formations and had led to the inculcation of an inferiority complex in the minds of those it marginalised. Biko wrote that:

To a large extent the evil-doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of black man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced.

(28)

Importantly, the BCM attempted to make black people realise their worth without having to measure themselves against the white standards which denied them opportunities to participate politically and economically in the functioning of South Africa. The BCM was a response to the indoctrination of the apartheid ideology and it saw its mission as making black people restore self-confidence and pride in themselves.

VI: Beauty Myth

Biko and Fanon were also aware of the influence of colonialism on the lives of black women and how it informed the ways in which they perceived themselves. Both of them argued against beauty products that had been created with the intention of making it possible for the “miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction” (Fanon 84). Biko was aware that black women were using lightening creams and “straightening devices for their hair” since, as he wrote, “they sort of believe I think that their natural state which is a black state is not synonymous with beauty” (Biko 115).

These historical constructions of black bodies have had an enormous effect on black women and how they perceive their aesthetic and intellectual worth in the contemporary world. It is important to note however that women of all races have historically been perceived as inferior to men. The imposition of patriarchy has not only affected black women but women of all races. Susan Bordo writes that women’s bodies have always been enunciated in the negative, as men have seen these bodies as “distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (3). Their bodies have thus been

“weighed down” as Simone de Beauvoir argues, “by everything peculiar to it” and in contrast to this, man has cast himself as the “inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit” (qtd in Bordo 3). These historical constructions of gender, together with restrictive notions of beauty, still manifest in the present and many women are still battling against them.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf writes that although women in the West started attaining levels of independence from the 1960s, as they were admitted into higher education and the corporate sector, they had to deal with the fact that male constructions of their bodies existed. Thus, even though women became accepted in the work environment, a beauty myth developed in the 1980s that required that they not only have the capacity to work, but that they should be aesthetically appealing as well. This, writes Wolf, was a result of “real fear, on the part of central institutions of our society, about what might happen if free women made free progress in free bodies through a system that calls itself meritocracy” (29).

This beauty myth, she contends, is used by men to police the bodies of women. This has the consequence of making women vulnerable to being evaluated on the basis of perceived beauty and the corporate sector, which is largely male dominated, determines what forms of beauty are acceptable (14). There is however a contradiction in that while women need this approval in order to participate in the corporate sector, The Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs has noted that women represent 50% of the world population and “perform nearly two thirds of all working hours, receive only one-tenth of the world income and own less than 1 percent of world property” (Wolf 23). This means there has been historical exploitation of women as a result of the fact that the work that they do is not considered ‘real’ work, as opposed to that performed by men. It is therefore not surprising that when they enter the work environment, some women do not “expect promotion and higher wages because they have been conditioned by their work experience not to expect improvements in work status” and are “often unsure of their intrinsic worth in the market place” (49).

The cultural milieu within which women find themselves has also played a critical role in how they perceive acceptable standards of beauty. One of the dominant influences in the late-capitalist world has been the role of women’s magazines in the public sphere. Wolf writes that the role of these magazines has been to glamorise “whatever the economy, their advertisers, and, during wartime, the government, needed at that moment from women” (64). This means then that these magazines, which

purport to represent the views of women, have not been entirely independent as their views have often had to conform to their advertisers' needs. Even though women's magazines have a vested interest in the very system that subjugates their readership, Wolf notes that they have also been important for women as newspapers and TV news programmes often relegate women's issues to the 'women's page,' thus not giving their issues the serious interrogation that they often require (71). Consequently, women's magazines become the "only products of popular culture that change with women's realities, are mostly written by women for women about women's issues, and take on women's concerns seriously" (71).

These magazines have therefore had to negotiate their pro-women content with the "beauty backlash trappings" that are used by advertisers to create dominant forms of beauty. As a result, they have occupied a space which enables dialogue between women but they have also been culpable in perpetuating doctrines of acceptable standards of beauty that their readers have had to live up to and which, many African feminists note, have been harmful to the ways in which women perceive themselves.

Bordo writes that these homogenous notions of beauty "function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines', and 'corrects' itself" (15). She notes that the contemporary landscape has dominant and 'normalising' forms of power that women have to contend with which are racialised and gendered. These constructions, subsequently, cannot be said to be heterogeneous or subversive as they are necessarily entangled within power formations that inevitably construct dominant forms. This notion supports Foucault's invocation in his essay "The Order of Discourse" that:

Doctrine binds individuals to certain types of enunciation and consequently forbids them all others; but it uses, in return, certain types of enunciation to bind individuals amongst themselves, and to differentiate them by that very fact from all other.

(64)

This means that dominant forms of power create ideal beauty types and simultaneously renders other forms as antithetic to what has been constructed. But the irony of this, as Foucault notes, is that for dominant notions of power to exist, they necessarily rely on the existence of the construction of the 'ugly' and it is only in this process of differentiation that what is deemed 'beautiful' gains its recognition.

It is with this understanding that Bordo argues that women who are seen as complicit with these hegemonic formations of power should not be taken to be dopes, as they are acutely aware of the ways in which power functions and that “given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it” (18). It is no surprise to Bordo that cosmetic surgery in the United States, at the time of her writing, was worth \$1.75 billion a year, with a 1.5 million-strong client base, most of whom were middle-class women who could afford it (15). Noting the racialised nature of cosmetic surgery, Bordo writes that it is often European and not African or Jewish features that are desired, and this exposes the persistent aspiration to white aesthetics that still exists in the twenty-first century.

The racialised nature of cosmetic surgery and dominant notions of beauty reveal the ways in which black women suffer not only from sexist discourse but from racist discourse that generates notions of what it means to be ‘beautiful.’ bell hooks argues that there is an “institutionalisation via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of black people” (2). For hooks, these mass representations of black identity have had a huge impact on black women who are already oppressed on the basis of their gender. Like Foucault, hooks is critical of the ways in which black people have been subjected to images they cannot control, which often “leaves us ravaged and repressed” (4). This thesis will argue that these dominant discourses that constitute notions such as ‘beauty’ are still pervasive in the contemporary world, and play a crucial role in how black characters in the novels under examination measure their beauty against white dominant notions of beauty.

VII: Hair and Skin Colour

The racialisation of bodies has made hair and skin colour play a significant role in the lives of black women, and this is evident in the novels that will be studied. A character’s ability, or inability, to navigate their social world is in large part determined by the type of hair and skin colour they have. The use of hair as a marker of racial belonging was used in colonial contexts to distinguish between people. Alongside variations in skin pigmentation and bone formations, hair was used as a sign to be “named, classified, and ordered into a hierarchy of human worth” (Mercer 35). Kobena Mercer writes that even

though hair is an organic matter produced by physiological processes and seems to be a 'natural' aspect of the body, it never is because "it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally 'worked upon' by human hands" (34). As a consequence, hair will inevitably be socialised:

Making it the medium of significant 'statements' about society and the codes of value that bind them, or don't. In this way hair is merely a raw material, consistently processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with 'meanings' and 'value.'

(34)

The value ascribed to hair has been particularly harmful to black women who have had to defend their 'natural' attributes against white supremacist thinking that has divided the world into binary oppositions that privilege white people over black people. Mercer notes that in the United States, the pejorative expression of 'nigger hair' has served as an indication of the way in which "black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin" (35). The result has been that black women's natural hair has been dismissed from the public sphere and a lot of black women now either relax their hair or make use of weaves and wigs.

Cheryl Thompson writes that in 2007, a *Glamour* magazine editor was asked to speak on the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of corporate fashion and in that session told her audience, which included black women, to 'just say no to fro' and that dreadlocks were 'truly dreadful' (83). This illustrates the fact that white notions of what constitutes 'beautiful' hair still dominate the contemporary world, including the corporate sector. The other problem Thompson highlights is traction alopecia which is caused by chronic pulling on the hair follicle. While it has been observed in women of all races, it has been frequently seen on black women because of the amount of strain and pulling their hair undergoes and which has medically been regarded as hazardous to their health (85). Thus, the problem of hair is not only about the historical discourses of different types of hair but also about the health issues that rise from the need to conform to what is seen as acceptable in society.

There has also been contention around the skin pigmentation of black people. Even though in the colonial era, as elaborated on previously, white people's pigmentation was regarded as superior, there were also hierarchical categories black people were assigned based on how close to 'white' they looked. In South Africa, this can be seen in the construction and treatment of people who have been classified as

coloured. During apartheid, under the Population Registration Act of 1950, the state officially constructed four different racial categories which included black, coloured, Indian and white peoples. The Group Areas Act was used to ensure that these different racial groups were segregated from each other geographically.

Zimitri Erasmus writes that the effect of these racial classifications has been immense on coloured identity as they have been placed within a continuum that renders them as “not only white, but less than white; not only black, but better than black” (2). Even though coloured people were discriminated against during apartheid they, were treated better than their black African counterparts. Besides being located in areas that were close to cities, they were also allowed to vote in the Tricameral parliament that was formed in the 1980s together with Indian people. The reason for this, Erasmus reports, had to do with the physical features of coloured people, which were perceived as closer to whiteness. Thus respectability, in a society constituted by racial hierarchies, was measured by one’s closeness, and in this instance physical resemblance, to those that were dominant.

This historical racial classification that privileges people of light skin has not only been a South African phenomenon, but has been ubiquitous in other parts of the world, including the USA. Margaret Hunter writes that in the USA this classifying doctrine is known as Colorism and is devoid of overt racial or ethnic classifications but is however a “process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of colour over their dark-skinned counterparts” (237). She maintains that the repercussions of this discourse are that lighter-skinned people enjoy privileges that are unattained by their dark-skinned counterparts, and this includes one’s chances of employability and the amount of money one is paid at work. Similar to Bordo, hooks, and Foucault’s arguments about the trappings of power, Hunter notes that this system is so pervasive that:

many people are unaware of their preferences for lighter skin because that dominant aesthetic is so deeply engrained in our culture. In the USA, for example, we are bombarded with images of white and light skin and Anglo facial features. White beauty is the standard and the ideal.

(238)

Wicomb’s and Adichie’s novels grapple with these dominant discourses and their impact in the contemporary world. Coloured people in Wicomb’s novels differentiate themselves from black people and other coloured people based on their skin tones.

Privilege relies in large part on being the ‘right’ colour, which means, simplistically, not dark skinned. In Adichie’s *Americanah*, questions around privileges that are enjoyed by people that are lighter skinned, such as the election of the first US black president Barack Obama, are subject to scrutiny. This thesis will show that both novels grapple with the persistence of racial discrimination and the ways it continues to manifest in the present.

VIII: Transnational Studies

Wicomb’s and Adichie’s novels explore the transnational lives of their characters in the twenty-first century, and probe what it means to belong and find a home in a world where one’s identity is no longer considered to be solely rooted in one’s country of birth. They portray the changes that have taken place due to globalisation and that have made it possible for people to travel and engage with the cultural and economic commodities of different countries. In *The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*, Paul Jay writes that it was in the 1960s and 70s that literary and cultural studies took a turn and started paying attention to the movements that people were making between different places due to technological advancements.

This change in the social and political spheres had an impact on the kind of literature that was read and studied in academic institutions. This turn, he writes, “complicated the nationalistic paradigm long dominant” and “transformed the nature of the locations we study, and focused our attention on forms of cultural production that take place in the liminal spaces between real and imagined communities” (1). Jay writes that some of the political and social factors that had a direct impact on this turn were the advent of Postcolonial Studies, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement and the fight for Gay and Lesbian Rights (2).

The emergence of postcolonial studies into the world stage therefore challenged the “primacy of discrete national literatures and what seemed like their insular concerns” and instead provided “a framework for studying literature and culture in a transnational context that moved beyond and explicitly questioned older European models of comparative analysis” (3). Jay however notes that this change has been contentious as it can never be understood as only a cultural change in literary studies as it also operates in the economic sphere. This contention around transnationalism has come from scholars such as Anthony Giddens and Simon Gikandi, who argue that the increasingly transnational world, or globalised world, is exploitative as it only has economic motives from Western countries and is driven by the need to dominate other

countries in the same ways they were dominated during colonialism. Giddens argues that the dominance of transnational corporations has aims of turning the world into a “single market for commodities, labour and capital,” and therefore has no regard for the sovereignty of countries (37). Gikandi on the other hand argues that those who celebrate the “liberatory effects of globalisation” often forget its effects on nations and only focus on “amorphous, metropolitan, and highly westernised sphere of the ‘global’, where it is mainly elite migrants who enjoy the supposed benefits of hybridity and difference” (47).

This perspective sees globalisation as a new instrument of exploiting developing countries through new economic ties that have emerged since the dismantlement of colonialism. Globalisation or transnational studies within the academy are therefore questioned because they are seen as co-opting postcolonial studies which have been strategically important as a means to write back to the empire.

Jay argues that the problem with the perspectives offered here are a result of two different ways in which globalisation has been understood. The first view separates postcolonialism and globalisation historically and only connects postcolonialism to the “rise of modernity and the epoch of nationalism, while seeing globalisation as fundamentally postnational and postmodern” (41). The second sees postcolonialism as marking a break from colonial power, but insists that postcolonialism “belongs nevertheless to the late history of the nation state” and in marking this break from colonial history, does not however break from that history (41). This second point of view, Jay argues, “insists that globalisation actually has a long history and that the whole arch of European imperial expansion, colonialism, decolonisation, and the establishment of postcolonial states figures prominently in that history” (41). This means that it would be impossible to think of postcolonialism without considering the history that informed it. This is one that is deeply tied to colonialism and the postcolonial and transnational world that we inhabit in the present.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha also argues that it would be impossible to understand the contemporary transnational world without history. He argues that:

The demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees.

(5)

In making this argument, Bhabha’s work calls for a re-reading of colonialism that does not necessarily regret its occurrence but rather sees it as having provided an opportunity for

reimagining the ways in which identity constructions were perceived prior to colonisation. Bhabha criticises attempts by postcolonial nations to reinscribe essentialist and nationalistic ways of thinking about the postcolony. He writes that there is a need to “think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (1).

For Bhabha, these processes of articulation are provided by the advent of transnational literature which occupies an ‘in-between’ space that initiates “new signs of identity, and innovate sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of the social itself” (2). Thus transnational literature, which often deals with the difficulty of encountering others, provides a space for the emergence of a community which moves individuals ‘beyond’ themselves and into a project of “revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present” (3).

Bhabha argues that moving ‘beyond’ oneself and living in the present necessitates accepting a condition of being ‘unhomed,’ as borders between home and the world are confused and notions of the public and the private are entangled as they are now a part of each other (9). He contends that:

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees, these border and frontier conditions, may be the terrains of world literature.

(12)

What makes this literature possible are the hybrid spaces occupied by the writers as they have both experienced discontinuities in their identities which make them more critical of notions such as home. Even though Zoë Wicomb has been critical of Bhabha’s idea of hybridity as it does not account for her actual desire to return ‘home,’ Dorothy Driver argues that Wicomb’s work attests to this very condition of an ‘in-between’ space as it has given her the ability to reflect acutely on questions of belonging (15). This is evident in *October* as Wicomb’s protagonist, Mercia, struggles to find a home in her ‘home’ country, South Africa.

Even though Bhabha’s concept of an ‘in-between’ space and hybridity will be useful in this study, it is important to be mindful, as Edward Said writes, that exile is “compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (137). This is because it is an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its home” (137). When theorising about exile, it should be remembered that it is always more difficult, and challenging, to experience. This is because exile is “fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles

are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” and because of this “the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for discontinuous loss by creating a new world to rule” (144).

Said also argues, however, that exile can offer different ways of looking at the world as the exile’s new experience occurs “against the memory of these (historical) things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” and this can be fulfilling for someone in exile as it can offer the feeling that “one were at home wherever one happens to be” (148). His writing on exile is attentive to both the suffering that it causes and the possibilities it can offer for those who no longer reside within the borders of their nation states. Many novels, such as Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), Chris Abani’s *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2009) represent some of the challenges that Said points out as they are about people who move between different continents, for political reasons, and about the obstacles that these movements present to belonging. The questions that are raised in these novels also preoccupy Wicomb’s and Adichie’s novels as they also interrogate notions such as belonging and finding a home.

IX: Gendered Migration

Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler write that research on migration has always followed gendered trajectories as early studies of migration show that it has predominantly been studied from a male perspective. This skewed focus stems from patriarchal constructions of society that have regarded men as the most important travellers while women “were presumed to play passive roles as companions” (2). Later research has however shown that this is not necessarily true and that the attention paid to male travellers is a result of the ways in which scholarship favours male perspectives. Even though this focus on male migrants changed from the 1970s and 1980s, Pessar and Mahler write that this did not change the stereotype of the “lone male migrant” that still dominates perceptions of migration patterns (5).

In their study of gendered migration, Pessar and Mahler write that ‘Gendered Geographies of Power’ inform the ways in which gender plays itself out in transnational spaces, an important area that has hitherto been neglected by scholars of migration. Their use of the spatial term ‘geographies’ is noteworthy as it illustrates an understanding that “gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g., the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains” (5). This means, as they argue, that it would be impossible to understand

the process of migration without considering the role that gender patterns have played and continue to play.

The importance of considering gender when examining transnational flows has to do with the fact that as a discursive construction, gender has real consequences for those whose identities are constituted by it. As it was with race, gender was essential in the hierarchies that were established during the Enlightenment. The ramifications of this for migration are that women – particularly black women with limited education and skills – are most likely to be disadvantaged since hierarchies of gender still exist in almost all parts of the world. Susan Forbes Martin writes that “about half of the migrants in the world today are women, as has been the case for several decades” (4). The reasons for their movements include: joining family members that have migrated, a search for employment, or fleeing conflict and persecution from their home countries amongst other factors (4). The search for better jobs and educational attainment are some of the factors motivating women to migrate, and this usually has to do with the economic instability that makes it difficult for them to sustain a basic livelihood in their own countries.

Migration is however experienced differently by women depending on the level of their education and skills when they migrate to other countries. Women who lack a high level of education often find themselves having to do jobs which include picking “fruits and vegetables, manufactur[ing] garments and other items” and working in nursing homes or cleaning restaurants and hotels, amongst a myriad of other menial activities (20). Laura Brace writes that these women often earn low wages and have inadequate health insurance, sick pay and retirement benefits. The reasons why these jobs continue to be poorly paid is that the work that is done is still deemed as ‘women’s work,’ and therefore does not merit much importance. What exacerbates this problem is that women in these positions often lack formal citizenship and are therefore constantly in fear of being caught. This makes them more vulnerable to being exploited by their host countries (873).

In *Americanah*, representations of migration confirm the role that gender, race, and class play in transnational flows. Apart from showing the effects of these hierarchies on migration, literary representations are important as they also explore the emotional effects of migration, which can often be invisible in historical and sociological studies.

As has been noted, race, class and gender play an important role on whether or not people are made to feel that they belong after they migrate to other countries. Brace writes that the terms of belonging are:

related to the 'somatic norm' of being white and male, but some others, including women, can pass as the universal human, if they are protected by their skills or their aspirations, or by the privilege of being racially unmarked.

(874)

The privilege of being 'racially unmarked' means that white women are more likely to experience migration differently from other women, particularly from black women. It is however important to note that black women who have attained a good education or who have the necessary skills also find it easier to participate economically in their host countries. Martin writes that these women obtain jobs that require specialised skills, "run multinational corporations, teach in universities, supply research and development expertise to industry and academia" (20). They are able to "rely on their own capacities, their grounding in self-ownership and improvement, to claim 'citizen-like entitlements' on the basis of their respectable standing" (Brace 874). Wicomb's protagonist epitomises some of these advantages. Having attained a PhD in English, Mercia has the option of moving to different countries and continents in search of jobs, an advantage that illegal immigrants portrayed in Adichie's novel do not have.

X: Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as Writers

Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work has been greatly influenced by their personal lives. Their work is preoccupied with gender issues and questions about belonging for people who live between different continents. Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira has observed that these writers have an "interest in the representation of marginalised or minority ethnic groups within the nation, the coloured people in the case of Wicomb, and the Igbo in the case of Adichie" (ii), and what informs this interest is that both these writers come from these marginalised groups within their nations. While their literary work explores the ways in which hegemonic constructions of identity affect subordinated groups, they also show that even within these subordinated groups, further marginalisations occur.

Wicomb was born in South Africa in a small town known as Namaqualand in 1943. After graduating from the University of the Western Cape, which was historically designated for coloured students, she went into voluntary exile in England in 1970, later settling in Scotland. Since then she has been living between Scotland and South Africa. Her first collection of short stories, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town*, was published in 1987 to critical acclaim. This collection centres on the life of Frieda Shenton who grows up in Namaqualand

and becomes conscious of the political climate of her country and the damaging effects it has on people's subjectivities. Frieda grows up in a family where she is told that she should speak 'proper' English so that she does not sound like the savage 'hottentots' in her community (9). These stories are concerned with the ways in which coloured people were made to feel inferior and consequently long for links their European ancestry. These stories are interlinked and trace Frieda's life from a young age to her migration and eventual return to South Africa before the demise of apartheid.

Wicomb's second book, a novel, is titled *David's Story*, and was published in 2001. The novel takes place in 1991 before the dawn of democracy and follows the life of an Umkhonto we Sizwe guerrilla fighter, David Dirkse, who wants to discover his 'true' ancestry so as to better understand himself (2). In this novel, Wicomb exposes the fallacy of pure racial identities and the impact this construct has had in South Africa's history and people's understandings and conceptions of their identities. Throughout David's quest to return to the past in search of his racial identity, we are shown that there is no place from which an individual can start tracing back their lineage as the past is convoluted and complex and always frustrates a linear narrative. This book offers an argument against the apartheid regime's obsession with racial purity and cautions the post-apartheid society to resist any forms of marginalisation based on race and gender classifications.

Her third book, and second novel, *Playing in the Light*, also interrogates notions of racial purity. The protagonist of the novel, Marion, discovers that her family had 'passed' as white during apartheid and had adopted this new identity as it was allowed by apartheid government laws. Her parents decided to 'pass' because of the better economic prospects their new racial classification would provide (Wicomb *Playing in the Light* 117). This, however, came at great personal expense as they had to cut ties with extended family in order to adopt this new identity. Finding this out in post-apartheid South Africa, Marion has to reconcile who she thought she was and what her history tells her. Once again, Wicomb's preoccupation is with the inherent contradictions that were part of the apartheid regime's concept of racial purity.

Her second collection of short stories, *The One that Got Away*, came out in 2008 and is set in both Cape Town and Glasgow as characters travel between these two cities. It is in this collection that Wicomb started exploring Glasgow, a place that she had said she was incapable of writing about because of the alienation she felt (149). These stories explore the historical and contemporary connections that exist between South Africa and Scotland. The collection also explores the pervasive nature of racism as it is shown to affect characters not only in South

Africa but in their travels overseas. Thus, the short stories open up a wider conversation about race and other forms of marginalities and how they play out in similar patterns in other parts of the world. This reveals how the world is simultaneously divided and connected in the twenty-first century.

As shown above, Wicomb has an enduring interest in the telling of stories and in the role they play in the formation of people's subjectivities. All of her books feature characters either writing books or engaging in other artistic forms. Her preoccupation with writing is also evident in her most recent novel, *October*. After Mercia is abandoned by her partner, Craig, she starts writing her memoir. This task proves to be a challenge however as Mercia realises that she will have to write about other people, her family in particular, if she is going to tell her story. She thus realises, as Judith Butler argues in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, that "If I try to give an account of myself, If I try to make myself recognisable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or mine alone" (Butler *Giving an Account* 26). This means that Mercia's story is not hers alone and she has to consider the broader environment from which she comes in order to write about herself. This thesis will argue that through the depiction of the inherent difficulty of writing a memoir, Wicomb's novel opens up possibilities for thinking anew about the telling of marginalised stories.

Adichie was born in Nigeria, in Enugu, in 1977. Her parents worked at the local University of Nsukka, where Adichie grew up. After enrolling for a degree in medicine, she dropped out as she was not passionate about it and subsequently relocated to the USA, where she pursued her passion for the arts and completed her Master of Arts at Yale University. Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published in 2003 and centres on the life of Kambili, a fifteen year old girl from a deeply religious family. Her father, Eugene, is a devout Catholic who punishes her and her brother Jaja when they are perceived to have done something wrong (26). This has an enormous emotional and psychological effect on everyone, including their mother, and compromises their happiness as everyone lives in constant fear. The novel explores the intersections between religion, patriarchy and the family in postcolonial Nigeria.

Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, was published in 2006 to critical acclaim. In this novel, Adichie looks at the Biafran War and its impact on those who lived through it. The characters in the novel experience great changes when the British colonialists leave and war ensues between different factions because of a demand by south-eastern provinces to secede and form their own country, Biafra (57). The consequences of this war still have an impact in

Nigeria today. Similar to her first novel, questions around gender and marginalisation in postcolonial Nigeria are interrogated in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie's work has always been sensitive to the ways in which power structures marginalise women and those who have been denied the right to privileges such as education. In her third book, a collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie started exploring transnational themes as her characters move between different continents but mainly between Nigeria and the USA. Some of the short stories involve women moving to America in search of better prospects only to find that the country does not fulfil their dreams. Adichie explores many topics, including the difficulties faced by sexual minorities in Nigeria (*The Thing Around Your Neck* 124).

Similar to *October*, *Americanah* explores the theme of storytelling. When Ifemelu moves to America, she finds it difficult to deal with the racist and sexist environment around her, and because of this starts writing a blog. The blog, titled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black* becomes a medium where she expresses herself and connects with people who share her experiences. Serena Guarracino writes that the advantage of Ifemelu's blog is that it allows her to express herself in a "hybrid form that brings together storytelling, reportage, and emotional value" (14). The use of the blog in the novel seems to suggest that there are different ways of expressing oneself in the twenty-first century, and this is important to note, especially for women, as it could allow for a new kind of engagement with the world.

This brief biographical sketch is intended to highlight some of the themes that these two writers concern themselves with. *October* and *Americanah* show a sustained preoccupation with themes such as gender, class, race and writing. Even though both of these authors started exploring transnational themes in their previous collections of short stories, this theme is dealt with in depth in the novels that will be studied. This chapter has already outlined some of the concerns that will preoccupy this thesis and these include:

1. Interrogating the ways in which Wicomb's novel *October* and Adichie's novel *Americanah* explore themes of race, gender and transnationalism in the homelands and host countries of their characters.
2. To argue that Wicomb's and Adichie's representations of racial and gender categories in the twenty-first century show that the historical discursive hierarchies that were constructed in the nineteenth century still marginalise black and coloured female characters that are depicted in their work.

3. To comment on acts of reading and writing practices that are self-reflexively represented in the novels. In doing this, the thesis will examine the role of these activities and what their value might be in the twenty-first century.

Chapter Two

This chapter will consider the ways in which Zoë Wicomb explores race, gender and transnational issues in her novel, *October*. It will argue that Wicomb's engagement with race and gender themes highlights the ways in which these historical constructions remain pervasive in the present. It will further argue that her interrogation of transnationalism highlights the difficulty of making sense of home and belonging in the contemporary world. Her characters navigate a world in which dominant notions of race and gender still influence perceptions of identity, while coming to the painful realisation that historically inscribed notions of belonging are becoming less significant in the contemporary world.

I: "Of Old Scottish Stock": Race, Shame and Respectability in the Coloured Community of Kliprand

Wicomb's novel, *October*, interrogates the impact of race in her characters' lives during apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. As indicated in the introduction, all Wicomb's books, from *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* to *October*, examine the historical inscription of race and how that has influenced the making of South African identities. Her interest has been mainly focused on the coloured community in the Western Cape as she herself is a member of that community. Wicomb's interest in *October* is in representing how this racial category has influenced the ways in which coloured people have experienced life and continue to do so in post-apartheid South Africa.

The novel is mostly concerned with events that happen in the Murray family and examines the impact of historical racial classifications on family life. In paying attention to the events that pivot around this single family, the text manages to offer diverse perspectives that show the multiple ways in which coloured people negotiated living under apartheid and the impact of that history in post-apartheid South Africa.

Wicomb's novel demonstrates how race, gender and class prejudice are passed from one generation to the next. Mercia, the protagonist, and her younger brother, Jake, are exposed to South Africa's racial classifications from their father Nicholas. This, however, does not mean they accept these prejudices as they are both critical of his views. Their father's perspectives still inform the ways in which they experience their childhoods in Namaqualand, Kliprand, and the kinds of adults they become. Nicholas consistently tells his children that they are different and should therefore not associate with the other "dirty hotnos" children who roam the streets

of Kliprand. According to him, the Murrays are better coloureds who should resist mixing with the rest of the coloured community. He tells them that if they want to have friends, there are other cousins they could correspond with who reside in Cape Town. He insists that “the children here in Kliprand do not wash their hands” and should therefore not be befriended (166). This early indoctrination informs the ways in which Mercia and Jake participate in the communal activities of Kliprand even though they grow to be critical of their father’s views.

This differentiation between the Murrays and the rest of the community is evident after the birth of Mercia and Jake, when Nicholas, together with his wife, Antoinette, decide they will not have more children as they do not want to “saddle themselves like poor and ignorant coloureds with a large brood” (137). The number of children the Murrays have is clearly influenced by the racist discourse of their time and their children’s lives will also inevitably be influenced by this discourse. It was with some disappointment that Nicholas accepted a job in Kliprand as it is a place full of ‘dirty hotnos,’ making it the last place he wanted his children to be raised. Having moved to Kliprand, he sees his mission as making it clear that they, the Murrays, are of “civilised Scottish blood” and “they were different, that living amongst the Namaqua’s did not make Namaqua’s of the Murrays. The people around them were not their kind” and because of this he “taught his children to speak English. Which meant that they were not to play with others who spoke Afrikaans” (94). Thus from his first move to Kliprand, Nicholas establishes difference between his family and the rest of the community and attempts to maintain this difference so that his family cannot be contaminated by what other members of the community do which includes the language that they speak.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon writes that during colonisation, there was a deliberate strategy to use the language and culture of the coloniser in order to colonise other countries. He argues that:

Every colonised people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country.

(9)

This, as Fanon argues, was used to annihilate the cultures of people who were being colonised in order to ensure that they aspired to be part of the cultural practices of their colonisers. This explains Nicholas’s desire to only want his children to learn English and not Afrikaans, which is the dominant language spoken by the people in his community. Language was used as an instrument to differentiate between those who were superior and inferior during apartheid. This

preference for English also influenced the kinds of names that were given to children. Nicholas and Antoinette give their children English names because of their belief that they are superior to 'hotnot' names. This stems from their histories and how they were named. Antoinette was given a French name because for the Malherbes, who were "plain folk, names must transcend their condition; a name must ring with grandeur, and so earn respect. A grand English name, as they thought it to be, would cancel out the Afrikaans surname with its reference to madness" (Wicomb 132). Thus, being English was seen as superior, and as what children should aspire towards, as the identity did not have the attachments of shame that Afrikaans did in the coloured community.

Giving Antoinette this name was important not only because it was seen as a respectable name, but also because for "the life of a girl with few resources" it would "help in the tricky business of finding a husband, for who nowadays would want a Kaatjie or Grieta. Certainly not a teacher, or rather a principal" (132). Antoinette's naming is thus strategic as the Malherbes are aware of how respectability is gauged in their community. Antoinette marries Nicholas, who enjoys a privileged position in the community, as he finds her attractive precisely because of her name and what it suggests about her family background. Accordingly, his own children will be made to speak English and not Afrikaans. He is aware that respectability, within this social milieu, is only accorded to those who are able to speak English and embrace its colonial culture.

Furthermore, when Nicholas becomes a teacher in Kliprand he sees his role as beating out of the children "the hotnos ways, the memory of clicks and kabarra and ash" and this is because:

he hated their speech. The dragged vowels and especially the use of ga and hitse, surely Hottentot words, he considered barbaric" for "how could knowledge be acquired in such a tongue? These people were too – and he appeared to search for the word each time – well, too indigenous, refusing to wash away the stamp of Hottentot origins.

(157-8)

This means that according to Nicholas, if they are able to transcend the language, they will also be able to transcend the shame that is attached to the "Hottentot" identity. His role is thus similar to that of missionaries whose intentions were to educate the natives and rid them of their barbarism. This was driven by the belief that the colonised would rise above his "jungle status" if he was able to adopt the colonisers' cultural standards (Fanon 9).

Nicholas thus assumes that if his students are able to master the language and culture of their colonisers, they will be assimilated into that culture and lose their barbarism. These are

the same aspirations that he has for his children, Mercia and Jake. Nicholas has internalised the racist discourse of his time and his emphasis of his European ancestry and his cultural preferences are a way of overcoming the shame he associates with his African ancestry. In this way, Nicholas represents a perfect example of the ‘noble savage’ as he aspires to belong to a community he can never be part of.

Zimitri Erasmus writes that much of the racism that is found in the coloured community has to do with the fact that coloured identity has always been clouded with feelings of shame. She argues that notions of respectability and shame have become “defining terms of middle class coloured experience” (14). That is why Nicholas conceives of himself as a “good man, a decent coloured man, with a name that he had never disgraced – unthinkable, he was a Murray, of civilised Scottish stock. He neither drank nor smoked” (Wicomb 17). Thus for Nicholas, it is important that his identity, and that of his family, is construed in this respectable manner as this differentiates them from the rest of the coloured community that he perceives as shameful.

Much of the shame depicted in the novel has to do with the history of coloured identity in the nineteenth century and the politics of miscegenation during that time. Miscegenation refers to the “interbreeding of people of different races” and in the context of South Africa refers to sexual encounters between indigenous African people and European travellers and settlers (“Miscegenation”). The offspring of these encounters were not acknowledged by the colonial government and this has meant that “‘Interracial’ sex, and those born from these liaisons, have a long history of denial. The silences on sexual encounters between Europeans and the Khoikhoi in the travelogues point to the repugnance associated with “‘interracial’ sex” (Erasmus 35). This meant that “colonial society preferred the crossing of social boundaries to be temporary and sought to exclude the products of those unions from entering the white social stratum” (39). This, she points out, was done for economic reasons as the colonial government could not afford to import enough European women to Africa due to financial constraints (38).

Erasmus writes that senior officials were aware of the existence of interracial relations but discarded the offspring of these relations since Europe’s justification for colonising Africa was that it was on a civilisation mission and as a result constructed notions of ‘pure’ racial categories to legitimise their mission. Different racial groups were constructed as having specific attributes and the coloured race, which required that it be negated in order to assert the purity of other races, was constructed in negative terms and seen as having inherited the worst attributes from the black and the white race. Erasmus contends that because of this, coloured identity has been spoken about and associated with “immorality, sexual promiscuity,

illegitimacy, impurity and untrustworthiness” and consequently, “these associations have meant that identifying as coloured is linked to feelings of shame and discomfort” (17).

This history has shaped Nicholas’s perspectives. His thinking, occurring within a historical period that was obsessed with race, has a detrimental effect on his children and the larger community of Kliprand. Despite the fact that he plays an important role in uplifting the community through his work as a deacon and community worker, he is shown to be hypocritical as he does not have sincere regard for the people of Kliprand and refuses to allow his children to be associated with them (Wicomb 95). This is because he sees Kliprand as “inhabited by uncouth, uneducated people. Yes, their home was there, but the Murrays couldn’t possibly think of belonging there” (95). The novel exposes the fact that hierarchies also existed, and continue to exist, within the coloured community itself.

Erasmus argues that such divisions are prevalent within the coloured community as those who are dark-skinned and have kinky hair are treated as inferior to those who are light-skinned with long hair (24). Being light-skinned with straight hair not only ensures that you are regarded as beautiful and respected within your community, it also influences your economic prospects. This is shown in the novel through the description of the Willemse family, who also live in Kliprand. Even though the sisters in this family are light-skinned, they do not have “such good hair, such good blood” as the Murrays and the community is therefore baffled that they gave themselves “airs and graces” which they did not deserve (107). The Willemses thus occupy an inferior position compared to the Murrays as they do not adhere to all the prescriptions of respectability that are required in order to be seen as superior in the community.

It is these racial hierarchies that make Nicholas adamant that his children attain a good education. Such an education will not only solidify the innate differences that he believes exist between the Murrays and the rest of the community, but it will also allow his children to move out of Kliprand and not be associated with people who he believes are indecent. It is because of this pursuit that Nicholas persistently (and even violently) ensures that Mercia and Jake do well at school and attend university.

Moreover, it is because of these beliefs that Nicholas tries to ensure that his children do not sin and do not associate with those he sees as not respectable. He uses the bible to enforce his authority as well as to accept the racial status quo that exists in South Africa. According to Nicholas, South Africa’s racial divides are God-made and should therefore not be questioned. He tells Mercia and Jake that “we can’t think of this country as ours, because it belongs to white people, even to the English who claim to belong to Europe” (166). What is important to Nicholas is that he has been able to establish himself above the rest of the black and ‘other’

coloured population and sees everyone as having the responsibility of attaining success despite the racist legislations that govern people's lives. Nicholas's thinking reflects the successful use of religion by colonialists who described indigenous people as lazy and stupid and thus justified the need to civilise them (Erasmus 23). Nicholas has imbibed these beliefs and as a result has become complicit in their perpetuation because of the benefits he has been able to accrue.

The use of religion to justify apartheid was recognised by the Black Conscious Movement (BCM) led by Steve Biko. In writing against the dominant mode in which religion was used during apartheid, Biko wrote that "the bible must not be seen to preach that all authority is divinely instituted. It should rather preach that it is sin to allow oneself to be oppressed" (31). The BCM's critique of religion was a result of the realisation that there were sectors of oppressed people who used the bible to condone and justify the oppression of other people through the discourse of race. Biko argued that this thinking made the church complicit in perpetuating apartheid. He criticised ministers similar to Nicholas, who "stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their thieving, housebreaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery," without ever attempting to "relate all these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, lack of schooling and migratory labour" (57). This critical examination of religion exposed the ways in which the church perpetuated the apartheid system.

According to Biko, an acceptance of the authority of religion, without any criticism, was what legitimated the apartheid system. In his criticism of the church, he argues that Christianity was "corrupted by the inclusions of aspects which made it the ideal religion for the colonisation of people, nowadays in its interpretation it is the ideal religion for the maintenance of the subjugation of some people" (57). Thus, the problem, as Biko points out, is not so much religion itself but the ways it has been used to perpetuate the suffering of people. Nicholas accepts Christianity's divine authority, and the ways it is used by the state, and as a result becomes complicit in oppressing people who he sees as inferior to him.

Mercia and Jake are however critical of Nicholas's religious stance and continuously question his belief in a God that legitimates the suffering of other people. This leads to Nicholas punishing them as he believes that they go against the will of God by questioning a system God has legitimised. The aim of his punishments, as indicated previously, is to ensure that his children do not "turn out like the people of Kliprand, like the dirty, drunk Bassons" (Wicomb 88).

Nicholas has accepted the racist discourse that governs South Africa and does not find it necessary to challenge the status quo. Part of his motivation for maintaining this status quo,

as mentioned, has to do with the minimal privilege he enjoys within this hierarchical set-up. Mohamed Adhikari writes that coloured people enjoyed small privileges during apartheid and that this was critical in maintaining the apartheid system as it “rewarded Coloured exclusivism and conformity with white racist expectations, while discouraging alternative strategies, particularly association with a broader black identity” (xii). Adhikari writes that these minimal privileges created a fear in coloured people as they did not want to be relegated “to the status of Africans” as this would result in the loss of the minor privileges they enjoyed. This fear “encouraged a separatist strategy with respect to Africans within the Coloured political leadership” (11). Any association with Africans was feared as it would send a message that Coloured people were ungrateful for the privileges they were offered by the government. Nicholas can be seen falling into this trap that the apartheid government used to ensure that oppressed racial groups were separated from each other.

The BCM recognised how the apartheid system worked and Biko argued that the government intentionally stratified marginalised races, and they were thus denied a sense of broader community, regardless of how similar their suffering was (52). The minimal privileges given to the coloured race can be seen as having entrapped Nicholas as his intentions are to maintain them and to also influence his children into accepting them without critique ensures that these privileges are ‘minimal.’ He naïvely assumes that he is in control and can determine the course his life take, while in actuality, the oppressive structures have overdetermined who he is and his ability (or lack thereof) to manoeuvre within them.

Jake, more than Mercia, is overtly critical of his father’s thinking and actions. From an early age he finds it difficult to accept the race and class differentiations that his father endorses, and develops an acrimonious relationship with him as a result. One of the criticisms he levels against his father has to do with the responsibilities that Nicholas assumes in Kliprand as a deacon and community leader. As an influential person in Kliprand, Jake expects him to be outspoken about the brutality of apartheid, but as already elaborated on, he prefers to do his duties so as to enjoy the privileges he receives. This leads to Jake calling him a “bloody apartheid collaborator” as his silence confirms that he is complicit in maintaining the system (93). The tension between Jake and his father results in Jake rebelling against his father’s wish that he finish his university education. This decision angers his father who asks him whether he wants to “go back to bed like a lazy hotnot and sleep till midday than do your duty?” (92). Nicholas tells him that he has shown himself “to be as unreliable as any Kliprand hotnot. A failure” and that he will “have no failure in (his) house” (47) and as a result of this, Jake is forced to move out of the house.

Jake's refusal to continue with his studies brings shame to the family, which is why Nicholas no longer wants to be associated with him. By refusing to attain an education, Jake makes the Murrays look like the other 'indecent' and uneducated families in Kliprand. The hatred that Jake harbours towards his father leads him to abandon all notions of what it means to be a "decent coloured person," and to living a life that contradicts everything that his father stands for. Jake's intentions are to attain independence and not be constrained by his father's expectations of him. These incidents show how apartheid intruded into people's private spaces as it went so far as to influence the kinds of relationships parents had with their children.

Mercia, on the other hand, has more sympathy towards their father and accuses Jake of being unfair in his assessment of his political views. This is because Mercia believes that Nicholas has been conditioned by the context that he was born in. She tells him that their father did teach them, at the very least, self-respect and "never to capitulate to whiteness" to which Jake responds "self-preservation all right. And what about Africans? Did he teach us to respect the people of this country? Or the people of Kliprand? What does he mean when he says they're not our kind of people?" (94). Mercia's sympathy towards Nicholas is premised on her view that his complicity was informed by the need to ensure that they attain a good education. Jake does not, however, want to believe this or accept it as a correct moral stand.

Mercia's understanding does not however mean that she is not critical of Nicholas's perspectives. She also disparages her father's views, although she does this more gently than Jake. This is revealed, for instance, when she asks her father about their African forefathers that he does not speak about such as Dennis Brutus, Cissie Gools, Alex La Guma and A. C. Jordan, who were classified as coloured but still challenged the apartheid system. Nicholas's response is that he "wants to know nothing about them," as he is indifferent to their political activism and as a result refuses to engage in a conversation with her (167). At another point in the novel, Mercia asks if a parallel condition exists between his sermon about Moses, who led his people out of slavery, and the condition the majority of native South Africans face. Nicholas responds by telling her that Moses was "led by the voice of God" which is the same God, according to him, that has instituted the existence of apartheid (167). Thus to Nicholas, these figures are going against the will of God in rebelling against apartheid. Mercia, like Jake, has an acute understanding of what is happening in South Africa. She is therefore able to be critical of her father's views even though, as I have argued, she shows more sympathy towards him than Jake.

When Mercia is in high school in the 1970s, she joins the BCM to rebel against the apartheid system and together with Fanus, a classmate, she distributes the leaflets of the

organisation. When the Soweto Uprisings of 1976 erupted, they followed the news with interest as they were in solidarity with what other students were doing around the country. This is because they saw themselves as “black South Africans who with the disposed majority would bring the country to its knees” (205). One of the founding aims of the BCM was to:

make the black man come to himself; to pump life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth.
(Biko 29)

The aim was to fight against the mental oppression that decades of subjugation and violence had wrought into the minds of natives. Mercia and Fanus’s self-identification as black is important since the BCM’s aim was to group all oppressed people as black so as to avoid the divisions the apartheid regime forged between those who were similarly oppressed (52). This was meant to ensure that there was unanimity in the fight against apartheid and to make all oppressed people proud of their African heritage. Adhikari writes that this made the BCM popular in the Western Cape in the 1970s as the movements’ views about coloured identity were always debated. While there were many who insisted on continuing to identify themselves as coloured, the more educated and politicised members of the community rejected their coloured classifications as they preferred being classified as black. These debates, he argues, lead to some solidarity between black and coloured people in their fight against apartheid (6).

When Steve Biko, the leader of the BCM, died, the Minister of Police, Paul Kruger, announced that he did not care about his death. Kruger’s response troubled Mercia and when she asks Nicholas how he feels about Biko’s death, his refusal to share his opinion leads to her screaming and asking; “what do you think? what do you say?” but because of his indifference to what she is asking he leaves the room where they are talking (Wicomb 205). It is clear then that although Nicholas’s thinking about apartheid has profound implications for his children, it does not lead to either of them endorsing his ideological position. They both manage to think independently and critically about the apartheid system, despite the hardships they have to endure because of their beliefs.

Colonialism had a profound impact on people’s social and economic lives. In 1913, the white-led government forcefully took ownership of land that belonged to the indigenous people of South Africa. Eighty seven per cent of the land was distributed amongst the white population, and thirteen per cent was to be shared amongst the majority of the population who were oppressed. This had huge implications for the quality of life of indigenous people as they

were resettled in small pieces of land that became over-concentrated (Benjaminsen, Kepe and Bråthen 224). Wicomb's fictional construction of Kliprand is exemplary of the residential areas that were created by apartheid on the outskirts of many cities in South Africa. A large majority of the people who live in Kliprand are from working class backgrounds and continue to be subjected to poverty. That is why Mercia and Jake speak of it as a "place to leave behind," as it has no opportunities for self-improvement and is rather a 'godforsaken' place (Wicomb 109).

Apartheid's disenfranchisement is depicted more acutely through Sylvie, Jake's wife, who had hopes that her life would not be constrained in the same ways in which the lives of her sisters, and others in Kliprand, was. Sylvie refused to accept her sisters' racist thinking and did not understand why they cared about "the blood of a boer from long, long ago, the respectable blood that AntieMa bleats on about? That is the stale story of aged, tired blood that has clotted in varicose knots on the legs of the old women" (111). This difference in perspective was informed by the fact that Sylvie envisaged a different future for herself that would not be constrained by apartheid. This future, however, does not materialise as she faces the constraints imposed upon her by the social and political structures of the time. Sylvie unfortunately finds, like many people, that her life has been overdetermined by the apartheid government and she ends up working at a butchery store for much of her adult life.

Unlike her sisters, Sylvie refuses to accept the hierarchies apartheid has imposed on coloured people. She is also shown, ironically, to hold the same prejudices as Nicholas towards black South Africans. This comes out when she is in a conversation with Mercia about the state of the country in post-apartheid South Africa and lets out her disappointment about "black wanting to kill all the coloureds, and swarming into Kliprand, into the RDP houses. Who knows what will happen to them in such a state?" (55). This shows that Sylvie accepts the racist discourse that has been created by apartheid even though her identity has also been constructed in the negative as she is regarded as inferior as a coloured person. Furthermore, while Nicholas has been able to enjoy the minimal privileges given to coloureds, this has not been the case with Sylvie, but she nevertheless holds the same prejudices. This shows, as the BCM argued, that apartheid was not only about benefiting certain groups economically, as it also created hierarchies between races and, in this way, divided them.

Sylvie's racist views are thus similar to those of Nicholas, even though they occupy different social and economic positions in their community. The two characters who are critical of Nicholas's racist views are his children Mercia and Jake. This, however, does not mean that they are unaffected by these views. Jake's inability to attain an education is in many ways a result of his father's attitude towards him. On the other hand, Mercia is able to become a

postcolonial scholar precisely because of her understanding, and dislike, of the ways in which racial discourse impacts on society. Wicomb's novel thus shows the different outcomes that oppressive political environments have on people's lives. Since its central concern is with the present, the novel can be read as a reminder, and a warning, of consequences that continue to emanate from South Africa's racial history.

II: "A Woman of Fifty-two who has been Left": Gender, Class and the Beauty Myth

In addition to race, Wicomb's novel examines the role that gender plays in its characters' lives. This is because gender, like race, is a socially constructed category. It has had a huge influence on how women experience the world as opposed to how men do. Like the social construction of the black race, women have been classified as inferior to men. In *October*, Wicomb shows how such classifications impact every aspect of a person's life and are detrimental to women as they occupy a marginal position within the gender hierarchy. In the novel it is Mercia, Sylvie, and Antoinette who are affected by the pervasiveness of these gender constructions as they all live in deeply patriarchal environments.

The novel does not, however, portray women simply as victims. Most of them resist the patriarchal norms they are born into. Thus, the novel has a strong feminist bent, as it shows the ways in which marginalised groups, women in this instance, battle against hegemonic power structures. Wicomb's novel also interrogates the intersections between gender and class. While Mercia is an academic and is economically privileged, Sylvie and Antoinette come from working-class backgrounds and do not, therefore, have the opportunity to question, and at times escape, their marginalised positions in the same ways Mercia does. This illustrates that the ways in which women respond to societal norms is heavily influenced by their class and educational opportunities.

The opening lines of the novel alert us to some of the gendered themes it will deal with. We are told that "Mercia Murray is a woman of fifty-two years who has been left" (1). Mercia and Craig (her partner for twenty-four years) assumed that because of the time they had spent together they would be lifetime partners. Things do not, however, turn out that way. At the age of fifty-two, Mercia finds herself having to rethink her life and what it means to live in Scotland when the only important attachment she had to it was her long term relationship with Craig. They decided not to marry as Mercia "was not for the giving" as a feminist which means she did not see marriage as a necessity in order to be in a stable relationship (29). They also decided

not to have children as she did not think she had the “stomach for reproduction” and did not measure her worth as a woman based on whether she had children (39). Craig conceded to this decision as “he didn’t feel one way or t’ other, he was a bloke, immune to the moon. Although, if Mercia really wanted such a thing, he could be persuaded, could think himself into the unthinkable” (81).

To Mercia this meant that the relationship was based on true companionship as they were not bound to each other by children but by the fact that they cared for each other. bell hooks offers the same perspective on one of the achievements of the feminist movement. She writes that the feminist critique of:

mothering as the sole satisfying purpose of a woman’s life changed the nature of marriage and long-term partnerships. Once a woman’s worth was no longer determined by whether or not she birthed and raised children it was possible for a two-career couple who wanted to remain childless to envision a peer marriage – a relationship between equals.

(81)

Mercia’s decision to not have children is informed by this feminist perspective of motherhood. Her choice is however challenged when Craig leaves and she wonders “if they had had children, would Craig have left? Would he not have had a fling and returned to the fold? She wept for the shame of it all” (82). Furthermore, Mercia thinks that “an older woman is not only left, but left behind, which she supposes refers to reproduction, as if that is what every women wants” (37). Her experience raises questions about what it means to be a feminist in a world in which relations are still driven by a heteronormative system. Even though they both made the decision not to have children, Craig can leave and start a new family, as he can still reproduce, and this is something impossible for Mercia at her age.

As already indicated, Mercia offers multiple reasons as to why her relationship with Craig does not last. Besides Craig wanting to have children, she also thinks he left because she is now unable to do things that younger women can. This is because on hotel visits, Mercia has become accustomed to “the screaming of women in extremis” and wonders when “such requirements for women might have been established” and whether “not having known about it, was that too a mark of her failing relationship?” (58-9). Illustrated here are the sexual experiences that women of different generations have and how these changes can impact on their relationships. Mercia wonders whether Craig left because he was looking for “someone younger, more attractive, someone less preoccupied with her work, with a job that allows for leisure time, indeed – yes, she said that word, indeed – someone with an eager womb?” (60).

These are things that Mercia, as a middle-aged professional woman, has never been able to give him.

When dealing with the loneliness that comes after Craig's leaving, Mercia finds herself going to the gym and shopping for new clothing. Even though she tries to convince herself that she is not doing these things to be in a relationship, it is clear that she does worry about her appearance, and ultimately, how others perceive her. At a clothing store, Mercia stares at herself and is "in dismay at the bizarre figure of a fifty-year-old in the mirror. Like the favoured photograph of themselves that people carry with for decades in their wallets, Mercia had identified with an outdated image of herself" (129). This "outdated image" is one that is no longer reflected in the mirror. It is important to note that Mercia, like most people, had probably looked at herself in the mirror on a daily basis. The difference is that she is now looking at herself through other people's eyes as she is thinking about possible reasons that led to Craig deserting her.

bell hooks argues that the importance that has been placed on bodily image means that "all females no matter their age are being socialised either consciously or unconsciously to have anxiety about their body, to see flesh as problematic" (35). Thus, at the age of fifty-two, Mercia thinks of herself as an "abandoned woman, an old woman, whose thighs have spread and who sits with her legs comfortably apart, hands folded on her stomach" (Wicomb 188). She has thus, as hooks argues, become part of a large number of women who, past the age of forty, are still single, "finding themselves in competition with younger women for male attention" and because of this, emulating "sexist representations of female beauty" (hooks 34).

Wicomb's novel, however, shows that Mercia has always been aware of the ways in which gender hierarchies function in society. From an early age she is made aware of her role as a girl in her home: a role that differs significantly to that of her brother Jake. The duties placed on them are informed by the fact they have different genders and are seen as possessing different skill sets. Mercia remembers how "chores assigned to her were specifically for her training as a girl" and was puzzled by the fact that the "nasty" chores were reserved for her (Wicomb 171). Some of these chores included washing the family's handkerchiefs and emptying the bowel chambers, activities that Mercia found demeaning and disgusting (171). This made her aware of how gender constructions determine the ways in which one is treated in the world.

Gender constructions also influence the kind of life Sylvie lives. As a teenager, Sylvie goes through a phase that suggests some form of self-emancipation as she is interested in making her own decisions, as opposed to living in a way that is expected of her. She thinks that

her three sisters do not know anything as “they are of another world. They have not noticed how the world around them has changed” and furthermore that:

they do not see that the young are new, that their bodies are fresh, that music beats in their blood, that with their heads lifted to the blue sky, their spirits soar way, way above the little church steeple. Hitse! This is the new South Africa.

(109)

Sylvie makes a distinction between what the old people believe, and how they believe she should act, and what she actually does. This is made clear when she is told by her sisters that she should start thinking about marriage and children. To this she wonders “why she should have to be a wife and mother when none of the sisters, her sisters, was” (106). Sylvie clearly does not conform to societal expectations and thinks independently about the kind of life that she wants to live. Furthermore, she is capable of studying her social environment, her sisters in this instance, as she notices the hypocrisy that is behind what they are telling her.

When Ousie, one of Sylvie’s sisters, advises her to pray for forgiveness so that she can grow old and wise and understand the ways of the Lord, Sylvie lowers her head and thinks “old and wise? No, rather old and ugly with budging veins of stale blood, and who would want that?” (111). This reflects that Sylvie has a different perspective on religion to what her sisters, and the larger community of Kliprand, expect her to. She refuses to conform to the dominant demands placed on her as a child and as a woman. She is shown to be indifferent to society’s expectations and envisages a future where she will make her own decisions.

Sylvie’s hardships escalate as she becomes an adult and the novel shows the ways in which these difficulties are a result of gendered norms and class differences that exist in her community. She marries Jake, who is then abusive towards her. He has become an alcoholic who can no longer afford to do anything for himself and has become dependent on Sylvie for the maintenance of the household and for caring for their child Nicky. His dependence on her does not however mean that he treats her with any gratitude or respect. Having found out about her molestation by his father Nicholas, Jake thinks she was also responsible for what happened without considering the gender norms and age difference between Sylvie and Nicholas. Nicholas took advantage of Sylvie’s trust and dependence on him as a young girl as she “loved to hear Meester’s stories about sheep” and anything else he would tell her (214). When she became a teenager, however, Meester ordered Sylvie to “unbutton her shirt and free her new breasts, small as green apples” and from then on took advantage of her (217). The novel suggests that in many ways, this was a betrayal of the father figure that Sylvie saw in Nicholas.

Jake's continuous abuse towards Sylvie (as well as his dismissive attitude to prior harm, which compounds this abuse) shows that adulthood has not provided the emancipation she hoped for. Even though she aspired to be an independent person, patriarchal expectations limit what she is able to do with her life.

The novel reveals, as African feminists have argued, that patriarchal norms also have negative repercussions for men which is why they argue that "men and women should form an alliance in their fight against these social phenomena – and that this fight should include a common challenge of patriarchal social structures" (Arndt 73). This shared need is reflected through Jake's life: he suffers precisely because of his father's sexual molestation of Sylvie as the consequences of that incident have a deep effect on his life.

As indicated, Jake accuses Sylvie of colluding with his father to make his life miserable. He tells her that she has "crept out of a reed hut" to ruin his life (14), and is indifferent to how Sylvie has been a victim when she was sexually molested by Nicholas as a young girl. Sylvie responds by telling him that she did not grow up in a reed hut but grew up with her AntieMa who has "a good zinc roof." Jake responds by telling her to "fuck off to AntieMa. Or to Kiewiet street. Fuck off and take the little bastard with you. Get out" (15). Sylvie is unwelcome in her home as Jake has more power as a male. For Sylvie home is not a place where she can assume a level of comfort, as her home is the place where she experiences the most abuse.

The abuse Sylvie experiences from Jake makes her resort to being more subservient. She does many things to impress him, including cooking, as she believes the old adage that "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach" (14). Even as she knows that Jake has been "lost for good to the evil drink" and that "she will never have him back," she still sees it as her duty to take care of the household as there "is nothing a girl can do to change the course of events," and this contrasts the view she held as a young woman (14). bell hooks calls such circumstances "Patriarchal Violence" as they are "based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force," for example, the ways that Jake controls Sylvie even when he no longer supports his family. hooks emphasises the fact that this violence should be seen as patriarchal and because as opposed to the term 'domestic violence', patriarchal violence "continually reminds the listener that violence in the home is connected to the sexism and sexist thinking, to male domination" (62).

Jake's abuse is not only directed at Sylvie, but their child Nicky as well. Jake calls Nicky a "bastard" as he does not believe that he is his child (Wicomb 15). This shows how children also become victims of patriarchal norms as they, together with their mothers, are vulnerable to the power that is wielded by their fathers. hooks argues that "children are violated

not only when they are the direct targets of patriarchal violence but as well when they are forced to witness violent acts” (63). In line with this form of violence, Nicky continuously has to witness the abuse of his mother and is also called names by his father despite the fact that he is his child.

Class also plays an important role in *October* as women from different economic positions respond to gendered norms according to the level of education they have attained. In contrast to Sylvie, Mercia enjoys a privileged position because of the family she was brought up in and the educational opportunities it gave her. These opportunities lead to her becoming an academic and feminist. Sylvie, on the other hand, is from a working-class background and works at a butchery for much of her adult life. Mercia’s and Sylvie’s ability, or inability, to deal with patriarchy is informed to a great extent by the class positions they occupy. This means that women, as African feminists insist, cannot be regarded as a homogenous group as class differences exist and inform the trajectories that their lives take (Arndt 73).

These class differences lead to a deeply troubled relationship between Mercia and Sylvie as they are unable to understand each other’s thinking and priorities. When Jake told Mercia he would be marrying Sylvie as she was pregnant, Mercia disapproved because Sylvie did not come from the same class background as them. She saw Jake as marrying beneath their standards (101). She approved of the marriage only because “fatherhood would keep Jake on the straight and narrow,” even though she thought him irresponsible in the “casual way in which he took to reproduction” (101). This shows that Mercia has no interest in Sylvie’s life and how she feels about the marriage and pregnancy beyond how the association might benefit her brother.

Mercia’s judgements of Sylvie are informed by the fact that she sees her as a “simple, uneducated country girl” and because of this is not interested in hearing her opinions (181). Thus, on one of her visits to Kliprand, she reports that “the trick is not to give the woman too many opportunities to air her views” (41). Although Mercia claims to be embarrassed by her own snobbery, she thinks that she cannot correct herself “while the girl shouts as if she were in another room” (42). Even though she says she believes in female solidarity, she finds that “she simply cannot take to this girl” (74). Mercia’s assessment of Sylvie, as well as her persistent use of the infantilising and therefore derogatory term “girl,” shows that she is not interested in Sylvie’s life and clearly still thinks Jake made a mistake in marrying her. This position, as stated earlier, is ironic as she also claims to understand her difficult life despite ignoring what Sylvie has to say.

It is not only Mercia who bars Sylvie from airing her opinions; Jake also accuses her of liking to complain. Whenever Sylvie wants to express her unhappiness, she thinks that Jake will accuse her of whining even though “she can’t stop herself from putting grievance upon grievance, from uttering the thoughts that nubble day and night with no hope of abatement” (41). Sylvie’s experience shows that women can be marginalised by other women just as they are subjugated by men. These incidents are examples of how power is used, by *all of* those who are more powerful, to subjugate others. Jake is able to get away with his abuse because of his position as a husband. On the other hand, Mercia sees Sylvie as an embarrassment to the family, and the differences in their class and education allow Mercia to belittle her and be indifferent to the abuse that Jake puts her through.

Antoinette, Nicholas’s wife, also battles with the gender constructions and expectations that Mercia and Sylvie encounter. She is named Antoinette because of her parents’ awareness that the name “would influence the life of a girl with few resources, and help in the tricky business of finding a husband” and Antoinette apparently succeeds in this “tricky business” by marrying Nicholas (132). In their marriage, Antoinette is expected to play a subservient role as Nicholas considers himself to be the head of the household because of his religious and patriarchal beliefs. This is the same role that Sylvie also has to accept in her relationship with Jake. hooks argues that in a predominately Christian society, “masses of people continue to believe that god has ordained that women be subordinate to men in the domestic household” (2). This is clear in the ways in which Nicholas and Antoinette live and the kinds of expectations they have of each other.

Her subservient position means that Antoinette has to eat meat even though she does not want to. As a ‘good wife,’ she always has to grit her “teeth to prepare dinners” as “Nicholas could not be expected to tolerate a fastidious palate” (132-3). To Antoinette, Nicholas resembles her father who was also “strict, a good man, a man of principle who would not tolerate fussiness. It would take some drilling to find the well of kindness that she knew was there, in his heart” (133). Similar to Sylvie, who accepts that she is being whiny when she complains, Antoinette also thinks that if she were to refuse to do as she is told, she would be regarded as showing signs of “fussiness,” and this is something she avoids as she wants him to regard her as a good wife.

When Antoinette has her first child, Mercia, she expresses feeling “nothing for her,” contrary to the love a mother is expected to possess. When they have their second child, Jake, Antoinette hides the fact that she had actually delayed the pregnancy as she did not want a child and “did everything in her limited means to prevent pregnancy” (135). When they discover

that their second baby is a boy they both “exclaimed with delight. And relief, for that meant they could put behind them the business of reproduction” (136). The “business of reproduction” would have continued had they not had a son, and this illustrates that in patriarchal environments, women do not own their bodies and that they belong to their male partners. Antoinette and Nicholas would have continued trying to have a son, despite the misgivings that Antoinette had about having more children. This is informed by the notion that a family is only considered complete once there is a male offspring as this ensures a line of inheritance in a capitalist system that only recognises a lineage of men and elides the lives and value of women.

Furthermore, when Antoinette falls ill with cancer, she hides her sickness from Nicholas until she is in her deathbed. After her death, Nicholas thinks that “cancer was something resistible that you let into your own heart, that you allowed its crabbing into your organs” and because of this thinks that the “cancer bush” would have cured her and concludes that he will never “put his faith in a woman” (108). Nicholas clearly thinks that Antoinette is responsible for her death and does not consider the fact that she was never given an opportunity to air her views in their home. Because of the patriarchal set up of the home, all the decisions that were made came from him, despite her occasionally opposed views. Her death can thus be read as an escape from the constrictions she has had to live through for much of her childhood and adult life in her marriage.

While Mercia is in Scotland, she receives a letter from Jake asking her to return to South Africa to take Nicky with her since he is sick. This request troubles Mercia as she does not want to raise children. Much of the novel is driven by Mercia’s unsettled thoughts on whether or not she should take Nicky with her. It is only after Mercia discovers that Sylvie has been sexually molested by her father that she decides she will take Nicky with her as a way of compensating, and taking responsibility, for what has happened to her sister in law. When she tells her of these intentions over the phone, Sylvie responds by asking her “What do you mean? How can you take him? Where to?” and tells her:

Nicky is a Murray but he is also my child, my own child. He’s all I have. I’m a nobody, so you think you have to take my child away? That I’m not good enough to bring him up? You can’t take him away. I won’t let anyone take him away.

(269)

It is only at this point that Mercia realises that the letter Jake had written was a reflection of his sentiments alone, and took no account of Sylvie’s. This incident is important as it highlights

the ways in which Mercia had, from the onset, denied Sylvie the right to have a voice. The only person she listened to was Jake as she regarded Sylvie's views as insignificant.

Sylvie's response to Mercia reveals the nature of Sylvie's relationship with her son. While Mercia had assumed that Sylvie was irresponsible in wanting to give Nicky away, her refusal to let him go shows the importance that Sylvie places on her responsibility as a mother and the significant role that Nicky plays in her life. African feminists argue that contrary to Western conceptions of motherhood that cast it as a means to subjugate women, motherhood plays an important role in the lives of many African women. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi writes that this is reflected in a lot of African writing, who find "empowerment in their children and families" (25). Contrary to Mercia's views of the debilitating nature of motherhood, Sylvie values the role, regardless of her economic position. The importance of motherhood for African feminists, however, is also balanced by the need for women to "realise and to define themselves beyond wife and motherhood" (Arndt 72). It is a politics that is against binary ways of thinking. Being a mother does not entail a betrayal of feminist politics as women should be able to choose what it is that they find valuable.

In her survey of African women's novels, Susan Arndt argues that what most of them highlight is the importance of education in women's lives and "solidarity among women as well as women's economic and social independence from men, as important means toward the emancipation of women and the equality of rights and status between men and women" (78). This, indeed, is clear in the novel as Mercia's education ensures that she still has choices about where and how she wants to live despite the failure of her relationship. This privilege is in stark contrast with Sylvie's station in life, which is an even more precarious one after Jake's death. Wicomb's novel can thus be read as an attempt to give a voice to the subjugated people and the hardships that women like Sylvie continue to face. By the end of the novel, Mercia is forced to concede to Sylvie's demand to keep her child and comes to the realisation that her feminist principles cannot be universal as women experience the world differently. Thus, Sylvie's voice comes alive when Mercia is forced to accept the limits of her own perspectives and comes to understand that her relationship with her sister in law can only work if she allows her to make her own decisions about her life.

III: "Home, no More than a Word": Kliprand, Glasgow and Macau

Homi Bhabha argues that the contemporary period is a time “of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” and that this has resulted in a “sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement” (1). Bhabha’s description of the contemporary world resonates with the ways in which Wicomb’s novel interrogates themes of home and belonging in the twenty-first century. After Mercia and Craig separate, she starts thinking about what it means to live in Scotland without him. This results in Mercia feeling disorientated as she has to re-evaluate what it means to belong in a place she has never thought of as her home. She also realises that South Africa, her country of birth, can no longer be regarded as home either.

Mercia went into exile in the 1970s after her university studies, as she could not tolerate living under apartheid rule. Exile was an attempt to attain freedom from the ideological and professional constraints that were imposed by the apartheid government. While in exile, she suffers from homesickness as she is no longer close to the things that once lent meaning to her life. This homesickness is exacerbated when Craig leaves her after their twenty-four-year relationship. Mercia then attempts to write about her childhood, in the form of a memoir, which will include the people she found valuable in her country of birth, South Africa. In a state of disorientation, in struggling to find a home, she engages in writing, in reconstituting history, to help her make better sense of her present predicament.

As a postcolonial literary scholar, Mercia is aware that although she is in a disorientated space, the search for a true home is no longer possible in the contemporary world. She betrays this awareness when she bemoans the fact that “home, no more than a word, its meaning hollowed out by the termites of time, a shell carrying only a dull ache for the substance of the past” is an impossible attainment even though “living in another country, in a crazy era” she is “not yet ready for its collapse” (27). Her writing and thinking about home are therefore attempts to reconstitute this history against the perplexing demands of the present.

She is thus, as Svetlana Boym argues, engaged in an act of nostalgia. Boym defines nostalgia as a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” and she argues that this sentiment is a “mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility” that is “the very core of the modern condition” (8). That is why nostalgia is only able to survive “in a long-distance relationship,” when the native no longer lives in their homeland. Furthermore, Boym writes that nostalgia may appear to be a longing for a place while it is in fact a “yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams” (7). In *October*,

this yearning takes the form of Mercia's preoccupation with her childhood and deceased parents when she thinks about what she will include in her memoir.

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said writes that nostalgia results from the exile's "discontinuous state of being" because "exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (140). This explains Mercia's insistence, although having lived in Scotland for twenty four years, that "she is only there temporarily; it cannot be her home" (Wicomb 23). She thinks of her true home as South Africa, the country of her birth, and sees Scotland as a place that she can never belong in.

Exile means that one is necessarily estranged from one's homeland and this has various repercussions. One of them is that one cannot spend adequate time with loved ones as one is removed from the geographical space one grew up in. These losses have a great effect on Mercia as her father passes away while she is in Scotland and she regrets that she never spent much time with him after she left for the UK. Her remorse is exacerbated by the fact that Nicholas used to tell her that he knew that at some point she would return to South Africa to spend time with him. Mercia would respond by saying she would do so "as soon as this monstrous government is overthrown" and after it was overthrown, and he kept asking her when she would return, "she had nothing to say, would smile sheepishly at him" (24). Thus the trauma of exile, as Said argues, has to do with not only what has been lost during childhood, but the loss that the migrant experiences during the time they are not 'home.'

Mercia finds it difficult to return to South Africa after the downfall of apartheid because exile, as she says, is not a "frozen affair" (165). When people (including her father) ask her when it is that she will return to South Africa, she finds it difficult to answer since an exile is not "kept pristinely in the past, one that a swift thaw could restore, so that rinsed and refreshed, you are returned in mint condition to an original time, an original place" (165). Thus the question of return is a "tricky notion" that does not resolve itself easily after a regime change. Her life continues while in Scotland and this makes it difficult for her to easily return to South Africa (165). As established, what makes Mercia stay in Scotland is her long-term relationship with Craig and the life they build together. It is because of her complete reliance on Craig that she feels deserted and disoriented when he leaves her.

Interestingly, while living together in Scotland, Craig was indifferent to her longing to visit South Africa and to her feelings of displacement in Scotland. In their relationship, "there were no discussions about where they would live, about which one of them would give up his or her home" since she was in Scotland to escape the oppressive nature of apartheid (187). Craig saw her move to Scotland as a sign of social upward mobility and her feelings of

estrangement were suppressed within the narrative of “self-improvement” (17). Craig remarked about “how very far” she had travelled, to which she thought that “travelling had brought very little, that apart from the civility achieved through money and self-regard the northern world seemed much the same” (147). Contrary to the expectation that people have that she should be grateful to be in Scotland, Mercia refuses to measure herself, and her worth, by the standards and value systems of the northern world.

Craig’s indifference to Mercia’s emotional state leads to her feeling more displaced and longing to visit Namaqualand. In their twenty-four-year relationship, Craig never travels with her to South Africa, despite her numerous attempts to convince him to do so. When Mercia asks that they go to the Cape together he complains that it is “too expensive” and “would take up too much time” since he hates long flights (228). He suggests that they look for a place that resembles the Cape in order to deal with her longings and to save money. What his refusal illustrates is that even though Mercia gave up her home country to make her relationship with him work, he does not perceive the magnitude of her sacrifice, or appreciate the value of the home she has lost. Instead, Craig complains about her travels, asking her why she cannot:

stay put, enjoy leisure without thrashing about in airports? Are you not getting too old for this wanderlust? You know that banging on about sunshine is an excuse. You just want to be on the move, get to as many places as possible. Tick them off. Conspicuous consumption of space.

(232)

This shows that Craig is unaware of her feelings of displacement and as a result sees her as suffering from ‘wanderlust.’ Thus, if Mercia struggles to belong in Scotland because she no longer resides in her home country, what this passage suggests is that even in her relationship, where one would assume she would have a sense of belonging, her partner does not in fact understand her.

As already elaborated on, the loss experienced by exiles does not only have to do with the people that one is no longer able to interact with; there is also the loss of a cultural milieu. This explains why Mercia often gets overwhelmed by “the smell of fried cardamom” in her kitchen in Scotland while cooking and because of this elicits a “bittersweet homesickness” (194). While cooking, she listens to Basil Coetzee and Abdullah Ibrahim that make her think about Kliprand (194). Roberta Rubenstein understands such acts as portraying what she terms “cultural mourning” which refers to an:

individual's response to the loss of something with collective or communal associations, a way of life, a cultural homeland, a place or geographical location with significance for a larger cultural group, or the related history of an entire ethnic or cultural group from which she or he feels severed or exiled, whether voluntary or involuntary.

(5)

The smells that emanate from her cooking and the Karoo Blues give her an ability, even if temporary, to remake the world she has now lost.

It is however important to note that when 'cultural mourning' is experienced at extreme levels, it can have negative consequences. Mercia, for instance, decides that she cannot belong in Scotland despite the fact that she has been living there for more than two decades. The ideas she has about her need to have an actual home and to belong seem to be so deeply engrained that she cannot re-evaluate what 'belonging' means when she no longer lives in her country of birth. Which is why, as said earlier, she has decided that her stay in Scotland is only temporary: "it cannot be her home" (23). This has resulted in Mercia constantly feeling estranged from Scotland to the point that she feels grateful "when Glaswegian bus drivers or workmen said, There you are pal, or, Got the time, pal? She was named, felt the warmth of an embrace, a welcome that came close to a sense of belonging" (80). This means that other people's mere greetings, as she says, "came close to a sense of belonging." Edward Said is critical of this need migrants have to isolate themselves and writes that:

No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who feel their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood. Anyone who is really homeless regards the habit of seeing estrangement in everything modern as an affectation, a display of modish attitudes. Clutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will, the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong.

(145)

This perspective describes the position that Mercia has taken. She refuses to belong in Scotland because of her difference and because of her felt need to belong in her country of birth. She thus finds it difficult to let go of a notion such as an original home, even when she is aware that it is no longer a useful way of thinking about belonging in a transnational world. Mercia confirms Julia Kristeva's argument that the contemporary world is one in which a lot of people are in disarray. For Kristeva, this has to do with the fact that we are facing a "values crisis," and because of this "we are no longer what we are and take shelter, to preserve a token personality, under the most massive, regressive common denominators" which includes, as shown through Mercia, the fetishisation of national origins (2).

Although Mercia refuses to see Scotland as her ‘true’ home, she also finds it impossible, despite her desires, to regard South Africa as home. She does not only struggle with being ‘home’ on her actual visits to the country, but her difficulty with Kliprand arises even when she has to engage remotely with news that comes from the place. When Jake writes her a letter, she struggles to open it as “news from home was always disturbing, making any kind of work impossible” (23). Mercia is however able to reflect about her home in the memoir she is writing. This means that while she is able to think about home retrospectively, she is unable to deal with its current realities.

Furthermore, when refusing to open Jake’s letter, Mercia decides to read a novel titled *Home* by Marilynne Robinson. This suggests that she prefers attending other people’s fictitious homes than issues that call for responsibility in her life. Mercia’s views about home and her need to belong are thus shown to be ironic. If, indeed, she cannot fit in in Scotland and regards South Africa as her home, why then does she struggle with reading a letter that comes from home? There are clearly contradictions in Mercia’s conception and understanding of her home country, South Africa, and her longing to return to the country.

While explicating the contradictions that exist between Mercia’s nostalgia while in Scotland, Wicomb’s narrative interweaves her experiences as an adult with her experience of growing up under apartheid in South Africa. The importance of this link is to problematize Mercia’s homesickness when in Scotland and to render it ironic through the representation of her childhood under an oppressive regime. Growing up under a strict religious father, Mercia and Jake were not allowed to have opinions about what was happening in the country, and if they disagreed with their father’s views, they were punished. As already indicated, one of the things Nicholas tried to make them believe was that they did not belong in Kliprand. He relentlessly told them that they, the Murrays, were of old Scottish blood, and could therefore not think of themselves as belonging in Kliprand with the ‘dirty hotnots.’

Thus, even though their home was in Kliprand, “the Murrays couldn’t possibly think of belonging there. As long as they could fit in anywhere with decent people, also city people, that was the important thing, that was where they could be at home” (95). This reveals the ways in which South Africa, similar to Mercia’s experiences of exile, was constructed along similar lines of inclusion and exclusion. It is therefore doubly ironic that Mercia sees herself as belonging to a place where she was constantly told she did not belong by her father and the apartheid government.

When Nicholas moves from Overberg to Kliprand, he decides not to regard Kliprand as his home because of his dislike of its inhabitants. He maintains instead what he calls a

“necessary distance” and “an unbelonging,” simply because he does not respect the people who live in the community. He sees his role as that of changing them from their old barbaric habits into civilised people. This means then that if Kliprand is not home to Nicholas, “it cannot be home to his children. They were born there, raised in Namaqualand, but no, they should not think of it as their home” (165). When Mercia and Jake question him about where it is that they belong since he tells them they do not belong in Kliprand, he responds by asking “why belong to any place or any people in particular? They simply belonged, a word that need not be followed by where or to?” (95). What is therefore important, according to Nicholas, is not the place where one is born and the people in one’s community, but rather that home can be “anywhere as long as it was surrounded by people who looked like them, people related to them” (95). Thus Nicholas does not think that physical geography has much significance since he finds it important “in the interest of self-improvement, to dispense with the notion of home” (165). This is why Mercia is allowed to go overseas as she will be among people who “look like” her and not the people from Namaqualand who Nicholas thinks of as barbaric.

Nicholas justifies his exclusion of his family from the larger community on the basis that their forebears, the Scots, “left their home and braved the seas to make new lives at the Cape” and that these people, for him, are “examples of developed minds who were able to shrug off the outmoded, atavistic notion of home, way back in the nineteenth century” (166). These are people who his children should emulate instead of the people of Kliprand who have “an excessive sense of belonging” that leaves them “limited and ambitionless, bound by their past and its unspeakable customs” (165). His children should thus see themselves as above geography: “free to belong anywhere” (167). This means that the place Mercia and Jake grow up and assume to be their home is in fact a place where they are constantly told they should not regard as home. Furthermore, since Nicholas claims that the ancestors of the Murrays come from Scotland, Mercia, ironically, also finds it impossible to make Scotland her home as she regards South Africa as her home.

Mercia’s difficulty opening Jake’s letter has to do with the fact that Kliprand reminds her of her childhood and how they were treated by their father. This letter, as already discussed, arrives at a time when Mercia has just separated from her long-term partner and is in mourning over the loss. While she is reluctant to respond to the letter due to her grief, she decides to go to Kliprand because of her hope that it might be “the place where she might stop crying – at home, a place where a heart could heal” (23). Within a day in Kliprand, however, she discovers that “she would like to wash her hands of these people who are her own, would like to pack her bag right away and leave” (35). Even though it has been stated that Mercia has an

ambiguous relationship with her country of birth, her physical presence in Kliprand exacerbates her oppressive memories of it and she finds herself unable to “bear to be in that place” (225). It is a place that is “hot, oppressive, and heavy with the memories of growing up under their father” (27). She paradoxically finds herself longing for Scotland.

These contradictions within the narrative reveal that the home that Mercia longs for when she is in Scotland is only made possible by the nostalgia that an exile has about the country of their birth and their childhood. This supports Svetlana Boym’s perspective that “the danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one” (7-8). Roberta Rubenstein further argues that “even if one is able to return to the literal edifice where s/he grew up, one can never truly return to the original home of childhood, since it exists mostly as a place in the imagination” (4). This explains why Mercia’s longing for home is the very thing that thwarts her ability to attain or experience it whenever she does return to Kliprand.

While Mercia never thought Nicholas, her father, was perfect, she had more empathy towards him than Jake. When she discovers that he sexually molested Sylvie, she becomes distraught and wants nothing to do with Kliprand. She only survives Kliprand by thinking about her life elsewhere and by propelling herself “into another time, another country” other than South Africa. She comes to realise that the popular conceptions of country life as “God’s own country, mythopoetic home of wholesomeness, home to Kalkoentjies bursting blood red into a new vernal world, home of healthy, simple pleasures seasoned with the plentiful salt of this earth” where “simple people are supposed to live wholesome, frugal lives amongst arcades and harmless locusts” is actually an inaccurate version of country life since “there is no such thing as simple people” (Wicomb 245).

Thus, her return to Kliprand exacerbates her feelings of displacement and she wonders if she could “tell anyone that this home has been burned to the ground, that she would rather choose to suffer the dark and icy north with its plentiful water for washing away the sin that is now hers?” (245). Her visit to Kliprand forces her to revise what home means and at this point, it is no longer grounded in the South Africa in which she was born. She now understands the difficulty of making sense of any space that she has inhabited. That is why when she returns to Scotland, she says that she is “Home at last” but immediately wonders if “this is where she lives? Is this her home? What does she do with all these things, all this space?” (251). This means that Scotland, like South Africa, cannot be constituted as her home.

This experience leads to Mercia applying for a job in Macau in China as she longs to go “somewhere where she does not know the language, somewhere where there is no possibility of interaction, where she can’t read the script” (265). She however discovers in an

interview in Macau that in similar ways in which she does not understand what South Africa and Scotland mean to her, she cannot easily make sense of Macau and make it her new home. As a result of this realisation she runs away from the interview wondering if she is “a mad menopausal woman who has been left losing her marbles?” and at the airport she “avoids looking in mirrors” as she is surprised by her “erratic behaviour” (265). Mercia’s disorientation once again confirms Kristeva’s argument that the contemporary world is a state of hysteria; people can no longer conceive of belonging in the ways they used to. Mercia’s longing to belong is proven to be an impossible endeavour and she has to accept that she can no longer make sense of home and belonging in the contemporary world as she assumed she would be able to with South Africa when it attained its democracy.

Recall that Homi Bhabha argues that in a transnational world, there is a need to think “beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (2). As already indicated, he calls such spheres ‘in-between’ spaces as they “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovate sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself” (2). Mercia’s struggle to find a home confirms Bhabha’s call to think in the ‘beyond,’ in the contemporary world, and to see this ‘beyond’ as promising a future that is “unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the ‘present’, which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced” (4). This seems to be the position that Mercia is left to occupy as the possibility of finding a true home is shown to be an impossible and an unattainable aspiration.

Since having a sense of belonging is no longer a possibility in the contemporary world, Wicomb’s novel calls for a rethinking of what it means for people to belong. Mercia initially thought she belonged in the country of her birth, South Africa, and at the end comes to realise that finding a home is not as simple as she had assumed. Neither South Africa, nor Scotland, nor Macau are able to give her the sense of belonging that she desires. This complex representation of the difficulty of belonging shows that one can no longer conceive of a home within a geographical setting but that it may, perhaps, as Rubenstein argues, be the realisation that home “is ultimately a state of mind” (65).

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to explore Wicomb's treatment of race, gender and transnational themes in her novel *October*. As has been illustrated, the novel does not offer simple ways of understanding these historical constructions: different characters experience them in profoundly individual ways. This shows, as has been argued, that Wicomb is deeply interested in how the past continues to shape the present. This past, as represented in *October*, no longer depends on a specific historical location as Mercia's life continues to be haunted by her past wherever she finds herself.

Chapter Three

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Americanah*, interrogates its characters' identities within a constantly changing contemporary space. Most of Adichie's characters move from one continent to another and in that process are exposed to new ways of living, and of thinking, which challenge their preconceived ideas of what it means to be in the world. The themes of race and gender preoccupy *Americanah* and the text examines the ways in which these historical classifications continue to impact on people's lives in the in the twenty-first century.

I: "You've Got the White-Girl Swing!": America and Race

Adichie's protagonist, Ifemelu, tells a group of friends that the first time she became aware of being black was when she moved to America from Nigeria (290). Although Nigeria, as is represented in the novel, has a lot of social, political and economic issues such as tribalism, gender inequality, and corruption, race discourse is shown not to be as pervasive as it is in America. Ifemelu's move shifts how she looks at herself, and how she is seen by others, as the dominant racist discourse in the USA impacts how she experiences life in her new location.

The USA has a long history of racial subjugation, which dates back to the eighteenth century when black people were taken from West Africa through the Atlantic Slave Trade to the United States. Slavery lasted for many years and was finally abolished in 1865 through the Thirteenth Amendment Act. The abolishment of slavery did not however mean that black American citizens would be seen as equals, as the state still segregated people according to historically-inscribed categories of race. Black people were still seen as inferior and as a result there was a felt need to segregate races in order to maintain the purity of the white race. It would be in the twentieth century, in the 1960s in particular, through the Civil Rights Movement, that all laws which discriminated against other racial groups were overthrown, and the American constitution recognised individuals' human rights and the rights of all citizens to have equal opportunities (West XIV).

It is however clear in Adichie's novel that these changes in legislation have not necessarily meant that racist ways of treating black people have changed. *Americanah* shows that in the twenty-first century, America is a country that is still plagued by the racism and prejudices that shaped but of its history. Racism manifests in multiple ways and this includes the systemic ways in which people, particularly black people, are obliged to perform their identities in order to have a sense of belonging in the country. It is clear in the novel that the

ramifications of this discourse have a particularly negative effect on young people, as seen in the character Dike, who attempts suicide as he is continuously discriminated against at the schools he attends.

Ifemelu decides to move to America because of her dream to attain a better education (Adichie 65). Her Aunty Uju, together with a scholarship that she receives from an American university, make it possible for her to attain this education. She is therefore motivated to move to America. When Ifemelu arrives, she finds herself having to conform to acceptable modes of behaviour that contrast with what she is used to. One of the first experiences she has of being treated differently because she is black, and particularly because she comes from Africa, occurs when she goes to register for her degree and an assistant at the institution, Cristina Tomes, assumes that Ifemelu cannot understand English properly and because of this changes the way in which she speaks and says, “You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office” (133). Ifemelu fails to understand why the assistant speaks to her in that manner but later realises that she does so because of her “foreign accent,” and because of this she feels “like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling” (133). She feels belittled and humiliated by the way in which she is spoken to.

Fanon writes that “a white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronising, cozening” (19). Ifemelu experiences this infantilisation first hand, and it is therefore not surprising that she feels like a “small child” as racist discourse always assumes to know the position of the other based on skin pigmentation (Adichie 133). She thus feels, as Fanon argues, patronised as her race and her foreign accent predetermine the ways in which she is addressed.

The response Ifemelu receives from people like Cristina Tomes convinces her to change the way she speaks. She begins to imitate the ways in which white people speak so that she can fit in (322). As a result, she finds herself practising how to roll ‘R’s’ in the mirror and changing the way in which she pronounces words. This change of accent is influenced by the realisation that she posts in her blog, about the tribalism which is “alive and well” in America. She notes four pillars that underlie this tribalism which include class, ideology, race and geographical spaces. She writes that class is the ubiquitous division that exists between rich and poor people and is something fairly easy to understand as it is pervasive. It is then followed by the division forged by the ideological differences between liberals and conservatives, where “intermarriage is discouraged and on the rare occasion that it happens, is considered remarkable” (184).

Ifemelu writes that America is also divided into regions: the North and the South. This segmentation, as she is aware, is informed by the history of America which has resulted in a

majority of poor people, who are black, residing in the South, and richer people, who are mostly white, living in the North. Then there's the "ladder of racial hierarchy" that has already been noted (184). In this ladder, "White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on the bottom, and what's on the middle depends on time and place" (184). Ifemelu's is aware that these distinctions will also determine how her identity is categorised and will thus frame her prospects of doing well in America.

Ifemelu writes in her blog that, in America, "whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course but many minorities have conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness" (205). She hopes that her ability to speak well will align her with "WASP whiteness" and confirm that she belongs in America. Fanon writes that "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation" (8-9). This is because a language that marks a civilisation affords one "remarkable power" (8-9), and this means Ifemelu is not naïve in attempting to fit in as she is aware of how power is distributed and is therefore of the privilege she will have if she is able to speak in a manner that is perceived as acceptable.

Ifemelu's predicament is similar to the experiences that have been depicted in some novels by black writers in post-apartheid South Africa. One of these novels, *Coconut* by Kopano Matlwa, has a character named Fiks who lives in the townships of Johannesburg. Like Ifemelu, Fiks is convinced that by learning how to speak English with the 'right' accent, she will be taken "further from the squalor of the township – from being poor, black and dirty – to the romanticized white world of the rich and famous" (Spencer 71). This stems from the realisation she and Ifemelu share that people who succeed in their world are people who are able to master the dominant language, and in both their cases, the language is English.

It is not only Ifemelu who experiences racism. Other immigrants, especially those who are more disadvantaged than Ifemelu, face worse challenges in their stay in America. Halima, who works at a salon that is located in a ghetto, tells Ifemelu of how her son used to be beaten up when they arrived in America because of his accent. She tells her his peers beat him up "purple like onion" and what is ironic is that it were not white people who were criticising his speech but black American boys (187). As was also illustrated in the analysis of *October* in the previous chapter, this shows that historically marginalised people can also subscribe to dominant discourses of acceptable speech. It is only after Halima's son is able to mimic his peers that they stop bullying him. This suggests that 'belonging' is premised on notions of

inclusion and exclusion and that to be included in a group, one has to remove the attributes that place them beyond the bounds of the group: the attributes that the group constitutes itself against.

These experiences lead to Aunt Uju discouraging Ifemelu from speaking Igbo to Dike as she wants him to master English so that he can fit in in his new location. When Ifemelu asks why this is the case, her aunt tells her that “two languages will confuse him” (109). Aunt Uju’s view paradoxically exists alongside the fact that she and Ifemelu are able to speak two languages quite comfortably, and without confusion. This suggests that Aunt Uju’s request is motivated by her desire for Dike to speak with an American accent and learning how to speak Igbo is seen as a disturbance to this pursuit. In her attempt to do well, and ensure that Dike is accepted in the social milieu of America, Aunt Uju is willing to sacrifice their culture.

Ifemelu comes to recognise that it is not only the way that she speaks that will have to change if she wants to fit in. She finds herself confronted with the fact that her physical appearance does not conform to the normative standards of America. She notices this when she starts looking for a job and is constantly told, by her family and friends, that she has to do something with her braids as she will not find employment if she goes to job interviews with them. Corporate America, her friend Kemi tells her, will think that she is “unprofessional” if she wears her braids (119). This point is restated by another friend, Ruth, who tells her to “lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job” (202). At first, Ifemelu tries to resist this advice and her Aunt, who had told her the same thing, tells her that “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” (119). Ifemelu is hereby informed of the kind of discourse that operates in the American corporate world and the kinds of sacrifices she has to make in order to fit in.

Thus hair, as Kobena Mercer argues, is not only raw material, but also functions as a social discourse because it is “processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with ‘meanings’ and ‘value’” and this is clear in the ways in which the politics of hair are represented in *Americanah* (34). Recall that Mercer argues that in the United States, what has been known as ‘nigger hair’ has been “devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness” and this has had huge consequences for black people, particularly women, and how they style themselves (35). It is precisely because of these expectations that Ifemelu decides to relax her hair before a job interview. When she goes to a salon to relax her hair, she experiences “needles of stinging pain” shooting “up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head” (202). Cheryl Thompson writes that the consequences of constantly pulling

one's hair, through relaxation, is that a lot of women, and particularly black women, have developed traction alopecia which is medically recognised and regarded as hazardous to their health (85). Ifemelu's black hairdresser, however, tells her that she can endure "just a little burn" and afterwards tells her that she looks pretty as she has a "white-girl swing!" (Adichie 203). Ifemelu is however deeply dissatisfied with how she looks and resents the fact that she has to experience such pain in order to conform to the expectations of the corporate sector.

This experience invokes a sense of identity mutation as she is constantly told that she cannot perform her identity in the ways that she wants. She finds herself having to relegate what is important in her life in order to fit into the dominant discourses. That is why in a blog post titled "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor," Ifemelu writes that hair is "the perfect metaphor for race in America" and this, she argues, is proven by the fact that in makeover shows that have black women "in the ugly "before" picture, and in the pretty "after" picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight" and that some black women "would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair" (297). She writes that "when you Do have natural Negro hair, people think you "did" something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven't "done" anything to their hair" (297). Ifemelu is arguing that there is something wrong with the fact that America has taken it for granted that everyone should aspire to whiteness, regardless of their preferences. This shows that in America, white normative practices are seen as the standard and anything that does not fit is cast as deviant and ostracised.

Long hair is not the only attribute that black women are forced to have in order to be accepted into the corporate world and to be regarded as beautiful. Being light-skinned also plays an important role in whether or not people, especially women, are allowed to enjoy certain privileges. Ifemelu writes in her blog that:

American black men like their black women to have some exotic quota, like half-Chinese or splash of Cherokee. They like their women light. But beware what American blacks consider "light." Some of these "light" people, in countries of Non-American Blacks, would simply be called white.

(213)

This means, as she asserts, that "light skin is valued in the community of American blacks," even though many people would want to deny this fact (214). This, for Ifemelu, is proven by the fact that "many successful American black men have white wives," and "those who deign to have black wives have light (otherwise known as high yellow) wives" (214). This means that a racist space also constructs people's desires as it can influence who people find attractive.

Ifemelu is aware though that this discourse does not only exist in America but can be found in other parts of the world. She observes that Ethiopians do not want to be classified as black and Small Islanders are always eager to say that they have a “mixed” heritage as opposed to seeing themselves as black (214). This suggests that constructions of race that privilege whiteness can be found in many parts of the world outside America and this, as Ifemelu is aware, has caused a lot of harm as it has influenced the worth that people attach to themselves.

The privilege that is enjoyed by light-skinned women is also evident in Nigeria as Kosi, Obinze’s wife, constantly receives compliments about her light skin (22). Even though Obinze claims to dislike her enjoyment of these compliments, he is still aware that Kosi gives him social capital as he is shown respect by people they come into contact with because of how she looks. Ifemelu’s friend, Ginika, is voted as the prettiest girl in secondary school because she is half-caste and therefore light in complexion (56). The consequences of such preferences, as Fanon and Biko wrote, are that black women attempt to make their skins light so that they can be seen as beautiful. Fanon vehemently opposed skin-lightening laboratories, whose intentions were to make it possible for the “miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus throw off the burden of that malediction” (84). Fanon made this argument back in 1952, and Adichie’s novel shows that this discourse and pressure to conform still dominates in many parts of the world in the twenty-first century.

As mentioned earlier, Margaret Hunter writes that this preference for people who are light-skinned is known as Colorism in the USA, and is “a process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts” (237). Furthermore, preferences for light skin also influence the job opportunities people have. Hunter contends that in the workplace, people who are light-skinned are still preferred over their dark-skinned counterparts (238). She further notes that “many people are unaware of their preferences for lighter skin because the dominant aesthetic is so deeply engrained in our culture” (238).

Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt, her white boyfriend, further exposes her to the interaction that race has with class and how this permeates American society. Even though Curt claims that his attraction to Ifemelu was a result of “love at first laugh” (191), it becomes evident that their relationship has to struggle against the racist society they live in. The demise of the relationship, in fact, is a result of their inability to reconcile their differences. When they start dating, Curt’s mother thinks of him as “her adventurer who would bring back exotic species – he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl – but would, with time, settle down properly” (198). Curt’s mother therefore does not see the relationship as having any longevity

and because of this she is able to accept Ifemelu, despite being black, and maintain her conservative Republican views. Curt's decision to date Ifemelu casts doubt on his motivations as his history suggests that his interest in people who are outside his race is a result of the fact that he exoticises them.

Even though Ifemelu and Curt are sensitive towards each other and have a relatively healthy awareness of their difference, it becomes evident that their relationship cannot escape the fact that they live in a racist society. When Curt leaves Ifemelu at a spa to do her eyebrows she is told that they do not do 'curly' eyebrows and she calls Curt to fetch her. Curt is aware that there is no such thing as 'curly' eyebrows and that she is told that because of her race and as a result he insists that they do them or else he will take legal action (345). While this shows that Curt has an understanding of the ways in which racial discrimination functions, Ifemelu is still rendered helpless as he is the one, with white and class privilege, and the associated confidence, who can make such interventions on her behalf as she does not have the power to challenge establishments that she has only recently been introduced to.

There are however times when it is clear that Curt is oblivious to the ways in which racial discrimination functions. For instance, he complains that *Essence* magazine is racially skewed as it only has black models. This forces Ifemelu to take him to a magazine store to show him the privilege that is given to white female models over black models (234). Even though Curt acknowledges his ignorance, it still casts doubt in Ifemelu's mind about how much he can understand her as these are issues that she is acutely aware of and has to live with on a daily basis.

The ways in which the public responds to Curt and Ifemelu also has an impact on the relationship. This is mostly evident in spaces where Ifemelu meets Curt's friends and family and thinks about the judgements that are being made about her (256). When they break up, Ifemelu tells Ginika that she cheated on him because she felt there was something missing in being with the "happy handsome Curt, with his ability to twist life into the shapes he wanted" (345). Even though this can be read as an excuse for Ifemelu's cheating, it is however clear in the novel that they do have misunderstandings and most of them are a result of their different responses to the racist environment they are in. That is why Ifemelu disagrees with an interracial couple that she meets when they say that "race is never an issue for them and that Obama will end racism" (290). Ifemelu tells them that:

the only reason you said that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie. 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.

What Ifemelu is saying is that in a country in which race plays an important role in how people construct their identities, race will necessarily feature in how relationships function and this is similar to Homi Bhabha's argument in *The Location of Culture* that:

The recesses of domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorientating.

(9)

Bhabha's understanding of history is reflected in Ifemelu's thinking about interracial relationships. Even though these relationships hope to escape the discourse of race that makes them difficult, Bhabha argues that this is impossible since the world and the home are always intertwined. Thus, the couple that claims that race is not an issue is untruthful since racial discourse still pervades American society, and, by extension, intimate and personal spaces such as relationships.

Dike also suffers a great deal from the racial prejudice that exists in most American schools. He finds himself constantly accused of being aggressive, in different schools, despite the fact that he behaves in similar ways to other children. When Auntie Uju decides to move to a different town, to Willow, she hopes that her son will not suffer the same prejudices he has in his previous schools. She however finds that this is not the case. The consequences of this racism lead to Dike being accused of having hacked into the school's computer system on a Saturday, even though he spent that day with his mother. Auntie Uju recalls to Ifemelu that when she:

asked why they thought it was him, they said they got information. Imagine, you just wake up and blame my son. The boy is not even good with computers. I thought we had left them behind in that bush town. Kweku wants us to lodge a formal complaint, but I don't think it's worth the time. They have now said they no longer suspect him.

(349)

This suggests that Dike was seen as an easy culprit because of his race. Even though Auntie Uju wants to lay a formal complaint, she cannot do so as her time is taken up by many activities which include working hard so that Dike can go to school. Furthermore, when they go on a camp, Dike is refused a sunscreen because he is told that black people do not need it (345). Even though Dike acts as though this is funny, as he does about many things that happen to him, it is clear that this has troubled him.

The experiences that Dike has in America are however no different to what African American men have always experienced. In one of her blog posts, Ifemelu writes about how her boyfriend, Blaine, was once stopped by the police as he was suspected of possessing drugs. This, she writes, is ironic because “American Blacks and American Whites use drugs at the same rate” but when the word ‘drugs’ springs up the only image that comes to people’s minds is that of a black man. She writes that Professor Hunk thought he was in a better position to respond to the racism since he is an Ivy League professor and wonders what would happen “if he were some poor kid from the inner city” (375). *Americanah* is timely in pointing out the ways in which black men are treated in America because over the past few years there have been a number of incidents in which black men have been tragically shot by police officers as they were falsely accused of being in possession of unlawful weapons or drugs. The victims of such murders include Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Walter Scott.

The racist and brutal nature of such accusations confirm Njabulo Ndebele’s perspective when he says that:

We are all familiar with the global sanctity of the white body. Wherever the white body is violated in the world, severe retribution somehow follows for the perpetrators if they are non-white, regardless of the social status of the white body. The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the global vulnerability of the black body.

(137)

Ndebele’s perspective is reflected in the position that Dike’s black body, and that of other African American men, find themselves in in America. All these violations, and misreadings of his body, culminate in Dike having a low-self-esteem and he attempts to commit suicide. If, as the sociologist Emile Durkheim argues, every suicide is an indictment of society, then it is clear that Dike’s suicide attempt is an indictment on the racist discourse that continues to pervade American society (53).

The lives of Ifemelu, Auntie Uju and Dike illustrate the difficulty of living in a space that is hostile to their race. This hostility inevitably means that they are not given recognition as human beings. As argued earlier, these experiences are a result of the ways in which America has not dealt with the oppression that it has inflicted on black people. Adichie’s novel therefore shows that a racist discourse continues to inform who is allowed to belong and who is ostracised in America in the twenty-first century.

II: “Fat People Don’t Need To”: Intersections of Gender, Beauty and Race

In what is becoming a famous speech entitled “We Should All be Feminists,” Adichie says that “I’m trying to unlearn many of the lessons of gender that I internalised when I was growing up. But I sometimes feel vulnerable in the face of gender expectations” (“We Should All be Feminists”). Her preoccupation with gender, and specifically with the roles that women occupy in Nigeria and America, yields one of the central themes in *Americanah*. This is because in many facets of society, and in many different countries, women still occupy marginal positions. Adichie’s novel shows the multiple ways in which race, gender and class intersect in the lives of black women. Auntie Uju, for example, despite possessing a university qualification, still finds herself having to “ass-lick” in order to make a living (77). Ifemelu has to offer sexual satisfaction to an old man in order to have shelter in America. *Americanah* examines the ways in which gender oppression continues to manifest.

Adichie’s novel, however, also shows that women of the same race do not necessarily occupy the same class positions in society. This is also explored in *October*, as argued in the previous chapter. Mercia and Sylvie come from different class backgrounds and because of this respond differently to the challenges that confront them. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s life is remarkably different to that of other immigrants who work at salons in the ghettos of America. Even though she struggles when she first arrives in America, her life drastically improves after she starts her blog and because of it she gets a fellowship at an Ivy League institution. In showing these different class positions that women occupy in society, it is evident that Adichie is interested in depicting the accomplishments of African women in the past few decades. Ifemelu and other characters in the novel are able to attain education, pursue careers of their choice and decide with whom they want to be in a relationship. These choices highlight some of the changes that have happened in the lives of African women and Adichie’s novel, it seems, seeks to celebrate such achievements even as it highlights the subjugation of patriarchal norms that is still prevalent.

When Nigeria gained its independence in the 1960s, a large number of women were accepted into university and attained higher education (Aja-Okorie 67). While this change improved the lives of many women, it is evident in *Americanah* that the country has faced many postcolonial challenges that have made it difficult for women to easily celebrate this achievement. One of these challenges has to do with whether or not people, especially women, can find employment after they complete a degree as the economic power of the country is still in the hands of men. Adichie’s novel seems to suggest that this is a challenge and has therefore

led to many young women, such as Auntie Uju, having to make certain compromises in order to survive. This economic power imbalance leads Auntie Uju to be in a relationship with The General, a politician, who provides her with an apartment, a car and the means to survive (46).

Auntie Uju's justification for this relationship is that they "live in an ass-licking economy" and unlike other people who "won't lick anybody's ass, or they don't know which ass to lick or they don't even know how to lick an ass" she feels lucky in that she is "licking the right ass" (77). Thus, even though she has higher education, Auntie Uju is in many ways still subjugated as she is in a relationship with someone who she concedes that she is with solely because of his economic power. She tells Ifemelu that "ah, this thing called power. I was attracted to him even with his teeth like Dracula. I was attracted to his power" (78). This proves that Auntie Uju's attraction to The General has to do with the money that he has which contrasts to her economically disadvantaged position as a woman.

Problems start to arise when Auntie Uju has The General's child and a few months after the child's birth he passes away. The General's family storm into her apartment telling her that she is a "common harlot" and that "God forbid that you will touch our brother's property! Prostitute! You will never live in peace in Lagos!" (86). Auntie Uju is therefore forced to take sole responsibility for Dike as he is unknown to The General's extended family. As a result of these threats, she leaves Nigeria to escape the harm that may befall her. This incident exposes the prevalence of sexism and how it is used to belittle and denigrate Auntie Uju and other women in society. Even though it was The General who made advances on Auntie Uju, she is the one who is made to take sole responsibility for the affair and The General (and his family) is absolved of any responsibility.

This incident is similar to what happens when Kosi sees a packet of condoms in her helper's (known as 'house girls' in Nigeria) apartment. Kosi rushes to her asking "What is this for? Eh? You came to my house to be a prostitute?" and when the house girl responds that "in my last job, my madam's husband was always forcing me" she refuses to accept this explanation and forces her to pack her bags and "go now-now" (43). Thus Auntie Uju, and the house girl, live in a patriarchal environment that creates their circumstances and at the same time makes them victims of those circumstances as they are unable to escape them. Kosi's behaviour shows that women can also be complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchy.

Auntie Uju faces more challenges when she leaves Nigeria for America. In order to make a decent living and finance her studies and Dike's education, she is forced to take on three jobs. This inevitably compromises the amount of time she is able to spend studying and she finds herself having to repeat courses (109). She also finds that it is not only their financial

well-being that has to be taken care of as Dike struggles to survive the racist environment they are in. Unlike other children his age, he is constantly accused of being aggressive and mischievous when this is not the case. Auntie Uju has to therefore take it upon herself to ensure that Dike is happy and takes him to schools that she assumes will be good for him, even though this is not the case.

Alongside having to monitor Dike's emotional well-being, Auntie Uju is faced with the challenge of finding a partner. She tells Ifemelu that she is "not getting any younger" and wants "Dike to have a brother or a sister" (118). She thus decides to be in a relationship with Bartholomew, a man who Ifemelu feels is "jarringly unsuited for, and unworthy of, Auntie Uju" (116). Auntie Uju's situation contradicts Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's Womanist idea that African women place value on motherhood because of an intrinsic "mother-centred ideology" that sees motherhood as an inevitable aspect of how they should live their lives. (43). What Adichie's novel shows is that the expectations that are placed on women continue to be shaped by the unequal gendered spaces that women find themselves in and this is clear in the portrayal of Auntie Uju.

Bartholomew, indeed, does not enhance Auntie Uju's life but takes what she has worked hard for. He tells her to stop giving her brother money and to instead hand over her salary to him "since he is the head of the family" (217). Bartholomew's patriarchal beliefs lead to Auntie Uju complaining about how unfair it is that even though they both work, "He just sits in the living room and turns on the TV and asks me what we are eating for dinner" (217). It is evident that Bartholomew subscribes to patriarchal beliefs of how a family should function and expects Auntie Uju to understand since they come from the same country. Auntie Uju withstands Bartholomew's abuse for some time because of the pressure that society puts on her to get married and have children. Indeed, Adichie states in "We Should All be Feminists" that:

I know young women who are under so much pressure from family, from friends, even from work to get married, and they're pushed to make terrible choices. A woman at a certain age who is unmarried, our society teaches her to see it as a deep personal failure. And a man, after a certain age isn't married, we just think he hasn't come around to making his pick.

These sexist expectations placed on women are illustrated in the novel as kind of challenges that face Auntie Uju.

The contradiction and tragedy of this situation is that the feminist movement's intentions were to liberate women from patriarchy but as is clear in the novel, and as bell hooks argues, "work does not liberate women from male domination. Indeed, there are many high

paid professional women, many rich women, who remain in relationships with men where male domination is the norm” (49). Aunty Uju remains in this kind of relationship for some time precisely because of the expectations that society has placed on her and as a result she finds herself in a contradictory space where, on the one hand, she has been able to take advantage of the opportunities that the feminist movement fought hard for, but on the other, still finds herself marginalised and exploited.

Susan Forbes Martin writes that “about half of the migrants in the world today are women, as has been the case for several decades” (4). As already stated in the first chapter, and as is evident with Aunty Uju’s life, one of the reasons for this large migration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is a search for jobs and educational opportunities. The lack of an education, or work permit, leads many women to settle for jobs that include picking fruits and vegetables, working in nursing homes, cleaning restaurants and hotels among other low-paying jobs (20). Ifemelu faces a similar challenge when she moves to the United States. When she decides to stop living with Aunty Uju because she wants independence, she finds that she has to do things that denigrate her. Since she does not have a work permit, she is advised to use Ngozi Okonkwo’s permit, who is also a migrant from Nigeria, in order to get a job (106). This inevitably means she will have to apply for menial jobs as employers that offer such jobs tend not to rigorously interrogate the status of her citizenship. One of the jobs she applies for involves helping a sports coach “relax” because he cannot sleep (144). Even though Ifemelu is hesitant because she can assume what the job will actually entail she decides to do it when it becomes impossible for her to pay her rent and thus sustain her living.

As part of his relaxation, the sports coach puts his “finger between her legs” and she hears “his sigh-moans in her ear” and because of this “felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness” (154). Thus Ifemelu’s financial desperation results in her feeling guilt over the fact that her body, despite feeling repulsed, was sexually aroused when it was being violated. When she receives her payment, the “crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her” (154). This position is not that different to that of a prostitute. She has had to sell her body in order to make a living and has therefore been made to feel disembodied in the process. She feels, unsurprisingly, “like a small ball, adrift, and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily” (154). As a migrant without a work permit, this marginal position in her host country makes her more vulnerable as she cannot report the case to the police.

The sexual violence that Ifemelu experiences has similarities to the sexual molestation of Pecola and Fiks in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut*

respectively. Both Pecola and Fiks are molested because of their vulnerability to the adults around them and also because they do not have the space to voice the violations that they experience. What this suggests is that women, particularly young women, continue to be marginalised by patriarchal norms that still see their bodies as available for men's consumption. Ifemelu's experience is made worse by the fact that she is in a foreign country and she is unable to speak out, like Pecola and Fiks, because she does not have the privilege of opening a case.

Laura Brace writes that women who lack of full citizenship are more vulnerable and more likely to be exploited by their host countries, as Ifemelu and other migrants are (873). When she travels to "the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people" (9) in order to do her hair, she meets women who come from different parts of Africa who are surviving in precarious circumstances as most of them do not have legal citizenship. The only jobs that these women are able to secure are ones located in the informal sectors. This means that they work in neglected spaces and this consequently makes them invisible and vulnerable.

It is clear from this that the positions that these women occupy are drastically different to those experienced by privileged, and especially white women, in America. bell hooks argues that "Western women have gained class power and greater gender inequality because a global white supremacist patriarchy enslaves and/or subordinates masses of third-world women" (43). These 'third-world' women are then not only subordinated within their "third-world" countries, but are also marginalized when they go to countries where they hope to better their economic prospects.

One of the women who works at the salon, Aisha, tells Ifemelu that "Last year. My father die and I don't go. Because of papers. But maybe, if Chijioke marry me, when my mother die, I can go. She is sick now. But I send her money" (364). These women are not only marginalised by their economic positions, but are also alienated from their home countries as the process of moving in and out of the country has been made difficult by their lack of legal citizenship. Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler write that migration has 'Gendered Geographies of Power' and these geographies operate "simultaneously on multiple spatial and social (e.g. the body, the family, the state) levels across transnational terrains" and this has great consequences for women (5). The income that Aisha is required not only to provide for her needs but for those of her family in her home country. In order for her to attain citizenship, she decides to have two boyfriends in the hope that one of them will marry her and enable her to become a legal citizen (Adichie 17). Adichie's novel depicts the compromises that women such as Aisha often have to make in order to survive.

Although Ifemelu and the women at the salon share some experiences, Adichie's novel reveals that there are differences in the position that she occupies. From an early age, Ifemelu has access to a good education and is allowed to be an independent thinker. This is evident when she is talking to Obinze, while in secondary school, and tells him that "she very much wanted God to exist but feared He did not," and that "she worried that she should know what she wanted to do with her life but did not even know what she wanted to study at university" (61). Therefore, even as a young woman, Ifemelu is allowed to have perspectives that do not conform to dominant social discourses.

This position differs from that of Wicomb's protagonist, Mercia, who is told what she should study when she gets to university even though she defies her father's wishes. Ifemelu, on the other hand, is given an opportunity to be aware, and take responsibility, for what she wants to do with her life. Furthermore, when she meets Obinze's mother, she is asked whether or not she can cook and responds honestly by saying "I don't like cooking. I can eat Indomie noodles day and night" (71). She thus refuses to accept prescribed roles that women are expected to take on as she is able to think independently about what is important to her.

Even when it comes to relationships, Ifemelu decides for herself who it is that she wants to date and whether or not she wants to remain in a relationship. When she decides to leave her boyfriend Blain, she says this was because "her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out" (7). Ifemelu is clearly not content with being merely comfortable in her relationship. Her ability to decide whether or not she wants to be in relationships is different to that of women such as Aisha who are forced to be in relationships, even when they do not want to, as that is the only hope they have of surviving. Adichie's novel illustrates, as already argued, that women of the same race do not necessarily occupy the same class positions. Once again, it is confirmed that women cannot be seen as a homogenous group as their class determines how each of them experiences race and their gender constructions.

This thesis has argued that markers that have been used to subjugate racial groups have often been found within a so-called race's physical attributes. In America, these markers, as explored previously, are found in the hair of the black race that has been referred to as 'nigger hair.' Furthermore, within the black community itself, someone's skin tone plays an important role in the worth that is given to that person. What Adichie's novel depicts is the intersectional way in which these attributes impact the lives of black women. Kathy Davis argues for an intersectional understanding of subjugation because it helps clarify the multiple positions that women find themselves in. The importance of intersectionality is that it always "asks the other

question” which would mean asking, as M. J. Matsuda states: “when I see something that looks racist, I ask ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’” and this is important as it makes it possible to understand the multiple positions that are occupied by black women (qtd in Davis 72).

The link between race and gender goes back to the eighteenth century when European ‘scientific’ inquiries, such as phrenology, used the figure of the black woman, as exemplified by Sarah Baartman, to argue that there was something inherently inferior about black people. The intersectional results of this history are visible in Ifemelu’s life as the judgements passed against her hair are not only a reference to her race but also to how she is expected to look, if she wants to be accepted in America, as a black woman. When Ifemelu submits to relaxing her hair, Wambui tells her that “relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn’t go running with Curt today because you didn’t want to sweat out this straightness” (208). Wambui is able to convince Ifemelu to remove the relaxed hair and when Ifemelu does remove it and looks at herself in the mirror, she finds herself ugly and unrecognisable (208). This leads to her going to the drugstore and buying oils, in an attempt to get back her hair until she realises in an online post from Jamilah that “there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me” and she begins learning how to appreciate her natural physical attributes (212).

What Ifemelu’s experiences represent are the pervasive hegemonic norms that still dictate how women, particularly black women, are expected to look. These Western standards of beauty are also present in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Matlwa’s *Coconut* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. What these novels portray is the inferiority complex that is inflicted on black women’s subjectivities as they often have to measure themselves against unattainable constructions of beauty that dictate the attributes that women should have in order to have worth.

Alongside the politics surrounding her hair, Ifemelu, as a woman, also has to deal with questions that pertain to her weight. When she is at a supermarket buying a packet of Tostitos, she is told by a man behind her that “fat people don’t need to be eating that shit” (6). This has such a great impact on her that when she gets back to her flat, and stands in front of the mirror, “she realised that she had ignored, for too long, the new tightness of her clothes, the rubbing together of her inner thighs, the softer, rounder parts of her that shook when she moved” and as a result of this, she says, “she was moved” (6). Ifemelu has internalised the standards of beauty that Western society expect women to adhere to. Even though she was indifferent to her weight, the man at the supermarket store reminds her of society’s expectations of her body. bell hooks writes that before the women’s liberation, all women, young and old, were socialised

“by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men” (6). Adichie shows that this kind of thinking is not only in the past but in many ways still influences the ways in which women conceive of themselves in the contemporary world.

The man who tells Ifemelu that she is fat thus acts in similar ways to the women’s magazines that Ifemelu confesses to reading, even though she is aware that they “forced images of small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate” (178). Naomi Wolf argues that women’s magazines have “beauty backlash trappings” that are put in by advertisers with the intention of indoctrinating women with the belief that in order to do well they should embody certain beauty ideals (71). This beauty, she argues, is a myth as it is created by those who want to maintain power over women (71).

In a blog post about the preferences that black men have for black women who are light in complexion, Ifemelu writes that the inspiration she and her friends derive from Michelle and Barack Obama’s marriage is that Michelle is a dark-complexioned woman and their marriage shows that a powerful black man, contrary to what they are used to seeing, can be with a woman that is dark in complexion (167). Ifemelu’s appreciation of this shows the continued inferiority that is still attached to dark-skinned women. Michelle Obama, as a public figure, represents a form of hope that Ifemelu and her friends are able to hold on to.

Aunty Uju’s and Ifemelu’s lives show the multiple ways in which black women’s subjectivities continue to be shaped by racist and patriarchal notions of what is acceptable in society. It is however also clear that as migrants in America, their lives are characterised by more privilege than those of other African women, such as Aisha and Halima, who are in America illegally. Class continues to play an important role in how women experience their lives even though they all, in one way or another, continue to experience the negative effects of heteronormative and racist stereotypes.

III: “A Piercing Homesickness”: Travel, Nostalgia and Belonging

From an early age, Ifemelu and Obinze entertain fantasies that at some time in the future they will go study and work overseas. This is because the social milieu within which they live in Nigeria confers respect and recognition on people based on how widely travelled they are. It is Western countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, that are seen as

places worth travelling to. As a result of this, Ifemelu, and especially Obinze, develop a longing to live in America since it is perceived as better than African countries. In *Americanah*, travelling has a huge impact on characters' experiences of life both within their homelands and their host countries. While the decision to travel is an available choice for most characters, as exemplified by Ifemelu and Obinze, sometimes it is a result of social, political and economic issues that are beyond a character's control, as illustrated by Auntie Uju and other illegal migrants who relocate to America.

America plays an important role in how Obinze envisions his life and the kinds of dreams he has about his future. His obsession with America informs the kinds of books he reads, films he watches, and what he talks about when he is with his friends. The novel explores the multitude of ways that America plays a central role in the popular imagination of Nigerian citizens. Travel to other countries, particularly Western countries, means that one is accorded respect and seen as better than people who have not travelled. The word 'Americanah' is used to refer to people who have travelled between America and Nigeria, and it marks the difference that exists between those whose lives have moved, or continue to move, between these different spaces and those who have never left Nigeria (384). As a consequence, those who have travelled can no longer be seen as purely Nigerian, since they have lived in America. This labelling, interestingly, is seen as an advantage within the postcolonial Nigerian context. Most of the characters that have travelled to America embrace this position as it gives them social capital and they show this by joining the Nigeropolitan club which is made up of people who have travelled to America and other countries in the West.

Upon her return from America, Ifemelu also joins the Nigeropolitan club. Similar to others who have joined the club, she finds she has issues with the political and economic state of Nigeria. While moving around Lagos she feels assaulted by "the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards and the heaps of rubbish that rose on the roadsides like a taint" (385). It is clear that her experience of America has given her a different perspective of her home country. This unease with the state of Nigeria unveils itself when she expresses feeling that "anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid store. And so she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar" (385). Her move between two continents has made her at once familiar, but at the same time unfamiliar, with her home country and this explains why she feels strange in a place that she always assumed was her home.

In an interview with *The Guardian* online paper, Adichie says that leaving Nigeria has made her aware of what is possible because “If you’re enmeshed in mediocrity, you just don’t know how mediocre it all is. And because I know the potential in Nigeria, whenever I go back I think we could do better” (‘Don’t we all write about Love’). Adichie shares this perspective with her protagonist. Travel plays an important role in how they both relate to their homeland as it triggers inevitable comparisons between the two countries.

Ifemelu moves to America because of Auntie Uju, who had moved there before her. Ifemelu was however sceptical of moving because she feared that she would not have the resources to maintain a decent lifestyle, as her scholarship would not pay for all her fees. After much persuasion, Obinze was able to convince her to take the opportunity. This persuasion has to do with Obinze’s own longing to continue his studies, which is why it is sadly ironic that it is Ifemelu who is given a study permit as opposed to Obinze who had been dreaming of going to America since he was young.

The racial discrimination Obinze experiences signifies the changes in American foreign policy post 9/11 and its fears of terrorist attacks. This fear from the West has intensified the racialisation of black male bodies, and it is partly because of this that Obinze is denied access to the country. Paul Gilroy argues in *Postcolonial Melancholia* that, post 9/11, America and European countries have once again become obsessed with race in their attempt to maintain control over the world and that is why, particularly in Britain, “parties that express popular opposition to immigration have triumphed at the polls. Xenophobia and nationalism are thriving” and this is because the obligation “to dwell peaceably with aliens and strangers” is increasingly coming to be seen as “unrealistic or unwelcome” and it is particularly males bodies, as *Americanah* shows, that suffer the consequences of this racialisation (2).

Experiences similar to Obinze’s have been represented in many novels during the post 9/11 years. One of these, Teju Cole’s *Open City*, depicts the experiences of immigrants who are treated with suspicion because of the pervasive fear of terrorist attacks. The protagonist of the novel, Julius, meets people who have been victims of America’s racist discourse and these include those who come from the Middle-East and African countries. The novel’s title, *Open City*, is therefore ironic as America’s openness is conditional and is based on whether or not people fit into what the country deems to be acceptable categories, and this mainly includes white people who are perceived as non-threatening to the American culture.

When Ifemelu arrives in America, she has preconceived ideas about what it should look like and many of these perceptions are a result of Obinze’s idealisation of the place. She notices a disjuncture however between what she thought America looked like and what she experiences

when she is there. She is taken aback by buildings, cars and signboards that are “matt, disappointingly matt” and this is because “in the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shine gloss” but this, she finds, is actually not the case (104). When she looks below Aunt Uju’s street, she finds it to be “poorly lit, boarded not by leafy trees but by closely parked cars, nothing like the pretty street on *The Cosby Show*” (106). Thus the representations that she has been exposed to, and that she believed, are proven not to be true when she is in real contact with the country.

Furthermore, Ifemelu finds that many parents who come from other countries, similar to Aunt Uju, are deeply uncomfortable with the prospect of raising their children in America. This scepticism challenges the assumptions that Ifemelu and Obinze had made about America. Ifemelu comes across this dissatisfaction of raising children from Aunt Uju’s neighbour who says that the hardest challenge in America is that “your children become what you don’t know. It’s different back home because you can control them. Here, no!” (112). This is similar to the response that Aunt Uju gives when she is told that Dike was caught showing his private parts to a girl in the bathroom at school. She blames America for this behaviour, telling Ifemelu that “He is not yet seven years old! What type of thing is this? Is this what I came to America for?” (141). Aunt Uju believes that this behaviour would not have happened if Dike had been raised in Nigeria, and this shows that a move from one continent to another can make parents doubt how they should raise their children as they are now in an environment that is different to the one they grew up in.

Ifemelu becomes aware of the ways in which Aunt Uju and Ginika have changed, or indeed refuse to change, since their move to America. Aunt Uju now pronounces “put it back” as “Poor-reet-back,” and this, Ifemelu says, is only said “in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans” and because of this new-forged accent, Ifemelu observes that she has become “a new person, apologetic and self-abasing” (108). It is because of the need to fit in that she wants Dike to learn English and not Igbo, his home language (109). What is important for Aunt Uju is for Dike to assimilate into American culture, even though this will compromise his ability to learn how to speak his home language. Aunt Uju’s desires confirm bell hooks’s argument that the only way in which the black body can attain recognition is if it assimilates and performs the normative codes of whiteness. Without such assimilation, it cannot be given any recognition and will thus continue, as happened historically, to be seen as barbaric and uncivilised (46).

There is however a paradox in the fact that Aunt Uju refuses to allow Dike to learn Igbo. As indicated earlier, she is sceptical of raising Dike in America because of the cultural

differences that exist between the different countries, but at the same time she does not want him to know the language that is spoken in Nigeria, the place where she wishes she raised him. These are some of the contradictions that Auntie Uju has to negotiate as she wants to retain values that she perceives as important but at the same time wants Dike and herself to fit into their new social environment. As a result of these contradictions, Ifemelu remarks that she has a sense that Auntie Uju “had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place” (119). These incidents corroborate Bhabha’s argument that we “find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (1).

While Auntie Uju’s strategy has been to fit into the dominant culture, Ifemelu notices that her old friend, Ginika, has chosen a different path as she does not want to be thought of as having lost her roots. When in conversation, Ifemelu finds that Ginika has “lapsed into Nigerian English, a dated, overcooked version” since she was “eager to prove how unchanged she was” (123). Ginika’s attempts to prove her authentic Nigerian identity leads to her saying things such as “shay you know” even though Nigerian people no longer speak in that way (123). Ginika and Auntie Uju thus represent different ways in which migrants relate to their homelands when they move to other countries or continents.

One of the things Ifemelu has to deal with, as already elaborated on, is encountering other people’s contemptuous attitudes towards Africa and its people. When she struggles to make a living as she does not have a work permit, Ginika tells her to use the work permit that Auntie Uju gave her which belongs to Ngozi Okonkwo, since she can always tell her employers that Ngozi is her “tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They’ll believe all kinds of shit about Africa” (131). This attitude implies, as is shown throughout the novel, that the space that Ifemelu inhabits is ignorant about her history and present socio-economic circumstances. Even though Western countries have a history of exploiting African countries, Gilroy’s assertion that “the imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries” even in the present is indeed true (2). These stereotypes show that ways of seeing, and thinking about Africa, have not significantly changed in the twenty-first century.

Ifemelu is thus forced to apply for menial jobs such as being a waitress, hostess, bartender and cashier, as it is impossible to get a well-paid job that can help her to support herself adequately. She ends up having to work as a baby-sitter for Kimberly as that is the only job she is able to find. Laura Brace writes that these kinds of jobs are one of the many such jobs that immigrants find themselves accepting despite having attained qualifications from their

homelands. The difficulty of not having work permits forces them into these marginal spaces that make it easy for them to be exploited since they are not protected by the state.

Ifemelu's encounter with her employer, Kimberly, further reveals the racist ways in which Africans are still regarded in America, particularly in the white community. When Ifemelu is asked for her name, Kimberly responds by saying "What a beautiful name" and "Does it mean anything? I love multicultural names because they have such wonderful meanings, from wonderful rich cultures" (146). Ifemelu notes that the hypocrisy of Kimberly's compliment lies in the fact that she would never think that Norway had a rich culture and this, to her, exposes the ways in which Kimberly exoticises African people and African cultures even if she does so unintentionally.

When Ifemelu starts going to college, she discovers that she is not the only one who has experienced prejudice because of her African ancestry. She is made aware of the existence of the African Student Association (ASA) and the Black Student Union (BSU), which seek to represent the views of those who are still subjugated. ASA represents foreign students who come from Africa. It was formed because of the prejudice that African students face in America, which is why in most of their meetings "they mimicked what Americans told them: You speak such good English. How bad is Aids in your country? It's so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa" (139). The society is meant to bring them together so that they can offer each other moral support as they are in a different continent that has harmfully preconceived ideas of who they are.

It is therefore not surprising that at these meetings "Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself" (139). The Black Student Union, on the other hand, represents the marginalisation that is felt by African Americans at the institution. What this shows is that even though African Americans and students from Africa all refer to themselves as black, the challenges they face are different based on the different, even though deeply similar, historical circumstances that have shaped their current circumstances. This means the students are aware of the need they have to work together even though the issues they are tackling are not always similar.

During the eight years that Ifemelu spends in America, she develops feelings of nostalgia as she thinks about the kind of life she could be living in Nigeria. While her nostalgia is invoked by many things, it often comes when she finds herself in difficult circumstances in America and longs for her old life in Nigeria and the people she had around her. For Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" and as argued in the previous chapter, also "a sentiment of loss and displacement" which could be "a

romance with one's own fantasy" (2). Ifemelu develops what she calls "homesickness" and much of it, as she says, is a result of her longing to see Obinze. She thinks of the fact that he is now "a husband and father" and confesses that she cannot pretend that "he was not part of her home sickness, or that she did not often think of him, sifting through their past, looking for portents of what she could not name" (Adichie 7).

She describes these nostalgic moments as "an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness" (6). This, as Boym argues, is a state that every migrant goes through as their old life always seems better than their present circumstances. These nostalgic moments, and their occurrence in the twenty-first century, result in Ifemelu scouring "Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs" and through them discovers "yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home" (6). As a result, she feels the:

dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil.

(5)

Boym's observation that "nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time-time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams" is confirmed in Adichie's novel as Ifemelu's childhood in Nigeria is contrary to the nostalgic feelings she has about it when she is in America (7). This means that "nostalgic love," as Boym argues, "can only survive in a long-distance relationship," which we see reflected in Ifemelu's return to Nigeria as she is disappointed with how things actually are since there is a difference between what she sees and how she imagined the place while in America (7).

Feelings of nostalgia are also evident in Obinze's move to the United Kingdom and similarly to Ifemelu, these feelings are exacerbated by the difficult conditions he faces in his new location. These conditions have to do with how Obinze is treated as a black migrant in the UK, which illustrates Gilroy's point that African migrants are still seen as aliens and strangers in many European countries and are ostracised from the social, political and economic spheres of the place (2). Obinze, for example, is refused a permit to study in the UK without any reasonable explanation. As a result of his inability to attain a permit, he is told to marry an Eastern European woman so that he can attain permanent citizenship and the fact that he has attained a university education in Nigeria is not recognised in this space. His experience is thus

similar to Ifemelu's as he is refused recognition because of the presumptions that are made about African people.

Obinze is forced to clean toilets in order to make a living. While doing this he meets a Ghanaian woman who has the same job, but he finds it difficult to communicate with her since although she has "a background similar to his, a childhood cushioned by family, by regular meals, by dreams in which there was no conception of cleaning toilets in London," their new location has made them invisible in London as their race and historical locations predetermine the ways in which they are treated (236). His awareness of what her historical background might be makes companionship between them impossible as he sees himself as being "too close to what she was" and consequently he has a sense of shame over their situation which is why he suspects it would be difficult for the two of them to communicate (236).

These experiences inevitably lead to Obinze becoming nostalgic for his background as he is refused belonging in his new location. His situation is exacerbated by the fact that he is a son of a professor and now finds himself in a position where he has to clean toilets in order to survive. Obinze thinks a lot about his relationship with Ifemelu and his mother and how his life could have been if he had stayed with them. These longings reiterate Edward Said's notion that exile "is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives" (140-1). These nostalgic feelings consequently "tore deep into him" (237). The kind of life he is living in London is not the life "he had imagined for himself" as it is a life infused mostly by "panic and hope" and ultimately results in him feeling very lonely (259).

The move Ifemelu, Auntie Uju and Obinze embark on from Nigeria to Western countries shows the complex ways in which immigration is experienced. Indeed race, gender and class are depicted as playing an important role in how they experience their host countries. These experiences confirm Bhabha's call that in the twenty-first century, what is politically important "is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on these moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (5), and this is most evident in the lives of Ifemelu and Auntie Uju, who struggle with questions of what it means to belong and have authentic identities as they keep encountering cultures that are different from their own.

Bhabha argues against the need to maintain authentic identities since "the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent

borderlines of modern nationhood” (5). This means that in the twenty-first century, people live in an “in-between” space that has been constructed by history but at the same time departs from that history. This means then, as is clear in Adichie’s novel, that there should no longer be a longing for authentic identities as most cultures have become irreparably entangled with each other in this contemporary period.

This section has shown the impact that moving from one continent to another has on characters’ lives. Similar to the arguments that were made in the previous sections, it has also been made clear that class plays an important role in how characters experience their new locations. Ifemelu’s and Auntie Uju’s lives, as already argued, are different to the kind of life endured by most illegal immigrants. This, however, does not mean they are not faced with challenges in their new location as dominant discourses about race and gender still impact how they look at themselves and how they are perceived by the public. This depiction illustrates, as this thesis is arguing, that history still has a strong hold on how women, particularly black women, perceive themselves in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Adichie’s novel depicts the multiple challenges that her characters confront in the twenty-first century. Her characters consistently navigate worlds in which their race and gender determine the ways in which they experience the world. Dominant Western beauty standards continue to have a profound impact on the characters’ lives as they are obliged to aspire to be people they are not. Furthermore, this racial prejudice also affects the most vulnerable people in society, as can be seen through the character of Dike. The novel thus shows that although we may be living in an increasingly transnational world, historical stereotypes about race and gender are still dominant and have an influence on how African people experience different parts of the world.

Chapter 4

Introduction

Zoë Wicomb and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have argued that literature has the capacity to make people understand contemporary social and political issues through a literary framing that puts historical events into perspective (Mzomera Ngwira 6-7). Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira writes that these writers have an “interest in the representation of marginalised or minority ethnic groups within the nation, the coloured people in the case of Wicomb, and the Igbo in the case of Adichie” (ii). Their representations of these marginalised groups are informed by their appreciation of literature and how it can be used to counter hegemonic forms of representation. In her TEDxt talk titled “The Dangers of a Single Story,” Adichie says that when she started writing books at an early age, she “wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. All my characters were white and blue-eyed. They played in the snow. They ate apples” and this demonstrates “how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children” and because Adichie had not read any books which represented people who looked like her, she was “convinced that books by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them, and had to be about things which I could not personally identify.” It was after coming across a complex representation of black characters in the works of Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye that she went through “a mental shift” in her perception as she gained the understanding that black people can be represented in literature.

Wicomb has also stated that she would not have become a writer had it not been for the Black Conscious Movement and the feminist movement in the 1970s. These movements allowed her to see herself differently and to counter the dominant modes of representation that were used to classify those who were marginalised by the apartheid government (Driver 45-6). Dorothy Driver writes that as a result of these influences, Wicomb’s writing “bears witness to a history of deprivation” and furthermore “suggests ways in which to subvert this history: not through political or economic change but through a psychological change whose major route is in rewriting representation” (45). Similar to Adichie then, Wicomb believes that there should not be a single representation of anything, but multiple stories that challenge hegemonic representations of the world. Both writers seem to suggest that if this is not done, it will lead to the exclusion of other stories and people whose lives continue to be marginalised.

This chapter will assess how the performative aspects of reading and writing are thematised in *October* and *Americanah*, and how this illustrates the writers’ interest in telling

marginal stories. In Wicomb's novel, the theme of writing is shown in Mercia's fraught attempt to write her memoir and in her discovery of Sylvie's photographs. In Adichie's novel, it is shown in the role of fiction and the perceptions it creates about a place and in Ifemelu's use of blogging as a way of expressing her feelings of displacement in America. The chapter will ultimately argue that both writers are interested in interrogating the complexities that underpin all forms of representation.

I: Giving an Account of Oneself: The Politics of Representation in *October*

As stated in the first chapter, Wicomb's literary interests are deeply influenced by postcolonial and poststructuralist modes of representation. In an essay titled "Comment on Return to South Africa," written at the dawn of South Africa's democracy, Wicomb writes that "one can only be optimistic about another generation of readers and writers who will be attentive to the central position of irony and paradox in all aspects of our culture" (523). Driver writes that Wicomb's interest in irony and paradox is evident in all her fiction and critical writing, and when combined, these literary techniques become "more unsettling and more liberatory, not least since they extend into the interface between the imaginative world and external reality, and between what is commonly known as writing and history" (524).

The importance that Wicomb places on literature can be seen as a result of the fact that in the 1960s and 1970s, when she was at university, she did not read any South African literature in her academic courses. When she went into exile, similar to many South Africans, she was "separated from writers at home" and because of that could not "readily claim a literary heritage" (45). Thus, because higher education institutions during apartheid marginalised the teaching of South African literature, Wicomb became aware of how stories are used to assert power as some are excluded and are regarded as not being worthy of being told.

Wicomb's interest, then, is similar to Adichie's as they are both interested in representing people who have been marginalised. This task of writing new stories in the postcolonial period means that Wicomb's view of literature is similar to Adichie's, who says that "stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity" ("Dangers of a Single Story"). In *October* and *Americanah*, both writers exhibit a sustained interest in the politics of writing and the possibilities it can provide for thinking anew about the formation of subjectivities.

At the age of fifty-two, Mercia is left by her partner, Craig, who she has been with for twenty four years. This unexpected loss leads to Mercia thinking that she should write a memoir as a way of dealing with her pain. She is however doubtful of this pursuit as she is deeply “sceptical of the genre, has misgivings about the contemporary turn to memoir, would never dream of reading such a thing” (Wicomb 16). This hesitation is fuelled by the fact that this is something society always expects and finds suitable “for a woman who has been left” and furthermore, as a black woman who has travelled to Europe, “autobiography is what people like her are expected to produce” (17). Writing the memoir would involve conforming to societal expectations. She however finds it difficult to cope with the condition of having been ‘left,’ and writing presents itself as the only option for expressing her feelings of displacement in Scotland.

When Mercia left South Africa to go into voluntary exile in Scotland, it was with the hope that after the fall of apartheid she would return to South Africa. This however does not happen as she finds herself in a long term relationship with Craig. When Craig leaves her, she finds herself not only suffering from the loss, she also feels displaced in Scotland because the important thing that kept her there was her relationship with him. Writing becomes a way of dealing with this displacement as she finds herself in a country that she has never regarded as her home. She decides then that if she will write the memoir, she will think of it as “private, not for publication,” and this would mean that she is “free to write; there need be no thinking through the reason or purpose, no need to retract her views on memoir” (16-17).

It is only in rethinking her views on memoir writing that she is able start writing, even though this is something she never finds easy to do. Edward Said writes that because exiles are displaced, they usually turn to writing and the creative arts as a way of expressing their feelings of deracination in the places they live (144). Thus, even though writing the memoir is not the preferred mode of communication, Mercia finds it to be the only available medium that will allow her to express what has happened to her.

When she starts writing her memoir, she is confronted with the challenge that she cannot start writing her story using her own personal narrative as “there are her parents, Nicholas and Antoinette, both dead and representable” that she has to consider first in her writing (17). Mercia sees their deaths as an opportunity to write about them since they cannot object to what she pens. She realises however that there is very little that she “remembers or knows about them [and] how much there is to invent” (17). Mercia recognises that her wish to write truthfully about her past will prove impossible as she will have to invent stories about her past family life. This difficulty speaks to the fallibility of memory: historical events are

reconstructed as subsequent events influence the ways in which she remembers her past. Thus, in order for the memoir to be written, Mercia is aware that other people, who she may not even remember well, will also be implicated in the story she will tell. This is why Judith Butler writes in *Giving an Account of Oneself* that:

the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or an agent of its making. In this sense, then, the subject of recognition is one for whom vacillation between loss and ecstasy is inevitable. The possibility of the 'I', of speaking and knowing the 'I', resides in a prospective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies.

(23)

This means, as argued above, that Mercia cannot write about her personal narrative without including her family history. Her story, as Butler would argue, is one she has not single-handedly authored, and it will therefore be necessary to include other people in the story that she will tell. Her story would not only have to include her parents, but would also include Jake, her brother, who she has been trying to avoid as she does not want to be “caught up between him and their father” (Wicomb 21). She is thus confronted with the fact that an attempt to write about her life will take her to places she does not want to go.

In Mercia's attempt to give an account of her life, she has to accept that her narrative, as Butler argues, will be “disorientated by what is not [hers], or what is not [hers] alone” and because of this “the narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of [her] story” (26). That is why when writing her story, she finds that she has to start with the story of her parents since she cannot tell the emergence of her own narrative and the “conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense becoming witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, prior to one's own becoming, and so narrating that which one cannot know” (26). She thus recognises that other people are already implicated in the story that she will tell. She will therefore rely on her fallible memory as it is the only way in which she can narrate what she believes will constitute the ‘truth’ of her tale, even though she is aware that much of the story will necessarily be invention.

Recall that while Mercia is struggling to write her memoir she receives a letter from Jake, in South Africa, and a novel she had ordered titled *Home* by Marilynne Robinson (10). Instead of reading the letter, which she assumes could be urgent, she decides to start with the novel as “news from home was always disturbing” (Wicomb 20). There is an irony in the fact

that Mercia finds it difficult to read a letter that comes from her own home, but is willing to write about her home, from a distance, and read about other people's fictional homes. Robinson's novel explores the complexity and difficulty of family life in the lives of the Boughton family. Mercia's diversion from real-life issues raises questions about the ethics of reading and writing practices for literary people. Her reluctance to read Jake's letter suggests that Mercia prefers reading difficult fictional stories, and writing literary criticism, to attending to challenges that confront her and those around her. The way in which reading and writing enable her to escape immediate challenges is illustrated when she is in Kliprand, after her father's passing, and she is working on her laptop and Jake asks if she calls what she does work "and a laughing Sylvie interjected, You should come to the butchery on a Saturday morning to see real work" (56). Mercia has no interest in Sylvie's work even though her profession, as a postcolonial literary critic, is to represent historically marginalised people like Sylvie. An undeniable hypocrisy therefore underpins Mercia's version of "work."

This work, which constitutes reading books and writing literary criticism, is seen by Sylvie as "a waste of time," as Sylvie would not "het up like a teenager about people you don't know, dressed up people who have nothing to do with you. No more than a kind of busyboddiness that passes for being 'clever'" (149). What is important to Sylvie is doing work that responds to people who live in one's community and not people one is removed from, as Sylvie assumes is the case with fictional characters. This is why she wonders, before assigning duties to Mercia, whether she is "any good at needlework, at invisible mending. That might just give the woman a much-needed something to do, something practical" (149).

This response from Sylvie and Jake is similar to Mercia's father's response to her attainment of a doctorate in literature. He remarks that she is a doctor "who could not even cure a headache" and therefore hopes that "she would not go about calling herself a doctor, making a fool of herself. Doctoring books, he said wistfully, well, what good could that do?" (36). These perspectives from her family contrast with what she believes her work involves, which is reading and trying to "think things through, think about texts and their language, and interpret the world" (57). In staging this clash between what Mercia thinks about the work that she does and how it is viewed by her family, the novel invites readers to also think critically about the activity they are engaged in.

While Mercia is reading the novel *Home*, and thinking about her memoir that she has also titled 'Home,' questions pertaining to the difference between fictional narratives and Mercia's life begin to emerge. Comparing herself to Gloria, the protagonist in Robinson's novel, she thinks that she "may not be as good as the glorious sister in the novel, but the

correspondences are there, including the ironic depiction of home. Strangely familiar, this story of siblings, brother and sister, that turns out also to be one of father and son” (21). In her reading of the novel, she realises that she is faced with the same predicaments that confront the characters in the novel as they also struggle with the notion of home. There is an irony in the fact that even though Mercia has avoided reading the letter from her ‘actual’ home, she nevertheless confronts Jake through a similar character who has a similar name to him, Jack, in Robinson’s novel.

These similarities raise fears in Mercia as she thinks that she will “suffer with the anxiety of influence” since she will struggle to differentiate between the novel and her own history. This anxiety is justified when she thinks about her past and wonders whether her thinking is in fact “an actual memory? Her own? Or is the smell entwined with that in the novel she is reading, where the house is filled by the mother with fragrant food?” (26). She bemoans the fact that “she can’t distinguish between her own history and someone else’s fiction” and because of this she temporally abandons the memoir (26). This shows that Mercia’s attempt to think about her history is in fact an attempt to find some form of truth in her story. Robinson’s novel shows her the ways in which personal narratives are always influenced by the stories that one encounters, which means that one’s story is not simply one’s own, but an amalgamation of many stories and this is why Mercia struggles to tell her own story.

Mercia is unable to distinguish between “an actual memory” and a memory that has been influenced by the reading of the novel. Her memory has necessarily been changed by the different discourses she has encountered. This confirms Butler’s view that Mercia cannot know the story of her origin as there are “several possible versions of (her) origin” and not merely one, as she would like to believe (26). This means that Mercia is always reconstructing in the very act of telling her story (27).

Robinson’s novel has a direct impact on the memoir she is writing in the same ways that it has influenced the writing of *October*. In an article for the *Sunday Times* newspaper, Wicomb writes that she was able to write *October* after reading “Marilynne Robinson’s extraordinary novel *Home*, and was struck by certain parallels with my half-formed characters. I decided to use it, to transpose the story of genteel Americans to rural Namaqualand” (“Leaping Upstream”). The influence that the novel had on Wicomb’s writing plays itself out in Mercia’s family situation as she sees resemblances between what she is reading and what she is experiencing in her life. This makes her aware of how stories are transposable and that “there is nothing extraordinary about the Murrays; in fact, are there any stories in the world that do not have a counterpart in another culture” (Wicomb 164). In reading Robinson’s novel,

it becomes apparent that there are similarities that exist in people's stories, even from different continents, and this leads her to think that her memoir may in fact be "redundant for the telling" (21).

Wicomb's novel not only engages written fictional and non-fictional representations, it shows that historical narratives can be found in different forms of media representation. Photography is shown to have played an important role in Sylvie's life when she was young and the photographs she took when she was younger show a different perspective to what she espouses as an adult. As a young woman growing up in rural Kliprand, her attitude towards the normative racial and gendered discourses was radically different to that of the adults around her. While her family believed in the notion of the 'purity' of races, she saw herself as being part of a 'New World' whose thinking was not restricted by hegemonic racial and gendered discourse as she refused to conform to societal expectations of how women should behave (168). Much of this is evident in her obsession with taking photographs of herself where she wears tight clothing and takes photographs that are deemed shameful. Her behaviour is seen as aberrant as she insists on wearing "tight, tight clothes that would give any healthy person hiccups" (108).

Sylvie's obsession with taking photographs of herself is an escape from the deeply racist and sexist discourse that pervades her everyday life. However, as she becomes an adult this begins to change when she is sexually molested by Mercia's father, Nicholas. Sylvie increasingly begins to perform the subservient gendered role that women are expected to play and her marriage to Jake puts her in a position where she is submissive and loses all the independence she had cultivated for herself as a young woman. The novel shows that in an oppressive social environment where there are conservative views on gender, a woman may experience some form of freedom at a young age but this is taken away when she becomes an adult since societal expectations come to dictate how she should live her life.

When Mercia comes across Sylvie's photographs on a visit to Kliprand, she is taken aback by how they represent Sylvie. Her sister in law, for the first time, appears different to what she had assumed she was like. This is because Mercia's perception of her has always been that of "a simple, uneducated country girl, one who talks too much, prone to whining, but modest all the same" (180). This is why Mercia, as discussed in Chapter Two, did not want Jake to marry Sylvie. She did not see her as "one of their own" because of the class that she comes from. When she comes across the images she realises that she is "so radically different from the woman she knows, or rather from the current Sylvie" (180). Thus what Mercia sees is not some "simple, uneducated country girl" but rather "evidence of a confident, bold young

woman brimming with self-confidence and striking various poses” (181). They are images of a “Sylvie whom Mercia does not know and cannot fathom. A strange young woman in knowing performance who claims for herself an iconic presence in the ethereal light, then subverts it with a grin” (190). Through these representations of Sylvie, Mercia comes to realise that she had been prejudiced against her as she is not the person she had assumed she was. Through these images she even recognises a “self-reflexivity” that she sees as “beyond the knowing aesthetics of representing the self” (191). Similar to how Adichie argues for different kinds of stories, the novel shows that photographs can also give different stories about people.

Sylvie’s ‘memoir’ is found in the photographs and they challenge a viewer’s perspective of who she was and the kind of person she has become. What the photographs show is that Sylvie’s sense of herself as a young woman was very different to her current self image. They reflect someone whose subjectivity has not been stagnant. This means that the ways in which Mercia has been reading her, and even the way she will read her after seeing these photographs, will always be limited. Butler argues that any account that is given about the self will always be “haunted by that for which I have no definitive story” and this is because the story that one tells “cannot assume that its referent can adequately take narrative form” (27). This revelation means that Mercia has to accept that she cannot accord Sylvie a narrative, or a narrative that is conclusive, as she will always be constrained by what she does not know about her. As a living human subject Sylvie will also continue to change as she encounters different situations, and her complexity will therefore always exceed a simplistic representation.

Mercia’s attempts at memoir writing become disturbed when she is back in South Africa after reading the letter from Jake. Although she had assumed that Jake’s alcohol problem was self-induced, his confessions reveal secrets he has been living with that have exacerbated his condition. Besides the acrimonious relationship he has always had with his father, it is when he finds out about Sylvie’s molestation by his father that his alcohol abuse escalated. This information changes the perception that Mercia had of her father. Even though she was always aware of his abusive nature, which she had experienced as a child together with Jake, she never thought it possible that he would sexually molest someone, especially Sylvie, Jake’s wife. After hearing this information her immediate reaction is to leave Kliprand and return to Scotland. She expresses a feeling of shame over the fact that she had misjudged Sylvie, not knowing that her own father had caused such damage to her (226). Furthermore, she feels ashamed that she,

a woman devoted to the close reading of words and actions on the page, failed to keep track of events in her own life. Blinded by griefs and perhaps, by the condition of having been left, for she has not always been able to separate the two, she has not arrived at an explanation of what happened

(227)

Precisely because Mercia feels she has been blind to many things “she finds the file, ‘Home’, still on the desktop, and without opening it, drags it into the trash bin” (269). These revelations make it difficult for Mercia to think that it is possible to write her memoir, despite her claims that she was aware that she would have to invent in order to write. It suddenly becomes clear that she cannot even rely on invention, as even her imagination is capable of harmfully misrepresenting the stories of those she thought she knew. As Homi Bhabha argues, one can no longer rely on a historical tradition in order to understand oneself because it is always a “partial form of identification” since “in restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity” (2).

Mercia’s abandonment of her memoir can also be linked to Desiree Lewis’s argument that a lot of autobiography written by black South African women has been “relatively reticent in dealing with private life and interpersonal relationships. This reserve could be traced to concern with emphasising that the ‘I’ is important only in so far as personal experience reveals the history of community” and because of this need to belong, “stories about subjects like sexual violence or abusive marriages seems to betray the spirit of communal or racial unity, especially when represented as familial” (43). It is clear then that Mercia’s abandonment of the memoir is a result of this betrayal of the assumptions she had, which are revealed not to be true, about her family. She comes to the awareness that living in a communal space means that her story does not actually only belong to her as there are other people whose actions are implicated in any story that she tells about herself.

Mercia’s experiences confirm Judith Butler’s view that if one were to give an account of oneself, as Mercia would have done, that account would necessarily be partial and this would mean that her “efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision” (27). It is precisely this revision that Mercia finds herself having to live with. It starts off with losing her partner of twenty four years, Craig. She then loses the concept of who she thought her father was. Things that she had always assumed to be true about her family, which she would have narrated in her memoir, suddenly reveal themselves to be partial truths. Dorothy Driver writes that Wicomb’s interest is in showing that “in any attempt at interpretation lies the mutual

dependence of the fictive and the real: you cannot do without the real in interpreting the fictional, and then again you cannot do without the fictional in interpreting the real” (540). *October* can thus be seen as an attempt by Wicomb to unsettle “the authority of the text, event or events under discussion” (524). It can be argued that the texts under discussion, in this instance, is the memoir Mercia is attempting to write, ‘Home,’ and the novel we as readers are reading, *October*. The authority of these narratives is brought under scrutiny as they are both shown to be deeply entangled with other stories.

While writing her memoir proves impossible, it is Sylvie’s story, although similar to Mercia’s (in that it is not fully knowable), that emerges. While Mercia had long assumed Sylvie’s subject position, based on her class position, by the end of the novel Mercia comes to accept that she cannot claim to fully understand Sylvie. This means that Mercia has to accept, as Gayatri Spivak argues, that as a postcolonial academic, and intellectual, her privileged position entails a loss (83). She cannot claim to understand subalterns even though her work involves representing them.

The task of the postcolonial intellectual, as Spivak argues, is learning to “speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern” (91). Indeed it becomes clear that Mercia, as a postcolonial academic, cannot claim to speak for Sylvie as she has not formed a relationship with her. By the end of the novel she discovers that Sylvie’s interests and story are not what she had presumed. This becomes clearer when Mercia discovers, amongst many things, that Sylvie does not in fact want Nicky to be taken away from her. But because Mercia had never consulted her on this issue, and had merely accepted Jake’s version of events, she must acknowledge that her inability to speak to Sylvie, and thus regard her as an equal, is what has led to an ethical failure on her part.

I would argue then, in line with Spivak, that because the subaltern cannot speak the need for “representation has not withered away” and precisely because of this, “the female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (104). Mercia’s failure to understand Sylvie can be seen as an admission by Zoë Wicomb that as a privileged postcolonial intellectual, she is unable to represent the life of this marginalised black woman. Through a fictional representation of this failure, on the part of Wicomb, the author, and an intertextual counter narrative through photography, Sylvie is finally able to speak. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, Adichie argues for a proliferation of stories in order to subvert stereotypes and restore the dignity of people, and Wicomb’s novel, *October*, can be seen to endorse the same approach. The novel does not only portray its marginalised

subjects, but it also invites some scepticism from its readers as it exposes them to the intrinsic complexities that are always inherent in all forms of representation.

II: Telling a Different Story: Reading, Travelling and Blogging in *Americanah*

The aim of Adichie's lecture "The Dangers of a Single Story" is to deconstruct the notion that a nation, or people, have a single story. Her objectives are to displace the uncomplicated narrative that is perpetuated about Africa, particularly in Western countries, and to show that it is a complex place and can therefore not be treated in a simplistic way as it is by some characters in her novels. Adichie's interest in telling multiple stories is evident in *Americanah*. Although this thesis has argued that Ifemelu's life is made difficult by the racial and gendered spaces in which she finds herself, there are resources that she has which enable her to thrive and fulfil her goals in Nigeria and America. This is evident in the fact that even though she comes from a working-class background, as a woman growing up in post-independence Nigeria, she is able to go to school and eventually attend university. Adichie's novel gives a complex perspective on what is happening in Nigeria that problematises simplistic Western narratives which always portray Africa as "The Hopeless Continent" (Redvers Louise "No Longer the Hopeless Continent").

The novel shows that stereotypes and simplistic analyses of Africa still exist in the twenty-first century. In her TEDxt talk, Adichie recalls a story about a reader who told her how shameful it was that Nigerian men abused their women as she had just read her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie responded by saying she also thought it shameful that American young men were serial killers as she had also read *American Psycho*. The point she was making was that a place cannot not be homogenised under a single representation and interpretation.

In *Americanah*, most characters who live in America are shown to perpetuate single stories about Africa. When in America, Ifemelu meets a woman named Kelsey who wants to travel to Africa. Prior to her travels, Kelsey had read a few African texts including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. She complains to Ifemelu that she found the book "quaint" as it did not help her "understand modern Africa" (190). The book that she enjoyed was V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, as it made her "truly understand how modern Africa works" since according to her, it is "the most honest book I've ever read about Africa" (190). Ifemelu, however, has a different perspective as she does not think "the novel was about Africa at all. It was about Europe, or the longing for Europe, about the battered self-image of an Indian man

born in Africa, who felt so wounded, so diminished, by not having been born European” (190). If Kelsey thinks this is the best representation of Africa she clearly holds a naïve and simplistic perception about the continent even though, she claims to have a ‘neutral’ perspective about Africa.

Kelsey’s perception of Africa is in direct opposition to Ifemelu’s attitude towards the USA. Ifemelu is aware that she has very little understanding of the history of America, and therefore devotes herself to reading as much as possible, including all of James Baldwin’s literary works. It is through her devotion to understanding things that “America’s mythologies began to take on meaning, America’s tribalisms – race, ideology and region – became clear. And she was consoled by this knowledge” (136). This knowledge allows her to have a complex understanding of the contemporary issues facing America and this allows her to have views that are informed.

In a discussion at her university, she disagrees with one of her black classmates about the use of the word nigger in a documentary titled *The Roots*. The classmates’ view is that the word “has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to use it” (138). Ifemelu, having been influenced by William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, responds by saying that she does not “think it’s always hurtful. I think that it depends on the intent and also who is using it” (137-8). This is evidence of her understanding of American history and culture and this shows that she has a more nuanced understanding. This, as is clear, is in direct contrast to Kelsey’s perspective which relies on a single book to understand how “modern Africa works.” What the novel suggests, which is similar to what Adichie argues for in her TEDxt talk, is that an engagement with a wide range of literary and cultural productions of a country allows for one to have a better understanding of the complexities of places and not to homogenise and therefore have a prejudiced attitude towards a people or place.

As stated in Chapter Three, Ifemelu first experiences racism when she moves to America. Due to numerous brushes with discrimination, she decides to start a blog that she calls *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. This decision is influenced by her close friend, Wambui, who advises her to write about her experiences. This advice comes after Ifemelu had taken her white boyfriend, Curt, to a magazine store to show him how black women were marginalised in popular representations to counter his short-sighted view that magazines such as *Ebony* were discriminatory as they prioritised black women (294).

After this experience with Curt, Ifemelu writes a long email to Wambui “about the bookstore, the magazines, the things she didn’t tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished. It was

a long e-mail, digging, questioning, unearthing” and after reading this, Wambui replies telling her, “This is so raw and true. More people should read this. You should start a blog” (295). Wambui’s advice resonates with Ifemelu as she has “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? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze?” (296). After thinking things through, she breaks up with Curt and starts her blog.

In an interview, when Adichie is asked why she decided to make her protagonist a blogger, Adichie responded by saying that “I wanted this novel to also be social commentary, but I wanted to say it in ways that are different from what one is supposed to say in literary fiction” (Guarracino 2). Since the blog’s intention is to serve such social commentary, Ifemelu can then be seen as a critic who is able to do what Adichie says she cannot say as a literary writer. Ifemelu therefore fulfils Homi Bhabha’s view that “the critic must attempt to fully realise, and take responsibility for the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (12). Many of Ifemelu’s posts are indeed about the ways in which America’s racist history continues to manifest itself in the present.

Serena Guarracino writes that the strength of Adichie’s use of blogging as a literary device to effect social commentary is that it allows Ifemelu to come into writing not through established forms of creative writing, but through a “hybrid form that brings together storytelling, reportage, and emotional value” (14). This hybrid form is important since Ifemelu wants to reflect on her own personal experiences but also on political and historical factors that inform those experiences. This need to reflect on her migration experience yields what Bhabha would call “world literature,” and this means that “where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature” (12). Both Ifemelu’s blog and the novel can be seen as serving this purpose as they break with traditional conceptions of what can be transmitted, and how things are transmitted, in the twenty-first century.

Ifemelu’s reason for blogging is in many ways similar to Mercia’s reason for wanting to write a memoir in *October*. Having no one to fully express herself to after having been left, the memoir presents itself as the only available medium to process her past and get a better understanding of her present predicament. Similarly, Ifemelu sees blogging as affording her the opportunity to express herself and further as enabling her to interact with other people who may share similar experiences. Barbara K. Kaye writes that blogs are “diary-styled venues that offer news and information posted by a blogger and to which readers may add their own

opinions and begin discussions on new topics” (210). As Ifemelu envisages, blogs “promote discussion and community” and allow one to make “online friends, and connect users with similar interests and viewpoints” (200). This is the kind of community, as Ifemelu says, that she is looking for as it will give her an opportunity to share her views and to hear other people’s views as well.

Kaye writes that research shows that young people, between the ages of eighteen and twenty four dominate the blogosphere, and the reason for this, Kaye argues, is that they “offer different and more insightful perspectives on events than traditional media, which is held in disdain by many blog readers” (213). Furthermore, Mia Lovheim writes that although young people participate the most in blogging, “international studies confirm that young women seem to be the most active readers and writers of blogs. They are ‘key actors in the history and present use of weblogs’” (3). In her analysis of the content of blogs in Sweden, Lovheim writes that subjects that are the most written about are a person’s everyday life, fashion and beauty, and that blogs which include this content are among the top-ranked blogs in the country (5). This means, as Lovheim writes, that a lot of bloggers frame their blogs as personal rather than professional spaces. Furthermore, in many blogs by females there is an “identification with ‘ordinary girls’” and this shows that “young female top-bloggers negotiate, and thereby bring out, a connection between the genre and gender conventions in personal blogs” and this means that bloggers perform a “self through the blog that bridges blogging as well as gender conventions” and this ensures “authenticity as well as a position as a personal and popular blogger” (14).

These conventions are very similar to the ones Ifemelu uses in her blog. Most of her posts are about the beauty standards imposed on black women, her views on figures such as Michelle Obama and celebrities like Beyoncé. Ifemelu uses ‘ordinary girl’ techniques in order to establish a sense of familiarity with her readers. For instance, in one of her blog posts titled “A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor” she starts off by writing:

White Girlfriend and I are Michelle Obama groupies. So the other day I say to her – I wonder if Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it. And she says – you mean her hair doesn’t grow like that? So is it me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair.

(296-7)

What this post shows is that even though Ifemelu is dealing with important subject matter, her approach is that of the ‘girl next door,’ and in this way she sets up a sense of intimacy with her readers.

Some of Ifemelu’s posts go into the intimate spaces of her life. In one post she writes that she is “still a bit sad about the break-up with The Hot White Ex,” and further confesses that she “signed up for online dating. And I looked at lots of profiles” but was greatly disappointed when she found that the space was deeply racialised (306). The blog is thus a space that she uses to express herself and write about things that agonise her. It is a space, as Bhabha would say, where “private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions the binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed” (13). In the blogosphere, the distinction between the private and public collapses as Ifemelu finds it necessary to write about the private in order to generate commentary about the public.

After a few months of blogging, the blog expands as her readers increase “by the thousands from all over the world” (303). Furthermore, when she sees her “posts reposted on another site, she flushed with accomplishment, and yet she had not imagined any of this, had never nursed any firm ambition” (303). The blog starts receiving regular visitors, such as SapphicDerrida, who engage her on difficult topics and as a result a big community of readers develops. Patchareeporn Pluempavarn and Niki Panteli write that “by blogging and interacting with other bloggers, individuals with similar interests gradually start to form a specific group or community and identify themselves with that particular group” (3). A similar community develops with *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, as people start to see the blog as a space where they can go in order to interact in an honest reflection on what is happening in America.

As Ifemelu’s blog expands, she starts to receive emails from readers who want to “support her” and because of this she puts up a link to her PayPal account. After a brief period of time “credits appeared, many small and one so large that when she saw it, she let out an unfamiliar sound” (Adichie 303). Alongside the money, she also starts to receive emails from people asking her to give talks about race issues at their institutions and corporate companies. She realises that she can charge as much as she wants due to the popularity of her blog, and people readily agree to pay her (304). She however comes to realise that people who attend her diversity workshops are not the same people who read her blog. After an invitation to speak about the racism that exists in America she receives an email stating “Your talk was Baloney. You are a Racist. You should be grateful we let you into our country” (305). Ifemelu comes to

the realisation that in corporate America, “the point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves” (305).

With this observation, Ifemelu decides to start saying what she is expected to say since she is aware that she is not invited to challenge people’s thinking but to rather provide camouflage for companies. This compromised position raises ethical questions as it suggests that she is willing to say what people expect from her even if she does not believe what she is saying. If this is the position she takes, how then will it be possible to change the racist nature of American corporations as she conceals her views when given an opportunity to share her observations?

The blog changes Ifemelu’s life as she is able raise her standard of living. Through blogging, she is able to buy herself a small house, receive a fellowship from Princeton, and start supporting her family. After some time she realises that the blog has taken a toll on her personal life and because of this she decides to stop writing it. She begins to feel uneasy about how she was making “fragile links to race. Sometimes believing herself” (5). She realises that the “more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false” (5). Thus, although Ifemelu started blogging because she wanted to express her truth, she comes to realise that because of the pressure to always have something to say, she has become “naked and false.”

Guarracino writes that what makes Ifemelu stop blogging is her awareness that she has become “predatory” and this means that “the ‘raw and true’ writing that had first prompted her to open the blog has slowly become an exacting job, leaving her in constant search for new material” (17). This indeed is true as Ifemelu’s social interactions began to lose their authenticity as she was preoccupied with what she would say in her blog when she interacted with people. This is evident when she meets Aisha, who she describes as a “small, ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin” and when she tells her of her difficult life as an illegal immigrant, Ifemelu thinks that her story “would have made for a good blog post,” that she would have titled “A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy” (18). Instead of empathising with Aisha’s story, Ifemelu’s only interest in her is premised on the fact that her story would have made a good post and would probably have attracted a lot of readers.

When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, she decides to start a blog that she names *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. The blog takes on a different face as her preoccupations in the US are not similar to the issues she confronts in Nigeria. She regards her concerns in Nigeria as

subjects that are “just about life” because “race doesn’t really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black” (476). What concerns the blog are issues about the social and economic challenges that face Nigeria. In a blog post about the lifestyles of young Nigerian women who live lives they cannot afford, Ifemelu writes that:

One of them is my friend, a beautiful, brilliant woman who works in advertising. She lives on The Island and is dating a big man banker. I worry that she will end up like many women in Lagos who define their lives by men they can never truly have, crippled by their culture of dependence, with desperation in their eyes and designer handbags on their wrists.

(422)

This post gets her into trouble as her friend, Ranyinudo, identifies herself as the person in the post and calls asking “Ifem, how can you do this kind of thing? Anyone who knows me will know it’s me!” and furthermore, Ranyinudo questions Ifemelu’s ethical standpoint and asks her, “How is it different from you and the rich white guy in America? Would you have your US citizenship today if not for him? How did you get your job in America? You need to stop this nonsense. Stop feeling so superior!” (422-3). Guarracino writes that this incident shows that unlike in the USA, “the relational nature of writing here (in Nigeria) becomes explicit and unavoidable, and the separation between blogger and character far less secure” (20).

Furthermore, in Lagos, “it is not possible for the blogger to claim only ‘to observe’, as Ifemelu had previously asserted” (20). Ranyinudo shows that Ifemelu cannot simply detach herself from what she writes about as she is also implicated in the judgements that she passes. This incident forces Ifemelu to take down the blog post and become more careful about what she writes. The blog does however continue and by the end of the novel Adichie seems to suggest that Ifemelu will carry on blogging.

What is interesting to note is that there is an actual blog titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* on the internet and it has contributions from different people including someone who calls herself Ifemelu. This actual blog acts as an extension to *Americanah* as it also tackles the same issues that are dealt with in the novel. Guarracino writes that the actual blog means that the “distinction between writer and character, person and persona, becomes more and more dangerous territory where traditional signposts are displaced by the specificities of blog writing” (22). This perspective echoes the optimism that Bhabha expresses at the prospect of such acts as they suggest an encounter “with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation” and in this way art “innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). It could be argued that

the ‘actual’ live blog disturbs the finality which might be imposed on the novel as ‘Ifemelu’ continues to express herself in another medium regardless of the fact that it cannot not be fully known who it ‘is’ that is doing the writing.

Adichie’s novel, similar to her TEDxt talk, aims to offer multiple stories about how places and people can be seen. As argued above, Nigeria and America are represented as complex places that require multiple representations. Furthermore, the novel also suggests that the technological changes of the twenty-first century have the potential to open up communication in ways that were not possible before. As stated above, research shows that the people who make the most use of blogs are women. This could be attributed to the fact that for a long time women have been deprived of the opportunity to express themselves in traditional media platforms. Blogging presents a new way of self-fashioning and communicating that displaces exclusionary traditional means of communication. It is however clear in the novel that there are dangers that lie in the need to constantly communicate and therefore please an audience. Ifemelu stops blogging precisely because she is aware of the pressure that comes with having to constantly say something. The optimism in the novel, however, stems from the fact that technological advancements have the potential to offer more stories, different stories, that may displace the dangers that come with a single story.

Conclusion

Both Wicomb and Adichie’s novels engage with the politics of representation and their impact on people whose lives have been historically marginalised. In Wicomb’s *October*, Mercia takes to writing her memoir after she has been left by her partner who leaves because he wants to have a child. Mercia’s attempt proves impossible however as she discovers that what she thought she knew about her family is in fact not true. Thus, the basis upon which she has constructed her identity comes to be questioned and because of this it becomes impossible to write. Furthermore, Wicomb’s novel shows that there are other forms of representation besides written fictional and non-fictional work. This is shown through Sylvie’s photographs that offer multiple and contradictory perspectives on who she is. Through these photographs, Mercia is forced to challenge her perceptions as Sylvie is not the person she assumed she was. *October* can thus be read as a novel that questions taken-for-granted modes of transmitting knowledge. Wicomb’s novel engages with the politics of representation and deconstructs assumptions, or beliefs, that claim that it is possible to fully understand oneself and those around us.

Adichie is also interested in questioning traditional modes of representation. Ifemelu starts blogging because she finds it difficult to live in America and hereby finds a means to express herself and communicate with people who share her experiences. Her blog opens up a different world and allows her to improve her standard of living as she receives invitations to give talks about racial issues at American institutions. Through the blog she is able to talk about important subjects such as race, hair, celebrity culture. She is also able to share other views she holds which she would never have been able to express before. Adichie's novel engages with the content of her TEDxt talk as it shows the complex ways in which people and places should be understood. It suggests that in the twenty-first century, where communication and travel have become widespread, an understanding of different countries and cultures will be important in order for people, with different histories, to live with one another.

Conclusion

In an online *Times Live* newspaper article, the acclaimed South African musician Hugh Masekela writes about his contentious decision not to take pictures with women who wear weaves, wigs, or use chemicals to straighten their hair. In explaining how he came to make this decision, Masekela details his family history under apartheid and how that system manipulated black people into thinking that their natural features were inferior. He writes that the racist discourse of apartheid resulted in black people having a “deep measure of embarrassment and shame over what sat on their heads” and he became aware of how this discourse was making black women use hot cobs and skin lightening creams so that they could pass “for identities as far removed as possible from Africanness regardless of how dark-skinned they were.” This observation, Masekela writes, made him aware of how “African people were successfully being manipulated into believing not only that they were inferior to Europeans, Asians and Coloureds, but also that their own hair texture and its quality had to be perceived as unmanageable, uncivilised, primitive and backward” (Masekela). Masekela’s comments, as it should be clear, have a bearing on the two novels that have been considered in this thesis.

Both Wicomb’s and Adichie’s novels are concerned with dominant racial and gendered discourses and the impact they have had and continue to have on women who have been historically marginalised. What these novels depict, as Masekela argues, is that acceptable and respectable forms of beauty in the contemporary world are still largely determined by Western beauty standards. These dominant discourses are so pervasive that they force Adichie’s protagonist, Ifemelu, into cutting off her natural hair before an interview since her friends tell her she may compromise her opportunities of getting the job if she goes with her natural hair. As indicated in Chapter Three, Ifemelu’s experiences are informed by her race, gender and class and this means that the oppression that she faces is intersectional.

These experiences of marginalisation are similar to those depicted in Wicomb’s novel. In the coloured community of Kliprand, features that are associated with whiteness are prized and seen as respectable. Hair and skin types that do not fit into acceptable forms are derided and consequently, people who have these features are seen as inferior. Both Wicomb and Adichie’s texts are attentive to the ways in which the history of racial and gender oppression is still pervasive in the twenty-first century and still informs who is seen as worthy.

While this thesis has argued that Wicomb and Adichie’s novels represent the continued racial and gendered oppression that their characters continue to experience, it has also shown how race and gender hierarchies have been challenged by thinkers such as Frantz Fanon,

Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, Steve Biko, bell hooks, Homi Bhabha and others. What the work of these intellectuals illustrates is that even under oppressive social and political spaces, it is important to be critical of how dominant discourses inform the ways in which people think about themselves. Fanon's, hooks's and Biko's work, similar to Masekela's article, has been deeply critical of Eurocentric discourse and the consequences it has had on the world. Further, their thought has provided different ways of thinking through these challenges and possible ways in which they can be transcended.

As this thesis has argued, some characters in Wicomb's and Adichie's novels are critical of the value systems that are dominant in their societies. Mercia's and Jake's disagreements with their father illustrates their refusal to accept the privileged position he wants them to assume which comes at the compromise of the people who live with them in Kliprand. They both question their father's acceptance of the apartheid government and refuse to accept, as he has, that it is a natural system that is God-given. A similarly critical stance is evident in *Americanah*. Ifemelu attains self-worth when she becomes aware of how racism functions in America and refuses to acquiesce to what is expected from someone who looks like her. These experiences result in Ifemelu starting a blog and through it she challenges the racism and sexism that is dominant in the country.

An important focus in this thesis has been that of migration and the questions the novels raise about what it means to belong and have a home in the contemporary world. As Bhabha argues, and as I have quoted in the introduction of this thesis, we now "find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity" and this means that historical notions of belonging are insufficient in the contemporary world (1). This is clear in Wicomb's novel when Mercia returns to South Africa after her break up and hopes that it will be the place where her "heart could heal," since she regards it as her home (23). She however discovers that the memories that she has about her place of birth are in fact not true when she learns, amongst many things that are revealed to her, of Sylvie's sexual molestation by her father.

These revelations make it difficult for Mercia to think of South Africa as her home, as she discovers that she does not actually know the place, even though she had assumed that it was where she belonged despite the fact that she had spent over two decades in Scotland. Mercia's experiences confirm Bhabha's argument that in the twenty-first century, there is a need to go beyond ordinary notions of belonging as "the present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future" and this is the experience Mercia

has and is thus forced to reconceptualise what it means to belong and have a home in the contemporary world.

While Wicomb's novel is mostly concerned with the effects of migration on the protagonist, Mercia, Adichie's novel shows the effects of immigration on people who come from different class backgrounds. The novel contrasts Ifemelu's experiences of migration with that of the illegal migrants who work in salons that are located in the ghettos of America. What these comparisons highlight, as this thesis has argued, is the need not to homogenise the experiences of migration as a character's class position plays an important role in how they experience migration. As Laura Brace argues, migrants who do not have legal citizenship often find themselves doing low paying jobs regardless of the qualifications they have. Furthermore, such migrants are often unable to report the exploitation they may be subjected to as they do not have legal citizenship and because of this fear deportation (873). Adichie's novel, through characters such as Aisha and Halima, highlights the multiple ways in which women who come from underdeveloped countries experience migration and this is pertinent as it gives these characters an emotional voice through the representation of their experiences.

As argued in Chapter Four, both Wicomb and Adichie's novels thematise the practices of reading and writing in order to comment on the larger social and political issues that their characters find themselves in. In *October*, this theme is represented in Mercia's difficulty in writing the story of her life through a memoir. What Mercia comes to discover, in her attempt to write her memoir, is that some memories that she had about people and events in her past are in fact not true when she returns to her childhood home, Kliprand. She also comes to discover that the assumptions that she had made about Sylvie are in fact not true when she comes across her childhood photographs. Mercia's discovery of these photographs allows her to look at Sylvie in a different way and to become sensitive to the judgements that she passes about people who come from different class positions to hers.

Adichie's protagonist takes to blogging to express her disgruntlement with the marginalised position that she, and people who look like her, occupy in America. Blogging allows her to form an alternative community as she meets people who share the same experiences as her and is able to engage with people who have differing views. Adichie's use of blogging, as this thesis has argued, represents a new way in which information and experiences are communicated in the twenty-first century. It is through her blog that Ifemelu is able to have a conversation about how America continues to marginalise people who are not white and particularly those who are women. Through blogging, she is able to have a much better understanding of America and the pervasive ways in which the country continues to

marginalise people who do not fit into what is regarded as acceptable. The thesis has also argued, however, that it also in the blogosphere where there is a proliferation of racist and sexist language.

While Hugh Masekela's article is important in highlighting the subjugation that black people, particularly women in his argument, continue to face due to globalised Western beauty standards, it is important to recognise that he has been heavily criticised for his decision to refuse to take pictures with women who wear weaves or straighten their hair. One of his critics, Danielle Bowler, is a young blogger and a feminist. In her response to Masekela's actions, Bowler writes that:

Masekela's way of participating in this discussion, dictating the behaviours and practices of women, without acknowledging that he does not have first-hand knowledge of what it's like to walk through the world as a woman, has meant that the multiple power relations at play are not considered.

(Bowler)

Bowler asserts that Masekela first needed to accept his inability to understand how black women experience the world, as opposed to dictating what is best for them. This inability to understand his gendered position leads to Masekela contributing to a "patriarchal culture that tells women what to do with their bodies. That vilifies black women for the choices that they make with their hair, without taking aim at the system that complicates their choices, or acknowledging how complex it is" (Bowler). Thus, even though Bowler agrees with Masekela's criticism of Western beauty standards, she is able to understand the social discourses that coerce women to make such decisions. Even though Wicomb and Adichie, similar to Masekela and Bowler, criticise the impact of Western beauty standards on black women, their novels allow readers to see the everyday complex challenges that their characters are confronted with and the compromises they are sometimes forced to make due to dominant racial and sexist discourses.

In writing this conclusion, I decided to use the opinions of Hugh Masekela and Danielle Bowler to highlight the importance of the themes that have preoccupied my thesis. These issues, as it should be clear, are not only important in their fictional representation as they have far reaching consequences in people's everyday lives. The importance of Wicomb and Adichie's novels is that they show an awareness of how these racist and sexist discourses continue to impact women's lives across different continents in an increasingly globalised transnational world.

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