RACISM AND IDENTITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*

RACISMO E IDENTIDADE: UMA ANÁLISE CRÍTICA DO DISCURSO DE *AMERICANAH*, DE CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

RACISMO Y IDENTIDAD: UN ANÁLISIS CRÍTICO DEL DISCURSO DE *AMERICANAH*, DE CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze racist discourses and identity aspects in the novel *Americanah* (2013), written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The main objectives of this research are to identify the impacts immigration brought to the protagonist's social and personal life and to determine how her identity construction was affected by stereotypes and social structure. The methodology used in this study was a bibliographical research. The work is divided into two sections: firstly, a literature review, explaining theories on Critical Discourse Analysis, identity and racism, developed by authors such as Beale (1970), Smit (1996), Fairclough (2009) and Feagin (2014); afterwards, a critical analysis of excerpts and dialogues extracted from the book.

KEYWORDS: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Critical Discourse Analysis; Racism; Identity; Immigration.

RESUMO: O presente trabalho pretende analisar discursos racistas e aspectos identitários presentes na obra *Americanah* (2013), escrita por Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Os objetivos principais desta pesquisa são identificar os impactos que a imigração trouxe para a vida social e pessoal da protagonista e determinar como sua construção de identidade foi afetada pelos estereótipos e pela estrutura social. A metodologia utilizada foi uma pesquisa bibliográfica. O

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trabalho está dividido em duas seções: primeiramente, uma revisão de literatura, sendo explicadas teorias sobre Análise Crítica do Discurso, identidade e racismo, desenvolvidas por autores como Beale (1970), Smit (1996), Fairclough (2009) e Feagin (2014); logo após, uma análise crítica de trechos e diálogos extraídos do livro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Análise Crítica do Discurso; Racismo; Identidade; Imigração.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo pretende analizar discursos racistas y aspectos identitarios contenidos en la obra *Americanah* (2013), escrita por Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Los objetivos principales de esta investigación son identificar los impactos que la inmigración trajo a la vida social y personal de la protagonista y determinar cómo su construcción de identidad fue afectada por los estereotipos y la estructura social. La metodología utilizada fue una investigación bibliográfica. El trabajo está dividido en dos secciones: primero, una revisión de literatura, siendo explicadas teorías sobre Análisis Crítico del Discurso, identidad y racismo, desarrolladas por autores como Beale (1970), Smit (1996), Fairclough (2009) y Feagin (2014)); y después un análisis crítico de extractos y diálogos extraídos del libro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Análisis Crítico del Discurso; Racismo; Identidad; Inmigración.

1 INTRODUCTION

Americanah is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third and most recent piece, first printed in 2013. It is preceded by the novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and by a collection of short stories entitled *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Adichie approaches a large variety of themes in her works: religion, domestic violence, sexual abuse, war, military dictatorship, among others.

In the chosen novel, the focus is primarily on racism – more specifically on the racism experienced when dealing with the oppressive group for the first time, which is, in this case, White people. Therefore, this paper intends, through an analysis of the characters' discourse features, to identify the impacts this issue brings to the protagonist's social and personal life, associating it directly with her identity construction and adaptation to this new environment.

Sexism is an established matter on literature, not only in the academic context, but on a large scale in society. Most of the considered classical

masterpieces – *The Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet*, *Ulysses* and *War and Peace*, for example – were written by men. There are, of course, female authors who were also successful; however, the majority has been overlooked for a long time. This disparity is even bigger with Black female writers, who were hardly mentioned until the 21st century.

Ergo, this paper aims to raise awareness in academic terms towards literary pieces written by Black women, expanding existing analysis and fomenting discussions on social topics involving this group, which is barely approached in educational environments.

The study has a qualitative character and a bibliographical research was carried out, i.e., an analysis of published theories. Firstly, a historical background on Critical Discourse Analysis is shown, as well as Fairclough (2009) and van Dijk's (2016) contributions that will be used to investigate the discourses in general. Moreover, an exploration through the concepts of identity and racism is displayed, focusing on Black women's experiences. Subsequently, dialogues and excerpts of the book are used to illustrate the analysis made in the light of the authors mentioned in all sections.

2 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Ferdinand de Saussure, probably the most important researcher of modern linguistics, focused his work on understanding language itself: the changes over time and specificities in certain periods – diachrony and synchrony; the words and their concepts

– signifier and signified; their sounds and similarities. In fact, the whole *Course in General Linguistics*, which was published after his death by his followers Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, was turned to this grammatical investigation of language. Throughout the years, linguistics evolved as a science,

hence bringing many changes regarding its object of study. After the word, sentences began to be the main target, then texts and, finally, the discourse, which is the emphasis of this paper, that mainly focus on the rise of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA). (HOLDCROFT, 1991).

As explained by Guimarães (2015), during the 1970s, the study of linguistic features and their importance in the maintenance of social order had a major rise. A group of researchers from the University of East Anglia, in England, developed a new view on language and its influence on social and economic structure called Critical Linguistics. Later on, Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew (1979) published *Language and Control*, which discussed, essentially, the basis of ideology and authority usage in discourses of privileged classes.

In the 1980s, other bias of this theme started to be developed. Although Fairclough (1985) first mentioned CDA in his chapter of *Journal of Pragmatics*, entitled *Critical and descriptive goals in discourse analysis*, it began to be considered a line of research only in 1990, with van Dijk's *Discourse and Society* magazine. Wodak & Meyer (2008, p.3) state that "CDA is characterized by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data (written, spoken or visual)"; thus this type of analysis is intrinsically related to a fostering aspect towards marginalized classes, also being considered a relief valve to researchers who are included in those groups and a self-reevaluation mechanism in general.

The CDA approach is considered deep and complex and cannot be described as homogeneous. Wodak (2004) explains that it is a set of diverse theories and it does not have an analytical pattern, which allows a large variety of examinations and concepts. Kress' (1979) studies, for example, are more related to educational purposes, while van Leeuwen's (2008) are focused on visual and verbal aspects of discourses and texts. In fact, this diversification can be attributed to the fact that one of CDA's main characteristics is to break with

traditional methods of researching and inspection (VAN DIJK, 2008).

> [...] studies in CDA are multifarious, derived from quite different theoretical backgrounds, oriented towards different data and methodologies. Researchers in CDA also rely on a variety of grammatical approaches. The definitions of the terms 'discourse', 'critical', 'ideolgy', 'power' and so on are also manifold. Thus, any criticism of CDA should always specify which research or researcher they relate to. Hence, we suggest using the notion of a 'school' for CDA, or of a programme which many researchers find useful and to which they can relate. (WODAK & MEYER, 2008, p. 6)

Most of CDA's analysis and theories can be attributed to two main names: Norman Fairclough and Teun van Dijk. Fairclough's (2001) considerations are essentially composed by a deep study of discourse effects in social structures and practices (organizational system and daily habits, respectively). To this author, the many aspects contained in social practices such as time, place, conversational subjects etc. cannot be analyzed individually; there is a dialectical connection between them and CDA's central objective is, precisely, to inspect this relation. It is important to highlight that not only verbal statements are included in social practices, but also body language and facial expressions.

Fairclough (2009) states that discourse is presented in social practices in three forms: the way language is used considering a specific context; the influence of other people's practices in a person's own; and the construction of self-identity. Regarding particular scenarios, discourse is displayed through different manners, taking into account features of social structure – for instance, verbal assaults towards homosexual couples or even the disparity between a political leader's speech and actions before and after s/he gets elected. For him, although the legitimization of power is maintained with the reproduction of these discourses, hegemony will always be questioned with discourses from the

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marginalized groups.

Van Dijk's (1993) studies, on the other hand, consider, primarily, cognitive aspects of social actors. In fact, he believes that "neglect of such social cognitions has been one of the major theoretical shortcomings of most work in critical linguistics and discourse analysis" (VAN DIJK, 1993, p. 251), since a large number of researchers used to focus solely on other features. To the author, cognition is directly related to discourse in the light of individual experiences and subjective mindsets. Every episode incites a singular interpretation from each person. A Black customer being the first one to be charged when something is missing from a store, for example, is a situation that allows many points of view, which will be a result of various historical backgrounds and social constructions.

Van Dijk (2016, p. 206) also explores the micro and macro levels of social order. Discourses, language and communication itself are considered micro level instances, while structural oppression, social domination and inequality are associated with the macro level. This division is used to understand and analyze the characteristics of each level more properly, but both exist concomitantly: in a conversation where stereotypes are used by men to diminish a woman may seem inoffensive and even trivial in a micro level, but in a macro perspective it is another form of maintaining sexism and gender oppression.

There are plenty of other authors who discuss important subjects regarding CDA as a whole, but the core of this work is on Fairclough's (2009) and van Dijk's (2016) researches and studies, which make a very suitable parallel with the book's aspects that are going to be analyzed.

It is important to reinforce that the main relation found in this paper is actually the one between CDA and literature. On this matter, Hauge (2015) explains that, although some authors are still resistant, this field is already being

deeply explored and it brings great contributions and improvements to both areas.

3 IDENTITY

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others" is called *identity*. Every sort of individual characteristics, particular types of behavior and manifestations of feelings or thoughts, form a person's identity. Although the study of this notion has been an ongoing debate for a considerable time now, it has increased in the past few decades due to modernity issues.

> Globalization, the decline of the welfare state, increasing social mobility, greater flexibility in employment, insecurity in personal relationships — all these developments are contributing to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty, in which the traditional resources for identity formation are no longer so straightforward or so easily available. (BUCKINGHAM, 2008, p. 1)

These particularities of the contemporary world contribute to what Bauman (1988, p. 62 apud KEHILY, 2009, p. 2) calls *fluidity*: the fact that, because human beings face different situations and are included in a large variety of scenarios on a daily basis, identity could not be stable. Furthermore, the author underlines other aspects of this term such as the impact of time settings – past, present and future – in identity construction and how it alters over the life course depending on many factors.

This can also be related to one of contemporaneity most influential features, the Internet, and its direct connection with identity construction. Stern (2008) states that youths are now able to share their difficulties and conflicts online and also to find others who are going through the same problems; it develops a bond between individuals and empowers them. Social networks

such as Facebook, which allows the creation of groups, can be a convenient environment for discussions about identity issues, specially to marginalized classes. Blogs are also considered a rich space to post texts, poems and other types of creative expressions regarding identity and other subjects. Lately, YouTube has been a great platform to mediate these debates through videos and comment sections.

Nevertheless, social media is not completely safe. Not all arguments are led correctly, and many people may use of anonymousness to not be held accountable when judging others. Stern (2008) explains that this is one of parents' main concerns; how their children are exposing themselves too much online, besides the belief that teenagers should use Internet to study, mainly. However, this puts aside the importance of the bond created between individuals and how it helps identity crisis.

3.1 Concepts

Hall (1995) states that there are three distinct concepts of identity: the Enlightenment subject, that describes the essence of human beings – the inner core – which they are born with and is manifested throughout life, and considers, primarily, their own characteristics and particularities in a very individualist way; the sociological subject, which reckons the inner core as something innate to a person but also as a matter of sociocultural experiences, interactions and assimilations; and the post-modern subject, which takes into account the influence this contact with the world has on identity construction, thus defining it as something *fluid*, variable and directly connected with historical context.

Castells (2010) approaches identity construction in a more social way. The author proposes a division between three forms of identity construction, which he believes is built and established by whoever possesses the power: legitimizing identity, that is controlled by dominant groups to maintain their

supremacy; resistance identity, used by minorities as a defense to the social order determined by privileged institutions; and project identity, utilized by social actors in order to modify their position in society, thus going against their oppressing system.

Power is sustained by elite classes, mainly, through discourse. For a long time, there was the belief that Black people were mentally inferior due to scientific racism, and, nowadays, the idea of women existing only to supply men's needs is still common. For Castells (2010, p. 9), then, resistance identity is the most important category since it fights the system while forming groups and reversing terms to empower the members. Project identity, to the author, aims for a prolonged result. As he mentions, the transformation of women's role in society will be liberating not only for the group, but also for men and children.

3.2 Identity, Black Women and Immigration

Smit's (1996) analysis of Davies' *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, published in 1994, brings up another perspective of the theme directly associated with racial and feminist ideals. There is a common belief that Black females are always aggressive, non- resigned, hypersexual or exotic, which is a result of years of colonialism and oppression. The authors address the fact that, despite having their identities erased and reduced by these stereotypical notions, Black women do face uncountable struggles day-by-day and are just as plural and homogeneous as any other group.

Furthermore, Smit (1996) focuses on the relationship between identity and migration by explaining Anzaldua's (1990) theories. Migration is described as a series of meetings: diverse people from different countries; a set of multiple races, classes, gender, sexualities and, consequently, identities. Since the circumstances surrounding migrating scenarios are not always peaceful, in the light of different discourses and cultural expressions, for instance, some groups

may be harmed in the process – nowadays those are, usually, the immigrants.

Smit (1996), then, explains the specificities of being a Black female immigrant:

> As each (Black woman) is displaced or migrates through choice she leaves situations and moves to new circumstances for particular reasons – for liberatory reasons or in search of opportunity. Since she establishes new relations in each different situation, she negotiates and renegotiates her identities in terms of available subject positionings […] Her identity is therefore always 'multiply', determined by all the past, present and future migratory experiences and relations and never closed. (SMIT, 1996, p. 199)

Those characteristics, of course, are not regular. There are many situational aspects that need to be taken into account, especially the reason why a Black woman would migrate in the first place. Nonetheless, the author justifies later that, because those are more common considering academic and labor instances, the presence of Black female migrants on books and writing pieces in general is extremely significant since it helps not only with representativeness and resistance in literature, but it also supports Black women to better understand themselves in this particular scenario.

As seen, identity can be explored in many ways. A born-with, innate part of individuals, spreading itself through the course of life; a collective issue, shared with others; a social constructed matter shaped by institutional order but susceptible of change and resistance. It is also variable depending on gender, class and ethnicity. This heterogeneity allows many other interpretations and theories, yet those remarked here can be directly associated with Adichie's (2013) work.

4   RACISM

Wilson (1999, p. 14, apud CLAIR & DENIS, 2015, p. 857) states that the term "racism" is applied in situations where a dominant group – in this case,

Whites – uses biological and cultural features to diminish others – Blacks. There are, certainly, many other types of racist deeds directed to Asians, Indians, among others. As Fredrickson (2002) points out, the label itself started to be spread only in the 1930s due to the Second World War and Nazis' discourse and actions towards Jews, but the oppressive facet of the so-called superior race dates way before.

4.1 Historical Background

In the United States, according to Dias (2013), racism started to rise in the 17th century, when the region was still a set of colonies where the new Americans were establishing themselves as a nation after escaping Europe by the end of the Revolutionary War. In 1790, the Naturalization Law framed the right to citizenship to "any alien, being a free white person" (DIAS, p. 6). Rodrigues (2013) highlights the irony in this specific kind of legislation, since their central goal was freedom – but only if your skin produced little amount of melanin.

The economy was maintained through slavery, which was at its highest. Although White slaves indeed existed, the majority were Black. The punishment for White runaways were significantly less severe and, by law, the murder of Black slaves for the same motive was not even a crime (DIAS, p. 6). This system lasted until the end of the Civil War (1861 – 1865).

Dias (2013) thus explains that, with the support of federal troops who guaranteed their rights – but not for long, as they were removed from the south in 1877 –, Blacks attempted to live normally, some even getting jobs in the Congress. However, with the advent of Plessy vs. Ferguson[118] – one of the most

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[118] Louisiana, 1896: Homer Plessy, a man with both (slight) African and (major) Caucasian descendance, boosted by the ideas of the "Free People of Color in New Orleans" group, decided to sit in a full-White assigned seat in the train and refused to leave. He ended up getting arrested and being judged in the Supreme Court by John H. Ferguson, who profusely announced the verdict that

outstanding cases in the U.S. regarding the invalidation of Civil Rights –, Blacks were thrown back in the past and segregation laws progressively gained more force. In the future, the institutionalization of the Jim Crow laws, which also incited segregation, and movements such as Ku Klux Klan, that defended the White supremacy and the hate towards immigrants, would carry on the legacy.

4.2 Racism in Contemporaneity

Feagin (2014) draws attention to the fact that, nowadays, the alleged post-racial society that claims only old generations are to blame for prejudice, and not only understands Blacks' feelings but also sympathizes with them, does not correspond with reality. Harris (2016, p. 104) believes that "it might even have become worse", as he points out the disparity between Blacks and Whites in work and academic environments, "despite anti-discrimination laws [and] better access to education for minorities".

Modern racism, Feagin (2014) affirms, was built on centuries of oppression and discrimination against Black people; it is an institutionalized matter. Every individual act of misjudgment, reproduction of stereotypes and nullification is part of the issue. Nowadays, these problematic deeds are masked by ornate discourses of White social warriors, despite being quite constant. The author, then, explains that these negative images are so deeply implanted in society that the perpetuation can be involuntary, even:

> Discrimination can be self-consciously motivated, or it can be half-conscious or unconscious and deeply imbedded in an actor's core beliefs. At the level of everyday interaction with black Americans and other Americans of color, most whites can create racial tensions and barriers even without conscious awareness they are doing so. Examples

segregation laws did not violate the Constitution. These rules would only be abolished in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act. (KOUSSER, 2003)

of this include when white men lock their car doors as a black man walks by on the street or when white women step out or pull their purses close to them when a black man comes into an elevator they are on. Stereotyped images of black men as criminals probably motivate this and similar types of defensive action. (FEAGIN, 2014, p. 156)

4.3 Racism and Black Women

Beale (1970) underlines another important issue in relation to race and gender: how Black women, besides from suffering with structural racism on a daily basis, also face sexism. As previously mentioned, Black females are constantly addressed as sexually malicious, which influenced abuses from White men during colonization and is still used as some type of twisted justification nowadays. The author also highlights how Black women are explored by the working system, being paid even less than Black men when both are assigned the same job.

Johnson & Bankhead (2013), in addition, point out how hair affects Black women's lives. The authors explain that "for African people, hair is deeply symbolic, and its meaning extends into multiple dimensions of Black culture and life" (p. 86). It was a tool for ethnic groups to carry messages around their regions and it helped the identification of religion, social class and age. However, Chapman (2007) indicates how all those significances were torn apart abruptly when, in the 16th century, Europeans invaded the continent to trade and ship Africans to America and forcefully scalped them. Since whiteness has been the norm for so long, chemical straightening – which was (and still is, in some cases) the cause to so many injuries and lesions in the scalp – became one way to "fix Black hair's wildness".

4.4 Racism and Immigration

Pierre (2004) investigates another significant matter regarding Black culture and immigration. During the early 20th century, since Europeans massively migrated to the U.S., the assimilation theory conveyed around the

country. Its main argument was that of internalizing American culture in order to become one nation. Afterwards, intellectuals started to consider the cultural expressions of those immigrants, aiming a plural society. The author highlights, however, that this tolerance was exclusive to Europeans, whilst other groups were still marginalized. This beautiful ideology of equality for all just avoided a real and deep discussion on racial omission.

Pierre (2004), then, explains how, even with the changes achieved during the Civil Rights Era, the acknowledgement and permission of Black culture expressions are not an established matter. The author describes ideas of modern academic researchers, a group that, theoretically, should have a more educated and enlightened view on this subject, but actually presents narrow-minded and pejorative convictions. For instance, Waters (1999, apud PIERRE, p. 151) believes in ethnic identity choice, as though this construction was

simply an individual option, that African Americans do not behave appropriately and that racism is experienced by Blacks only in interpersonal relation; even so, it happens because their expectations are not responded.

It is possible to understand, then, that racism has been an issue for centuries now and, although some situations have changed thanks to the Civil Rights Era, it is still ingrained in society. *Black Lives Matter*, a 21st century movement that gained force majorly on the Internet and fights against racial injustices on police treatment towards Blacks, is a good example of how the discussion around this subject is essential (RICKFORD, 2015).

5   *AMERICANAH*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. She grew up in Nsukka, where she first got in contact with the academic life by studying pharmacy and medicine in the University of Nigeria for a short period. In 1996, Drexel University offered her a scholarship and she moved to the United

States. The author used to edit a magazine during her time in Nigeria and, in the U.S., she began to write articles for the Eastern Connecticut State University's journal. When Adichie was there pursuing her degree in communication and political science, she started to write her first book, *Purple Hibiscus*.

Adichie's (2013) works, as mentioned before, commonly address social problems. *Americanah*, her latest novel, was not different. It was released during a period of intense protesting and questioning of established social values in general. Adichie (2013) involves those aspects in this book, describing some possible reality Black female immigrants may experience, the difficulties they might face at some point. This makes her work relevant not only at the time it was published, but also nowadays. After the presidential term of Barack Obama, the first African American to ever achieve that position, the paradoxical election of Donald Trump in 2017 incited once again discussions regarding those issues, given that the latter is a conservative White man who makes his harsh convictions on the presence and settlement of immigrants in the U.S. very explicit.

5.1 Plot

Americanah tells the story of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman who, after going through a hard period in college due to constant strikes in her native country, decides to move to the United States in order to study. Once there, Ifemelu faces situations she never went through, recognizing herself as a Black woman in the eyes of Whites for the very first time. As the protagonist tries to adapt to the new environment and its circumstances, she begins to understand the struggles of being an African immigrant in that country, which slowly but deeply affect her inner and outer self.

5.2 Corpus Analysis

The term *americanah* is first brought up in the story during a conversation between Ifemelu and her friends when she is still in Nigeria. One of them, Ginika, is going to live in the U.S. and they are discussing if she would still be the same when she eventually returns. The expression is used to refer to a person who goes abroad for a certain period of time and begins to neglect his/her original culture, using a different kind of accent and acquiring new habits, for example. When Ranyiudo refers to a girl as an *americanah* and the others find it amusing, it is possible to infer it has a critical meaning.

Considering the narrative is set in modernity and one of the objectives of the contemporary Black movement is culture empowerment (CASTELLS, 2010), Adichie's work, since the beginning, is characterized for valuing Nigerian origins. This can be explicitly seen in another passage years later, when Obinze, Ifemelu's first boyfriend, is discussing scholar curriculum with his wife Kosi and some of her colleagues at a party:

> "Oh, yes, Sidcot Hall," Kosi said. "It's already on top of my list because I know they teach the British curriculum."
>
> Obinze […] said, "Didn't we all go to primary schools that taught the Nigerian curriculum?"
>
> […] When he was younger, he had admired people with moneyed childhoods and foreign accents, but he had come to sense an unvoiced yearning in them, a sad search for something they could never find. He did not want a well-educated child enmeshed in insecurities." (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 29)

By the time Ifemelu arrives in the U.S., the first thing she notices is how her Aunty Uju, who used to live in Nigeria, became different. She adapted her accent to sound more appealing to Americans, even changing the way she pronounced her own name. Ifemelu also observed her aunt had a really strong aversion to the usage of Igbo, their native language, in front of her son:

"Dike, I mechago?" Ifemelu asked.

"Please don't speak Igbo to him." Aunty Uju said. "Two languages will confuse him."

"What are you talking about, Aunty? We spoke two languages growing up." "This is America. It's different." (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 109)

In another moment, Aunty Uju herself uses Igbo when talking to Dike, but she is actually punishing him, which made Ifemelu fear that one essential part of who they were, the *maximus* of their cultural expression, would become a trigger to her cousin. It is even paradoxical, as Aunty Uju, minutes later, complains about her neighborhood – "This place is so white" –, pointing out how they do not have enough makeup shades or how Dike's school saves all their racist stereotypes to him (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 171). The character still has some boundaries and critics towards Americans, however, she is also directly affected by the place. She is surrounded by them, and being a minority in that scenario influences her to act out differently.

As previously described by Pierre (2004), Black culture performed by Black people
– that would include native language and habits in general – is not considered pleasant in the American context. However, considering the Black movement agenda, to keep fighting against institutional injustices, especially in a foreign country, is an outstanding form of resistance. Therefore, Aunty Uju could be struggling with this shock of ideologies. Attempting to maintain her essence as an individual, as a Black person, but also trying to trying to fit in.

The protagonist faces, then, her first deadlock, as her aunt is slowly becoming an americanah. Ifemelu believes that "Aunty Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 119); she has a glimpse of how being an immigrant, even in a modern setting, can be harmful to a person's identity.

Another character that awakens her sense for this matter, but in a different way, is Ginika. Although she changed her own tastes in fashion and adjusted her speech, she still tried to sound Nigerian, at least when she was talking to Ifemelu. The protagonist attributes that to "the flexibility and fluidity of youth" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 125). As Bauman (1988) explained, identity is not stable, it can vary depending on many factors, and in this case, place and age played a major role. Nevertheless, it is vital to acknowledge this change was not entirely spontaneous.

Yet, what startles Ifemelu the most and has a direct impact on her perceptions about the U.S. is, naturally, racism. As previously mentioned in this work, modern society is led to believe that prejudice towards any other race besides White is not an issue. Nevertheless, what Adichie (2013) shows through her whole novel is that subtle racism is, in fact, real, and that it can happen even in places where discussions on social matters are usual.

The very first episode takes place in a store, where Ifemelu and Ginika are shopping. The cashier is asking them which one of the sellers helped them:

> "Was it the one with long hair?" the cashier asked. "Well, both of them had long hair."
>
> "The one with the dark hair?" Both of them had dark hair.
>
> [...] "It's okay, I'll figure out later and make sure she gets her commission." (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 127)

In this situation, one of the sellers was Black. The cashier kept asking about one common feature when the confusion could be solved just by questioning their ethnicity, as Ifemelu mentions later in the scene, when they are already out of the store. Analyzing the cashier's whole discourse, it is easily perceptible that she did not want to remark a regular characteristic probably because she thought it would be racist, since people tend to think it is

disrespectful to address a Black person by bringing up his/her race. But this action, as simple as it seems, contributes to ethnic erasure. Once again, as van Dijk (2016) states, it may seem inoffensive in a micro perspective, but looking at the whole picture, it perpetuates an erroneous idea.

When the protagonist is trying to register in the university she got into, she experiences another situation:

> "Good afternoon. Is this the right place for registration?" Ifemelu asked Cristina Tomas, whose name she did not then know.
>
> "Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?" "Yes."
>
> "You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office." (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 133)

In this case, Cristina is blatantly using a typical stereotype applied for immigrants, that of not being able to properly understand English. During her first question, it is already possible to identify the prejudiced mindset: Ifemelu, besides being Black, most likely spoke to Cristina with a strong accent. The character automatically started to say the words slowly, assuming Ifemelu is not proficient on the language.

Another situation involving African stereotyped presumptions happens after Ifemelu started to share an apartment in West Philadelphia. She is arguing with one of her roommates, Elena, about her dog eating Ifemelu's food. "You better not kill my dog with voodoo", Elena says at some point, and amusingly declares she is just joking. Here, Adichie (2013) draws attention to the fact that dominant groups, when being racist, sexist, homophobic or oppressive in general, frequently state they are only being humorous, which push the problem aside and prevents any type of effect solution.

Throughout the course of these events presented above, Ifemelu reveals a really critical view on the abandonment of Nigerian traditions. She often

displays her discontentment, especially during conversations with Aunty Uju. Nonetheless, it is possible to see changes in Ifemelu as well. Not so ironically, she starts to modify her accent, acquiring so many new pronunciations and expressions that she only notices it when a telemarketer compliments her on how American she sounds. In accordance with Fairclough's (2001) theory, the combination of other people people's social practices starts to affect the protagonist's manners directly. To be immersed in a place where the majority of people speaks in a specific way certainly had a huge impact on her.

Another constant occurrence in Ifemelu's life is her failures in being accepted to a job. Since she is not allowed to use her visa when applying because it is restricted to study, Aunty Uju offers her a friend's Social Security card. In the beginning of her hunt, although Ifemelu is called for a few interviews, the vacancy is always fulfilled for someone *more qualified* – usually, a White person. The character also experiences a situation where the employer suggests she could earn money through a sexual relation. Naturally, she begins to blame it on herself, on how she usually forgets she cannot use her real name, on how she always ends up doing something wrong.

This endless rejection begins to affect Ifemelu, and she also needs to pay her bills. As time passes by, she feels obligated to accept that previously mentioned job, the only one that could offer her an immediate financial response. The protagonist goes through a traumatic experience and begins to feel miserable, to not attend classes, to avoid any human contact and even to consider a suicide.

At a certain point, Ifemelu gets another job interview, and this one is actually related to her major in communication. However, when she tells her friend Ruth about it, she is advised to unbraid and straighten her hair. Ruth explains that this is an unspoken rule – even though the employer does not demand it, this would hugely increase her chances. Ifemelu then ends up doing

it, even though she kept her hair braided ever since she went to the U.S.

Straightening is a difficult and painful process and Adichie (2013) portrays the complications the protagonist goes through while and after doing it very accurately:

> "Ifemelu's head bent backwards against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head […] At night, she struggled to find a comfortable position on her pillow. Two days later, there were scabs on her scalp. Three days later, they oozed pus. Curt wanted her to see a doctor and she laughed at him. It would heal, she told him […]" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 203-204)

Hair, for Ifemelu, may not have the same meaning as it had for a member of an ethnic group during the Colonial Period, but it still did represent her as a Black person (JOHNSON & BANKHEAD, 2013). This part of her was silently taken away so she could achieve something that should not even depend on her appearance in the first place. Ifemelu ends up getting the job, which shows Adichie's (2013) intention of making the readers wonder if this would happen if she decided to keep her hair as she wanted.

A noticeable aspect of the book is Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, her White American boyfriend. Curt is portrayed as a decent man: he treats Ifemelu with devotion and respect, introduces her to his family, brings her to parties to meet his friends; overall, it can be considered a healthy relationship. When they eventually break up, however, is when the protagonist shares all the unpleasant moments she experienced while with him, most of them related to racism. Given that one of Curt's most prominent characteristics is his so-called sympathy towards Ifemelu's ethnicity, how he deals with his people acting with prejudice towards her in a righteous way, this is the last thing the public would expect to read.

As Feagin (2014) explains, contemporary society is filled with White activists who claim to acknowledge and understand Blacks' struggles but who end up perpetuating racist ideas. Curt is a clear example of that; he defends Ifemelu's right to maintain her hair as she pleases, but discredits her complains when she states that a waiter diminished her existence when they were asking for a table in a restaurant, implying that she was overreacting.

Some would affirm that this is a paradoxical behavior that needs to be improved or even an "honest mistake". Nonetheless, this, once again, pushes aside any further discussion on the topic and ignores the real cause: White privilege. Curt can justify those types of situation because race has never been – and will never be – an issue for him. He is able to walk around freely at midnight without being followed by the police just because he looks suspicious. He will probably never worry about being paid less than a Black woman. To recognize this is a much more effective step towards racism eradication than just stating that you are not part of the problem.

One of those episodes was actually the reason why Ifemelu would later start her own blog entitled *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. The protagonist "longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 296), wanting to know how those people dealt with the hardships, if they were forced to choose reclusion in order to not be an inconvenient.

Although the blog did not start with an ambitious objective, it reached a large and unexpected number of followers, becoming one of the most visited websites in the country, to the point that Ifemelu began to be sponsored by a lot of branches and to be asked to lecture in universities and events. This sudden success allowed Ifemelu to interact with plenty of people; among those, some "haters" emerged as well. Obnoxious remarks such as "YOUR TALK WAS BALONEY. YOU ARE A RACIST. YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL WE LET YOU INTO THIS

COUNTRY" were recurrent in the comment section (ADICHIE, 2013. p. 305).

This statement, besides representing the warrant of anonymousness (STERN, 2008), illustrates Castell's (2010) legitimizing identity. The unknown speaker is using the Internet as a shield in order to degrade Ifemelu's blog simply because she was stating facts. Assuming that this person is most likely White, which can be inferred by some discourse features (calling her a racist, as if she was downgrading his/her ethnicity by pointing out what Whites did wrong; saying that she should be grateful because they, the Whites, allowed her to enter the U.S.), it is possible to discern that this person is using their racial supremacy as a support.

After going through a lot in the new country, Ifemelu decides to move back to Nigeria. It was not an easy decision for her, however. She ponders for quite a while, especially because everyone around her, from her braider to her parents, seemed to think this was a disadvantageous idea. In the end, she decides to go anyway and, once back, the first thing she realized was that something was different:

> At first, Lagos assaulted her [...] the air was dense with exaggeration, conversations full of over-protestation [...] Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. And so she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 385)

Although her first instinct is to blame it on the environment, on the others, afterwards, she starts to wonder "what was new in Lagos and what was new in herself" (ADICHIE, 2013, p. 387). Time has certainly altered some realities in her native city in general terms, but the biggest change was in Ifemelu. Taking into account that she spent over thirteen years in the U.S. – and also all the adaptations she had to do in her behavior –, it is almost impossible

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that she did not change at all.

Considering Smit's (1996) studies, the impacts immigration brings to a Black female can be really profound. Ifemelu moved to the United States searching for a new opportunity, which made her see a whole new perspective, perceiving herself as a Black woman in the eyes of the oppressive group. Hence, she also had to face the stereotypes directly and indirectly. Ifemelu had in fact become a new person, perhaps even an americanah, but the main point here is to acknowledge that all those modifications were not only results of natural causes, but especially (and primarily) of the hard experiences she lived as a foreign Black woman.

6   CONCLUSION

From the aspects analyzed throughout the topics, it is possible to underline some facts. Primarily, albeit some adjustments were made to benefit people of color, racism is still an issue and it affects marginalized groups on a daily basis. Its reproduction may be both intentional and veiled, for racism is structurally embedded in society. Black female immigrants, the main focus of this paper, have to deal not only with racial stereotypes, but also with sexism alongside.

Discrimination of any kind, naturally, has a substantial impact on an individual. It can influence even solid perspectives and mindsets, especially if the person is inserted in a non-sympathetic environment. Ironically, the protagonist migrates to the modern United States, which is supposedly against any kind of misjudgment. Despite that, Ifemelu witnesses and experiences a set of intolerant episodes that changes her being. Identity is a fluid feature that can be naturally adapted depending on time and place (BAUMAN, 1988). In the book, however, this adjustment is forced by the societal context as well.

Americanah approaches a large variety of motifs that are not often

mentioned in literature. Adichie (2013), besides developing a strong Black female character, displaying her feelings, aspirations and struggles, also incites deep discussions on social problems. As explained by Smit (1996), this representativeness – Black women being portrayed without following any stereotypical agenda – is essential nowadays, considering it has been neglected for so long. It helps this specific public to better comprehend their conjuncture, while exhibiting to the general community a different facet of this matter.

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