

## **FASHION AS A SIGNIFIER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE WOMEN IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Fashion, particularly in Nigeria, has always been more than just dressing in the outward sense; it has always carried with it a sense of all that the people stand for, their belief, their cultural heritage, their experience, in fact, their identity. The advent of western civilisation through colonialism has however affected the fashion sense of Nigerians; modern fashion is hence the outward reflection of the psychological borrowing of western ideologies which has permeated every sphere of our national dealings. This study examines modern fashion as a "sign", a signifier of the changing post-colonial identities of Nigerian women. The primary texts under consideration is Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi's *Americanah* with keen interest in the female Nigerian characters of the text, at home and in diaspora, and how they express their changing post-colonial allegiances, through their fashion. The theories adopted for analysis are post-colonial feminism and semiotics. The research is able to affirm that fashion is vital to the discourse of identity and that it may be interpreted as a sign of underlying post-colonialism. Analysis shows that the post-colonial situation of Nigeria has occasioned the desperate need for survival among women to varying complicated degrees. Nigerian women everywhere struggle with issues of post-colonialism such as place and displacement, hybridity, diaspora, and hegemony, among others, and that these their experiences are made manifest and documented in their fashion statements. It is therefore subsumed that modern fashion is a potent tell-tale of post-colonialism.

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Fashion, post-colonialism, identity

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The question of identity is crucial, especially to any people who have ever had their identities under question resulting from cultural hybridity, diaspora, imperialism, trans-nationality, and displacement. According to Ashcroft et al (2004):

A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or voluntary removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model." (9)

Thus, any situation of culture-contact, such as colonisation, is a potent causative of identity crises. The hybridity of culture resulting from colonisation has psychological implications for both the coloniser and the colonised. However, when we speak of post-colonial literature, attention is focused on the writings of the colonised people and how they reflect their colonial experiences. Hence, it is not the interest of this research to interrogate the psychological implication of colonialism on the colonised, but the material manifestation of the influence of colonisation on the colonised people by assessing their idea of fashion-The generally accepted mode of appearance of the people (which inevitably captures their state of mind) and how they employ fashion to signify their changing identity, because, as posited by Burman and Turbin, (2002) "fashion is closer to personal identity than other material objects, it reveals significant social change at several levels, and subtle links between changes in individual and historical processes, especially with regard to gender ideologies" (5)

The dynamism of identity is premised upon the fact that it is constantly changing as influenced by the changing human conditions. And individual or personal identity cannot be radically severed from social identity. The two terms are mutually inclusive as the former seems to reflect the consequences of the latter and vice versa, hence they say that 'identity is socially constructed'. Scholars have agreed that the question of identity is answered when one answers the question: who are you? However, this question will produce different answers under different circumstances because different social contexts or situations influence a person's opinion of himself at given points in time. What post-colonial factors influence a woman's perception of 'self' How does this sense of 'self' change with her changing experiences? How does her fashion statement signify this changing sense of self? These are the concerns of this paper.

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

This paper is interested in examining the fashion sense of the female characters of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* with particular interest in the leading characters, with a view to discovering how their experiences as western-civilised women have shaped their idea of fashion and the extent to which this idea corresponds to the native sense of fashion. This research has chosen to concern itself with fashion-particularly women's fashion, because it has been observed that little scholarly attention has been paid, so far, to modern fashion as a postcolonial phenomenon. Whereas, the study of modern fashion alone is key to understanding aspects of post-colonial influences like religion, education, trade and commerce, because fashion is their materialisation.

The interest of this paper has been drawn to Chimamanda's *Americanah* for its versatility in the area of interest of this paper. In that the writer is a post-colonial Nigerian writer who has experienced western education both at home and abroad and therefore has related her experiences as a Nigerian woman in diaspora through her female characters. The story of Ifemelu fascinate us as a 'signifier' of the post-colonial experiences of her creator- the writers, as well as the subtle hints dropped every now and then through other female characters in the book which are relevant to the subject of this work.

## 1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories employed in the analysis of the selected text of this paper are Semiotics and Post-colonialism theories respectively.

### Semiotics

One broad definition of semiotics is the one given by Eco that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else" (Umberto, 1976; 7) To explicate on this Chandler" (no date; 2) says "semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands' for something else...how meanings are made and how reality is represented"

Lechte (1994) like Chandler, also identifies Ferdinand De Saussure and Charles Peirce as the earliest figures associated with the theory of semiotics. And following the opinion of Chandler which contains models offered by the earliest scholars, we have limited the concern of semiotics in this paper to human *semiosis* only. This is because it is based in the humanities; more focused and suitable for the purpose of this paper.

According to Chandler, "for the philosopher Charles Peirce 'semiotic' was the 'formal doctrine of signs' which was closely related to Logic. For him, 'a sign... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' Peirce's position is that 'every thought is a 'sign' In other words, a sign is what you make of it. Pierce says that nothing is a 'sign' unless it is interpreted as a sign. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something referring to or *standing for* something other than itself.

Saussure offered a 'dyadic' or two-part model of the sign. He defined a sign as being composed of: a 'signifier' (*signifiant*) - the *form* which the sign takes; and the 'signified' (*signifié*) - the *concept* it represents. The *sign* is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified.

Using this theory therefore, this paper examines how fashion signifies identity and how it represents the colonial experiences of Nigerian women. It analyses modern fashion as the outward/physical manifestation of deeply rooted psychological, economic, cultural, social, and religious displacement and hybridity of the post-colonial Nigerian woman, analysing the fashion sense of Nigerian women both at home` and in diaspora, as signifiers of their conformities and conflicts with the demand of their post-colonial society.

Following the Piercean model however, this research analyses fashion as an overlap of both symbolic sign and indexical sign. In explicating these terms, Chandler's descriptions are adopted in his words as follows: "**Symbol/symbolic:** a mode in which the signifier does *not* resemble the signified, but which is fundamentally *arbitrary* or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt" Symbolic signs bear no remarkable semblance to their objects. Their significance therefore must be learnt. Symbolic signs are inculcated into the knowledge of a person through the socialisation process. For example, tribal marks were adopted in the African

traditional society to indicate family lineages. A foreigner will not understand the significance of the different tribal marks until he is initiated into the social system.

Similarly, Indexical sign is defined by Chandler thus: “**Index/indexical:** a mode in which the signifier is *not arbitrary* but is *directly connected* in some way (physically or causally) to the signified - this link can be observed or inferred” Indexical signs, in essence, are ‘pointers’ they are like the demonstrative pronouns ‘that’ ‘those’ ‘this’ which indicate their referents. Indexical signs exhibit observable links between the signifier and the signified; they are necessary signs. And as put by Chandler, are “like a fragment torn away from the object”

From the foregoing, the position of this research is that Modern Fashion is both a symbol of and a pointer to the various changing senses of identity occasioned by the post –colonial experiences of the Nigerian woman. It “is a matter of fact” pointer to the post-colonial disorientation and does not necessarily require an interpretive mind to link, because the changing fashion statements bear observable link with the post-colonial situation that it favours at a point in time. At the same time, elements of the traditional fashion as they are used as symbols of class, age, occupation, marital status and what have you, remain evident in the fashion statement of the modern Nigerian woman. It is then justified to proclaim the modern Nigerian woman’s fashion as a hybrid, hence, a sign of post-colonisation.

### 1.3 Post-Colonial Feminism

Rather than be a separate entity, the post-colonial feminism is an offshoot of colonialism that arose out of the sense of neglect perceived by the feminists in the colonial discourse. “Postcolonial feminism has never operated as a separate entity from post-colonialism; rather it has directly inspired the forms and the force of postcolonial politics.” (Raj, 2013; 130) The informing opinion is that post-colonialism is male-centred and has excluded the woman, and the informing question: “where are the women in the theorizing of post-coloniality?” (Boyce, 2003; 60) It is in a bid to answer this fundamental question and to provide a place for the woman within the framework of post-colonialism that the feminist post-colonialism becomes a necessary invention.

To further justify this claim, Tyagi (2014) analyses how greatly gendered the proponents of the theory of Post-colonialism were. She says:

Edward Said’s seminal study *Orientalism* itself accorded little attention to female agency and discussed very few female writers. Homi K. Bhabha’s work on the ambivalence of colonial discourses explores the relationship between a “colonizing” subject and a “colonized” object without reference to how the specifics of gender might complicate his model.” (45)

By implication, the proponents of the post-colonial theory never had the condition of the woman in mind from the outset.

Therefore, in defining the sphere of post-colonial feminism, Tyagi (2014) states that it is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonised countries and in Western locations. It concentrates on construction of gender difference in colonial and anti-colonial discourses, representation of women in anti-colonial and postcolonial discourses with particular reference to the work of women writers. The postcolonial feminist critics raise a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representation of gender.

In Tyagi’s opinion, while postcolonial theorist struggles against the maiden colonial discourse that aims at misrepresenting him as inferior, the task of a postcolonial feminist is far more complicated. She suffers from “double colonization” She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. (Tyagi, 2014; 46)

Hence, Seeing the society through the woman’s eye, this research opines that the tendency of the modern Nigerian woman to indicate her preference for the western ideology by visibly shunning traditional dress codes haphazardly for western ones, not minding whether it is convenient for her or not, and doing this sometimes without fully grasping what the new codes mean originally and how they affect her “Nigerianess” is indicative of serious underlying post-colonial displacement. A modern woman is forced to see her native fashion as inferior, old-fashioned and unsuitable, even though they are evidently designed originally to cater for her fashion needs. And sometimes, within the social constraints, she finds herself without the two options but to solely abandon her native idea of fashion for the western one. And many times also, the woman does not shun out the traditional sense of fashion for the western one altogether; she tries to create a balance between the two, as she struggles to find her ‘self’ within her two contrasting worlds.

Together with 'his' feminist version therefore, this research finds the post-colonial theory suitable in examining modern fashion as a phenomenon internal to imperial nations signifying the disorientation associated with colonialism, and exhibited more significantly by the woman. The position of this research is that modern fashion in Nigeria reflects the disorientation occasioned by the colonial experience of the Nigerian people and this disorientation spans across many aspects of their endeavours and manifests significantly and most noticeably in the outward impression of the people- their fashion sensibility.

We employ this theory because the text under study has post-colonial settings without sparing to touch on post-colonial issues, especially such as relating to fashion- women's fashion as it undergoes alterations and modifications between the traditional sense and the western one; as it changes to accommodate new western religion, western job, and new interest or belief which are associated with post-colonialism. The changing identity of the modern Nigerian women from crude to sophisticated, from unlearned to learned, from local to international, and other such transitions, are evident upon their fashion statements. In the texts, we see women going back and forth between the western fashion and the Nigerian native fashion, not knowing which to prefer because on the one hand, the western fashion is the dreamland, it affords them better social and economic dispositions than the traditional one. And on the other hand, traditional fashion is more convenient because it is originally designed and defined by the Nigerian woman and with the Nigerian woman in mind.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research which for the most part involves the analyses of the primary text. Materials gotten from the library and the internet constitute the sources employed in data collection, analyses and explications and in validating the theories used in the data analyses.

### 2.1 The Book and The Writer

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, non-fiction, and short-story writer. As a seasoned Nigerian writer, she has been called "the most prominent" of a "procession of critically acclaimed young Anglophone authors that is succeeding in attracting a new generation of readers to African Literature. Chimamanda was born on September 15, 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria, but she is a native of Anambra State. She had her secondary education at the University of Nigeria Secondary School; she then moved on to study Medicine and pharmacy at the same University, but only for less than 2 years before proceeding to U.S.A to study Communications and Political Science. Chimamanda possesses a Masters' degrees in creative writing and in African Studies respectively.

On fashion and identity, Chimamanda, when she first appeared in the writing scene in the U.S, tried to dress more subdued in an attempt to be taken more seriously but soon realised that her personal style had the right to shine through. She once implied that life in America made her make conscious efforts to create an identity which reflected well in her fashion sense. (web 1) This her view on the subject of fashion is made manifest in the characters of *Americanah*, especially the female ones.

Chimamanda has offered several revealing interviews about her personal life, both as a Nigerian female writer in diaspora and a feminist. She revealed in one TEDxEuston talk in April, 2013, how she was going to repress her fashion sense just to be taken seriously as she went to teach her first writing class in the U.S. she said "I really wanted to wear my shiny lip gloss and my girly skirt but I decided not to, instead, I wore a very serious, very manly, and very ugly suit... If a man is getting ready for a business meeting, he doesn't worry about looking too masculine and therefore not being taken seriously. If a woman is getting ready for a business meeting, she has to worry about looking too feminine and what it says, and whether or not it will be taken seriously." She however concluded that people should wear whatever they feel comfortable in. (Web 2)

"I was raised to care about my appearance, but when I went to U.S, I internalised the idea that if a woman wants to be taken seriously, she can't seem to care much about her appearance." She added in one of her interviews with BBC news. She however took her stand by pointing out "I don't care very much about what anyone else thinks" (BBC News, 2016)

Recently, Chimamanda became an ambassador of a make-up line, Boots. Being the face of No7 further strengthens her claim to personal identity. She continues to hold that she can be an African feminist and be fashionable. -only an 'African Feminist' can afford to be, even if she resides in the United States. This claim reflects her traditional and post-colonial allegiances, and presents it without reserve in her fashion statement.

*Americanah* is a book of many stories, however, one major cord seems to conjoin these stories and it is the cord of disillusionment occasioned by Africans' post-colonial experiences at home and abroad. Wesley Macheso discusses this concern in his post "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century African as a Cosmopolitan Individual in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, 2015" where he says:

The portrayal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century African as a cosmopolitan individual in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* reveals the new attitude that Africans have regarding their identity in the global village while at the same time exposing the challenges of the Afropolitan approach that oftentimes culminates in disillusionment in African émigrés who see themselves as citizens of the world.

He further clarifies that:

A cosmopolitan individual is defined as someone who shows cultural diversity by exhibiting the influence of many countries and cultures... they are known by their funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes... what is manifest is the extent to which the modern adolescent African is tasked to forge a sense of self from widely disparate sources. (Web 3)

This identity crisis with which post-colonial Africans are faced in diaspora is made evident in their mismatched and enigmatic fashion sense which is neither traditional enough to be called African nor modern enough to be called Western.

*Americanah* (2013) a 477-page novel divided into seven parts, is a narrative spanning thirteen years and three continents, touching on race, gender, and the search for identity among many other themes. The story opens on Ifemelu's preparation to return to Nigeria after thirteen years in America, as she sits in the salon making her hair. Adichie uses flash back to reveal how military regime in Nigeria and its attending socio-political upheaval which includes strike actions in universities have triggered Ifemelu's emigration. Her migration severs the romantic relationship that exists between her and Obinze, her secondary school lover who also later goes in search of a better life for himself in London. Before her relocation to America, Ifemelu and her school friends have nurtured a surreal image of America which she, upon her entry into America discovers to be a mere illusion. She experiences first-hand the challenges of immigrants in America. It is in America that the 'unfashionability' of the colour of her skin and the texture of her hair dawns on her. She dates Blaine, a highly principled sanctimonious professor at Yale with whom she finds conversation tedious and wearisome. She later dates Curts, a wealthy white man. She becomes a successful blogger but later returns to Nigeria and attempts picking up the pieces of her romance with Obinze who is now wealthy, married and divorced.

The novel is preoccupied with the discourse of post-colonialism and its attendant effects upon the situation of the country. On the long run, all the preoccupations of the novel exhibit post-colonialism. Some of the preoccupations are: religious hypocrisy, political instability, migration, diaspora, identity crisis, imperialism, and economic survival, while fashion itself is employed to reflect all the themes. That is, in their fashion statements, their post-colonial experiences are signified.

## 2.2 Fashion and Sign In *Americanah*

A Nigerian woman is taught that silence and complacency is virtuous, hence, crisis ensued when one woman was assumed to have raised her voice in her own defense. Defying a male professor by any woman was as severe as fighting him in a physical duel and throwing him. However, these women have their silent way of telling their stories. They do this consciously or otherwise in their fashion. Since post-colonialism was fashionable in this story, it is only logical that fashion would signify it. Some of the very many ways in which this is done are examined.

Fashion, however covertly, is the first port of call in the appraisal of an individual's identity, conversely, fashion taste and sensibilities are largely influenced by the individual's identity. The consequence of this symbiosis is that the individual's fashion taste changes as their identity changes. The double consciousness of Black female in the novel is revealed by her constant struggle to uphold her individual Black identity while yet seeking acceptance into the

American social life or the Nigerian postcolonial setting. This fact is mirrored in the personalities of Ginika. Uju, and subsequently, Ifemelu as much as other black women in America.

The hair is one recurrent symbol with which Adichie relates the fashion experience of Nigerian women both at home and in diaspora as a large scale reflection of Post-colonial hybridity and mimicry. She decries the need for the Nigerian woman to modify the texture of her hair or hide it away to adopt the modern identity of the globalised world. To this, Kerry Manzo in his appraisal of *Americanah* (2013) says “A common assumption is that Black standards of beauty, especially with regard to hair, are entirely derivative of white standards of beauty, and therefore at some level, an expression of self-loathing or feeling of racial-inferiority.” Going by Manzo’s position, the idea of fashion has to be Western to be fashionable, hence the need for Nigerians to attempt alterations to their identities so as to secure for themselves their ‘national honour’ in the western world. It therefore translates that every time a Nigerian woman alters her home-made idea of fashion to imbibe the imperial idea, she implies her conformity, however reluctantly.

The importance of the Nigerian woman’s hair, to her, her husband, her children, her national integrity, and, to summarise these, her identity, cannot be overemphasised, yet, the Nigerian standard on hair is highly conflicting with the western as much as the textures defer across these boundaries. The hair thus comes up as a very vital symbol in the discourse of post-colonial identity.

To begin with, Adichie takes Ifemelu to a salon to have her hair braided for her journey home. Braids is a style of hairdo that she doesn’t get to do every time because of the constraints, but this time, she has to take the hot afternoon train to Trenton, just to make her braids. Ifemelu is firm about getting braids as much as she is about returning to Nigeria. This implies that the hairdo has a strong connection with her identity as a Nigerian and to be truly determined to restore her banished identity as a Nigerian, where to start is from aligning herself with Nigerian hairstyle. Hence, going by Peirce’s semiotics, the hairstyle is a symbolic sign, though it has no direct link with Nigeria so that anyone can see why “braids” is a signifier of “Nigerianess”, it is conventional that Nigerians should wear braids while in Diaspora, so that anyone who is familiar with this convention is able to link the two. Salon where braids are made is only found among the blacks and the hairstyle, we learn, is suitable for only kinky hair (Nigerian type) which alone can support its attachment. Thus, by wearing her braids, she can constantly bring back to herself a sense of home which she has lost and thus prepare herself psychologically for the return home.

The same symbol of hair is repeated severally in the book. On page 41, Ifemelu is described as growing in the shadow of her mother’s hair. The elegance of Ifemelu’s mum’s hair reflects upon her person, her disposition to life, her simplicity of nature, her passion; her essence. These are the things that she had which Ifemelu didn’t have, and this is why Adichie said that she grew in the shadow of her mother’s hair-not her mother’s person. Adichie therefore resolved that in cutting the hair, the woman’s essence left her. We should however not lose track of the reason why she had to cut the hair in the first place. In cutting her hair, Ifemelu’s mum suggested her rejection of her old allegiances. This resonates the biblical “old things are passed away” The hair therefore strikes us as an indexical sign in this context. One can hence safely conclude that in casting off a very significant fragment of herself, Ifemelu’s mum intended to symbolically cast-off old nature. It does not require any interpretive mind to create a link between a person’s hair and her nature. The hair is a fragment torn away from the person. There is a significant way in which someone’s identity is sculpted out and woven into the fabrics of their fashion.

Obinze’s mum is another character whose hair is used to reflect her identity. Her wearing a low-cut hairstyle is one feature that distinguished her as a professor at a time when such level of academic attainment was not very common among women. And not only that, it also served as a complimentary to her daring nature, as we have been previously acquainted with her news of fighting a professor, who was a male, and defeating him. Even though we would learn later that she only fought him by making him apologise to her for slapping her. Such a character as Obinze’s mum would not be done justice to if she were made to wear strong, dark lustrous hair like Ifemelu’s mum. She is a woman whose femininity is not depicted in her compromise or complacency, but in her assertiveness and self-assurance. She would, in a typical Nigerian setting, be regarded as being masculine; hence Adichie puts her on Low-cut. Her hairstyle is therefore a sign of her non-conformist nature, her vast learning and her place among her contemporaries who were mainly men. This will also suffice for a symbolic sign, since it is context-related.

Moreso, if we look beyond the surface, the hair as a fashion tool is used suggestively in a number of cases in the story. We analyse Ifemelu's tutorial to Aisha on the natural hair as is given in page 12:

She touched Ifemelu's hair "Why you don't have relaxer?"

"I like my hair the way God made it."

"But how you comb it: Hard to comb." Aisha said

Ifemelu had brought her own comb. She gently combed her hair dense, soft and tightly curled, until it framed her head like a halo. "It's not hard to comb if you moisturize it properly." She said, slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merit of wearing their hair natural. Aisha snorted.

Ifemelu here plays the sympathiser-with Aisha and other black women like herself, on the need to embrace their black nature, to not opt for the seeming easy American standards that will eventually damage their essence. Ifemelu, after living 13 years in America and being sufficiently convinced that the American standards are not good enough for her or any black woman at that, vested in herself the duty of enlightening other women on the need to embrace their "self" and that where to start is from their hair: that is where Ifemelu herself started. By saying "It's not hard to comb if you moisturize it properly." Ifemelu suggests that the coarseness of the African hair is, in a way, linked with the harshness of the situation in Nigeria, and the journey into relaxing one's hair texture is also likened to the physical journey every emigrant makes to the west for easier lives. The eventual relaxed texture of the hair would mean the supposed achieved American dreams, but everybody knows that it is only a matter of time before a relaxed African hair begins to react to the chemical treatments. Therefore in begging Aisha to moisturise the natural hair properly for combing, she suggested that if Nigerians will put the right attitudes into dealing with the situation native to us, it will not turn out as difficult as it looks. And Aisha's decided snorting response implies her resolve to take the short cut anyway. It has already been said of her to have clothed herself with the "I must survive" attitude by dating two Igbo men together because to her, they take care of women "real good"

Thus, the hair metaphor is adopted to tell the stories of subjugation, oppression, misrepresentation and survival. One cannot but feel the whole vibe about hair as drawn out in the long blog-post on page 297. The social distastefulness of African natural hair in America Ifemelu sums up thus:

... (By the way, can we ban Afro wigs at Halloween? Afro is not costume, for God's sake.) Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spiral curls...she would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote.

The struggle to be heard is a long fought and lost battle between the Occident and the Orient and this defeat is daily worn by the Nigerian woman. It is not even a battle for superiority, it is just in a bid to be allowed to survive that the black fashion is employed, but this is still too much of a luxury for the imperial power to allow. Ifemelu said: "that it was absurd how women's magazines forced images of small-boned, small-breasted white women on the rest of the multi-boned, multi-ethnic world of women to emulate." To suggest that America lived in oblivion of the existence and fashion need of the transnational, post-colonial black women, and the black women in turn lived in acknowledgement of this fact-they could not do otherwise.

The boundary between fashion and professionalism has blurred so much that it is only a matter of common sense for any émigré professional to make their look as close to American as possible, hence severing themselves from their African identity to take up a new identity in order to get by. When aunty Uju finally passed her exam and was preparing for her interview she declared "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional." Ifemelu who could not see the link between professionalism and the individual's hair asked if there were no doctors with braids in America

to which aunty Uju replied “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).

To Ifemelu, Aunty Uju’s appearance when she came to pick her at the airport was signifying something beyond the grasp of the naked eyes. Aunty Uju’s braids were rough and her ears bereft of earrings. This became to Ifemelu a sign. Ifemelu could tell right away from the airport that “There was something different about her...” (104). Aunty Uju’s appearance was a symbolic sign, suggestive of her frame of mind. Ifemelu would later confirm that there were frustrations in Aunty Uju’s life which included trying to pass her medical examination among other challenges that American émigrés faced.

Soon afterward, after life in America had dealt heavy blows on her, Ifemelu found herself in a situation identical to Aunty Uju’s and she had to make a difficult choice between taking the job that Curt helped her get or keeping her natural hair. She made the difficult but important choice of straightening her hair so that she could get the job. Here again Saussure’s dyadic model of sign is found very instrumental in explicating Ifemelu’s post-colonial situation:

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

Ifemelu’s burnt hair is the physical form of the sign; it is the signifier while the loss of her original identity psychologically attached to the hair is the *signifié*. (the signified). This is a symbolic sign. Submitting her natural hair to hot iron to be replaced with straight hair, meant to Ifemelu more than a change of look. It was a change of identity. It was a loss of who she originally was. That was the moment she became dead to her national self and it remained so until she made a return to her natural texture. Whereas, straight hair to America signified professionalism, it symbolised a huge loss to Ifemelu. But she, like other female émigrés, had to give up her national identity in order to survive her trans-national difficulties.

A blog-post that reads:

When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded this courtesy of self-presentation, but has turned that disregard into a virtue. “We are too superior/busy/cool/not-uptight to bother about how we look to other people, and so we can wear panamas to school and underwear to the mall” (129)

Explains the occidental ideology of fashion and why it contrasts significantly with the oriental. It hence holds that to survive in corporate America, a Nigerian woman has to filter and adjust her idea of the fashionable; she has to get over herself and take her look a little less seriously. When “fat” is a compliment in Nigeria but an insult in America (5), when skinny is unfashionable in Nigeria but totally cool in America (5), when shapeless dresses are signs of poverty and/or impropriety in Nigeria but trendy in America (.126), when, in America, you have to look untidy and your ears bereft of earrings to look studious (104), when your kinky hair offends the officials so that you have to wear straight hair to be welcome to the cycle of the professionals in America (119 and 202), hybridity of identity, as projected in one’s fashion, becomes germane to one’s survival in America. Fashion, in short, is being employed to tell the story of survival.

A typical case of mimicry and hybridised identity stemming from postcolonial heritage is made manifest in the person of Michelle Obama:



“...she mourned when Michelle Obama was clamped, flattened, made to sound tepidly wholesome in interviews. Still, there was in Michelle Obama’s overly arched eyebrows and in her belt worn higher on her waist than tradition would care for, a glint of her old self (354).

It is significant that Michelle Obama is a passive subject of this discourse and the verbs “clamped” and “flattened” as they relate to Michelle Obama’s appearance let on that she is involuntary of that look but must wear it, to submit her personal identity and make it sub-serve the American social identity.

This hybridity, we will also learn, becomes indispensable even when emigrants return to their nationalities, such that we don’t only find hybridised identities among trans-national Nigerians, but we also find them among returnees who, because, of their long sojourn in the west, have lost a significant part of their national identity, what they become is therefore neither sufficiently bleached to be called American nor tanned enough to be Nigerian. In their fashion statement, they exude cultural conflict and post-colonial disorientation. Their fashion is a signifier of their disillusionment. Doris, Ifemelu’s colleague at her Nigerian job exemplifies this character. Here is the narrator’s description of her:

Doris, thin and hollow-eyed, a vegetarian who announced that she was a vegetarian as soon as she possibly could, spoke with a teenage American accent that made her sentences sound like questions...Her long sisterlocks were sun-bleached a coppery tone, and she dressed unusually-white socks and brogues, men’s shirt tucked into pedal-pushers –which she considered original, and which everyone in the office forgave her for because she had come from abroad. she wore no make-up except for bright-red lipstick, and it gave her face a certain shock value, that slash of crimson, which was probably her intent, but her unadorned skin tended towards ashy grey and Ifemelu’s first urge, when they met, was to suggest a good moisturizer. (40)

Such an unusual fashion that even a fellow returnee could not place exemplifies the different heights of post-colonial disorientation that Nigerian women manifest. It becomes obvious that this character has missed it somewhere between being a Nigerian and being a black diaspora. This makes her appear highly comical in Nigeria as much as she would in New York. This description of hers as offered by the writer comes in handy for us to be able to relate with the unusualness of her role as would be learned later. The indecisiveness that she exudes has previously been hinted at in the description of her mismatched fashion. a sign of post-colonial disillusionment.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The Nigerian woman at home is disillusioned with foreign dreams which she pursues (practically or religiously) and when the dream seems to have come through, she finds that her identity as a Nigerian is a thing of dignity only as far as her nationality can contain her. Therefore, a lot has happened in between the woman’s idea of herself as a Nigerian and as a citizen of the world to alter her traditional perception of self and to downplay her “Nigerianness”. Her need to survive the double misfortunes of being a citizen of an oriental nation, and of being a woman, calls for serious complications and alterations of her “self” and in effect, her fashion. Hence, not knowing who else she is but a Nigerian woman, and not being fully able to let go of this self, she, through her fashion, expresses her hybridity.

The research has aimed at a materialistic analysis of the postcolonial tendencies which have been hitherto overlooked by scholarship. It was found that fashion has been hitherto overlooked because it has been labelled trivia and effeminate, whereas, it is the most outward manifestation of postcolonial underpinnings and vital in the understanding of the more underlying ones.

It has been demonstrated in this discourse that fashion is a marker of identity and the fashion of the colonised is a veritable testimonial of the aftermath of colonisation. With examples drawn across the female characters of *Americanah* at home and away, it has been argued that the post-colonial situation of Nigerians has affected the self-perception of the woman and so the fashion choices of the female characters in the novel signal the result of this self-

perception; of hybridity and of double consciousness. And not only has fashion signified underlying post-colonial tendencies, it has also been analysed as a valid semiotic tool capable of eloquently communicating underlying meanings.

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