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Economic Subjugation and Gender Oppression: The Role of Class in Female Exploitation

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Abstract:

This study examines the complex interplay between economic subjugation and gender oppression, with a specific focus on how class serves as a mechanism for the systemic exploitation of women. Grounded in a Marxist feminist theoretical framework, the research aims to uncover how capitalist structures perpetuate patriarchal norms that confine women to cycles of unpaid domestic labor and undervalued wage work. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, alongside critical engagement with scholarly works on gender, labor, and class. Through this intersectional lens, the paper highlights the dual oppression faced by female characters: economically exploited by capitalist forces and socially restrained by patriarchal expectations. The findings reveal that class-based hierarchies, reinforced by colonial legacies and global capitalism, disproportionately affect women, particularly those from marginalized racial, geographic, or religious backgrounds. The analysis demonstrates how female characters in *Americanah* navigate oppressive structures that strip them of autonomy, visibility, and economic independence, underscoring a global pattern of female labor commodification. Moreover, the paper identifies intragender subjugation and cultural complicity in sustaining gendered exploitation, further complicating the dynamics of resistance. The study concludes that economic liberation for women cannot be achieved without simultaneously dismantling both capitalist and patriarchal systems. It calls for a reevaluation of labor value, the redistribution of domestic responsibilities, and the integration of feminist ethics into economic policy-making. This research contributes to broader feminist discourses by situating gender oppression within class struggles and proposing a transformative approach to labor justice rooted in equity and inclusion.

Keywords: Marxist feminism, gender oppression, class exploitation, patriarchy, labor commodification, *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, intersectionality, economic subjugation, female labor

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1. Introduction

Women are exploited through capitalist systems without coincidence or merely in the historical past; without it being structural, deliberate, and infinitely developing. For a considerable period of time, women across both Western and non-Western contexts have been subjected to layered system of economic and gendered subjugation that intersect with class-based hierarchies of oppression. By this I mean that in this dynamic, in this struggle class is not simply an economic category but a gendered mechanism that helps to maintain the interests of patriarchal capitalism. Women's contribution to the global economy from unpaid-to-unpaid domestic labor, wage disparity, undervalued reproductive work, and others are invisibilized or exploited which fortifies their secondary status in the private and the public sphere as well. If gender oppression is experienced in conjunction with race and racial jingoism, colonial history and migration, these forms of marginalization become entrenched within them and form a matrix of oppression.

As the Marxist feminists have argued long enough that a capitalistic society thrives on the unpaid or under paid labors of the women (Das, 2022). This economic arrangement is reinforced by patriarchal systems which naturalize women's roles in the household thus legitimizing their exclusion from formal economic decision-making and autonomy. These forces of patriarchy and capitalism to this day thread through multiple forms in contemporary global society and literature. Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie provides such a fertile ground to be inquired into, that demonstrates how the experiences of gendered labor, class mobility, and diasporic migration are conflated experiences of exploitation and resistance. The protagonist Ifemelu's transnational journey—moving from Nigeria to the United States and back—sheds light on the socio-economic structures that condition female agency, class identity, and autonomy in both the Global North and South.

The following paper deals with the exploitation of women from the dual lenses of class and gender. Accordingly, it aims to examine how patriarchal values are embedded into labor systems and social norms in order to undermine female autonomy in capitalist economies. Focusing on the material conditions of women's labor paid and unpaid, the study demonstrates the interconnection of gender and class hierarchies. Using Marxist feminist theory, it covers how women are given a relatively powerless position because of economic subjugation other than low wages or lack of property rights, but more so by ideological constructs that handicap women's access to economic and personal freedom. What Ahmed (2018) reminds us of is, that patriarchy does not operate just on the surface, but through the fundamental internalized and culturally transmitted beliefs that justify female subordination.

The major aims of this study include exploring how class contributes to the reinforcement of gender oppression, investigating how capitalist labor organization particularize women exploitation, and considering how Americanah represents these realities in literature. The purpose of the research is to pursue the following questions: What is the use of class as a means

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of attaining women during capitalist regimes? How does gender collide with race, migration and labor in Adichie's novel? What use can Marxist feminist theory beneficially have in deconstructing contemporary socio-economic narrative of female subjugation?

This research represents a multidisciplinary contribution to both feminist studies and postcolonial literature and labor theory, as a theorized model for analyzing literary texts, as well as production, gender, economics and sexuality in the context of postcolonial societies. Although extant scholarship has paid some attention to gender oppression, on the one hand, and class stratification, on the other, this study connects these two frameworks by arguing for their interdependent character. Americanah is strategically chosen as the primary text; it is not only a literary work but also a socio-political document to document the reality of the structures in the political discourse of power, resistance, and formation of identity. Adichie's characterization of Ifemelu in the said novel successfully captures the subtle feeling of class anxiety, migrant precarity and gendered labor expectation which makes the novel a critical site of understanding modern forms of female exploitation (Orajiuka & Onyeachulam, 2025).

The methodologically employed methodology is a qualitative one which is grounded on textual analysis. Primarily, it does so from Americanah by using literary evidence and Marxist feminism and intersectionality reveals what it means from a theoretical perspective. Secondary sources that are interdisciplinary on gendered labor, postcolonial studies, and economic imperialism will also be analyzed to develop several dimensions of the problem. Not only do I aim to critique the systems of exploitation, but also to reveal embedded in literature and lived experiences ways of resisting (Cheng, 2022; Shebbs, 2025).

Using Marxist feminism as the core analytical framework of this inquiry, the study focuses on the capitalist system's gendered division of labor and the production of women's inferiority in ideology (Das, 2022; Ahmed, 2018). But this framework is expanded with an intersectional lens, in recognizing that class and gender oppression is lived as separate from race, as a migrant, from religion and from cultural background. According to Diko (2023), oppression is never one but accretes, cross many social categories so that some women are more vulnerable than other women. By taking such an intersectional approach, one can read these characters' experiences—for instance, the experiences of African women in the Western capitalist economy, through more nuanced ways in Americanah.

This research is both deliberately narrow in terms of its scope and thematically broad. By relying on Americanah as its primary literary analysis, it derives from global feminist theory to render its applicability wider. It seeks to generalize experiences of all women but rather points out structural patterns that occur in a number of different socio-economic contexts. The limitations of the study are the lack of empirical data from real labor systems; the study is based on literary

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and theoretical analysis. But literature provides a distinct advantage to reap the emotional, psychological and symbolic dimensions of exploitation which quantitative studies might miss.

2. Literature Review

The issue of labor and gender oppression is something that feminist theory has wrestled with for quite some time, particularly in societies that are patriarchal and in capitalist economies. Key to discussions around autonomy, identity, and justice are the women's labor, paid and unpaid, as central to debates about the issue ... To begin with, feminist critiques have consistently made visible the ways in which woman(s) labor is rendered invisible or devalued in domestic and caregiving roles typically assigned to them. Feminist struggle in this way is inextricably woven to economic justice in that many of the structures that exploit women are supported by class inequality, economic dependence, and cultural norms that undergird male supremacy.

In this broader framework, Marxist feminism is a unique strand of feminist though which specifically engages the combination of capitalism and patriarchy. In terms of their roots, Marxist feminists adopt classical Marxist analysis of class struggle and economic relations between classes of the society and extend these principles to argue that capitalism depends on the suppression of women particularly through their unpaid reproductive labor. Marxist feminist theorists from the likes of Alexandra Kollontai in the past and Silvia Federici later have long argued that domestic women's laboring is the foundation to support capitalist productivity. Federici (2004) emphasized that the so-called "natural" role of women as caregivers and homemakers is, in fact, a socio-political construction that serves capitalist interests by extracting surplus labor without remuneration.

This argument is an ongoing topic in modern contexts. It is argued by Das (2022) that capitalist accumulation is itself wrought with gender, as labor has unequal value accorded to it based on class, gender, and ethnic order. In the capitalist systems, the women are not limited to the lower paid sectors of the labor market, but they are forced to play the traditional roles of the gender at home; this makes them the double burdened ones. Just as Shebbs (2025) discusses, the cycle of labor exploitation in third world societies is furthered on by the coexistence of both patriarchy and capitalism in its simultaneous operation. Patriarchal norms are not also practiced alongside capitalist system, but they help in pushing women into subordination economically, as well as socially by legitimizing their subordinate roles.

Cheng (2022) takes this argument further by linking women's domestic labor to what she calls "economic imperialism." Through it, she argues that global capitalist system is fundamentally grounded on patriarchal structures that enslave economically marginalized women from regions of the Global South to care for the entangled joys and cares of the world's technically advanced male cadre. Depending on the stage of this process, colonial era hierarchies are recreated in new forms: the women of color from the Global South are the invisible engines of the affluent

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households of the West. Especially relevant to the narrative structure of Americanah is Cheng's argument that gender oppression extends from systems of economic dependency and labor migration to become globalized.

Capitalism and patriarchy come together therefore, not abstractly, but with material consequences that first and foremost target women of color, migrant workers, women in postcolonial societies. According to postcolonial feminists, women are still subjugated by gender roles, and with the help of economic disenfranchisement, through the legacy of colonial rule and global economic restructuring. According to Ade (2021), the male catalog system of dominance has not been a residual artifact from the past but an active force in the modern capitalist societies especially in the arenas of the African and southern Asian contexts where the traditional values are being manipulated to continue with the subordination of women. As Diko (2023) further notes, various religious and cultural institutions in historical and present days have contributed to the marginalization of women by portraying them as naturally submissive or passive subjects.

The areas in which female labor is most exploited in postcolonial contexts are in domestic service, caregiving, and in the informal labor markets. In these spaces women are forced to work for low wages, lack of legal protection and the social stigma that inevitably goes with it. As Chakraborty (2022) illustrates in her analysis of Dalit women in India, caste, gender, and class intersect to produce what she calls "twice-cursed lives," where female labor is exploited not only for its economic value but also as a means of maintaining social hierarchies. Her findings are in agreement with what Khan (2021) says about how women's sexuality, marriage, and labor are tightly regulated by patriarchal practices on the Swahili coast, which consolidate gendered and classed exploitation. Women's labor across the globe tends to be undervalued and overexploited, that too on top of various forms of race, caste, and cultural difference.

In 'Americanah,' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives literary account to these real-world occurrences, the multiple intersections of gender, class and migration in both the Nigerian and American context. Marxist feminist scholars like Orajiuka and Onyeachulam (2025) have analyzed the novel as Ifemelu's journey is characterized by the structural forces that determine women's lives in the transnational labor market. We see in the protagonist's experiences in the low paying jobs, her relationship with wealthy men and how she finally relapses into Nigeria the bigger issues of class mobility and gendered labor. Her story is representative of thousands of migrant women, who have to deal with racial as well as gender discrimination in Western economies, and, on the way back home, with outdated patriarchal expectations.

Diko's (2023) reading of Americanah details Americanah's depiction of Ifemelu's refusal to completely rebel and rather operate through the act of reclaiming her power to tell her story and her economic power. The intellectual labor produced by her blog espouses her critiques of American society's racial and gender hypocrisies. According to Lee (2020), resistance does not

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have to be revolutionary but can materialize in the development of counternarratives and alternative epistemologies; thus, this stance is in line with this perspective. In this sense, some degree of women's experiences is presented, challenged, and problematized through the act of writing, giving us some insight into which systems women navigate and without destroying,

Although there is a great deal of literature about gender, class, and labor exploitation, very few gaps exist. Theory work is based on either the economic or cultural dimensions of oppression, without bringing the two together. In addition, although feminist economists have worked on labor inequality for decades, fewer of them utilize the literary text to examine the ways in which such themes are narratively constructed and emotionally experienced. This generates a large space of interdisciplinary methods that invoke each of political economics and literary analysis. Further, the participation of intragender subjugation, how women do the patriarchal work for men has been overlooked in theory and literary studies. However, this issue has begun to be addressed by scholars such as Akaenyi (2024) but there is more that can be done to help understand how class-based hierarchies are internalized amongst women's communities.

Further, given the fact that Americanah has already been subjected to various analyses concerning themes of race and migration, less attention has been given to the role of class as the central mechanism of oppression. However, more concentrated attention has not been placed specifically on the intersection of economic subjugation and gender oppression, as it is a reality all over the world within the frames of global capitalist systems. Such a representation incentivizes filling this gap through a Marxist feminist reading of Americanah that focuses on class as the dominant theme accompanied by intersectional race and migration, and cultural identity.

3. Theoretical Framework

To understand the exploitation of women both economically and through the gendered lens, it requires a theoretical framework to understand how class, labor, and patriarchy can be intersected. As such, there is a lot of ground to cover with inquiring into the subject but the approach of Marxist feminism, building off the foundation of Marxist theory and women's lived experiences, offers a highly robust base for such an inquiry. Marxist feminism contends that at its roots, capitalism does not only exploit labor but exploits the labor of those labeled as women, as it systematically under-compensates and appropriates women's unpaid and underpaid work. The effects of capitalism and patriarchy are explained in that it states that patriarchy and capitalism are two highly intertwined structures that mutually reinforce each other to perpetuate gender subordination and economic inequality (Das, 2022).

Unlike classical Marxism, which primarily emphasizes class struggle and capitalist modes of production, Marxist feminism foregrounds the specific role of women within these systems—particularly their participation in reproductive labor. This encompasses care work for other

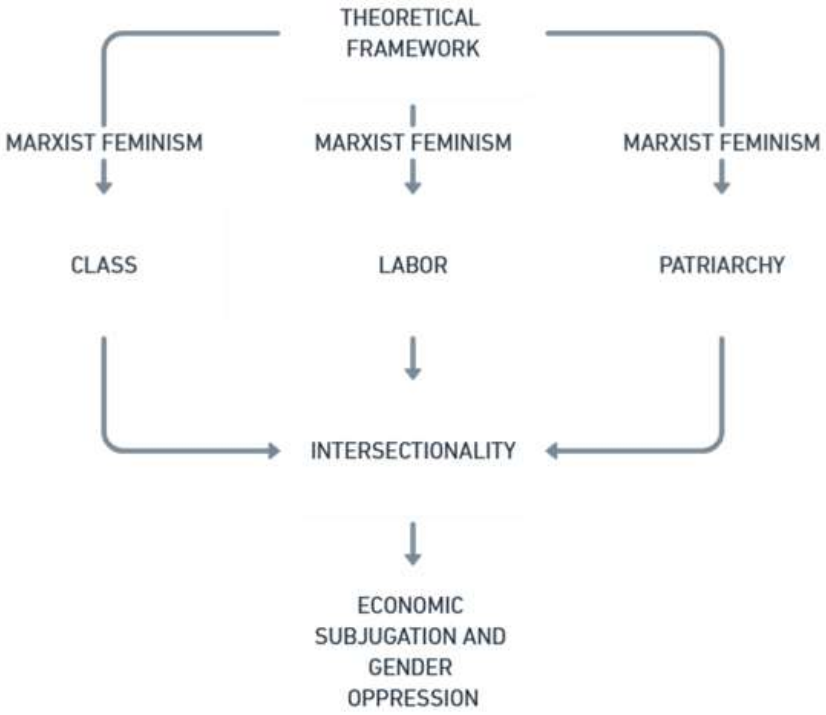
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people's children, domestic work and emotional labor, without which the capitalist economy cannot survive but continue to go unnoticed and uncompensated. According to Federici (2004), women's relegation to the private and, therefore, the naturalized labor that is supposed to happen there, as an extension of femininity, is rather than the labor that is economic contribution. By taking this route, capitalist systems also get surplus value from the unpaid labor of women within households.

In this way, Patriarchy acts as a culture as well as an economic force. It addresses the issue of gender roles to which is suitable for capitalist interests by giving gender roles that continue to supply unpaid labor and upholding man's dominance in the public and professional sphere. In Third World societies, this relationship is referred to by Shebbs (2025) as a result where patriarchy legitimizes the devaluation of women's labor and hinders their economic emancipation. Women are socialized into these roles of submission and economic dependency through educational, religious, and familial institutions and such structures become self-replicating.

To make the issue even more complex and nuanced, we should bring in the intersectionality tool which means that we recognize how gender oppression differently overlaps with different identities and localities. Intersectionality is first defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) that explains how multiple systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, classism, colonialism—is the interaction that creates totally different experiences of marginalization. For instance, a white middle class woman in western country will experience patriarchy and economic exclusion differently from that of a poor black woman in a postcolonial society. However, it is on this basis that intersectionality intensifies Marxist feminist critique, that is by the need to understand more than one axis of power operating simultaneously.

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This lens is applied by Diko (2023) to religious and historical contexts arguing how patriarchal structures are sustained in sacred texts and institutional traditions which lead further to the exclusion of women along the lines of race, religion and geography. Similarly, Chakraborty (2022) examines the lives of Dalit women in India, revealing how caste compounds gender and class oppression, creating what she terms “twice cursed lives.” She brings in intersectionality, as this helps one move away from the universalization of womanhood, contributing to a consideration of how different social locations generate a specific type of exploitation as well as specific kinds of resistance.

The analysis in the case of Americanah is relevant because it provides an intersectional insight into the migrant and diasporic exile experience as depicted in the book of Ifemelu as a Black Nigerian woman in the United States and how her identity intersects with labor, race, and class dynamics. As an immigrant, she is subjected to racialized hierarchies of the American labor market that often relies on the forms of discrimination, underemployment, and exploitation of black women. However, her experiences also demonstrate class stratification and gender expectations in Nigerian society where women are restricted in terms of their autonomy and are expected to play familial and cultural roles. It is only through an intersectional approach in this study that Ifemelu’s journey can be read more radically and that her oppression is not only about gender or only about class, but must be contextualized with race, culture and transnational identity.

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Another main part of the theoretical framework is domestic labor and economic imperialism (2022) proposed by Cheng. Her argument is that capitalist exploitation reaches globally, especially in the global commodification of care and domestic work. They often enter wealthier countries as domestic workers, nannies and caregivers, and are often in precarious working conditions. Instead, these jobs are presented as simply natural outgrowths of their gender − as opposed to legitimate work worth rights and protections. Cheng terms this phenomenon "economic imperialism," wherein the wealth of the Global North is sustained by the gendered labor of women from the Global South—exploited both at home and abroad.

Similarly, Americanah reflects how this globalized exploitation is mirrored in the experiences of Ifemelu working within the U.S. labor market and subsequently being forced to perform informal and degrading work, temporary yet persistent work for which she is temporarily (but also permanently) undocumented and from which she will eventually earn enough to apply for a Green Card and become truly documented, and thus qualified for work that would not debase her on a social level. What her story also gives us is an understanding of how economic systems rationalize underestimating immigrant labor along lines of race and gender. However, if her return to Nigeria after having ultimately found success as a blogger appears redemptive, it is also undermined by the contradictions around class and privilege that continue to, without fail, permeate all areas of liberation within capital patriarchy.

Further, Ifemelu's romantic relationships also demonstrate that economic and gender power are entangled. Her partners' socio-economic positions are the same as that of privileged, white American men and Nigerian elites, and speak to wider class dynamics that shape not only how she lives, but to whom she belongs and is connected, to whom she feels she can be who she is, and to whom she is partners. They echo Marxist feminist claim that economic dependence frequently prevents women's freedom of choice while reinforcing patriarchal power in the name of love or family responsibility (Ahmed, 2018).

This combined theoretical framework has a lot of relevant significance to contemporary socio-political discourse. The idea that achieving gender justice has to mean economic restructuring is increasingly being acknowledged in both academic and activist spaces. Marxist feminists call for paid domestic labor, universal childcare, wage equality, and basic income policy stem from the same principles. Furthermore, labor markets have become increasingly global and migrant care workers are playing a greater role in global gender inequality. Novelists like Adichie use narrative to bring to light systemic injustices that women face and gesture to the socio-political structures that shape women's lives.

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4. Textual Analysis of Americanah

4.1. Economic Exploitation in the Migrant Experience

Reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel Americanah gives the reader a different perspective as one unlikely to see that migration is not a sudden relocation as many make people believe about it but a long exposure to structural inequality and it is made worse if you happen to be a woman of color. In Ifemelu's journey from Nigeria to the United States, her identity as a Black, immigrant woman renders her economically marginal in much the same way as global capitalist and patriarchal exploitation of women and people of color worldwide. Thus, Adichie's novel aligns it with the critical Marxist feminist concerns of the commodification of labor of immigrant, intersectionality of race, class and gender in employment, the exploitation of unpaid caregiving.

When Ifemelu arrives in the United States, she understands very quickly almost immediately, that her foreignness is simultaneously branded in terms of race and devalued economically. Her education and potential for work are rendered ineffective to secure work in a labor market that commodity immigrants based on socially constructed categories of race and gender rather than skills. The desperation drives her into accepting a dehumanizing job as a house cleaner for a wealthy white woman. According to Adichie, in this moment the woman said, with a kind smile, that she had Nigerian friends who were nurses and doctors. She then assigned Ifemelu to clean the kitchen, mop the floors and scrub the bathroom tiles (Adichie, 2013, p. 165). While brief, this exchange perfectly sums up the dissonance between social politeness and its underlying power dynamics. Regardless of the educational background or aspirations, Ifemelu's identity comes down to a labor function.

This scene exemplifies what Cheng (2022) terms "economic imperialism," where domestic labor performed by migrant women from the Global South is commodified and rendered invisible in households of the Global North. Although their labor is essential to maintaining the lives of wealthier families, these women are not recognized as skilled or valuable. Ifemelu's sense of invisibility and objectification mirrors this critique: her work is essential, yet she is made to feel "like a ghost, floating through a house that was not hers, erasing dirt that was never hers" (Adichie, 2013, p. 168).

Race is also entangled in Ifemelu's labor in ways that make plain the deep entanglements of race, gender, and class. As a Black African woman, she is triple marginalized. Her accent, skin color, and immigrant status make her falter and become barriers to respectable employment and force her from comfort to scary — along with the money — and into the informal economy. Her friend Ginika's advice to "change your accent" if she wants a job reveals the performative expectations imposed on migrants: to be palatable to white employers, they must shed their cultural identities (Adichie, 2013, p. 134). This is also consistent with Crenshaw's (1989) theory of

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intersectionality which presumes that those with marginalized identities intersect to form types of systemic oppression that are unique to them.

When Ifemelu applies to be a receptionist and is told, “You sound intelligent on the phone, but I didn’t expect you to look like this” (Adichie, 2013, p. 145), Adichie draws attention to the complexity of this situation. Reminding us of how deeply racialized presumptions of access to labor and to social mobility run, this remark is a clear, a simple case. Her Blackness is accepted only until her intellect is visible. These moments show that capitalist labor markets are not neutral and are influenced by historical and social narratives of Black women to be worthless and have no intellectual worth.

Ifemelu even considers working as a sex worker so she can make a living during her lowest moment. She finally pulls out, yet this little glimpse into her short story reveals how economic precarity under capitalism in Bangladesh can propel migrant women as precarious workers into exploitive and dangerous informal labor. Later, she reflects that ‘she never wanted to be that person who did this thing for hundred dollars. Today, she was ‘this person’” (Adichie, 2013, p. 176). Although this internal conflict reflects structural oppression, it also captures the psychological effect of structural oppression based on Marxist theories of alienation that stem from the workers’ estrangement from the product of their own labor and, as a result, from the workers’ very own self (Das, 2022).

Ifemelu’s experience also has a great place for unpaid care work. Like many migrant women, she is supposed to do emotional labor both in her relationships and work. While living with Curt, her white boyfriend, she becomes a symbol of “exotic difference,” which is commodified in social settings. Although she enjoys economic comfort, she is acutely aware of the performative nature of her presence: “She was his Africa, his lovely African, and he was amused by her Africanness, in the way that one might be amused by a child's actions” (Adichie, 2013, p. 207). Her work here is now emotional, as is her work in other workplaces; it is both unpaid and based in capitalist objectification.

This long has been noted by Marxist feminist critique of the way that emotional and reproductive labor is undervalued and particularly so within romantic and domestic spaces (Federici, 2004). This is, for instance, reflected in Ifemelu’s case as both her presence romanticized and controlled. None of her labor as cleaner, lover or cultural interpreter is unfettered by economic implications. Her own success as a blogger is commodified as well. She becomes a “brand,” and her experiences are filtered through market expectations. She notes: “She was supposed to write about race in a way that made white people feel only a little bad, not guilty or indignant” (Adichie, 2013, p. 321). Though now financially rewarded, her intellectual labor is still constrained by neoliberal expectations that commodity radical critique is far too uncomfortable for consumers (Lee, 2020).

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Like migrant women generally, Ifemelu's economic trajectory is emblematic. As a result, because of immigration status, racialization, and gender norms, and having legitimate entry into the formal economy denied, they are pushed into informal or precarious labor markets. Even access to upward mobility frequently comes with new forms of commodification that constrain the freedom to be oneself and to determine oneself. In his paper Shebbs (2025) points out that in capitalist societies women's labor is cyclically exploited while ideologies are reproduced to justify this exploitation.

4.2. Gender Oppression and Patriarchal Reinforcement

Gender oppression as a force is driven out of Americanah in 2013 by Adichie, who painstakingly depicts it not only on the surface affecting romantic spaces, professional settings and societal norms but also undercover. Read through the lens of how the lived experiences of Ifemudu, niche a Marxist feminism and intersectionality, showed how patriarchy and patriarchal expectations become continued to have a role in defining a woman's roles, choices, self-perceptions and lived experiences. Hers reflects on how the entirety of gender works as social identity and as structural mechanism to keep us dependent, economically vulnerable, and emotionally subjugated.

In the way that gender expectations function in relationships even within the boundaries of free or progressive relationships, the notion of gender in Ifemelu's romantic life can also be interrogated. Her relationship with Curt, an American, is one of the only she's had with a white man, and as such there is an imbalance of power. In material terms, Curt provides Ifemelu with comfort and helps her secure employment; at the same time, Ifemelu becomes increasingly cognizant of her consumption as a novelty by virtue of her identity. She reflects, "He liked that she was different, that she was foreign, with the musical Nigerian accent and the endless curly hair" (Adichie, 2013, p. 234). Their commodification of her cajun descends (though unintentionally) into a subtle but real form of gendered and racialized objectification. Instead, Curt sees her as an exotic other to enhance his liberal credentials, rather than a peer as an equal.

Gendered dynamics can be found everywhere, even in what should be the world of empowering professional environments. Ifemelu secures a job at a public relations firm where struggle and appearance are gender coded. She recalls being told to "tone down" her accent to sound more "professional," revealing that assimilation to a white, masculine norm is a prerequisite for economic advancement (Adichie, 2013, p. 242). Feminist critique of capitalist professionalism requires that professionals live up to standards that are implicitly gendered and racialized (Ahmed, 2018) – this is in line with the previous perspective. The professional woman is expected to be savvy and competent but not threatening; self-assured, but deferential—an incredibly fine line in which women of color are burdened.

However, both in Nigeria and in America, Ifemelu's relationships are equally wrapped up in patriarchal structures. She has a long-term relationship with Obinze, one which is rich

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emotionally but not surprising due to traditional gender expectations. Obinze eventually becomes successful back in Nigeria and married to another woman while Ifemelu still questions the issue of fidelity, status and conformity. For what it is, the tension between them is based on society's assumptions about what makes a man successful, a woman available. Ifemelu is perceived as a woman who has "waited too long" and is now too "independent" to be desirable in a conventional marriage context (Adichie, 2013, p. 413). This refusal to follow these expectations sends her to a social limbo—admired although separated, equipped although unworthy in a patriarchal society's evaluations.

Both in Nigeria and in America, the roles accorded to men and women differ in terms of expression; they are however similar in functions as they perpetuate male dominance over women. In Nigeria, the traditional roles are more explicit. Women are required by society to be deferential, aspire to marriage and aid in responsibilities of the home. The cultural norm is portrayed through Ifemelu's interactions with other women especially Aunty Uju whose life is determined by her relationship with a powerful military man The General. The General symbolizes the male benefactors repeatedly relied on to survive economically and emotionally by women like themselves (as exemplified by the relationship between Uju and The General). After his death, Uju migrates to the U.S., and tries to begin a new cycle of dependency under different circumstances. Her story is reflective of the structural limits that women are trapped within when they are economically dependent on men.

Gender roles in the American culture are more progressive but contain just as much patriarchy hidden behind them. The fact that Ifemelu's experience in the U.S. does show that economic independence for women does not always lead to freedom. Despite professional and intellectual success, partnership, desirability, and fulfillment remain societal pressures that eradicate her too. She feels uncomfortable with Curt's patronizing admiration of her and Blaine's moral superiority, which suggests that even in liberal relationships, there is still power imbalance. Blaine is the ideal match: Black, an intellectual and at least consciously socially conscious, educated, politically aware. However, as the two become closer, Ifemelu also feels another form of oppression, feeling herself to be 'slightly out of step' with Blaine, like a guest at a party where she didn't quite know the rules' (Adichie, 2013, p.288). He expected ideological purity and intellectual conformity on his campus, if not in the province, and the objectives of the 'old boys' network' of scrapper patriarchs policing appearance and behavior find their subtler counterpart in the 'new boys' network' policing thought and emotion.

In both cultural settings, women's lives are defined by marriages, social status, and economic dependence, which define women's fortunes materially and psychologically. Marriage is often sold as a currency for social acceptability (i.e. marriageable status) in Nigeria. Even for those unmarried women who achieve things, namely, there is this stigma on you for being unmarried past a certain age. On Ifemelu's return to her motherland people are curious to know her status

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with a man as they ask whether she's coming to Nigeria to find a husband. She notes with frustration: "Aunty Uju had said, 'You can't go back to Nigeria and be single. 'It will be there that people will think there is something wrong with you' (Adichie, 2013, p. 386). This confirms the Marxist feminist idea that women's worth and value are often calculated about their own integration into the patriarchal system such as marriage as a symbol of a woman's economic and social containment (Federici, 2004; Das, 2022).

In addition, economic dependence is still an issue throughout the lives of several female characters. The economic options of Aunty Uju rely on The General, and then government jobs, when she can no longer rely on The General, a fact, which is emblematic of the women's economic options being constrained by patriarchy. Obinze's wife, Kosi, and the numerical arrangement of wealth and power in this dynamic also demonstrate this dynamic: a financially stable figure who is emotionally dependent, strongly invested in an ideal of a stable marriage. Kosi is the woman who critiques Ifemelu's happiness because she was fooling herself into thinking that she is happy with her marriage, infidelity and rape (Adichie, 2013, p. 435). As a dutiful wife, Kosi is rewarded with comfort and status, but in doing so, she practically has no personal freedom, nor any emotional authenticity.

This way, Adichie discloses that these dynamics, whether it is romantic or professional relationships, prevail in gendered economies where women agency is still limited in Nigeria or the U.S. In every setting, woman always has to navigate a tightrope between individuality and acceptability, self-actualization and its acceptance. The feminist crisis of capitalism and patriarchy need not only to change the labor market, but also in the intimate and domestic spaces (Ahmed, 2018; Shebbs, 2025) has been central to this tension.

4.3. Intragender Subjugation and Cultural Complicity

Patriarchy, commonly perceived as a system of oppression run by men, is shown to be somewhat more complicated in Adichie's Americanah as it decries how women can enforce the norms of patriarchy. Marxist feminists define intragender subjugation as a situation in which women maintain and disseminate systems meant to disadvantage their own gender in order to survive, socially ascend, and so forth. In this section, I investigate the ways in which female gatekeepers of patriarchy (the aunties, the elites and the mentors) work to uphold gender norms in the Nigerian as well as diasporic contexts. Adichie shows that sometimes oppression against women is not just a top-down arrangement but also plays in the hands of women themselves who do it out of complicity with cultural and institutional frameworks.

Much of the women around Ifemelu in Nigeria perpetuate a culture of reinforcing the male dominance while the girls and women are subject to dependency of the men. Aunty Uju, an educated doctor, who as a mistress becomes the emergency companion of a powerful military general is one of the clearest examples. Although she has professional qualifications, it is Uju's

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choices that are being constrained by lack of economic opportunities outside of the patriarchal networks of male patronage. In the beginning of the novel, she tells Ifemelu not to judge her for using the General as "This is Nigeria." If you want to survive, you will do what you must" (Adichie, 2013, p. 89). This provides a statement of a pragmatism, of many women working in oppressive systems without taking the time to fight against them.

Uju is complicit not because she wants to be but because nearly all of us, women and men, perform social functionaries we didn't choose. The social norm is such that if you are married to a powerful woman, you also benefit from the power that comes with it. And when she eventually migrates to America and begins to live a more independent life, Uju transmits to her son traditional masculine values while reproducing the same norms that have served her in the past. Her insistence on preserving her control over Dike's upbringing even after Dike's exposure to varying gender norms in the U.S. shows how patriarchal values are transmitted from generation to generation and from geography to geography.

Aunty Uju's friend is another key figure who represents female complicity in patriarchal culture by taking the advice of another woman advising her to present herself more submissively in romantic relationships. She constantly says to her; you must let the man win sometimes. Too, enough men do not like women. (Adichie, 2013, p. 224). This is given, of course, in the spirit of practical wisdom, but it shows a belief deeply internalized that women must lower themselves to be loved and loved or accepted. Akaenyi (2024) refers to it as intragender subjugation, that is women policing one another's behavior in accordance with patriarchal expectations. Although it reinforces harmful norms, the insidiousness of these forms of subjugation is that they take the form of care or mentorship.

The patterns are same in both Nigeria and U.S elite circles. By the time Ifemelu arrives in Lagos, she is reintroduced to Nigeria's high society where wealth and respectability are inextricably linked to traditional gender roles. In turn, these circles can be a breeding ground for successful women styling themselves as powerful, in which case, those who have excelled in the art of the performance of supportiveness, style and submissiveness while behind the scenes wielding power are successful. Slowly, Ifemelu notices a clique of rich women at a social event, but subtly Adichie criticizes this dynamic by pointing out their rehearsed laughter and 'off string' expressions. She reflects: "They had the practiced air of women who had spent a long time curating themselves for the male gaze, who had learned how to say just enough to be thought clever but not threatening" (Adichie, 2013, p. 392). By adhering to patriarchal standards, these women reproduce themselves in a position of social status and in the process affirm these patriarchal standards and establish them as desirable and ordinary of other women.

In the diasporic context, the subtly of women's complicity in upholding gender oppression becomes even greater but no less significant. Because immigrant women tend to be the most

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marginalized sector of the immigrant population, surprisingly, older women tend to be the guardians of tradition, encouraging younger women to uphold cultural practices that curtail their autonomy. For instance, other Nigerians in the diaspora see Ifemelu's relationship with a white American man as her straying from her cultural duties. She has the sense that she betrayed her community in her quest for true love and security outside the ethnic and cultural framework. In this response lies a tension between cultural preservation and woman's autonomy—often both woman and the burden of preserving the tradition fall on her shoulders.

Gender norms too are both practiced and preached in the diasporic church community. The Nigerian churches in America are depicted as places where women are expected to accept men's authority, the subject of husbands, and the priority of family as opposed to career. Still in a new country, these communities replicate the same patriarchal arrangements they had on the old continent, demonstrating how cultural complicity can go around. Also, such practices represent an intersection of religion, culture and gendered oppression where, even when she migrates to states boasting more egalitarian practices, a woman is always subordinate (Diko, 2023).

These narratives reflect Marxist feminist theory that gender oppression is practiced as much as it is imposed through external structures and intrudes on the mind of the individual that grew up in the set of patriarchal social standards (Federici, 2004; Ahmed, 2018). In this context, cultural complicity is an oppressive system's method of keeping women alive by rendering us partly advantaged and partly alienated at the same time, thus compelling us to accept the way we are as the way it is. This strategy, however, does also limit possibilities for collective resistance as women are divided by class, age and perceived moral superiority.

These complicit women are not seen by Adichie as villains, but rather, they are portrayed with empathy considering the structural pressures that have led them there. She reminds us, however, that it is essential that women adopt this discourse and immediately unlearn these internalized norms. This is a contrast to the female characters who conform and, eventually, It becomes rejected by Ifemelu in her relationships and professional decisions. Acting against Curt's wealth, refusing to reflect Blaine as an ideological mirror, and blogging about truth that is uncomfortable racially, is what makes her resistance. These are not grand revolutions, but in a world where a woman is encouraged to be silent and submit, these are still choices.

4.4. Resistance and Reclamation of Agency

Even though most Americanah deals with systemic oppression via race, class and gender, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also manages to carve out a narrative of resistance, of autonomy and agency. What is more, where Ifemelu's journey is concerned, it is not one of passive victimhood but an awakening, a choice, a reclaiming of voice, a gaining of voice, the gaining of identity, the gaining of power. Consequently, her acts of resistance—especially blogging and returning Nigeria—serve as a rejection to be permanently shaped or silenced by the capitalist and

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patriarchal structures that try to contain her. Rather than revolutionary in a conventional political sense, here are examples of resistance that are extremely personal, intellectual, economic, revolving around mundane decisions that state her right to define herself.

One point of Ifemelu's journey is her opening a blog, The Non-American Black. This platform challenges the racial and gendered perception that American society imposes on Black immigrant women through rendering them as invisible or voiceless. Through her blog, she establishes a means of resistance in speaking the unfiltered truths regarding race, identity, and power. One of her earlier posts included: 'Dear Non-American Black, when you choose to come to America you become black.' Stop arguing. Don't ever say I am Jamaican, or I am Ghanaian. America doesn't care" (Adichie, 2013, p. 273). It is a blunt commentary reflecting homogenization of the Black identity in the West and erasing of cultural specificity of African immigrants.

In the process of writing itself, agency is a kind of assertion. Unlike the speechless nature of the early days of Ifemelu in America where her accent, the way she looks, and being an immigrant made her watch her words and blend in the crowd, she no longer partakes in that form of imposed silence. Rather, she recovers narrative power by using language to accuse, incite anger and disgust, and enlighten. Even alienating some white liberals preferring less sanitized discussions of race, her blog draws wide attention. She observes, "She was supposed to write about race in a way that made white people feel only a little bad, not guilty or indignant" (Adichie, 2013, p. 321). This line demonstrates that even where platforms can permit expression, there are expected codes of conduct. Despite this, Ifemelu's refusal to adjust her voice is a form of resistance to both the buying and selling of identity and the politics of appeasement.

Her blogging also provides Ifemelu with some degree of economic self-reliance, something that she has previously experienced in an exploited manner. Her previous lines of work had all been domestic labor, receptionist work, or work that came with romantic relationship—blogging, however, affords her control over both what she's creating and the money she's earning. She is paid to be a speaker, respected commentator and can support herself without the help of men or degrading labor. Taking on a Marxist feminist lens, this transition means no longer being economically subjugated but rather allowing her to self-valorize her intellectual work on terms not generated through a system that alienates her very value (creating her subordinate position) (Federici 2004; Das 2022).

But Adichie complicates this by showing that self-reliance does not eradicate systemic barriers and the hoops through which you must jump to break free. With her blog successful, Ifemelu is still vulnerable to the limits of neoliberal capitalism. She is still limited by marketability and audience perception when creating her work. Neoliberal systems, as Lee (2020) points out, then

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rebrand acts of resistance as consumable products, authenticity as a brand. This means that Ifemelu is presented with the task of freely criticizing her culture, as she is urged to, but must do so within the confines of the economic constraints of being a public figure in a saturated digital marketplace. Thus, although it is a liberation, her blogging is not outside of the pressure of commodification.

This further portrays a complex act of reclamation by her decision to return to Nigeria. Return is, for many immigrants, failure or retreat. It becomes a conscious decision from Ifemelu about what success really means in the way that she defines it. She does not accept that the Western definition of success is endless upward mobility and yearns for that connection, for that rootedness and that personal authenticity. She reflects, "She had, finally, spun herself fully into being" (Adichie, 2013, p. 476). The self-spin of this metaphor paints a picture of an intention to create something, of a return that is, while in fact it is not a return to regressive states but rather a return to re-centering of oneself beyond the parameters of foreign expectation.

When she returns, the Nigerian patriarchal norms are only that much more challenging to the Nigerian expatriate because Ifemulu has no desire to play the game any longer: she does not want to occupy a submissive place in culture. This change is reflected in her re-engagement with Obinze, who is now wealthy, emotionally contained and who seems completely different from the boy she once knew. She does not agree to serve a peripheral role in his life or to pretend to be satisfied with having half-truths. There is honesty and vulnerability in their reunion, but it is Ifemelu who sets the conditions in which to renew their connection. This flips the power dynamic between a woman and a man, giving her the opportunity to be emotionally and relationally autonomous. Thus, her resistance is not only external (against systems), but internal as well, transforming the way in which she enmeshes with love, family, identity.

From a feminist theoretical standpoint, Ifemelu's choices represent what Ahmed (2018) describes as "feminist willfulness"—a refusal to accommodate structures and expectations that diminish one's autonomy. Her critique of the economic systems that prey on migrant women comes hand in hand with critique of the social scripts that demand that migrant women say nothing, be thankful, or settle for less. When the prices of upholding her voice and her values include discomfort, solitude, and uncertainty, she chooses discomfort over conformity, solitude over submission, and uncertainty over security.

Additionally, Ifemelu's ability to resist is also due to her class position. She is the opposite of many migrant women trapped in dependency cycles, because in her case she has the opportunity for education, language proficiency, and even digital platforms. However, Adichie does not

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ignore this privilege, and yet she uses it to draw attention to the structural inequalities that nullify the power of resistance for the ones not so privileged. However, Ifemelu reclaiming agency is not modeled as replicable by every woman but as one possible way out among many, through a range of resources or circumstances.

5. Comparative Socio-Political Insights

Ifemelu's struggles in Americanah speak well past the Nigerian and American contexts, as this paper will suggest, and they serve as a prism through which we can carefully scrutinize more general trends of female subjugation and resistance in postcolonial, patriarchal, and capitalist societies. Adichie's narrative is not alone; it meets global feminist discourses, particularly those which arise from the Global South where women's oppression is bound to fault of race, class and to many extents with colonial heritage and religious tradition. This chapter, for a comparative socio-political insight, comments on the sharing of African and South Asian contexts and in that kind of context underlines common structures of gendered exploitation and emerging forms of resistance.

Shebbs (2025), Chakraborty (2022) and Akaenyi (2024) have, therefore, explored the cyclical nature of gender and labor exploitation in patriarchy and capitalism from the perspective of Third World feminist scholars. From a pan-African perspective, Shebbs contends that after the decolonization of states, capitalism in the resultant postcolonial states draws strength from its role in the strengthening the patriarchal family systems, in which a woman's labor–domestic, emotional, and sexual–is taken advantage of to support the capabilities of these male dominated economy. For example, we see this in Americanah where Aunty Uju, and Ifemelu, who, if we consider the context in which the story takes place, are exceptional people; they merit and have the ambition to obtain from life anything they desire, despite all odds. Chakraborty (2022), focusing on Dalit women in India, articulates the idea of "twice-cursed lives," where caste and gender intersect to produce multi-layered subjugation. Ifemelu's racialized and classed experiences in the US are parallels to demonstrate that while the markers of oppression may differ, the function of their structural role is consistent – to maintain elite and male control over labor and mobility.

South Asia and most of the African countries legitimize gendered labor using cultural and religious traditions. According to Ali (2017), women in South Asian literature are played as opposing such structures that link femininity, obedience, purity and servitude. Just like Khan (2021) looks at the way Islamic marriage customs of the Swahili coast add to economic and sexual control of women, which perpetuates subordination in legal and religious norms. Adichie's depiction of Nigerian patriarchal culture regarding marriages of young women mirrors these insights as a survival and economic security mechanism against the reality of the

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socioeconomic standards of life in Nigeria. Ifemelu's refusal of marriage for status and her contempt for women like Kosi are how she refuses the traditional expectations.

To extend this discussion, Ahmed (2018) goes on to define patriarchy not as a leftover, but a constant system of oppression padded by institutions such as families, religious bodies, educational systems, and media. These institutions socialize both men and women into roles that appear "natural" but are politically and economically strategic. In America and in Nigeria, diasporic church communities and elite Nigerian social circles serve as institutions that reinforce patriarchy in Americanah by rewarding conformity to gender norms and punishing dissent with ostracism or shame.

These dynamics are also intensified by global capitalism by converting women's labor—especially care work and emotional labor—as commodities in transnational markets. In such a way are migrant women from the Global South (such as Ifemelu) absorbed into economies in which their labor is partially necessary, (and can only subsist) but is basically undervalued. Putting this, as Cheng (2022) explains, the global system of economic imperialism, it extracts gendered labor from margins while maintaining the illusion of meritocracy and equality. These early experiences in America are familiar to the expectation that migrant women need to assimilate, perform emotional labor, and accept low wages only in the name of opportunity. But in the end, her subsequent refusal of these terms and return to Nigeria is a rejection of becoming a commodity and a reminder of how few other options there are for anyone without similar educational or social capital. Ifemelu's struggles in Americanah speak well past the Nigerian and American contexts, as this paper will suggest, and they serve as a prism through which we can carefully scrutinize more general trends of female subjugation and resistance in postcolonial, patriarchal, and capitalist societies. Adichie's narrative is not alone; it meets global feminist discourses, particularly those which arise from the Global South where women's oppression is bound to fault of race, class and to many extents with colonial heritage and religious tradition. This chapter, for a comparative socio-political insight, comments on the sharing of African and South Asian contexts and in that kind of context underlines common structures of gendered exploitation and emerging forms of resistance.

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(2022), focusing on Dalit women in India, articulates the idea of "twice-cursed lives," where caste and gender intersect to produce multi-layered subjugation. Ifemelu's racialized and classed experiences in the US are parallels to demonstrate that while the markers of oppression may differ, the function of their structural role is consistent – to maintain elite and male control over labor and mobility.

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6. Discussion

This study finds that there are many complex ways that classes and genders and races are conjoined to create a systemic exploitation of women through the dynamic of global capitalism. Adichie's Americanah is a rich literary site for exploring these themes as it illustrates that

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migrant woman, especially from postcolonial societies, are ensnared in cycles of discounting of their labor, relegating them to subordination emotionally, or alienating them culturally. The extent of gender oppression around the world is neither locale fixed nor at a standstill, but rather, a malleable and adaptive power that transforms itself with socio economic and cultural surroundings.

This discussion has a central theme of the commodification of female labor, both physical and of the emotional. In doing so the novel proves Marxist feminist critiques right in its argument that capitalist systems have always depended on the unpaid or underpaid work of women, thinly veiled under discourses of domesticity, femininity, or love (Federici, 2004; Das, 2022). Her work cleaning, her romances, her eventual career as a blogger all involved different forms of commodification—of cheap immigrant labor, emotional caretaking, or writing from position of appropriate racial identity into marketplace.

In addition, it shows that oppression is not always external, but can be internalized and sustained by woman themselves, especially when they are the enforcers of the cultural norms and patriarchal demands. Aunty Uju and Kosi, like other female characters, relay how women from various class positions continue the same structures which restrict their freedoms. The above fits into Akaenyi's (2024) theory of intragender subjugation and presents that fighting against the outside systems must accompany the unlearning of internalized ideologies.

Ifemelu's acts of resistance—through economic independence, vocal critique, and a deliberate return to Nigeria—highlight the possibilities of agency within oppressive systems. But Adichie doesn't romanticize these choices; to her, they are won hard, and they are not finished. Yet economic autonomy maintains its susceptibility to commodification, and cultural reintegration in Nigeria is focused on new patriarchal expectations. This is evidenced by the need for approaches to feminist analysis that take an intersectional approach to feminist analysis, as stated by Crenshaw (1989) and Diko (2023), such that race, class and culture are no longer separated from the experience and practice of gender.

From being put into comparative contexts with the novel's themes, they can be found mirroring global South feminist literature and scholarship. The universality of these struggles becomes clear when the patterns of economic dependence, religious reinforcement of patriarchy and migration-based exploitation in South Asia and Africa are placed along side. However, Americanah does not take place off the hook from these realities but seems to bear with them which makes it an indispensable text in transnational feminist discourse.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how class is a tool of subordination that is also gendered in Americanah. It demonstrated how through a Marxist feminist and intersectional analysis, economic exploitation,

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cultural expectations, and global migration, make women, especially those from postcolonial societies, marginalized. Ifemelu's story of poverty in the U.S., cultural alienation, and resistance depicts the reality of women's life that could only be possible because of the systemic barriers and their subtle ways of reclaiming agency. Ultimately, the research permits its contributions in an addition to feminist literary and political theory of how literature like Americanah does not just reflect socio – economic realities but also critique and resist them. It stresses the fact that process of suppression based on gender is not a single experience, but is affected by class, race and cultural context, so once again highlighting the significance of global feminist and intersectional approach. Further research into this matter could explore how class and gender multiply on each other in contexts of other postcolonial literatures or the role of male complicity (if any) and allyship in patriarchal systems. It may also deepen the understanding about structural inequalities by expanding the concept to marginalized identities other than those of names. Labor and gender justice means reimagining the value and credit for reproductive and emotional work; economic equity; and fighting against the normalization of women's subordination. Resistance is personal, intellectual and collective on the part of Adichie's Americanah, and reclaiming voice is a radical act of self.

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