

## Deconstructing the 'single story': Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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### ABSTRACT

Stories in literature and in mythology carry a unique ability to teach, admonish, and denounce while representing a way to fight against conventional images and ideas. This article analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) as a postcolonial coming-of-age story, which rewrites the stereotypical plot of romance and the male-female double Bildungsroman, from the perspective of two marginalized characters, simultaneously deconstructing the Eurocentric patriarchal literary canon. Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Fiction award, the novel describes the formative processes of a heroine and a hero who meet and fall in love in Nigeria, migrate to the West, and ultimately reunite in their home country fifteen years later. Through the tension of adaptation and resistance to white norms and white privilege, racism, sexism, and classism of British and American societies, Adichie attempts to define the hybrid identity of the two protagonists and explore their strategies of resistance to overcome suffering. Approaches to gender, decolonization, globalization and Afropolitanism have been purposely adopted to clarify and deepen the analysis of their stories, with a special focus on the importance of Nigeria for the writer and her characters in the interconnection between Africa and the West, the 'global South' and 'global North'.

### Keywords

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, coming-of-age story, postcolonial, Western canon, patriarchy, resistance

### Adichie's approach to storytelling

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prominent, award-winning Nigerian novelist and an engaging storyteller. In her inspirational TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), she narrates personal anecdotes with wit and humour, in order to highlight the common mistake of reducing an event, a person, a country, or a continent to a single narrative: in the case of Africa, a place of poor, voiceless, and starving people, fighting senseless bloody wars and constantly succumbing to deadly diseases like AIDS. Drawing attention to the *power* and the *danger* embodied by stories, she points out that power – represented by the principle of *nkali*, "to be greater than another" in the Igbo language – is "the ability not to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie 2009). As a result, the story turns into a *single story*, which minimizes, misrepresents and, consequently, creates stereotypes. But the power of a story can also be positive and healing; it is not by chance that stories can be considered double-edged weapons, since "[they] have been used to dispossess and to malign.

But [they] can also be used to empower and to humanize. [They] can break the dignity of a people. But [they] can also repair that broken dignity.”<sup>1</sup>

Africa has an ancient tradition in the art of telling powerful, healing stories, which, often chanted or sung, are vital tools in supporting education, promoting language development, and building racial equality and religious respect. Ever since she was young, Adichie has written poems and short stories prolifically. She has been nominated for multiple literary awards, has published in journals and anthologies, and has been the recipient of several prestigious prizes. In her fictional narratives as in her lectures, she employs anecdotes to voice her convictions about complex and sensitive topics such as racism, immigration, gender biases, and cultural diversity. Her words often become inspirational quotes, tweeted or popularized by social and mainstream media, as she confronts pressing social issues.<sup>2</sup> Written narrative, which has its roots in her native oral tradition, represents for her “an essential repository of ideas”; it is about “memory, history, reconciliation and identity” (Adichie 2010, 96). People who read, study, and write literature are “more likely to be intellectually curious, progressive, humanist and open-minded” (96). In other words, people who believe that multiple and various narratives make a person, an event, a country, or a continent, and who, by rejecting the *single story*, a one-dimensional perspective, challenge conventional ideas or images and move closer to the idea of a common humanity.

Adichie’s idea of *re-telling the single story* is also indebted to postcolonial writers’ approach to the Western canon: appropriation and rewriting of European genres through parody, *pastiche*, or personal ideology (Albertazzi 2004, 57-60) in order to conform to or revise current cultural and social mores. Part of the Western canon are the romance tradition and the male-female double Bildungsroman genre. While the first one portrays adventures of imaginary and heroic characters, involved in a series of conflictual events, remote in time or place, and “leading up to a *quest*,” often represented by “the dragon-killing” (Frye 1957, 186-187, 206), the second one, which has been studied by American scholar Charlotte M. Goodman, describes the development of a male and a female protagonist, with the purpose to excoriate patriarchy and the rigidly defined gender roles assigned to women and men alike (1983, 31). By considering as prototype Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Goodman outlines a structure in three major stages. The first one portrays the shared childhood experience of the two characters who stand as equals, living in the same place which recalls the “prelapsarian,” “Edenic” world (1983, 30, 42). The second stage foregrounds their separation in adolescence or young adulthood, where “culture replaces nature and sexual differentiation occurs” (42), as the male hero begins a journey to seek his fortune, while the female figure is forced to remain close to home in a restricted environment. During the third and final stage, the male character returns home to meet his female counterpart. Their reunion, which could symbolize “a reaffirmation of the egalitarian childhood world in which [they] were undivided” (30-31), actually emphasizes the difference between their educational paths, hence the strong dichotomy

between them due to narrowly defined gender roles to which they have been forced to conform during their development. Even though the romance is essentially mythical, while the Bildungsroman is fundamentally realistic, they present some similarities, especially with regard to love between the hero and heroine and to adventure, which are major themes in *Americanah*.

Adichie's novel presents a tripartite structure and some of the hallmarks of the Western novel of development, which may partly be connected to the tradition of romance. But, by narrating a story focused on the perspectives of two black Nigerian migrants, marginalized characters in Western texts, the author rewrites the *single story*, the canonical mainstream and myopic plot of the aforementioned literary genres, and ultimately deconstructs it through her feminist perspective.

While the first part of the present analysis introduces central themes discussed in the novel, foregrounding the effects of the migration experiences of the two characters, as well as the issue of Afropolitanism related to the female protagonist, the second part dwells on the characters' formative processes and on their autobiographical inclination. Through the formative journey of the female character (Ifemelu), which can be said to follow the stages of Okuyade's Nigerian female coming-of-age story (2010, 2011), gender issues and strategies of resistance and empowerment, as outlined by Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos will be discussed. By contrast, in the growth process of the male character (Obinze), which partly follows the Bildung stages sketched out by Moretti (1999), Buckley (1974) and Austen (2015), the painful effects of migration to the UK and a critique of wealthy, corrupt and patriarchal Nigeria will be provided. The final part of this analysis focuses on the reunion of the two characters, when Adichie's feminist voice fully emerges, by emphasizing her characters' strategy of resistance to Nigerian and Western patriarchal norms.

As Jean and John Comaroff note, "the line of demarcation between 'North' and 'South', between zones of prosperity and power and zones of 'development of underdevelopment,' is not stable, but 'porous, broken, often illegible'" (2012, 127). By using the sophisticated technique of mixing English with Igbo, Adichie's native language, and by exploring in depth the burning social issues her characters face abroad (in the United States and England) and in their home country (Nigeria) as well as the protagonists' e-mail exchanges when they are separated, the writer stresses the power relations between homeland and hostland, the 'North' and the 'South', not as two fixed spaces, but as two worlds in constant communication.

### ***Americanah*: a postcolonial coming-of-age story**

Set in the globalized world of the early 21st century, *Americanah* describes, through a realist perspective, the formative processes of Ifemelu and Obinze, exploring themes such as migration, diaspora, displacement, borderlessness, racism, hair as a metaphor of race, the interconnectedness between race and gender, the search for identity and national belonging. These topics specifically identify the so-called 'third generation' of Nigerian writers: young

emerging voices especially living and working abroad, in a late modern global reality, unavoidably linked to “nomadism, exile, displacement and deracination” (Adesanmi and Dunton 2015, 16), and whose life experiences are close to those of their characters.

Ifemelu is the central protagonist of the novel and the one who has received the most critical attention, since two-thirds of the book are devoted to her and, in particular, to her American experience. By contrast, Obinze Maduewesi is a supporting character, whose complex backstory is in relation to Ifemelu’s. Nevertheless, several chapters of the novel are written from his perspective and, as his female counterpart, he undergoes psychological and emotional development. As in the tradition of the mythical romance, after meeting and falling in love as teenagers,<sup>3</sup> they undergo a perilous educational journey in the West, full of minor adventures and struggles “leading up to a *quest*” (Frye 1957, 187), here represented by their coming into voice, their own maturity that they will reach when finally reunited in their homeland fifteen years later. The writer portrays their adolescent love in an idealized, nostalgic way, with classic teenage politics and drama, which recalls the Edenic mythical world of childhood where the male and the female characters stand as equals (Goodman 1983, 30; 42). Sexuality is part of their emancipated relationship and, like food, enriches the story, by emphasizing the humanness constantly present in Adichie’s novels.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the Abacha regime (1993-1998), the University of Nsukka and other universities around the country go on strike. Professors’ protests for better salaries paralyze education, forcing many students to emigrate to America or Great Britain. Having been awarded a fellowship at the University of Princeton, Ifemelu moves to the United States. According to Okuyade, her departure corresponds to “the moment of the awakening” in which “[she] becomes aware that her condition of life [spatially and psychologically] limits her aspirations for the future.” In reality, her decision to leave Nigeria depends on spatial constraints only, rather than on limitations imposed by her family or friends. Indeed, university strikes – “the discontent for her geography” (Okuyade 2010, 10) – constitute the real impediment to the continuation of her educational career. Therefore, the female figure, and not the male one as usual, begins her journey to the New World. Subverting the Bildungsroman trope, the male protagonist, Obinze, hopes to reach her in Maryland, but when he is denied a visa after 9/11, he moves to Great Britain for three years with the help of his mother.

Ifemelu is therefore an “Afropolitan,” a portmanteau of ‘African’ and ‘cosmopolitan’, who “must form an identity” but also defend it on three levels: “national, racial and cultural” (Selasi 2005): hence a person who simultaneously belongs to an African community and other worlds, having different cultures, languages, and habits. Ifemelu goes back to her homeland as a “serious Americanah,” who looks at things “with American eyes” (Adichie 2013, 385), her affectation and clothing style influenced by years spent in the West. Unlike Ifemelu, however, Adichie does not want to be called “Afropolitan”: “I’m not an Afropolitan. I’m African, happily so... I’m comfortable in the world, and it’s not that unusual. Many Africans are happily African

and don't think they need a new term" (Barber 2013). Even Obinze cannot be called "Afropolitan," since "his cosmopolitan Africanness is deeply embedded in the criminality and corruption that Afropolitanism means to reverse" (Guarracino 2014, 18). Indeed, he attains economic success and a high social status with the help of a corrupted man called 'Chief'. Nevertheless, society does not consider him a shady person, and he feels strongly oppressed by his wealthy life and traditional-minded wife whom he does not love. Even without being an "Afropolitan," like Ifemelu, he is a diasporic and hybrid character. They are exposed to Western culture and, as a consequence, struggle in order to fit into their adopted society, to break through cultural barriers and to negotiate "the many identities they have to wear as Nigerians and as migrants in the US and in Britain" (Guarracino 2014, 8). Involved in the process of hybridization, their identity is hence not pure, fixed and single, but "composed from variable sources, different materials, many locations" (McLeod 2010, 253).

Obinze, as an undocumented immigrant in the UK, and Ifemelu, as a victim of racism and sexism in the USA, with their constant struggle against the discrimination that result from colonialism and patriarchy (Santos 2016, 21) – represent the "global South":

a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering. [...] a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism, and islamophobia. (Santos 2016, 18-19)

The 'North' and 'South' are two spaces at the crossroads of class, gender, identity, ethnic belonging and race, pressing issues the two characters face during their development. In the continuous interconnection between Africa and the West, Nigeria remains significant. As Adichie has declared in many interviews, *Americanah* is "a book about longing for home and what home means" and, although her American life has shaped how she looks at the world, her eyes "are still very Nigerian" (Barber 2013). For Ifemelu, Nigeria is the place "where she was supposed to be, [where] she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (Adichie 2013, 6). Obinze is the main reason why she decides to return to Nigeria after thirteen years spent in America; he represents "home" and embodies Adichie's and Ifemelu's national belonging. Their home country is, therefore, a place "where [they] are welcome, where [they] can be with people [they] may regard very much like themselves, where [they] are not at sea but have found safe harbor" (McLeod 2010, 242).

Nevertheless, as Boes underscores, "the hero no longer merely changes with the world; instead, the world also changes through *and without* the hero" (2006, 240, emphasis added). Back in their homeland, the two protagonists must accept or resist the values and norms imposed by "the world," i.e. modern Nigerian society. Their home country is not the same place they left before moving to the West, but "an adult Nigeria that they did not know about," like "the very expensive and transactional Lagos" (Adichie 2013, 429-430). Thus, they begin

criticizing people and many aspects of Nigerian culture. While Obinze is outraged by how many of his fellow citizens prioritize money and their values (even though he unavoidably conforms to what society expects him to be), in her new blog “The Small Redemptions of Lagos” Ifemelu, instead, as an openly critical Afropolitan, discusses the postcolonial changes in her homeland and how they affect Nigerian people.

### Obinze and Ifemelu: two different diasporic, hybrid subjects

#### *Ifemelu's bildung process*

Ifemelu's learning process begins when she is a teenager, not a child, and mostly involves her real-life experience in America. As McLeod points out, the process of identity formation for the migrant begins with trauma and anxiety, since s/he is always torn between losing his/her original identity and the need to conform to new cultural expectations (2010, 254). It is not by chance that after her arrival in the United States, Ifemelu feels insecure, alienated from American society and its people. Nevertheless, through an important network of women including her friend Ginika, Auntie Uju and Wambui, her colleague at the University, that “provides her with moral guidance in the face of gender adversity,” she gains self-awareness, becoming more independent in American's wealthy male-dominated society (Okuyade 2010, 10).

In the United States, the heroine has to negotiate between adaptation and resistance to American norms. She is firstly reluctant to conform to American attitudes and to learn the American-English accent; yet, when she goes to the international student office for her enrollment at the university, she meets Cristina Tomas, a white American employee, who purposely speaks to her in a slow way: “You. Will. First. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office” (Adichie 2013, 133). Ifemelu comes back with the letter, and Cristina says: “I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?” (133). Ifemelu realizes that Ms. Tomas is actually speaking in that way because of her “foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling” (133-134). According to Frantz Fanon, the black subject “will be proportionately whiter,” “will come closer to being a real human being,” as soon as s/he masters the *other* language, hence possessing “the world expressed and implied by that language” (1986, 18) or that unfamiliar accent, as in the case of Ifemelu. Soon enough, she decides to conform to an American accent in order to avoid being asked to repeat everything she says and being, therefore, considered different and foreign. Thus, the adaptation to American English can be considered Ifemelu's Fanonian mask of conformity. Nevertheless, when a call centre operator tells Ifemelu that her English “sound[s] totally American” (Adichie 2013, 175), she feels ashamed for having rejected her Nigerian English, her African identity, “her jungle” (Fanon 1986, 18), her very self, and she stops imitating the American accent.

Ifemelu starts being black when she settles in America: “I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adichie 2013, 290). Only when she goes back to Nigeria, she will finally “stop being black” (479). At a party organized by two American friends, full of wealthy white people, she meets a woman, chair of the board of a charity in Ghana, who offers her to work with her team in Africa. Ifemelu realizes “the luxury to charity that she could not identify with and did not have” (Adichie 2013, 169), “wanting suddenly and desperately to be from the country of people who gave and not who received” (170). Therefore, Ifemelu considers herself inferior, the ‘other’, because of wealthy Americans who think of Africa only in terms of charities and who, by demonstrating a “kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity,” unconsciously and unintentionally manifest attitudes of superiority and dominance.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the heroine’s relationship with Curt, a white American man who helps her quickly obtain a job and consequently start her green card process, reflects American white privilege and racism. Since white people are astonished to see Ifemelu engaged with a rich white man, she becomes convinced that racism matters, and consequently, “because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved” (Adichie 2013, 305).

Unlike Catherine in Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Ifemelu does not embody “the author’s identification with those women that have been forced to conform to traditional gender roles” (Goodman 1983, 31). On the contrary, she is an outspoken and independent girl, more ambitious and powerful than her male counterpart, a girl who, from the outset, has never lowered herself to comply with the female behavioral patterns demanded by the Nigerian and American societies. She exhibits an “autobiographical propensity” (Okuyade 2010, 6) by reflecting the writer’s own American experience, strong personality and activist role. Society’s racism and sexism encourage her to follow in her author’s footsteps, becoming a blogger, a storyteller of our globalized society, who, by using a virtual platform, voices her opinions in a provocative way, examining weighty issues and lighter topics such as hair and beauty.<sup>6</sup> Her blog and her hair, therefore, significantly contribute to her process of identity formation, guiding her towards her coming to voice and dealing with the third stage of her Bildung, “the exploration of femininity” (Okuyade 2010, 10). Ifemelu defines beauty magazines as “racially skewed” (Adichie 2013, 294), since they pretend to be for ‘everyone’: “blondes, brunettes and red-heads,” having “straight, wavy and curly hair,” but she knows that she is “none of those” (Adichie 2013, 295), because of her black kinky hair that cannot “form ponytails.”<sup>7</sup> When at the career centre office of the university, people suggest she straighten her hair, emulating Western hairstyles in order to look competitive and professional for a job interview, Ifemelu’s hair

was [actually] 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 recognize herself. [...] The smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (203)

The burning of her hair represents the violation of the black body and black standards through the imitation of the white body and the assimilation of white norms. Through her hair and her “fighting body” which “suffers, rejoices, and dies,” Ifemelu carries out her struggles and interacts with the world (Santos 2016, 26). As with her American accent, her adaptation to white values can be considered a resistant form of mimicry (Bhabha 1994, 85). Indeed, after feeling alienated and by realizing she has just denied her African identity, she ultimately refuses to adopt white paradigms, keeping her “black-black,” “thick” and “bristly” hair (Adichie 2013, 41). Natural hair is therefore ‘political’ for black women: “a key ethnic signifier, second only to skin [and] through [which] racist discourses have cast ‘black’ on the side of nature, wildness and ugliness” (Barker 2008, 421). This is probably the main reason why Ifemelu chooses to publish a post on her blog titled “A Michelle Obama Shout Out-Plus Hair as Race Metaphor,” explaining why natural African hair is “the perfect metaphor for race in America” (Adichie 2013, 296-298) and why even well-known black women like Michelle Obama or Beyoncé straighten their hair in order to conform to white beauty standards. Through this blog post, Ifemelu openly disapproves of black women’s tendency to equate female beauty with white femininity, since, in this way, they only reinforce racist stereotypes, and hair will always and inevitably be linked to notions of race and gender.

Similarly, make-up products, generally defined ‘universal’, are aimed at white women only as they do not meet the needs of dark-skinned women (295). As a black woman, Ifemelu feels she does not belong to a ‘universal’ or ‘unique’ category of women who use the same beauty commodities and hair toiletries; thus, through her blog, she defends her own position and criticizes the widespread Eurocentric perspective. Since “feminism should be an inclusive party [...] a party full of different feminisms” (Adichie 2015), Adichie believes that each woman has the right to be feminist, to express her own ideas and convictions and celebrate her femininity in a personal way. Ifemelu and Adichie, therefore, embrace a “multiperspectival” and “intersectional” version of feminist activity (Snyder 2008, 2), promote individualism and diversity and “rightly reject the universalist claim that all women [should] share a set of common experiences” (184).

Ifemelu’s decision to keep her Nigerian English accent, maintain her natural hair, and employ her blog as a personal weapon to fight against American society’s racism, sexism, and classism are strategies of empowerment and resistance to rules imposed by the ‘global North’ and which, in Bhabha’s words, define her as “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (1994, 86), “almost the same, but not white” (89). After thirteen years in the United States, struggling to negotiate her feminine subjectivity “in a society plagued by the debilitating forces of patriarchy” (Okuyade 2011, 152), she closes her blog and makes the

decision to return to Nigeria, reaching in this way her 'coming to voice' as a self-reliant subject (Okuyade 2010, 1; 6).

### Obinze's *bildung* process

While Ifemelu's formative process runs parallel to the growth of her blog, Obinze's psychological and moral *bildung* is mostly related to his own inner struggle to shape his identity, firstly in an unwelcoming and unknown Great Britain and later in a wealthy, corrupted and patriarchal Nigeria. Obinze is biographically the character most similar to Adichie, since both grew up in Nsukka with parents who worked at the university.<sup>8</sup> As the author confesses in an interview, her male protagonist is "the part that watches, dreams and mourns" because, like her, he is "nostalgic for things" (Adichie 2014a) and "a big dreamer" fond of American novels and movies (Adichie 2014b). Obinze symbolizes the writer's desire for learning, but not for "power, mobility, autonomy" (Goodman 1983, 31) as a reflection of Heathcliff in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Because of his insecurity and introverted nature, Obinze is not a legendary and invincible male hero (Frye 1957, 187), and he inevitably conforms to the role society expects him to play, becoming a married Nigerian 'Big man'. Like the classic modern male hero, his growth process takes the form of a "journey-adventure-wandering-loss" (Moretti 1999, 4), while touching all the stages of the African hero's development: individualism, concerning his individual life; his *Bildung* and the relationship to personal mentors like his mother; the European existence, thanks to his experience in the UK; and finally political understandings, associated with the nation state (Nigeria) or a wider global environment (Austen 2015, 214).

After graduation, Obinze lives with his mother for a year, trying to find a job in his home country without success. Finding "constraints, social and intellectual" (Buckley 1974, 17), like Ifemelu, he desperately tries to leave Nigeria to fulfill his dream of settling in the United States. Nevertheless, because he is denied a visa after 9/11, he moves to the United Kingdom, making his way independently in London. Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze does not enjoy white privilege; on the contrary he plunges into an impervious and undocumented life, taking a variety of menial jobs to pay the two Angolan men for his planned green-card marriage, which would give him the opportunity to become a legal citizen of the European Union. Abroad, like migrants, exiles and refugees, Obinze experiences firsthand the process of disidentification. In his case, this process of rejecting familiar identities is only related to the pain of loss and uprooting, and it will never become "an increased desire to belong" (Braidotti 2011, 322) to the new foreign reality. London is indeed "both the agent of liberation and a source of corruption," a "dark hell" full of "illusion and confusion," which firstly "promises infinite variety and newness" and then turns out to be an "illusory utopian place" (Buckley 1974, 20). It therefore truly disappoints Obinze more than his narrow provincial life in Nigeria. Forced to answer to the name of "Vincent Obi" in order to survive and avoid the risk of being deported, he becomes invisible and denies his Nigerian identity of a cultured, wealthy man. His existence becomes "an erased pencil

sketch,” since “each time he saw a policeman, or anyone in a uniform, anyone with the faintest scent of authority, he would fight the urge to run” (Adichie 2013, 257). Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze, as an undocumented immigrant, “prefers passive resistance,” since he knows that “open confrontation with the legal powers will mean deportation” (Santos 2016, 25).

Distinguishing characteristics of the *romance* hero (Frye 1957, 187) and the migrant subject (Shukla and Shukla 2005, 110) include alienation, nostalgia, loss, guilt and constant daydreaming, all of which feature in Obinze’s experience in the UK: “he thought of his mother and of Ifemelu, and the life he had imagined for himself, and the life he now had, lacquered as it was by work and reading, by panic and hope. He had never felt so lonely” (Adichie 2013, 259). On the day of his green-card wedding, his true identity is finally disclosed. Arrested and consequently deported “as a thing without breath and mind” (279), he is resigned and dehumanized, yet he is happy to cease pretending to be someone he is not. By leaving oppressive London, Obinze returns to his homeland, his real shelter, and the distant presence of Ifemelu alleviates his sense of estrangement, reinforcing psychic connections between them.

In Nigeria, as a ‘Big Man’, Obinze inevitably becomes a member of the Nigerian male-dominated community, composed of overbearing and corrupted people who constantly flaunt their power and success and express their superiority towards women. His existence becomes a prison of gold, and his spirit chokes on the fumes of unexpected wealth, which disorients him and simultaneously fuels his inner conflict: “bloated from all he had acquired – the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts – and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free” (21); “his mind had not changed at the same pace as his life, and he felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be” (27).

Similarly, his marriage, a “second skin that had never quite fitted him snugly” (456), reflects Nigerian conventional love relationships. Kosi, his submissive and traditional wife acts as typical Nigerian men would like their wives to behave, embodying the identity that a male-dominated society expects of her. Indeed, she apologizes for giving birth to a girl and not a boy (458) and, when Obinze admits that he wants to leave her for Ifemelu, she tells him that the primary goal of a good marriage is the subsistence of family rather than love (Adichie 2013, 464). Like Kosi, Obinze’s friend, Okwudiba, is subject to gender roles imposed by Nigerian patriarchal society when he suggests Obinze forget the “white-people behavior” of getting a divorce for the sake of love (467).

## Conclusion

After many years of silence, Ifemelu and Obinze connect again through e-mails. Their correspondence quickly bridges the distance between them. Enfolded in the novel like the blog writing, the e-mail exchange works not only as an innovative way of communication – typical

of globalized society, replacing traditional love letters – but it represents, first and foremost, the author's deliberate attempt to establish a connection between them when they are separated. Thus, the two characters function as “psychological doubles,” since each of them is involved in the psychic life of his/her counterpart (Goodman 1983, 31).

Their meeting in Nigeria represents the first and vital moment of their reunion, and it recalls their idyllic shared youth before their separation. By evoking their former love, still pure and sincere, part of their missing relationship is restored. After painful soul-searching, Obinze finally makes the decision to abandon his life, his conservative wife and his supposed success, rejecting the role that patriarchal society has forced upon him, and to which he has always conformed. Once reunited with Ifemelu, he “finally finds the accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make” (Buckley 1974, 18); consequently, by reaching his ‘coming to voice’ (Okuyade 2010, 1-6) his *Bildung* process is definitely over.

While Goodman suggests that a “harmonious and balanced androgynous self is fractured by a culture that assigns radically different roles to males and females,” which emphasize the strong dichotomy between them, limiting their full development (1983, 31), in *Americanah* “androgyny” is possible, and “the dream of a common language” between the two characters can be realized (43). If the main theme of the quest-*romance* is the dragon-killing by the male hero (Frye 1957, 189), in *Americanah*, both the hero and heroine slay the dragon, or the serpent – metaphorically represented by the gender roles of patriarchal societies – regaining Eden and becoming androgynous again, as in the well-known myth from Plato's *Symposium*.

As an African feminist, Adichie strongly believes in the involvement of men in feminism, openly asserting that a feminist is a man or a woman striving to solve the problem with gender, which “prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are” (Adichie 2014c, 34). While Goodman asserts that it is our culture that assigns rigidly defined roles to men and to women (1983, 31), Adichie emphasizes that “culture does not make people. People make culture” (2017, 46). The only way to change our culture and society's expectations is to reject gender roles, albeit so deeply conditioned in people and consequently so difficult to unlearn (19), and to raise sons and daughters differently, focusing on their personal interests and abilities rather than on their gender (2014c, 36). Obinze and Ifemelu's final rejection of gender roles represents therefore their strategy of resistance to Nigerian and Western patriarchal norms.

Adichie rewrites the *single story* from the point of view of two marginalized subjects, who represent the ‘global South’ for having suffered the injustices, dominations and oppressions caused by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. By celebrating the “myth of the androgyne,” i.e. equality between the male and female protagonists and their definitive rejection of gender roles, Adichie deconstructs the stereotypical plot of romance and the Western Bildungsroman. The reinterpretation of both literary genres from a postcolonial and anti-patriarchal perspective can be read, therefore, as a way of resisting the Eurocentric tradition. Finally, by employing

the technique of 'contamination' (Albertazzi 2004, 57), the author spreads new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication, thus establishing a point of connection between the West and Africa, and between English and Igbo, also stressing the important role of Nigeria for herself and her characters, at the crossroads between the North and the South of the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?nolanguage=it](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?nolanguage=it).

<sup>2</sup> Every summer, in Lagos, Adichie teaches writing workshops, attempting to make stories, novels, and poems accessible to all. With her Nigerian publisher Muhtar Bakare she has also started a nonprofit organization called Farafina Trust, established to promote "reading, writing, a culture of social introspection and engagement with society through the literary arts." For further details, see <http://farafinatrust.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ifemelu and Obinze meet at college in Lagos as teenagers. One day, Kayode DaSilva, Obinze's friend, decides to organize an impromptu party in his graveled compound; on this occasion, Obinze and Ifemelu meet, fall in love and start dating.

<sup>4</sup> After publishing her masterpiece *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie admits: "I was determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as grittiness of being human – a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life" (2008, 50-51). This realist approach to fiction is also used in *Americanah*.

<sup>5</sup> In that regard, in "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience" (2008), Adichie points out how mainstream media are used to provide a stereotypical image of the continent, partly based on the image of the poor starving Africans in need of salvation by Western whites. Her opinion is therefore close to that of Ifemelu when she meets these people.

<sup>6</sup> *Americanah* is written from a third-person omniscient point-of-view, except for Ifemelu's blog entries, which are integrated into the narrative and located mostly at the end of chapters. As the writer confesses in interviews (2014a; 2014b), her characters are completely fictional, but they exhibit autobiographical inclination, a distinctive feature of the Bildungsroman (see Okuyade 2010, 6; Buckley 1974, 14, 23-24). Adichie's presence can therefore be perceived through the voice of the omniscient and anonymous narrator, through Ifemelu's provocative blog entries, and through facets of personality and life experience of both protagonists.

<sup>7</sup> Adichie uses this expression in "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), referring to a distinctive hairstyle of Western women, which cannot be chosen by black women because of the texture of their hair. For further references, see [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

<sup>8</sup> For Adichie's detailed biography, see *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website*, maintained by Daria Tunca.

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