

# *From Feeling to Agency: Emotional Politics and Black Resistance in Americanah*

Zhu Hao

*Southeast University, 211102, Nanjing, China*

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**Abstract:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* has gained wide critical attention for its sharp portrayal of transnational Black identity and racial dynamics in contemporary global contexts since its publication in 2013. Much of the existing scholarship tends to approach the novel through postcolonial or feminist-nationalist frameworks leaving the affective dimensions of racial experience underexplored. This paper offers a fresh perspective by applying Sara Ahmed's theory of the cultural politics of emotion, situating *Americanah* within a broader global context of racialized feeling and structural injustice. In a world where race continues to be both hyper-visible and disavowed, Ahmed's affective lens helps illuminate how pain, shame, fear, and hate are not merely emotional responses but powerful social mechanisms that shape belonging, exclusion, and Black subjectivity. Through close reading of Ifemelu's diasporic experience, this paper argues that emotional life experience is deeply political and that resistance emerges not in spite of feeling, but through it. By centering emotion as a site of both vulnerability and agency, the analysis contributes to ongoing discussions of race, identity, and the affective dimensions of global Black diasporic struggles.

## 1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* offers a sharp meditation on race, migration, and identity from the perspective of a Nigerian woman navigating transnational Blackness. While the novel has been widely examined through postcolonial and intersectional feminist lenses, less attention has been given to the emotional dimensions of racialized experience. By approaching *Americanah* through Sara Ahmed's theory of the cultural politics of emotion, it argues that feelings such as pain, shame, fear, and hate are not private states but social mechanisms that regulate belonging and exclusion.

By reading Ifemelu's emotional journey through Ahmed's framework, this paper highlights how emotion both reflects and challenges the structures of racial power. Pain and shame emerge not simply as suffering, but as exposure to the demands of assimilation and visibility. In turn, fear and hate become sites of resistance, enabling a reclamation of Black womanhood and emotional agency. Through this affective lens, *Americanah* reveals how feeling is not only shaped by power, but also reshapes it—transforming vulnerability into resistance, and emotion into a form of knowledge and action.

## 2. Shame and Pain Are Political

Shame and pain are not merely personal experiences, they are socially distributed emotions that reveal the uneven conditions under which Black subjects move through transnational spaces. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's migration from Nigeria to the United States exposes how race and gender intersect with labor, visibility, and survival. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's affect theory, this chapter explores how pain marks the cost of assimilation while shame inscribes the emotional violence of being seen as the black. These emotions do not just register harm—they shape Black subjectivity under white-dominated structures of belonging.

### 2.1. The Shame of Being Exposed: Hair, Accent, and the Visibility of Blackness

Shame is linked to social exposure. It happens in the moment when racial difference is marked, misread, and disciplined through being seen and being heard. It argues that shame is not an internal flaw but a relational and bodily affect, shaped by white norms and maintained through acts of looking, judging, and narrating. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theory of shame as a socially mediated emotion, this section examines how Non-American Black's hair, accent, and appearance position them as hypervisible and permanently misrecognized in American society.

Non-American Black's hair becomes a crucial site of racial shame. It is worth noting that here "Non-American Black"[1] is another key concept in the novel. African American and non-American blacks have no common national or social background except the black skin in the context. Non-American Blacks feel even less a sense of belonging in the United States. When Non-American Blacks straightens their hair for a job interview, the act is not simply aesthetic; it is a negotiation with white professional respectability. When Aunt Uju is preparing for the job interview, she said: "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional [1]." Her natural hair is treated as unkempt. The behavior of changing her body to meet white expectations reflects what Ahmed describes as the internalization of the white gaze, through which the subject turns away from herself in shame. This is not about guilt for what one has done, but about being—a shame of who one is when made visible under conditions of white domination.

Additionally, the hair salon scene early in the novel offers a powerful microcosm of this racialized shame. Sitting in a salon that caters to African women, Ifemelu both shares and resists the judgment of the braider, who comments on her natural hair, her speech, and her Americanness. Their exchange reveals the layered dynamics of shame among racialized women—where whiteness remains the absent but organizing ideal. Ahmed suggests that shame arises when the subject fails to embody a desired image in the eyes of the other [2]. The braider's remarks re-inscribe this failure, reinforcing the visibility of difference within a nominally Black space.

What's more, shame is also linguistic. Nigerian accent becomes a liability. They consciously adopts an American accent to avoid being perceived as less intelligent or foreign. But this shift fractures her sense of self. As Ahmed notes, shame can lead to the splitting of the subject: a turning away from the self that is seen as the cause of humiliation [2]. This internal split is reflected in Ifemelu's early experiences, where she becomes hyperaware of how she is heard and seen. She has spoken English since childhood. When she was in Nigeria, she was the president of the debate club and was very proud of her spoken English. However, after coming to the United States as an adult, she began practicing American accents like a child learning a new language. When she met Aunt Uju's son-Dike, Ifemelu described him as follows: "now here he was, a first grader with a seamless American accent and a hyper-happiness about him; the kind of child who could never stay still and who never seemed sad [1]." She envies the little boy's American accent. Her speech, like her hair, becomes something to manage, disguise, or apologize for.

## 2.2. The Pain of Being Harmed: Race, Labor, and the Cost of Survival

Ifemelu's early years in the United States are defined not by hope or opportunity, but by structural exclusion and racialized suffering. This section argues that *Americanah* represents pain as an affective economy where racialized labor, undocumented status, and social invisibility converge to discipline the Black female body. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theory of the cultural politics of emotion, it explores how pain functions as an imposed condition: a bodily exposure to the histories and hierarchies shaping Black migrant experience.

One of the most painful moments comes when Ifemelu, unable to find work, accepts a job helping a tennis coach "relax." The coach sexually touches her and pays her. Often read as private trauma, this incident is carefully framed within a power structure that renders her body exploitable. Ahmed argues that "Pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the bodily life of that history" [2]. Ifemelu's suffering is not incidental but a direct result of systems that discipline undocumented African immigrants. Constant hunger and fear mark her body as exposed to harm without consequence. This suffering enacts what Ahmed calls a "making real" of power [2]: pain reveals and reinforces the boundary between those protected and those vulnerable.

Afterward, Ifemelu falls into silence and sorrow. She scalds her skin with hot water, leaving blisters. This silence is not empty but a heavy affective register of pain: "to speak of pain is to open the wound, to risk a repetition of the injury" [2]. Yet Adichie refuses to leave pain unspoken. Retrospective narration turns the wound into testimony. The novel follows Ahmed in rejecting victimhood or sympathy-seeking; instead, it politicizes suffering and turns it into a basis for action.

Pain in *Americanah* is economic. The hunger Ifemelu endures is not symbolic, but materially grounded. Her status as an undocumented migrant bars her from legitimate employment and pushes her toward exploitation. Ahmed emphasizes that pain "surfaces" through contact—it is not interior, but relational, contingent upon encounters with systems and bodies [2]. Ifemelu's encounters with American bureaucracy, with employers who refuse her, with the silence of friends who cannot help her, all contribute to a system in which her pain becomes socially acceptable. This acceptance is not passive, but organized: a sign that Black immigrant bodies are expected to absorb pain without protest.

Even Ifemelu's recovery later in the novel is tinged with this affective residue. Her shame about what happened leads her to give up eating, sleeping and contacting with Obinze, demonstrating how pain not only disciplines the body but also reshapes relationality. As Ahmed points out that pain shapes bodily surfaces and subjectivity[2]. Ifemelu's pain, silence and hunger are not only emotional states but political symptoms.

Through focusing on her hair, accent and skin—*Americanah* shows how shame works to enforce racial conformity. Yet it also shows how this shame can be politicized. Rather than allowing herself to be contained by the gaze, Ifemelu learns to confront it. The visibility that once wounded her becomes the ground for a new kind of self-articulation—one that turns exposure into expression, and shame into speech.

## 3. Fear and Hate Drive Resistance

Fear and hate are not merely reactive emotions but political technologies that organize the distribution of vulnerability, recognition, and power. In *Americanah*, these emotions do not operate as private responses to injury, but as socially mediated affects that circulate through spaces, relationships, and institutional practices. Fear locates certain bodies as threats before they act, while hate affixes to signs of racial and cultural difference, transforming proximity into discomfort and otherness into danger. Yet within these affective regimes, resistance begins to take shape. For Ifemelu, fear and hate do not only constrain; they also expose the mechanisms of misrecognition

and compel new forms of articulation. Her body becomes a site of surveillance and misreading, but also of political sensing. Her voice, particularly through writing and intimacy, refuses the closure of exclusion. This chapter explores how the racialized emotional landscape that restricts Black mobility simultaneously provides the grounds for critique, agency, and the reimagination of belonging.

### 3.1. Living in Fear: Surveillance, Misrecognition, and the Black Female Body

Ifemelu's embodied experience in the United States is structured not only by economic precarity and racial shame, but also by a pervasive atmosphere of fear. This section argues that *Americanah* depicts racialized fear as both a technology of governance and a lived affect that restricts spatial mobility, social legitimacy, and embodied presence. For people like Ifemelu, fear is not an individual psychological state but a structural condition imposed by white supremacist norms that mark Black bodies as inherently suspect, out of place, or potentially threatening. In this affective regime, fear operates as an invisible border that polices where Black people can go, how they must behave, and how much space they are allowed to occupy.

Additionally, fear produces spatial discipline[2]. Ifemelu learns which neighborhoods to avoid, which stores to enter quickly, and which routes to take home. Ahmed notes that fear restricts the spatial extension of some bodies while allowing others to expand. Ifemelu's sense of space tightens in the presence of suspicion; her body literally takes up less room. She moves cautiously, speaks softly, and avoids drawing attention to herself, as if shrinking into invisibility might protect her from harm. In Ahmed's terms, she becomes a subject sealed into a body that tightens up, navigating space as a potential object of suspicion. This experience resonates with the long history of Black bodies being coded as dangerous threats, where their physical presence becomes grounds for heightened monitoring or rejection.

More importantly, *Americanah* also reveals the cracks in this system. Ifemelu's awareness of being feared does not remain entirely internalized. It begins to crystallize into critique. Her blog entries document these micro-interactions and reframe them as part of a broader racialized affective economy. She writes not only to expose the mechanisms of fear, but to confront them—to unseal her body from the containment of white perception. By doing so, she transforms the fear directed at her into a source of political clarity and emotional agency, turning lived vulnerability into deliberate resistance.

### 3.2. Speaking Against Hate: Intimacy, Anger, and the Rewriting of Belonging

This section argues that hate in *Americanah* functions as a diffuse but persistent social force that circulates through everyday encounters, often masked by politeness or silence. Against this backdrop, Ifemelu's blog writing and relationships become tools for negotiating intimacy, voicing anger, and redefining what it means to belong. Drawing on Ahmed's concept of hate as a circulation of affect that binds collectives through exclusion, and Stuart Hall's view of identity as constructed through positionality[3], this section explores how Ifemelu challenges the culture that seek to marginalize her.

Firstly, hate in the novel and America operates less through direct attack than misrecognition, avoidance, and conditional acceptance. More crucially, hate and love are not opposites but complementary in shaping group boundaries [2]. When Ifemelu dates privileged white Curt, his family labels her "exotic," expecting gratitude for inclusion. This selective intimacy reveals hate embedded in romance: his acceptance hinges on her muting parts of her identity. Ahmed notes hate and love share an attachment structure—both define belonging by regulating inclusion and exclusion.

What's more, Ifemelu's anger crystallizes as a response to these patterns of exclusion. Ifemelu's blog is more than a medium for commentary; it is a site of emotional resistance. Through her blog, she names the quiet violences of racism. Her posts are sharply critical, but also deeply personal. She writes as one who has lived these contradictions, transforming anger into an epistemic tool. In Ahmed's theory, emotions are not signs of weakness but forms of knowledge. Ifemelu's anger allows her to see the structure behind the microaggressions, to recognize that her discomfort is not hers alone but socially produced and widely shared.

Ifemelu's resistance peaks in her blog "Raceteenth" (or "Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black") [1]. An insurgent discourse space, it defies mere complaint. In one entry, she declares: "Dear Non-American Black, when you come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care [1]." This cuts through American racial essentialism's false cultural specificity comfort, marking radical resistance. Her voice sparks community: readers respond with their own stopped, mistaken, silenced stories, forging a transnational Black counterpublic. This collective is rooted not in sameness but shared structural positioning and the labor of naming the unspoken. Belonging here becomes solidarity over assimilation.

Eventually, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, but her sense of belonging remains fractured. She is no longer the girl who left, nor is she fully American. Yet this in-betweenness is not failure. Following Hall, cultural identity is not fixed but positional, constantly transforming [3]. *Americanah* positions belonging as movement, not rootedness. Her trajectory affirms hate restricts but speech resists: silenced anger becomes a tool to rewrite inclusion boundaries. In this act, the novel offers hope—intimacy, writing, and alternative feeling can imagine new communities.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Americanah*, emotion is not a passive reflection of identity but an active terrain of political struggle. Through the intertwined dynamics of pain, shame, fear, and hate, Adichie charts how racialized emotions are both imposed and mobilized. Pain and shame expose the structural costs of assimilation, while fear and hate map the boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Yet, rather than succumbing to these affective burdens, Ifemelu transforms them into sites of resistance. Her embodied experiences of being racialized and misrecognized become the ground for critical self-articulation. Through her blog, she turns anger into knowledge, intimacy into solidarity, and speech into action.

By applying Sara Ahmed's theory of emotional politics, this paper demonstrates that Black subjectivity in transnational contexts is shaped through affective economies that regulate space, identity, and visibility. However, as Ifemelu shows, these same emotional mechanisms can be reclaimed—reversed into tools of critique and collective imagination. Her journey offers not only an account of racial suffering but a vision of agency forged through feeling. In making emotion visible, *Americanah* reminds us that resistance begins not beyond emotion, but from within it.

#### References

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