

**Struggles of the Past and Present: The  
African American Woman in Harriet  
Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave  
Girl* and Chimamanda Adichie's  
*Americanah***

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities

Brac University

April 2019

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**Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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**Approval**

The thesis titled “Struggles of the Past and Present: The African American Woman in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*” submitted by

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## **Acknowledgement**

At first, I deeply express my gratitude to the supreme authority almighty Allah (Swt.), for everything He has granted us in every aspect of life.

Finally, I am at the end of MA journey. I would like to show my gratitude to my supervisor Anika Saba for providing me with the best support and guiding me to prepare this paper with the proper information and knowledge. Without her kind encouragement and consideration it would have been difficult for me to complete the thesis paper. I thank her whole heartedly for her encouragement, warm response and for filling every gap of my personal development with her valuable ideas, which make this paper a successful one.

Lastly, I would like to thank every teachers of my MA journey in the ENH department who shares their knowledge and thoughts to enlighten me.

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**Abstract:**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays struggles of a black Nigerian as an American immigrant in *Americanah*. This novel shows conflicts of migratory life, relationship between African American and African people and explores multiculturalism. This paper will discuss stereotypes, racism, identity crisis and influence of literary representations of the West. Observation of characters will discover double consciousness of African immigrant. Adichie shows subtle distinction of cultures through languages. Considering all of these issues, I will discuss struggles of Ifemelu with herself as an African immigrant in the United States.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs is a novel of slave narration. Harriet Jacobs herself had gone through the horror of slavery and sexual abuses by her masters and she portrays her life struggles in her autobiographical novel. Though this is not completely autobiographical or fictional novel as the author says in the preface, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible, but they are nevertheless strictly true" (Jacobs, 3). I aim to bring out the sexual exploitation of women as well as the struggle of slave girl fighting for her freedom and rights in nineteenth century. I will focus on historical background of slavery and civil war to discuss the meaning of female life under suppression, racism and sexual abuses. However, this paper try to trace out slave life and migratory life studying characters of Linda and Ifemelu created by respectively fugitive narrator Harriet Jacobs and Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Key words: Black woman, Slavery, Immigrant, Racism, Sexual exploitation, Language

**Introduction:**

Slavery is the darkest period of human civilization. The history of slavery is full of blood, cruelty and tragedy. African black people were the main victims of slavery, both man and woman tolerated and witnessed the horrors of slavery but African American woman bore a horrific sign of slavery. African slave narrator in particular fugitive slave narrator brings this dark side of white superior in front of the world to make conscious the slave community and to know the whole world. From slave period to present era, African black female writer tries to portray black woman's struggles and position in history and in the present world through their pen. They use literature as their weapon to send their message. Their writings reflect African black woman's untold story. My dissertation focuses on struggles of African black woman as a slave and as an immigrant. From the period of slavery to present age their struggles are going on in different ways. Harriet Jacobs is the first fugitive slave narrator who writes an autobiography of female slave. As a slave girl she learnt to read and write with the help of her mistress though it was prohibited to educate slaves in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Later on, she uses her education as a weapon to abolish slavery. Chimamanda Adichie is a Nigerian writer who is famous for TED talk and her interviews where she talks on feminism and racism. Her novel *Americanah* is about an immigrant African black girl who faces racism in America. This paper investigates characters of Linda and Ifemelu through the lens of feminist point of view. It explores historical background of slavery and fugitive narrative and how Afro American culture took place and after a long struggle why still African black woman faces racism in multicultural America. Other things such as color, hairstyle, language, etc also play a vital issues

which we observe in Adichie's voice, "In undergrad a white classmate asks if I like watermelon, I say yes, and another classmate says, oh my God that is so racist, and I'm confused" (Adichie, 220). Linda's struggle was for freedom from slavery and Ifemelu struggles for finding her true self as an African immigrant.

### **History of Slavery in the United States**

Slavery, the darkest history of the world, began in the United States in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and practiced throughout the America but according to David Walker, slavery had long been practiced in Africa (Gates and Mckay 154). Comparing to previous slave system, white Christian masters were brutal and did greater crimes and injustices to humanity. "Slavery as perpetrated by the European colonizers of Africa and the Americas brought man's inhumanity to man to a level of technological efficiency unimagined by previous generations" (Gates and Mckay 154).

The horrors of slavery, in fact, was started by the Spanish enslavement which was triggered in America. America imported at least ten million human beings to North and South America against their will (Gates and Mckay 154). With the arrival of 20 enslaved Africans to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, horrifying slavery began in the new world. From the beginning, they were not considered as slaves and they were treated as indentured servants who could become free if they could make their master satisfy for a number of years. This situation became miserable in 1700 when the growing plantation economy of Virginia needed a work force and day by day black Africans became lifetime property of their masters rather than just a temporary servant. Black African slaves basically worked on the tobacco, rice, cotton and indigo plantations of the Southern coast during 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries but in the North where slavery was not much needed. The



North's manufacturing industry was well established and it assured their rise to economic and political preeminence over the Southern half of what would become the United States. The first Africans were brought in North to work as laborers but later on Virginia company demanded a work force that was cheaper than free and easily controlled, by establishing this chattel institution of slavery, black person became a mere servant (Gates and Mckay 155). After that, white masters started using them as their personal property as if they are not humans but a mere objects. Africans used to work whole day and night for masters and if they did any mistake, they were punished terribly. Thus, African black people lost their basic human rights where male slaves were treated like animal and female slaves were abused by masters.

Civil War is the most significant event in American history. It occurred in America in 1861 because of freedom of slaves. This war established equal human rights for all citizens of America as the largest slaveholding country in the world but this achievement was accomplished at the cost of many lives. The reason behind this brutal war was mainly imbalanced power between North and South. Then, National Government forbade slavery in the territories whose had not yet become states. Abraham Lincoln, the first antislavery president won election in 1860. He wanted to keep slavery out of the states so that seven slave states from Southern part got off and made a new nation named, the Confederate States of America. "Lincoln promised the South that he would not demand the abolition of slavery, but he wanted the secessionists that he would not allow them to split the Union apart" (Gates and Mckay 161). When South Carolina bombarded federal troops at Fort

Sumter in Charleston on April 12, 1861, Lincoln issued a call for seventy-five thousand volunteers to help put down what northern politicians called the Southern rebellion (Gates and McKay 162).

African-Americans played an important role when this war became more violent. They refused to serve in the Union army and waited until the summer of 1862. Then, Lincoln gave permission to free blacks of Louisiana and South Carolina to make regiments gathering both free blacks and former slaves. Later, Lincoln engaged full scale recruitment of black soldiers in the army but they were paid less than the wages white soldiers were paid (Gates and McKay 162). On the other hand, Northern blacks fought for abolishing slavery. After two years of battle, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in the summer of 1862 where he declared freedom for the rebellious states of slaves. Finally on 6 December, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution abolished slavery (Gates and McKay 162).

### **Fugitive Slave Narrative**

The fugitive slave narrative has great influence on abolishing slavery and to make black African American slaves conscious about their rights. Slave narrative, also known as narrative of the enslaved is both in fiction and autobiographical stories about life in slavery. These narratives mostly written in 1760s, were either recounted in writings or passed on orally (Proctor 349). Before the civil war, authors described their lives as a slaves which was known as antebellum and after civil war slave narrative was focused on how it was difficult to bring freedom and equality into reality. However, the fugitive slave narrative began as a new departure in African American

literature. “From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the fugitive slave narrative dominated the literary landscape of antebellum black America, far outnumbering the autobiographies of free people of color, not to mention the handful of novels published by African American” (Gates and McKay 158). The most widely read African American personal narrative was *The Confessions of Nat Turner* written by a black preacher named Nat Turner. He was hanged for his successful slave revolt in U. S. on 11 November, 1831 (Gates and McKay 157).

The other most major writers of slave narrative are- Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs. They started their writing career through describing their own experiences of life as slaves. So they are antebellum slave narrator. They showed the condition of slaves, how black slaves were brutally and inhumanely treated by masters, physical and psychological mistreatment and a hellish life on earth (Gates and McKay 158). We also see that there were many famous male slave narrators like Frederick Douglass who wrote *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by himself etc.* Then in the late 1840s, fugitive slaves for example William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb and James W. C Pennington introduced “African American folk culture, extensive literary and biblical allusion and a picaresque perspective on the meaning of the slave’s flight from bondage to freedom” (Gates and McKay 159). Besides the male narrator, there were some female slave narrators like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs. Harriet Beecher’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), was the most widely read American novel which “was profoundly influenced by its author’s reading of a number of slave narratives” (Gates and McKay 159). Sojourner Truth was one of the antislavery legends. She had worked as an abolitionist and black feminist for black slave girls. Her works are *Narrative*

of *Sojourner Truth*, “Book of Life”, “Ar’n’t I a woman etc. Another African American slave narrator Harriet Jacobs wrote her own story to “challenge conventional ideas about slavery and freedom in her strikingly original *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” (Gates and McKay 159). She shows how the white master exploited black women sexually, her struggles as a slave girl and how could she achieve freedom and life of a black woman under oppression and racism.

### **Harlem Renaissance**

African Americans carried their literary legacy throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century from fugitive slave narrative era. 1920s was a decade known as Harlem Renaissance when black Americans living in New York particularly in the district of Harlem showed their extraordinary creativity in arts. They embraced every sphere of arts such as literature, music, theatre and visual arts to represent “a new sense of confidence and purpose” (Gates and McKay 953). They wanted to establish their own world apart from the white stereotypes. They portrayed their own heritage and no more wanted to be dominated by a specific school of thought. Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940), was a significant period for African American culture which included a new idea in literature. During Harlem Renaissance, black Americans portrayed their social conditions. For example, the first book of poetry *Color* was written by an African American named Countee Cullen and the first fiction book *Cane* was written by Jean Toomer (Gates and McKay 954). The most significant event i.e. migration to North from South also occurred during Harlem Renaissance era. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, life of Southern African Americans became difficult because of Segregation laws which kept them in a separate and unequal world (Gates and McKay 954). They had lack of opportunities and discrimination in Southern part so they sought for more economic opportunities and a better

life. However, it became necessary for blacks to migrate to North. During First World War in 1917, their hopes came true when Northern war industries needed more employees to make war equipment.

Swift industrial expansion in the North created a demand for labor that made many Employers eager to recruit and hire black workers. This demand intensified when the United States entered into the First World War (1914-18) in 1917 and jobs previously held by white males, themselves now serving in the armed forces, became available to newcomers from the South (Gates and Mckay 954).

Those black people's destination was in Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, especially in New York City. The district of Harlem was another attraction for blacks where the leading writers and artists produced their own culture. As the national interest in African American culture grew, encouraged by a variety of factors, such as the growing popularity of jazz, blues, and dance. Harlem seemed well on its way to becoming, as the prominent writer and civil rights leader James Weldon Johnson put it, the Negro capital of the world (Gates and Mckay 955).

Thus, Harlem and New York had many prominent black African American writers. W. E. B Du Bois was one of them. He worked for cultural awakening of black people. From the Harlem period Afro Americans carried their cultural legacy. During last quarter of the twentieth century many

black Americans produced so much distinguished writing. Toni Morrison and August Wilson are the two notable writers. Toni Morrison was the first African American who got Nobel Prize in literature in 1993 and in 1990 August Wilson got Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson* (Gates and McKay 2127). These writers established the institution of African American literature where they focused on racism, slavery and social equality.

From 1970 to present, African American literature influences American black community about their rights. African black women writers also portray the social condition of women in present America. Among them Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Octavia Butler, Nikki Giovanni, Warsan Shire and many more are prominent. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an African feminist writer who grew up in Nigeria. She writes nonfiction, short stories, novels, and so on. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus*, *Americanah* are the best known novels of her. Her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* was accepted by Algonquin Press in the US. *Americanah* a novel written by Adichie where she portrays struggling story of Nigerian immigrant girl. This novel is different from Harriet Jacob's *An Incident of a Slave girl* but the voice of female freedom is echoed in a similar tune. Jacob's autobiography tells struggle of slave girl and Adichie shows how African black immigrant woman still goes through inequalities as a free human in America. Adichie focuses on the subtle matters which are not about only color but those are about everything such as: language, fashion for black girls, identity conflict and most importantly gender issue. She points out that how an immigrant has no choice but to practice American accent and different ways of expression forgetting one's own self. Frantz Fanon says in *Black Skin White Masks*,

Every colonized people-in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adaption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (Fanon, 9).

Woman's position as a slave girl and as an African immigrant in America reflects in a same mirror. Struggles of both women Linda and Ifemelu are for freedom to celebrate their own self though they are from two different times and places. This thesis concentrates their different struggles to get same achievement focusing on various issues. My paper's aim is to demonstrate horrors of slavery in the past and racism in the present in the American context through the chosen texts.

## Chapter 1

### Struggles of an African American black as a slave girl in 19th century

Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an autobiographical work first published as a slave narrative written in the nineteenth century. She herself is a black slave girl who has fought for freedom and rights. Jacob portrays how she has to go through unbearable oppression as an enslaved woman. She never stops her endeavors nor she remains silent. She always tries to figure out the way of freedom at any cost of her life. This chapter's aim is to bring out sexual exploitation of women to focus on sexual abuses from a woman's perspective. It also contains detailed discussion of her life incidents to examine the major aspects of slavery. Although slavery is the darkest era for human beings, under slavery the life of women is more miserable which is not imaginable. Harriet Jacobs's novel shows life of an African woman that experiences sexual abuses, oppression and racism.

### **Story of a Real-Life Fighter**

Harriet Ann Jacobs is a prominent name in the world literature. She brings the light of hope in mind of the black people who lived in oppression. She is known as African American female slave who challenges conventional ideas about slavery and freedom (159). She was born as a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813, daughter of Delilah and Elijah who died during her youth and she was raised by her maternal grandmother, Molly Horniblow (Yellin 3). In her childhood, she did not know that she was a slave until her generous mistress died at the age of eleven. She says that, "Though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping and liable to be demanded of them at any moment"



(7). When her mistress died, she willed her to Dr James Norcom and then lifetime of sufferings and intolerable oppression came to her life. In the meantime, Jacobs was involved in a sexual affair with a white neighbour of Dr Norcom, the lawyer Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, and hope that to get rid of the doctor's harassment but at the end she gave birth to two children who legally belonged to Norcom (knight 218). However, her white master became more oppressive and continued his monstrous abuses. Jacobs was afraid of her master that he might take her children away from her and sell them so she hid herself at her grandmother's house and watched her children from a far between 1835-1842. Within this time children were sold by their father what she expected (Knight 219). She was waiting for an opportunity to escape and she could make it in 1849. She went to New York and was reunited with her children. In New York, she worked with her brother in the abolitionist movement. Then, Jacobs decided to write about her struggle life and published a book but as a black woman no one wanted to help her. Finally, she found help from abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, the editor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Knight 219). This book brought a new dimension in her life. She became the first fugitive narrator and the source of freedom of black female community in America.

### **Horrors of Sexuality**

*Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl* is written by Harriet Jacobs who herself had gone through the horrors of slavery and sexual abuses by her master and she portrays her life struggles in her autobiographical novel. Though this is not completely autobiographical or fictional novel as the author says in the preface, "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are nevertheless, strictly true" (3). The editor of this novel, Maria Child clarifies author's preface to say that author is known to her and "The names of both persons and places are known to me; but for good reasons I suppress them" (Child, 5).

Valerie Smith suggests that slave narratives “combine elements of history, autobiography and fiction” (Foreman, 314). So, *The Life of a Slave Girl* depicts aspects of fiction and autobiography which visualized slave narrative and thirst for freedom but most importantly this novel echoes the panic of sexual tension through the character of Linda.

Jacobs starts her story with the first person narrator, Linda. Linda’s journey begins from her childhood and she says that she has no any idea about slavery until six years of her birth. “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (7). After six years of her birth, she encounters with slave life. She loses her mother and her kind mistress in chapter 1 then she loses her father in chapter 2 and becomes a property of Dr Flint’s daughter. Dr Flint represents Dr Norcom. Linda describes her master’s cruelty in her words, “Dr. Flint was an epicure. The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whippers, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence” (15).

Chapter 2 gives us vivid cruelties of her master. Author focuses on not only female slavery but also the story of a male slave who is nearly beaten to death for quarrelling with his wife because the master is the father of her children and the account of a slave girl who dies in child birth soon after her baby dies or her baby is taken from her to sell as a slave. Linda points out other women’s condition, “This poor woman endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby, for a whole day and night” (15). From chapter 5, we get detailed description of sexual harassment. Linda describes the daily torments she endures in her master Flint’s house. When she is fifteen, several times she hears foul words from Dr. Flint. Her master tries to humiliate Linda and Linda has no way to protect herself. The story tells us her miserable condition, “He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things”

(30). Her soul wants to revolt against tyranny but there is no hope and no safe place for her (30). As a slave girl, she has no any right to be human, she is a mere 'property' of her master. Valerie Smith notes that Dr. Flint, "for some reason reluctant to force Linda to submit sexually, harassed her, pleaded with her, and tries to bribe her into capitulation in the manner of an importunate suitor" ( Foreman, 318). However, Linda goes through a fear of him every moment because, her master always reminds her that she is belonged to him. His dark shadow always hunts Linda. In chapter 6, Dr. Flint brings her daughter to his room so that Linda is bound to sleep in the same room.

This incident describes how horrible her situation is as a young girl but she cannot go anywhere to protect herself. Her mistress, Dr. Flint's wife, is knowledgeable about her husband's lustful manners but she is emotionally immature. She has no courage to stand against her husband rather she shows her jealousy and hatred towards Linda. Linda says, "I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed" (37). Beauvoir's analysis of women's condition in her *The Second Sex* that she does not hold men individually responsible for the repression of women because this particular ideology is also working because of some women who accept inauthentic roles determined for them by patriarchal in society" ( Tidd, 68). This incidents clearly shows that the position of women remains same in the patriarchal society and women have no voice for other women. Linda points out that both black and white women are at the mercy of the white patriarchal system where the white man has the complete power to control his wife and he can do anything with his slave. It is clear that black African woman are not only delegated by white man but also white woman. "Dr. Flint functions with the terrain of the 'patriarchal

institution', which insists that the slave-master union is mutually affectional. He adopts the different roles of 'patriarch' throughout the narrative" (Foreman, 321).

When Linda is a young girl, she falls in love with a free black man. Though her lover is free but as a slave girl she cannot marry him. Finally, Flint's abusive behavior drives her to Mr. Sands and she physically engages with this white man and gives birth of two children. "He was an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor girl who trusted in him" (60). Linda has faith on Mr. Sand but soon her trust turns into fear that Mr. Sand may betray her and will sell her children and after few chapters we find that Linda's assumption becomes true. Linda here again becomes victim of sexuality in the name of love. According to Foreman,

The problem of the parental and the assertion of agency also resonate in Linda

Brent's experiences and in her relations with Dr. Flint and Mr. Sands. Jacobs's text

Explores the complexities of the 'patriarchal institution' and undermines the myth of

the Southern extended slave family. For instance, she describes her grandmother's

former mistress as the 'foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my

grandmother's breast'. In exposing their mistress's betrayal of both her foster mother

and sister, Jacobs exposes how the flexible parameters of 'family' often are eclipsed

by the inflexible parameters of property within the slave economy (321).

In Chapter 4, when Linda becomes mother of a girl, she laments that, "When they told me my new born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for

men; but it is far more terrible for women” (86). This passage supports the horrific situation of a slave girl which is also illustrated by Sojourner Truth in her “Aint’t I a Woman” where she depicts the life of negroes in the South and the women of the North. She shows the mother’s grief who sees her thirteen children are sold in front of her but she cannot do anything. Linda also fears her girl will be sold and faces brutal sexual abuses like her. Thus, African black woman is brutalized and dehumanized by white masters. They treat them as a slave-savage and property of them. Linda suffers the fear of stripped, beaten, raped and forced to breed more slaves which represents her sexual torture in this novel.

Linda endures all types of sexual harassment from her childhood, though she does not give up. She continues her struggle to become a free woman, to achieve rights as a human being. The character of Linda always reminds the reader about the right of womanhood throughout the novel. When Jacobs describes the act of jealousy that Linda receives from Dr Flint’s wife, her mistress, author does not only focus on sexual harassment of Linda but she realizes the helpless condition of white woman too. This white woman has no power like Linda, she is also used as object by her husband. She is a subordinate like slave girl. She has no voice to go against her husband’s will. Jacobs portrays a strong character of her grandmother who is a slave woman but throughout the novel she helps her to escape from the hell.

### **Comparison between Male and Female Slave Narrator**

Lives of American Slaves focuses on Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the life of F. D.* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl* where both novels depicts the author’s journey from slave life to free life but Jacobs’s novel is different because it addresses the issues of female bondage and sexual abuses from a woman’s perspective. Douglass describes brutal slavery

from man's perspective and his novel focuses on the motive of literacy and free speech. "Douglass organizes his narrative around the theme of increasing control over his life as a path toward personal independence. A major instrument in his quest is language and in particular, literacy. Perhaps the paramount virtue in his *Narrative* is the individual's courage, and the crucial weapon" (Morgan, 77). In contrast, Jacobs's story represents a feminist view of slavery where she focuses on the female community and family. She shows strong solidarity between Linda and her grandmother and Linda's determination to rescue her two children. According to Morgan, Douglass's narrative emphasizes his acquisition and development of written language but Jacobs depicts a network of relationship developed from bonds of love. Jacobs's narrator Linda has fear of her master but she never thinks of only herself, she has feelings and love for her grandmother, brother, uncle, aunt and above all for her children. She sacrifices her love to save her lover's life. She shows her respects and trust to Bruce family. Though Bruce family is a white family, as a slave girl she never judges humans based on skin color. However, Morgan points out that Douglass tries to connect with and control his relations with both black and white communities through his manipulation of language on the other hand, Jacobs feels closely connected with family and friends.

To sum up, Jacobs wants to show the world of the devastating and dehumanizing impact of slavery on women, so she depicts her horrific experiences as an enslaved African woman which presents one of the most powerful narratives of the slavery experience from a female perspective.

## Chapter 2

Struggles of an African woman as an American immigrant in 21<sup>st</sup> century

*Americanah* is written by Nigerian female writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in 2013. This book is different from Jacobs's novel but both of them talk about African origin woman. Jacobs portrays the struggle of black female slaves of 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas Adichie depicts psychological struggles of African immigrant girl of present age. Harriet Jacobs's *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an autobiographical depiction of herself where she shows a woman's inner strength which gives her mental and physical power to fight against her white master and the whole system of slavery to gain freedom. Adichie's *Americanah* is a novel of migratory girl which shows struggle of protagonist with herself. Both writers explore the black woman's position in history and in the contemporary world. Adichie's heroine Ifemelu, who is an African immigrant, portrays the struggle of African black female immigrants, endurance in adapting to new accent of language and culture of the West. This novel also introduces a new generation of African immigrant known as Afropolitans. Taiye Selasi says in *Bye-Bye Babar*:

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you.

You will know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos (2005).

However, protagonist Ifemelu explores the conflict of migratory life and clearly shows racism in multicultural country America. Ifemelu comes to America from Lagos, Nigeria, with new dream of advancing her professional career. Ifemelu and her Nigerian boyfriend, Obinze when they stayed in their country, had American ambitions. Obinze says, “I read American books because America is the future” (70). On entering the real world of America or Western realm, they become frustrated. Especially Ifemelu, as an African black woman, she faces numerous racism because of her color and race. We see a strong and positive minded character of Ifemelu when she was in Nigeria but she is in dilemma searching her true self in America. Adichie describes her situation in this line, “She could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty” (4). This line from the first page of the novel indicates Ifemelu’s thirst of searching her identity. This identity conflict arises from the adaptation of language and acculturation. Ifemelu starts writing about her experiences in United States and become a famous blogger and speaker on racism. She expresses her frustration and horrible experiences as an African immigrant in the United States through her blogging. I will focus on her blog writing to bring out the main barriers of her American life.

### **Hair and Skin**

From the beginning of this novel, we see that she has to go to Trenton to braid hair which is expensive. She also has to journey a long way because there are no salons for African girls in her city. This braiding salons are “in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people” (9). Later on, to get a job she is forced to lose the braids and straighten her hair like white girl and when she is made her hair a little burn, the hairdresser said, “But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!” (203). Furthermore, there is no magazine considering



black women as fashion model so that people consider white women's fashion as standard one. Ifemelu says to her aunt, "What if every magazine you opened and every film you watched had beautiful women with hair like jute? You would be admiring my hair now" (216). She also argues with her American boyfriend Curt about her magazine in chapter 31. Curt picks up a copy of *Essence* and comments, "This magazine's kind of racially skewed and only black women featured" (294). Then, Ifemelu takes him into bookstore and she spreads the magazines on the table. They notice that all of the models are white women, only three or four black women out of two thousand pages of women's magazines but "all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something" (295). Those fashion models are not as dark as Ifemelu. They do not look like her so she cannot get any clues for make up or which hair products are best for her or eye shadow matches her black eyes. She says, "An advertisement for foundation. There are seven different shades for white skin and one generic chocolate shade" (295). After this incident with Curt, she starts her blog taking suggestion from Wambui. Though blogs are new and unfamiliar to her, she gets her platform to express herself and to inform others about race problem in America. She writes a blog about hair named "A Michelle Obama Shout-out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor". She points out how hair can be used as race metaphor. She says that she wonders if "Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it" (296). She quotes it to show that hair plays an important role to express one's identity. African woman cannot braid even if they want to braids because their natural or braided hair is considered as unprofessional that is why Ifemelu was also bound to straight her hair before going to an interview (119). She points out that she never sees any black woman has natural hair on TV shows and makeover shows often picturized that natural hair is ugly and it becomes pretty when someone has "taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight" (297). In America, artificial hair is considered as natural but when someone has natural braided hair white people think she did

something to her hair. Thus, Ifemelu faces racism and identity conflict in American with a simple hair.

After a long time of abolishing slavery and racism still black people face racism because of their skin. Ifemelu's blogs claim this point properly. One of her blog's headline is "To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black, Baby" (220). This statement focuses that when any African goes out of their region they come to know they are black. In the United States, there is no other identity such as someone is Jamaican or Ghanaian, every African is considered as only black African. She portrays different aspect of racism in this blog. She says that strong minded black woman is granted as scary and if any crime occurs anywhere by a black person, other should stay away from that place to keep safe. She explains another situation, for example, if any black employee gives bad service to the white people in front of other black person, that black person has to be sorry as if both are guilty not for only bad service but being from a black community. She gives example of a restaurant where a black person must give tip generously otherwise next black person will be treated awfully. She points out that after getting treatment in such way any black person cannot tell to any non-black person about something racist happening to him or her. They cannot complain, they should be forgiving or they should present it in a funny way and they cannot be angry about racism because if they talk about white people's racism, they will be accounted as real racist (220-221). Thus, African people are reminded in every step of foreign life that they are black, they are different from white people because of their skin. This makes aware them of their blackness in the white society. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* discloses this fact that:

As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is an impurity, a flaw that

outlaws any ontological explanation. For not only must he be black; he must be black in relation to the white man (Fanon 82-83).

However, Nigerian culture is influenced by the Western. Skin color becomes important to them too though Ifemelu asserts at the end of the novel that, "Race doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (476). In chapter 12, Ginika, friend of Ifemelu who is influenced by American culture, is a half-caste girl and for this reason she wins the title of the prettiest girl in school (121). Again in chapter 2, through Obinze's observation we see that his wife, Kosi, feels happy when anyone asks her, "Is your mother white? Are you a half-caste?" (22). She gets pleasure to think herself as a mixed race. Ifemelu's blog 'Why Dark-Skinned Black Women- Both American and Non-American- Love Barack Obama' bring out that many American blacks feel proud if they are not "Full-Blooded Negroes" so light skin has value in American black community because "today most of the American blacks who are successful as entertainers and as public figures, are light" (213-214). Skin color is also important in Nigeria, they consider dark and light skin tone but Ifemelu does not face racism in her home country whereas in America she is reminded that she is black in every steps of her new journey.

### **Language and Accent barrier**

Ifemelu realizes her otherness through language and more particularly accent which always reminds her that she is different and peculiar. English is the second language of her, she speaks English after Igbo even she practices English with Obinze to grab more phrases but still she tries hard to become like native speaker when she moves to America. Ifemelu, and her friends when they stay in Nigeria, they try to become like American, to grab appropriate American English language, “Everyone watched American films, shows and exchanged faded American magazines” (67). She tries hard to adopt American accent and different ways of expression. According to Fanon, “Mastery of language affords remarkable power. Paul Valery called language the god gone astray in the flesh” (Fanon 9). When anyone becomes master in Western language and not only can speak well in that particular language but can use certain syntax, morphology, tone and expression, white people appreciate them as a part of their civilization. Finally, Ifemelu is able to speak like native speaker but one day suddenly she decides to stop acting like American speaker when she speaks with telemarketer. The operator praises her saying, “You sound totally American” and replies with a “Thank you” (173-175). After this incident, she feels ashamed and she thinks herself that it cannot be a success or accomplishment to sound like American. So, she resolves to stop faking the American accent (175). American blacks, do not appreciate other blacks who are new there and cannot speak like them. One of the characters of this book is Halima and black boys beat her son in school because of African accent, “now accent go and no problems” (187). Fanon describes in the chapter ‘The Negro and language’ that black man has two dimensions. He behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro (Fanon 8). As long as Ifemelu understands her two selves, she retains herself in her true self. That afternoon after

conversation with telecommunication operator, she speaks without American accent and discovers her true self. In *Americanah* Adichie depicts, except accent, word also plays an important role. Through her main character, she shows how black people become victim of racism because of choosing words. For instance, Ifemelu's friend Ginika tells her that 'fat' in America is bad word so she has to use 'big' instead of 'fat' (5). Ifemelu writes in her blog that words such as 'watermelon', 'tar baby' are used in jokes and being a Non-American black if anyone does not know about this he will be thought as racist (220). On the other hand 'thin' is a good word in America but in Nigeria it is considered as bad word and the expression also differs e.g. losing weight is something bad in their country but in America it is different (124). Students of America do not use 'I don't know', they say, instead, 'I'm not sure'. They do not give direct instruction and say 'You might want to ask somebody upstairs' instead of 'ask somebody upstairs' and they never use the word 'sorry' rather they express apology saying, 'Are you okay' (134). However, American accent, way of expression are different from Africa. It is difficult to adopt foreign language and accent for any new comer forgetting their native language and exactly that is what happens with Ifemelu. She does not want to deny her heritage to become an American.

### **Socio-Economic Pressures in Immigrant Life**

Ifemelu comes to the United States with bunch of dreams and hopes but when she starts observing the real America, she becomes frustrated and depressed. She faces racism being a black woman, has to struggle and sacrifice to get job and her relationship and sexual life are hampered. She goes through many unpleasant situation to find a job.

She becomes a victim of sexual assault where she works as a babysitter. She says, "There was, in his storytelling, an expectation of successful seduction" (150). She is forced to do odd job for some dollar and goes through mental trauma. She feels like, "The world was a big, big place and

she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptyly". She feels herself sinking, sinking quickly and unable to pull herself up. She does not find any hope to live even she has no energy to think how can she kill herself (154-156). The pressure of immigrant life makes her act like crazy. After ending her struggle period, she recovers from hopelessness and tries to figure out her true self and she realizes that one's comfort zone is her real identity so she stops being an American.

Ifemelu's depiction in *Americanah* clearly shows the racist mind of American. Her struggle for searching true self is portrayed through language and accent barriers.

## Conclusion

Fugitive slave narrator launched new footsteps in African American literature where the life of a slave is reflected. African slaves found their platform to assert themselves and through literature they could make a community to achieve their rights as human beings. Harriet Jacobs's novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a successful slave narrative which portrays inhuman activities of white masters such as sexual harassment of master, physical abuse, human suffering under slavery and the importance of family, family bonding under slavery, escape from enslavement and new life of freedom. Protagonist Linda is presented as one voice of every slave girl. Her struggles depict the darkest era of history. However, Jacobs shows bondage of slave girl through the characters of Linda and her grandmother and many white women also help Linda in New York to become free. Even, the author was encouraged by Maria Child to write her autobiography. So, the unity of women made it possible to fight against slavery. Furthermore, in nineteenth century black women were considered as personal property whereas white women had no right to go against white men. Somehow their social positions were different but both communities were controlled by white men. Finally, when black women came out to achieve their rights, to abolishing slavery, white women also joined them. The matter of regret is that long time after abolishing slavery, still racism exists in America. Linda is abused sexually, faces racism, gets tortured as a slave girl but Ifemelu observes racism in every subtle issue. Ifemelu's observation proves that racism is not only about color, it is about hair, fashion, language, expression and so on. Racism plays an essential role to develop her character. She is dominated by American culture and her true self is in dilemma. At the end, she goes back to her country, Nigeria embracing her own identity. She becomes a blogger and speaks on race. In this point, Linda and Ifemelu have

similarity, both of them struggle against racism and to make their own community conscious about their rights. They are from two different periods, their struggles are individual but their message echoes in a same way. At the end, my paper focuses on only African black woman and their struggles to become freed from white bondage and gain human rights but their freedom is achieved by their lots of sacrifices and struggles as well as some white women came forward to support them as being womanhood. There is no sufficient information regarding white woman's collaboration with black woman. So, there can be research on collaboration of white and black women during slavery.



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