

# Financial stability and power

Business



“ Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” -Abraham Lincoln In society, there is an idea of power from men towards women; that is, men possess a sense of power over women. The way this power is exerted is dependent on one’s character. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, there are recurring themes of power and financial security.

The actions of female characters in *Americanah* seem to be primarily motivated by the desire for power and financial stability; Auntie Uju is seeking power from The General but also obtains financial stability, Ifemelu is searching for financial stability from the tennis coach but also notices an aspect of power in their encounter, and in interactions between Kosi and Obinze, it can be seen that Obinze holds a sort of power over Kosi and Kosi wishes to maintain financial stability through her marriage to Obinze. Auntie Uju’s relationship with The General displays the influence of power in Nigerian society. Ifemelu is contemplating how Auntie Uju’s lifestyle has changed her and her motives for seeking such a lifestyle. “ Ifemelu wondered if Auntie Uju ever looked at herself with the eyes of the girl she used to be. Perhaps not. Auntie Uju had steadied herself into her new life with a lightness of touch, more consumed by The General himself than by her new wealth.

The first time Ifemelu saw Auntie Uju’s house...she did not want to leave. The bathroom fascinated her, with its hot water tap, its gushing shower, its pink tiles. The bedroom curtains were made of raw silk, and she told Auntie Uju, “ Ahn; ahn, it’s a waste to use this material as a curtain! Let’s sew a dress with it.

” The living room had glass doors that slid noiselessly open and noiselessly shut. Even the kitchen was air-conditioned....

Aunty Uju, in her big pink house with the wide satellite dish blooming from its roof, her generator brimming with diesel, her freezer stocked with meat, and she did not have money in her bank account...She looked suddenly small and bewildered among the detritus of her new life, the fawn-colored jewel case on the dressing table, the silk robe thrown across the bed, and Ifemelu felt frightened for her.. It startled Ifemelu, how much a relaxer retouching cost at Aunty Uju’s hair salon: the haughty hairdressers sized up each customer, eyes swinging from head to shoes, to decide how much attention she was worth.

With Aunty Uju, they hovered and groveled, curtsying deeply as they greeted her, overpraising her handbag and shoes. Ifemelu watched, fascinated. It was here, at a Lagos salon, that the different ranks of imperial femaleness were best understood...’ I did not sleep with him because I wanted something. Ah, this thing called power. I was attracted to him even with his teeth like Dracula. I was attracted to his power'” (89-94).

Ifemelu “[wonders] if Aunty Uju ever looked at herself with the eyes of the girl she used to be.” In itself, this quotation shows that Aunty Uju is now removed from the person she used to be. She “ had steadied herself into her new life with a lightness of touch more consumed by The General himself than by her new wealth.” Aunty Uju easily transitioned into her new lavish lifestyle with The General, but her priorities were not for financial stability but rather for the sole purpose of power; The General maintains a high

societal ranking which attracts Aunty Uju. The General, however, also provides her financial stability and therefore she does not have to work at all.

When Ifemelu visits their house for the first time, “ she [does] not want to leave.” She is “ fascinated” by “[the] bathroom...with its hot water tap, its gushing shower, its pink tiles” and by the “ bedroom curtains..

. made of raw silk.” She is “ fascinated” because these seem like such luxuries to her, so much so that when she sees the curtains, she deems it ““ a waste to use [the] material as a curtain”” and that rather than using them as curtains, they should be used to “ sew a dress.” Ifemelu is examining this house in awe, noticing that “[the] living room had glass doors that slid noiselessly open and noiselessly shut” and the kitchen was air-conditioned.” Ifemelu is looking through her eyes in the same manner that Aunty Uju likely would have if she had not been with The General; Aunty Uju’s new sense of normalcy is different from the way she used to see things.

When Ifemelu discusses how Aunty Uju herself is doing financially, however, Ifemelu is surprised to discover that she does not work at all and she does not have any money in her bank account; The General is supporting both of them on his own. Ifemelu ponders how “ Aunty Uju, in her big pink house with the wide satellite dish blooming from its roof, her generator brimming with diesel, her freezer stocked with meat...[does] not have money in her bank account.” Ifemelu brings to Aunty Uju’s attention how dependant she has become on the General and she “[looks] suddenly small and bewildered

among the detritus of her new life, the fawn-colored jewel case on the dressing table, the silk robe thrown across the bed.

“Aunty Uju has given up part of her identity by altering her perspective for an extravagant lifestyle with The General and “Ifemelu [feels] frightened for her.” Ifemelu, living a simplistic lifestyle, is “startled” by “how much a relaxer retouching cost at Aunty Uju’s hair salon” and how “the haughty hairdressers sized up each customer” and decide that Aunty Uju is worthy of an immense amount of attention due to her attire. The hairdressers “hovered and groveled, curtsying deeply as they greeted her, overpraising her handbag and shoes” because she is financially superior to them. Ifemelu watches, “fascinated” by this interaction because she knows she would not be treated the same way. She considers it apparent that “here, at a Lagos salon..

. the different ranks of imperial femaleness were best understood.” The clarity of the social hierarchy based on financials is apparent in the salon because the hairdressers give the most attention to the customers who appear to be the most wealthy. This idea is ironic because Aunty Uju herself has no money, but instead she is flaunting The General’s wealth. However, it is not the wealth she was seeking when she began her affair with The General.

She “was attracted to him even with his teeth like Dracula.” Even though The General is not physically attractive, Aunty Uju states that she “was attracted to his power.” The financial stability is not her top priority, but instead it is that she is with someone who has a sense of power in Nigeria.

Ifemelu's struggles in America concern both financial security and power and how far one will go in order to stabilize themselves financially. Ifemelu finds herself seeking a job to no avail. In her desperation, she initially turns down a job offer but later reconsiders it when she cannot find a better option.

Ifemelu is asked to be a masseuse for a tennis coach, which she believes to be an unsuitable job for her. " Her skin prickled, an unease settling over her. There was something venal about his thin-lipped face; he had the air of a man to whom corruption was familiar...

He spoke as quickly as he moved, his expression uncannily alert; his eyes stayed wide and unblinking for too long...He was not a kind man..

. his manner, his tone, had dripped suggestion...Whatever happened, she would approach it looking her best, she would make it clear to him that there were boundaries she would not cross..

. He offered her something to drink, in a perfunctory way that suggested he expected her to say no, and then he took off his shirt and lay on the bed... She wished he had done things a little more slowly. Her own words had deserted her.

.. She should leave now. The power balance was tilted in his favor, had been tilted in his favor since she walked into his house. She should leave..

. There was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted.

She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs...Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her.

She had come here on her own...She walked to the train, feeling heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud..

. She felt like a small ball, adrift and alone. The world was a big, big place and she was so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around emptily...She never should have gone there.

She should have walked away. She wanted to shower, to scrub herself, but she could not bear the thought of touching her own body...She curled on her bed and cried, wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened” (176-190). Ifemelu’s encounters with the tennis coach are uncomfortable and violating.

In their first interaction, Ifemelu feels her “ skin [prickle]” and a sense of “ unease [settles] over her.” Both these ideas signal that Ifemelu is fearful of him and his “ venal” nature. She says that he is “ thin-lipped,” meaning he is of European heritage, and therefore there is a presence of racial hierarchy in the scenes between the two of them. In him being “ venal,” Ifemelu knows that he is likely to take advantage of her, which she reinforces when she explains how “ he had the air of a man to whom corruption was familiar.” Ifemelu watches as he “[speaks] as quickly as he [moves], his expression uncannily alert” with “ wide and unblinking” eyes.

The tennis coach seems to approach his desires actively without a hint of hesitation and does not want to spend too much time on Ifemelu if she will not pursue his wishes. Ifemelu knows that he “[is] not a kind man” and at this point, Ifemelu leaves to seek other job opportunities. Regrettably, she learns that she must return to him after she cannot find work elsewhere and needs to pay her rent; she has reached a point where her desperation overpowers her dignity. Ifemelu “[approaches]” their next encounter “looking her best.” As she is preparing herself, she establishes “boundaries she would not cross” in her mind with the intention of conveying them to the tennis coach. When she arrives to meet him again, he offers her a drink “in a perfunctory way that suggested he expected her to say no.

” The tennis coach is not trying to pursue Ifemelu in terms of a relationship in any means, as displayed in the lack of effort he places forth. He lays on his bed shirtless and expectant of her to do as he wishes. Ifemelu, on the other hand, “[wishes] he [would do] things a little more slowly.” Ifemelu’s prepared terms which she had wanted to establish “had deserted her” and she knows that she “should leave.” Ifemelu knows that the “power balance was tilted in his favor, had been tilted in his favor since she walked into his house.” Not only is there an established racial dominance in the tennis coach being of European descent, but their location is also his home, which is advantageous for him due to his level of comfort, and Ifemelu is dangerously frantic to support herself financially.

Ifemelu sees “in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness” which makes her feel “defeated.” Ifemelu thinks of how “sordid it all was...that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay..



. because she had come.” The tennis coach knows that she will do as he wishes because of how desperate she is. She had never expected that she would have to sell herself for money but has found herself in a such situation which leaves her “ tainted.” She climbs into bed with the tennis coach and he does as he wants with her, leaving her “ coiled and deadened” after. It was consensual but violating regardless; “[he] had not forced her” but she had forced herself.

She had gone to his house and lain in his bed with him; both these actions were her doing. However, she only performed these actions because she knew it would help her stabilize herself better financially. After she leaves him, she feels “ heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud.” The entire encounter seems cloudy and seems almost impossible to have happened. Nevertheless, the memory itself exists vivid in her mind yet remains hard to process. She feels “ adrift and alone.

.. so tiny, so insignificant, rattling around empty.” She acknowledges her regret for having seen him again and wishes she had left when she still possessed her dignity. When she arrives home, she wishes she could shower and “ scrub herself, but she could not bear the thought of touching her own body.” Ifemelu wishes she could wash away his touch and the memory of him, but she cannot.

She “[curls] on her bed and [cries,] wishing she could reach into herself and yank out the memory of what had just happened.” She takes up the least amount of space as possibly when she curls herself up, as if she does not feel she is worthy of the space she would ordinarily take up. Ifemelu is no

longer herself; she has been violated to a point where she feels completely and utterly alone. The tennis coach exerted his power over Ifemelu; both he and Ifemelu knew that she would not put up a fight to him due to her desperation. Obinze and Kosi's marriage displays how the desire for financial stability impacts one's actions. Obinze and Kosi's relationship is falling apart due to his affair with Ifemelu.

When Obinze approaches Kosi to discuss a potential divorce, Kosi responds in a manner that shows that her priorities lie in maintaining her financial stance. " She turned from the mirror to look at him blankly...She raised her hand, her open palm facing him, to make him stop talking.

Say no more, her hand said. Say no more. And it irked him that she did not want to know more. Her palm was pale, almost diaphanous...

She lowered her hand. Then, slowly, she sank to her knees...and he did not want to comprehend what she was doing..

. She was kneeling and begging him not to leave and he wished she would be furious instead... ' all because your old girlfriend came into town?'

. He loathed Kosi, for knowing all this time and pretending she didn't know, and for the sludge of humiliation it left in his stomach. He had been keeping a secret that was not even a secret...

She was determined to remain married and it was the least he owed her, to remain married. Panic laced through him at the thought of remaining married...he told himself that he was being silly and dramatic. He had to think of his daughter.

.. But in the morning Kosi laid out...her blue lace long skirt, his blue Senegalese caftan, and in between, Buchi's flouncy blue velvet dress.

She had never done that before, laid out color-coordinated outfits for them all..." Hold Daddy's hand," she told Buchi as they walked into Ahmed's festival compound that afternoon. She wanted to will normalcy back. She wanted to will a good marriage into being" (571-574). Obinze confesses to Kosi that he loves someone else and Kosi "[turns] from the mirror to look at him blankly." Obinze tries to speak to explain himself but Kosi "[raises] her hand, her open palm facing him, to make him stop talking. Say no more, her hand said.

" Kosi does not want to know more, and it "[irks Obinze] that she did not want to know more" because he knows that if he was to do something similar to Ifemelu, she would challenge him in her response. As he looks at her hand, he notices how "[her] palm was pale, almost diaphanous, and he could see the greenish criss-cross of her veins." Her palm being " diaphanous" gives hint to their lifestyle; if she was tan, it would signal that she has a lower-ranked job in society. When she lowers her hand, she proceeds to "[sink] to her knees" and although Obinze "[does] not want to comprehend what she was doing," he knows that "[she] was kneeling and begging him not to leave." By kneeling in front of him and begging, it shows that Obinze has power over her. Obinze cannot help but "[wish] she would be furious instead.

" He wants her to be more like Ifemelu; he wants her to be more vocal and to stand up for herself. Kosi tells Obinze that she knows he has been cheating

on her. Obinze “[loathes] Kosi, for knowing all this time and pretending she didn’t know.” He wishes she had confronted him; Obinze is seeking an edginess that Kosi does not provide. Obinze feels a “ sludge of humiliation.. . in his stomach” for “ keeping a secret that was not even a secret.” Even though he cheated on her, which would result in the ending of a relationship between many couples, Kosi “ was determined to remain married” for the sake of her and Buchi, their daughter, remaining financially stable. Obinze knows that staying married to Kosi “ was the lease he owed her,” but he cannot help but feel “ panic [lace] through him at the thought of remaining married.” Obinze forces himself to maintain his marriage to Kosi for Buchi’s sake; he puts Buchi over his own happiness.

The next morning, “ Kosi laid out...her blue lace long skirt, his blue Senegalese caftan, and in between, Buchi’s flouncy blue velvet dress” for them all to wear to a party. By putting Buchi’s outfit out between the two of theirs, Kosi is establishing that they are unified by Buchi, not by their own will.

Obinze acknowledges that Kosi “ had never...laid out color-coordinated outfits for them all” before. Kosi is trying to impose on the three of them to be a stable, family unit.

As Obinze, Kosi, and Buchi walk into the party, Kosi tells Buchi to hold Obinze’s hand. Kosi “ wanted to will normalcy back. She wanted to will a good marriage into being.” Obinze feels that Kosi is trying to force something that does not truly exist; they are not the happy family that Kosi is trying to pass them off as. Kosi does not leave Obinze because she know that she

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would not be able to support herself and Kosi on her own. She is not with Obinze because she is happy; she is with him because he provides her and Buchi with a decent lifestyle.

Essentially, Obinze is with Kosi for the well-being of Buchi and Kosi is with Obinze for financial security. The major relationships seen in *Americanah* shed light on the priorities of women in Nigerian society. Aunty Uju begins her affair with The General because he possesses power, and in this affair she also finds financial security. Ifemelu meets with the tennis coach for the purpose of gaining financial stability, but in their encounter she understands that he is in power and uses this to his advantage. Kosi wishes to remain married to Obinze for the purpose of financial stability and for the well-being of Buchi, and in her begging there is a sense of power within Obinze. Overall, Aunty Uju, Ifemelu, and Kosi all experience events with aspects of financial stability and/or power.