

# Americanah as a sex- positive bildungsroman



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Many feminists deem sex-positive sex education necessary in order to promote safe, consensual, and healthy sex habits in adolescents that will leave an effect that lasts a lifetime. In the novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, however, Ifemelu's journey through learning about herself as a sexual being seems, at times, less than healthy, and certainly not sex-positive. In Nigeria she has no formal sex education to speak of, and what she learns from the women in her community about sex varies from a religious abstinence-only education to a rather sexist one, involving a very boys will be boys attitude. And when Ifemelu goes to America, she sees a very different result of a similarly flawed sex education system: one where racism infiltrates its way into the bedroom on a consistent basis. Yet despite the tumultuous path she takes to get there, Ifemelu ultimately comes out of her adolescence as a sex-positive woman. *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie has a multitude of plots, but Ifemelu's journey serves in part as a sex-positive bildungsroman.

Adichie's TED Talk, "We Should All Be Feminists," outlines exactly how feminism is inherently sex-positive. When criticizing globally sexist practices, Adichie says, "we teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller." Teaching girls to "make themselves smaller" implies that the patriarchy teaches women that they should feel less powerful than men. When thought of in a sexual light, that power imbalance becomes even more toxic. Adichie continues: "Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important ... Why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage but we don't teach boys the same?" This quotation furthers the

problematic nature of being unfeminist in a heterosexual relationship, using Adichie's definition of feminist from her TED Talk, "a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes." If women are supposed to only seek out marriage, it makes sense that they would settle for men who do not treat them well, who encourage them to "make themselves smaller" and give them less agency, which sounds genuinely dangerous in terms of one's sex life. Finally, Adichie suggests that, "we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are." This statement, within a lecture titled "We Should All Be Feminists," is inherently sex-positive. Adichie is saying if boys have the freedom to be sexual beings, then girls should be afforded the same opportunity, which is both sex-positive and feminist.

In fact, Adichie's upbringing in Nigeria mirrors the differences in sex-positivity that Ifemelu sees when she comes to America. For instance, in her TED Talk, Adichie had the following experience upon identifying as a feminist in Nigeria: "An academic, a Nigerian woman, told me that feminism was not our culture, feminism wasn't African, and that I was calling myself a feminist because I had been corrupted by Western books." Maybe to some people, even "an academic" such as the woman Adichie mentions here, feminism "wasn't African," but in a lot of ways it isn't American either. For instance, when Ifemelu goes to get her hair braided, she observes a rather unfeminist interaction between an African American woman and the African women braiding her hair. Adichie writes, Halima's customer tilted her head this way and that in front of the mirror and said, 'Thank you so much, it's gorgeous!' After she left, Mariama said, 'Very small girl and already she has two

children.’ ‘ Oh oh oh, these people,’ Halima said. ‘ When a girl is thirteen already she knows all the positions. Never in Afrique!’ ‘ Never!’ Mariama agreed. (Adichie 126) Halima and Mariama slut-shame African American women as a whole here. They believe that this African American customer has children so young because she is promiscuous due to the fact that she had a very early knowledge of sex, or “ already knows all the positions.” However, in some cases, having an early knowledge of sex can be very empowering for women. Perhaps if Ifemelu had more sex education other than, “ to let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside,” then her first sexual experiences would have been more comfortable (Adichie 65). Maybe the African American woman in the braiding salon wanted children young and was happily sexually active, or maybe she herself could have also benefited from learning about contraception at a younger age before she started having sex. No matter what this woman’s circumstance is, it benefits neither group of women for them to judge one another on their sexual practices. In fact, it plays into the patriarchal notion that women should not support each other, thereby “ shrink[ing] themselves” and making them ununited and less powerful. Ifemelu’s early experiences and instructions about sex were far less than sex-positive, and, therefore, unfeminist.

In a caricature of a religious, abstinence-oriented upbringing, a leader at church tells a girl in front of Ifemelu, I saw you wearing tight trousers last Saturday,’ Sister Ibinabo said to a girl, Christie, in an exaggerated whisper, low enough to pretend it was a whisper but high enough for everyone to hear. ... ‘ Any girl that wears tight trousers wants to commit the sin of temptation. It is best to avoid it. (Adichie 61)Sexualizing someone not even

old enough to be called anything but a “ girl” seems rather inappropriate, and definitely feels like a function of the patriarchy. Ifemelu grew up in a world where “ wearing tight trousers” and thereby owning her body a bit is something to be publicly shamed for, exemplified by the fact that “ Sister Ibinabo” chastised “ Christie, in an exaggerated whisper, low enough to pretend it was a whisper but high enough for everyone to hear” on purpose. An upbringing like this one seems plainly unfeminist and sexist, but Ifemelu also has to deal with more grey area when learning about how the world around her sees the feminine aspect of her identity. Two important female mentors in Ifemelu’s life, Auntie Uju and Obinze’s mother, give Ifemelu some rather convoluted advice on growing into a sexual being. For instance, when Obinze’s mother takes it upon herself to direct Ifemelu’s sex life, her intentions definitely seem more positive than Sister Ibinabo’s were, yet her advice is still problematic. For example, Obinze’s mother says, My advice is that you wait. You can love without making love. It is a beautiful way of showing your feelings but it brings responsibility ... I will advise you to wait until you are at least in university, wait until you own yourself a little more. (Adichie 87)Obinze’s mother is not entirely in the wrong here. Her advice gives Ifemelu the freedom to wait, and also supports her eventually becoming sexually active. However, she does not give Ifemelu the option to have sex in the present moment if she wanted to. She encourages waiting, and fears that Ifemelu is too young to handle the “ responsibility.” Ideally, people Ifemelu’s age should be educated about having safe, responsible sex early on so that when these sexual desires come, they can have sex safely. But Obinze’s mother knows that is not the case with Ifemelu and her son, so

she tries to protect both of them in a rather condescending manner that unfortunately does not give Ifemelu much agency in the situation.

However, talking about the complexities of sexual relationships at all definitely sounds like it was a positive thing for Ifemelu. After all, before speaking with Obinze's mother about this, her only conversations with adults about sex were rather brief and vague ones with Aunty Uju, such as this instance here: Aunty Uju brought her James Hadley Chase novels wrapped in newspaper to hide the near-naked women on the cover ... talked her through her first menstrual period, supplementing her mother's lecture that was full of biblical quotes about virtue but lacked useful details about cramps and pads. When Ifemelu met Obinze, she told Aunty Uju that she had met the love of her life, and Aunty Uju told her to let him kiss and touch but not to let him put it inside. (Adichie 65) Although Aunty Uju definitely exposed Ifemelu to a bit more realistic sexuality than "her mother's lecture that was full of biblical quotes about virtue but lacked useful details," unfortunately Aunty Uju also falls victim to teaching Ifemelu to be ashamed of her identity as a sexual being. For instance, the "James Hadley Chase novels" were "wrapped in newspaper to hide the near-naked women on the cover," rather than the female body in its natural form being celebrated. It makes sense that Aunty Uju felt the need to hide these things in a household so religious as Ifemelu's mother's, it just seems like an unfortunate outcome nonetheless. As progressive as Aunty Uju might sound in comparison to Ifemelu's mother, she still approaches talking to Ifemelu about sex in an abstinence oriented manner, saying she should not let Obinze "put it inside." However, all this did not stop her from having sexual desire, and,

incredibly enough, it didn't stop her from expressing that desire to Obinze at a pretty young age. When the couple first meets and flirts with one another, Ifemelu asks, "aren't we going to kiss?" ... He just seemed startled. 'Where did that come from?' 'I'm just asking" (Adichie 75). Here, Ifemelu elicits a lot of hope. Although she grew up being told all her life that her sexuality was a negative thing, from having church leaders denounce and sexualize the young female body to having her mother and Auntie shy around the topic of female sexuality, Ifemelu still has the confidence to assert herself as a sexual being. By asking, "aren't we going to kiss?" Ifemelu implies that she has a sexual desire she is confident enough to voice, which seems pretty remarkable and sex-positive for a person with an upbringing such as her own.

Although Obinze might not have as much toxic masculinity as some of the other male characters in the book, Ifemelu's initial sexual experiences with him seem pretty problematic at times. Obinze follows a rather textbook boys will be boys attitude and does not take personal responsibility for his sexual actions in the way that Ifemelu was taught to at the beginning of the novel. For instance, just before they have sex for the first time, Obinze tries to convince Ifemelu that having sex with him is okay even though she does not seem sure about her choice. She says to him, "you'll say anything now because your brain is between your legs," and Obinze responds, "but my brain is always there!" (Adichie 114). Here, Obinze blames his masculinity for trying to convince Ifemelu to have sex with him. Saying his "brain is always there" might have been Obinze trying to be funny, but in actuality it relieves him of any blame of trying to persuade Ifemelu into doing something she had

not thought through herself beforehand. As one would expect after a comment such as this, Ifemelu's first experience with sex sounds less than ideal. Adichie describes Ifemelu's first time, writing, "she had been tense through it all, unable to relax ... She had imagined his mother watching them; the image had forced itself onto her mind" (Adichie 114). Here, Ifemelu has two rather uncomfortable experiences. Firstly, she genuinely does not feel comfortable with her decision to have sex with Obinze, evidenced by the fact that she "had been tense through it all, unable to relax." Secondly, during the first time she has sex the shame that the older women around her taught her to feel around the act stuck to her mind so closely that it inhibited her ability to enjoy sex at all. She feels so guilty for being a sexual being that the "image [of Obinze's mother] had forced itself onto her mind." Clearly an intrusive thought like this suggests that Obinze's mother had a pretty big (and somewhat negative) impact on how she views her own sexuality. It is important to note that she still felt this shame even though she was in university and owned herself a bit more, as Obinze's mother suggested.

Owning yourself, or your own sexuality, sounds like a difficult feat when the world and its patriarchy tells you that your body is not your own. As if on a mission to prove that the patriarchy feels entitled to the female body, especially the Black female body, Adichie includes a rather upsetting nonconsensual sexual experience in Ifemelu's narrative. Ifemelu's experience getting paid for sex acts with the tennis coach reads as tragic, rightfully so. Adichie writes, that Ifemelu, "... did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her



ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness ... He had not forced her. She had come here on her own" (Adichie 190). However, although " she had come" to his house " on her own," her experiences as a member of the African Diaspora did, for all intensive purposes, " force" her to go to his home and have a sexual experience she did not at all want to have. As Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw explains in " Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite- that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. (Crenshaw 1) Crenshaw's words ring wildly true in Ifemelu's case. In her interaction with the tennis coach, she definitely experienced " violence." Afterwards, Ifemelu notes that, " She could not sleep, she could not distract herself" (Adichie 191). However, as Crenshaw wrote, this violence was " shaped by other dimensions of ... [her identity], such as race and class." If Ifemelu had been like her white roommates, born in America and immune to the specific type of racism Black African women experience, she could have gotten another job and made money immediately. If her parents or more of her family lived in America she might have had other people who could keep her going financially until she found a job herself, as she eventually ended up doing. But the body Ifemelu inhabits, that of a Black woman in the African Diaspora, set her up in terms of her " race and class" to experience the " violence against women" that Crenshaw mentioned. Additionally, Crenshaw proves her point further later in her work, <https://assignbuster.com/americanah-as-a-sex-positive-bildungsroman/>

saying, I observed the dynamics of structural intersectionality during a brief field study of battered women's shelters located in minority communities in Los Angeles.

In most cases, the physical assault that leads women to these shelters is merely the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience. Many ' women who seek protection are unemployed or underemployed, and a good number of them are poor. Shelters serving these women cannot afford to address only the violence inflicted by the batterer; they must also confront the other multilayered and routinized forms of domination that often converge in these women's lives, hindering their ability to create alternatives to the abusive relationships that brought them to shelters in the first place. Many women of color, for example, are burdened by poverty, child-care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills. These burdens, largely the consequence of gender and class oppression, are then compounded by the racially discriminatory employment and housing practices women of color often face. Women of color are burdened as well by the disproportionately high unemployment among people of color that make battered women of color less able to depend on the support of friends and relatives for temporary shelter. (Crenshaw 2) Ifemelu's " burdens" that led her to being inappropriately touched by the white man who paid her to do so were, in large part, as Crenshaw wrote, " largely the consequence of gender and class oppression." If Ifemelu were a Black American man, perhaps she would have been offered work for doing manual labor rather than being paid to subject herself to a sexual assailant. In this way, her identity as a woman was indeed " compounded by the racially discriminatory employment and

housing practices women of color often face.” With Crenshaw’s backing and research, it becomes clear that Ifemelu’s rather tragic experience has a lot to do with the intersection of her identity as a woman and her identity as a person of color in the African Diaspora.

As Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Sexual Politics*, “because Black feminist analyses pay more attention to women’s sexuality, they too identify how the sexual exploitation of women has been a basic ingredient of racism” (Collins 87). This further proves the point that Ifemelu’s “sexual exploitation” here comes from racism. The tennis coach exploits her financial need as a result of her race and class, and puts her in a rather traumatizing situation as a result. When Ifemelu reaches adulthood, she has a rather racialized sexual journey with her white boyfriend, Curt. For instance, Ifemelu notices that, in bed he was anxious. ‘Do you like that? Do you enjoy me?’ he asked often. And she said yes, which was true, but she sensed that he did not always believe her, or that his belief lasted only so long before he would need to hear her affirmation again. There was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing. (Adichie 257) At first glance, it seems as though Curt just likes Ifemelu a lot and feels eager to please her. Asking “do you enjoy me?” sounds like a considerate question to ask. However, Ifemelu notices that these questions are not particularly about her pleasure as much as they were about him hearing “her affirmation.” She notes that something deep inside Curt seemed “lighter than ego but darker than insecurity.” This negative feeling Ifemelu notices is, unfortunately, a function of Curt’s racism. For instance, Collins writes, West African people’s proximity to wild animals, especially

apes, raised in Western imaginations the specter of ' wild' sexual practices in an uncivilized, inherently violent wilderness. Through colonial eyes, the stigma of biological Blackness and the seeming primitiveness of African cultures marked the borders of extreme abnormality. For Western sciences that were mesmerized with body politics, white Western normality became constructed on the backs of Black deviance, with an imagined Black hyper-heterosexual deviance at the heart of the enterprise. (Collins 120) This information explains why Ifemelu felt as though Curt's actions during sex expressed something about him " darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing." This thing was, more accurately, his whiteness. His insecurity comes from his racist " Western imagination" of the idea that Black people have " wild' sexual practices in an uncivilized, inherently violent wilderness." He worries that because he is white, her " imagined Black hyper-herterosexual deviance" will not be satisfied with his " White Western normality," hence making his insecurity less than pure.

Because Curt's internalized racism tainted Ifemelu's sex life with him and made it sound rather unpleasurable, she cheats on him. When describing her sexual consort, the man who lives in her building, Ifemelu is simply looking for the positive, unproblematic, exclusively sexual experience she did not get to have at any other point throughout the novel. She explains that, " the way he dressed made him seem superficial to her, and yet she was curious about him, about how he would be, naked in bed with her" (Adichie 356). The fact that Ifemelu expresses her sexual desire so bluntly points toward a sexual revolution in her narrative. When describing her encounter with the man in her building, she notes that, " the sex was good the first time" (Adichie 365).

It was not uncomfortable, or tainted by shame in herself as a sexual being. She did not feel as though her identity was being exploited as it had been before. The sex simply felt “ good.” Although the Western world in particular treats infidelity as something inherently negative, the fact that this sexual experience was the most sex-positive one Ifemelu had thus far in the narrative seems like an inherently positive thing, and a breakthrough in her sexual coming of age.

Ifemelu completes her sex-positive bildungsroman when she stands up for her sexual identity when Curt attempts to slut shame her. Slut shaming involves someone shaming another person for their identity as a being with sexual desires, and can feel rather humiliating. For example, Curt tells Ifemelu that when she slept with the man in their building, she,... gave him what he wanted,’ Curt said. The planes of his face were hardening. It was an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say. In a sudden giddy fit of recklessness, she corrected Curt. ‘ I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental.’ (Adichie 357) This moment represents the final chapter of Ifemelu’s character going from someone uncomfortable with her own sexuality to a confident, feminist, sex-positive woman. She recognizes that the women who first taught her about sex was not inherently sex-positive, then compares Curt’s slut shaming statement to that upbringing, noting how what Curt said was “ an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say.” Ifemelu feels “ giddy” when she tells Curt that she “ took what ... [she] wanted,” her own sexual pleasure,

because she finally has the confidence and feminist mindset to appreciate her own sexuality and not let others shame her for it simply because of her identity.

In Adichie's *Americanah*, readers watch Ifemelu transform from a girl taught to be ashamed of her own sexuality, to someone who takes confident ownership of her identity as a sex-positive Black woman. Although Ifemelu's positive outcome at the end with Curt might seem unrealistic, it gives a rather hopeful feeling that even with a lack of early sex-positive, feminist sex education, women still have the possibility to have sex free of shame and other problematic ideas. As a Black woman in the African Diaspora, Ifemelu faces even more challenges when confronting her sexual identity, but Adichie gives her character a positive outcome nonetheless, encouraging all readers that sex-positivity, just like feminism, is possible no matter the oppression one faces.

## **Works Cited**

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