

## The Making of the 'New Man'<sup>1</sup> in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Mukoi Musagasa  
Department of Literature  
University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania  
[musagasaml@gmail.com](mailto:musagasaml@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This paper examines the making of a 'new man' character in Adichie's *Americanah* and discusses how such a moulded man integrates himself in society and deals with other gendered worlds. The discussion shows how much Adichie in the representation of 'new man' character in her novel rejects the naturalisation of the unchangeability of the male subject by dramatizing how much the male's enactment of masculine-self is contingent to the orientation one gets. In this paper, I establish that that Adichie's representation of progressive 'new man' character in her novel does not only serve as a role model for ideal alternative masculinity, but also re-invents a space necessary for a progressive female character to belong in hetero-patriarchal setting of the novel. Although the categorisation of modes of masculinity in this paper begins with Connell's binary of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, the objective of the discussion is beyond such fixity. My interest in this paper is precisely on the sets of masculinity which, although they divert from the hegemony, the difference or the deficit of hegemonic masculinity does not suggest the inferiority. The paper borrows Swain's (2006) "personalized masculinities" to refer to softer and transgressive modes of masculinities that are rebellious against the naturalisation of heteronormativity.

### Key words:

New-Man, New-Woman, Progressive, Masculinity, Femininity  
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<sup>1</sup> As Gorman-Murray (informs, the term 'New Man' in Western popular and academic writing is used to refer to the kind of domesticated men whose "loyalties and energies are centred on the home". The emergence of The New Man is associated with the Western women's greater participation in the workforce and "the reality of the feminist movement" (p. 371). The new man is thus an enlightened partner to an enlightened working 'new woman'

*The intelligent black woman writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her books end in integrative image of the male and the female world [Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" p.6].*

### **Introduction**

**T**he third-generation African women's writing is known for its positionality of the female protagonist from the normalised dominated position to a fully empowered female character who unapologetically fights to establish herself as full-human being and "not an appendage to someone else—a man" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, p.140). With reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, one may argue that the female subject is not the only character third-generation Nigerian women writers attempt to reconstruct; the male is equally their subject of concern. This paper analyses the representation of unconventional masculinities with which the male protagonist in Adichie's novel unapologetically identifies himself. Here, I particularly discuss the male subject to whom I refer in this paper as the "New Man" in African literature. This male character develops in the liminal space between the existing hetero-patriarchal masculinities and the emergence of an elevated female character—a more "educated, career-oriented and strong-willed" female character whose identity is more on her agency and independence rather than the conventionalised domestic sphere (Nadaswaran 2011, p.19). As an ideal partner to such an empowered female subject, the new-man character in the novel is, somewhat, made of the viewpoint that transcend the normalised heteronormative power structure which basically characterises the conventional male character in African literature. This progressive viewpoint of the new-man-protagonist is evident in both his intimate involvement in domestic space and his liberated attitude and treatment towards his female counterparts and other 'inferior' males. Put succinctly, the progressiveness of the new-man character in Adichie's novel is studied in this paper through his being uninterested in the display of normalized male dominance.

Studying the representation of new man character in Adichie's novel is, thus, an attempt to explore the representation of ideal masculinities, the counter of the normalized patriarchal masculinities which are historically represented as toxic in African women's writing. Indeed, this paper

explores the making of 'new man' character in Adichie's novel and examines how this moulded man integrates himself in hetero-patriarchal society as an agent for change in an African patriarchal setting. Since the unconventional masculinities enacted by the new man character in the novel do not interrupt the female character's determination to create her personal identity, the representation of progressive masculinities as enacted by a 'new man' character in Adichie's novel in this paper constitutes the author's technique of giving essence to a progressive 'new woman' – independent, strong and ambitious. The integrative image of the male and the female world is thus realised in Adichie's novel through the empowerment of both the elevated male and the elevated female.

In my reading, I subscribe to Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which proposes that masculinities are not simply about the male gender roles but also about power relations. This proposition directly suggests the idea of hierarchy of masculinities – hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. As Connell and Messerschmidt have noted, hegemonic masculinity refers to the social norms that define what a man ought to be, and therefore, male subjects strive to identify themselves with them. Subordinate masculinities are the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity. These are sets of idea that seem to depart from the normalized forms of manhood, and thus tend to be inferior forms of masculinity. In Swain's (2006) enlightenment, subordinate masculinities are normally created "under the two generic headings of 'difference' and 'deficit'" (p. 339). Behaving differently from the established masculine norms may automatically make a male be located in an inferior position, the situation which naturalises the norm and makes conformity the price the male subject is compelled to pay to somewhat enjoy what Connell calls "patriarchal dividends" – the advantage the male subject enjoys for being male.

Although the categorisation of modes of masculinity in this paper begins with Connell's binary of hegemonic and subordinate masculinity, the target of the study is beyond such fixity. As this endeavour is a quest for alternative ideal masculinities, I focus more on exploring the sets of masculinity which, although they divert from the hegemony, the difference or the deficit of the normalized ideal masculinities does not suggest inferiority. The masculinities that I refer to, in this study, as progressive masculinities are, thus, the kind of masculinities that Swain

terms “personalized masculinities” – the modes of masculinity which are softer and transgressive in nature, encourage rebelling against the naturalisation of heteronormativity (p.340). Largely, in this paper, the concept of hegemonic masculinity acts as one of key references in comprehension and analysis of masculinities represented in the novels the focus being to highlight the unconventional masculinities which are represented not as unwonted or rather inferior masculinities, but alternative ideal models of masculinities that can replace hyper-masculinities that work on the domination of others.

Progressive masculinity, as Mutua (2006) theorises it, is a kind of masculinity that works against social structures of domination—the key element of hetero-patriarchal masculinity. It “values, validates and empowers humanity” in all its variety in multicultural diversities (Mutua 2006, p.7). This kind of masculinity depends on the male subject’s recognition of his being an equal human—neither superior, nor inferior to his female counterpart, children or other males. Precisely, progressive masculinity intervenes in the hegemonic gender order and occurs when the male subject internalises the ideology that transcends the normalized ideas of being a real man, and thus, as Mutua puts it, “stands against social structures of domination”. In this paper, I basically use “progressive masculinity” as the author’s attempt to disrupt the Manichean allegory of gender whereby the male is the superior and the female the subordinate. By destabilising the normalized hetero-patriarchal psychological and institutionalized sets up, Adichie in *Americanah* shows the possibility of realising the ungendered Africa where the male and the female integrate symmetrically.

Like many Nigerian third generation women’s novels, Adichie’s *Americanah* falls in the coming-of-age novel category (Okuyade 2011, p. 154). Indeed, throughout the narrative, the main female protagonist, Ifemelu, develops her progressive-womanhood-personality from adolescence to maturity. Ifemelu passes through different challenging experiences both in patriarchal Nigeria and racist America to become emboldened enough to reclaim rebelliously her space in hetero-patriarchal Lagos of her adulthood. As opposed to other third generation novels, growth in *Americanah* also extends to the male protagonist. Like Ifemelu, Obinze’s progressive new-man-personality evolves from adolescence as his mother determines to raise a progressive man whose masculine

identity is beyond the hetero-patriarchal perception of a man as a dominant being. Thus, Obinze experiences ungendered relationship from adolescence with his mother and Ifemelu his school girlfriend. As Ifemelu disappears in America, Obinze attempts to act in Nigerian male conventions by marrying Kosi, a conventional 'good' wife. However, what he has to endure in such a conventionalised marital relation returns him to Ifemelu, his progressive school girlfriend which suggests his realisation that he cannot be happy and be himself in heteronormative world. Through the bond of the progressive 'new man' character and progressive 'new woman' the novel represents ungendered relation—an integrative image of the male and female world.

### **Teaching a boy how to be a Progressive Man**

Basically, in Adichie's *Americanah*, progressive masculinity is not represented through the creation of a utopian gender-free-society but rather as a personal project of a single mother seeking to mould his son into a progressive man in a hetero-patriarchal set up. His survival is thus the author's dramatization of how progressive masculinity can penetrate and find a space within a hetero-patriarchal society. In other words, progressive masculinity in Adichie's *Americanah* occurs as an organised womanist project aimed to mould the male subject's psychology by empowering him to live beyond the normalized male stereotypes. The aim of such empowerment is basically to enable him to associate healthily with the empowered female character and live harmoniously as equal partners in an ungendered world. Concisely, like Hurst in his TEDx talk<sup>2</sup>, Adichie's representation of progressive masculinity in her novel rejects the common phrase of "boys will be boys" as she suggests the idea that "boys will be what we teach them to be". This first section explores how Obinze's mother in Adichie's novel moulds her son to be a progressive man and act as an agent of progressive masculinity in hetero-patriarchal community of the novel.

Studies suggest that the most recurring image of the female protagonist's mother in the third generation Nigerian women's writing runs contra to the image of her daughter who treats her mother as the reason for striving

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Hurst in his TEDx Talk rejects the popular phrase "boys will be boys" as the justification for toxic heteronormative masculinity. Instead he insists that boys will be what we (society) teach them to be.

to attain a different womanhood. In Okuyade's (2011) analysis, the mother of an elevated female protagonist of the third generation women's writing is the woman who is "frustratingly trapped within the confines of domestic space" – carrying the burdens for conforming to the "iconic representations of women as subservient, self-sacrificing, chaste, and devoted mother" (pp.152-153). Conversely, focusing on Obinze's mother in the novel, one may argue that the mother of the new-man-protagonist, like the elevated female protagonist possesses the opposite characteristics from the normalized hetero-patriarchal womanhood. Through such an empowerment of the mother, the new-man-protagonist would internalize a more progressive view on himself and his female counterpart, which would enable him to see her not only as his subordinate but also as an equal human being. In the novel, Obinze's mother believes in gender equality; she believes both males and females are equal human beings – worthy of equal respect and treatment. She thus recounts her gender stance to her son who embraces it in the formation of his gender identity as a progressive new Nigerian man.

For instance, when Obinze's mother gets slapped by her fellow male professor who claims a woman cannot speak to him in a 'disrespectful' way, she unapologetically stands firm to defend her dignity as a human being; as the son recounts; "so my mother got up and locked the door of the conference room and put the key in her bra. She told him she could not slap him back because he was stronger than her but he would have to apologize to her publicly.... So he did" (p. 59)<sup>3</sup>. And when later she notes that people's pity her that such a macho-induced incident stems from her widowhood, she gets annoyed insisting that "she should not have been slapped because she is a full human being, not because she doesn't have a husband to speak for her" (p. 59). This statement signals the rejection by Obinze's mother of the patriarchal positioning of the female subject as the weak person whose survival depends on a man's mercy. This is, indeed, a denial of the traditional, early male writers' portrayal of the female character as a relational character who cannot stand for her own right but in relation to her father, her husband or her sons. Although she knows she cannot change the society's chauvinist psychology, Obinze's mother makes it her project to mould her son's mind-set on the perception of self as a man, as well as, his view of others, especially the female subject. This

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<sup>3</sup> All references to the novel have been taken from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, New York: Anchor Books, a division of Random House LLC, 2014.

is Adichie's attempt of reversing the normalized position of the female subject as the icon or the conveyor of hetero-patriarchal customs which marginalize her, to an agent of change in gender relations.

The project of moulding Obinze into a progressive man centres on his mother's home setting. In hetero-patriarchal tradition, home is one of key spaces where masculine identities and power relations are formed. It is the site where the male subject initially learns his naturalised position of power—the antithesis of his female counterpart's subordinate positionality defined by the normalization of domesticity as feminine (Gorman-Murray 2008). To reconstruct progressive masculine identity for his son, Obinze's mother interrupts such a normalized gender order by destabilizing the normalized hierarchies in her home, which is to disturb the normalized power relations. As Ifemelu observed in her visit to Obinze's mother, their home is made of the freedom which transcends categorized relationships as mother and son treat each other as equals regardless of their traditional familial position or gender; "their fluid, bantering rapport made Ifemelu uncomfortable. It was free of restraints, free of the fear of consequences; it did not take the familiar shape of a relationship with a parent" (p. 69). Breaking the normalized hierarchy is, indeed, the scheme of making Obinze think and act beyond conventional gender roles—a scheme of making him not a man but good human—reliable and respectful. Obinze's mother here interrupts Obinze's normalized perception of self as a man and thus superior being, to internalize a more progressive self-image which makes him perceive himself just as human being—the equal of any other human regardless of his or her gender. Largely, the relationship Obinze's mother creates in her home can stand as a microcosm of the idealised male-female relationship within and without the household—the bond which transcends the normalized hetero-patriarchal power relation.

In heteronormative conventions, home is positioned as feminine domain whereby domestic chores are naturalized as "the care work of wives and mothers characterised as domestic angels" (Gorman-Murray 2008, p. 369). However, since Obinze's mother seems to consider home a site for contestation of heteronormative hegemony, she de-genders domesticity as an effort to make her son negotiate alternative domestic masculinity. Obinze and her mother cook together; "They cooked together, his mother stirring the soup, Obinze making the garri..." (p. 69). Obinze's

participating in such domestic roles makes him enjoy cooking, hence subverting the normalized gendered and sexualized meaning of home where domesticity is considered feminine space that demonstrates a man's domination over the female subject who should serve him as her lord and master. Implicitly, Obinze's mother de-genders domestic space in her home to interrupt the conventionalized hetero-patriarchal gender order as the necessary process to make Obinze internalise the non-hierarchical gender ideology. In fact, throughout the novel, those who associate with him identify Obinze not as a man but a good human – kind, hardworking, respectful, reliable and compassionate. He is confident, very sure of himself but never considers others to be inferior because of their family background or gender. And this adaptation of her mother's humanist gender philosophy makes him a different man – a composed 'gentle' man, admired by both the males and the females who come closer to him.

In Biller's (1968) proposition, both the absence of father-figure and family background, such as the nature of the mother who heads the household in the absence or invisibility of the father, influence a person's development of masculine self because "when a boy is father absent in his preschool years, his opportunities to interact with and imitate males in positions of competence and power are usually severely limited" (p.1006). Simply put, in hetero-patriarchal tradition, a father is a key mediator of a normalized kind of masculinity to his sons; the mentorship which maintains society's normative gender order. His absence, physically or metaphorically, can therefore, incapacitate the 'automatic' adaptation of normalized masculinity to his son. In Adichie's novel, Obinze's father died when Obinze was seven years old. His mother, thus, becomes his major influence in the construction of his masculine self. Here, as Ng'umbi (2017) puts it elsewhere, Adichie "creates a new form of family structure where the father figure, as portrayed by older generation of African women writers, is no longer the head of the family" (p. 93).

This act disrupts the normalized wife/husband binary to give a progressive woman uninterrupted space to mould the male into someone who can somewhat equally share the available resources and power within and without the family space. Perhaps, one would challenge Adichie that her novel somewhat suggests the world without men since a father dies to give a mother room to raise the son singlehandedly and progressively. However, the fact that the novel ends up by bonding



Obinze—a progressive male, and Ifemelu—a progressive female character portends the author's optimism for an integrative world where the enlightened male and the enlightened female live together in a balanced relationship. This is, indeed, the hope for ungendered heterosexual household in African setting.

As such, Obinze morphs into progressive man not only to live free from hetero-patriarchal conventions but also to act as a positive role model in the matter of inspiring progressive forms of masculinity in the hetero-patriarchal society of the novel, which lacks such exemplary male figures. His enactment of his progressive masculine-self in his new school in Lagos reveals the author's attempt of interrogating heteronormative masculinity through the representation of more sophisticated mode of masculinity which works beyond demonstrating power and dominance. When Obinze joins his new school in Lagos, he is automatically registered in the group of "the Big Guys" at the top of students' masculine hegemony. By default, Obinze fits into the group because it comprises students from affluent families with some air of sophistication from their exposure to western world—the qualities which Obinze by default has, because his mother is somewhat well-off and, from the elite class which gives him the elegance that defines the group. Obinze is also bright in class and active in sports—the add-on to his masculine prowess in school hegemony. To use Swain's (2006) explanation, "a boy's position in the peer group is ultimately determined by the array of social, cultural, physical, intellectual, and economic resources" available to him to build his popularity and status (p.334). Obinze is thus resourceful enough to fit in at the top of school masculine hegemony.

However, my discussion on Obinze is rather on his masculine departure within the group than on his being part of school's hegemony. At this juncture, I use Connell's (1996) lead that "some aspects of the school's functioning shape masculinities indirectly, and may have the effect not of producing one's masculinity but of emphasizing the differences between masculinities" (p. 218). My argument here is that Obinze is Adichie's attempt to (re)create an ideal heterosexual male co-protagonist, who is part of the hegemony because of the heteronormative masculine resources available to him; but who also departs from such heteronormative norms, a situation that makes such a vivid difference that it overshadow the norms. Indeed, Adichie tries to (re)create a male figure who is part of the

hegemony but attractively act differently to stand as the influencer of progressive masculinity to the males who cannot imagine other ways of being men than playing the normalized hetero-patriarchal dominant figures.

Basically, Obinze's progressive masculinity outside his mother's household is emboldened by his ability to withstand peer pressure. This aptitude enables him to enact his progressive masculine self without seeking his peers' approval. The internalisation of such self-esteem suggests his mother's accomplishment of raising a confident man who not only enact alternative masculinity but also resists hetero-patriarchal pressure for conformity. The novel describes Obinze in his teenage years as a calm and composed young man—the composure which can be associated with the world he is exposed to by his mother through open discussions and reading culture that characterises their home. As portrayed in the novel, the Big Guys are known for their families' affluence and demonstrate their power through their resistance to “tuck in their shirts and for this they always got into trouble with the teacher” (p. 55). In Connell's (1996) analysis, peer groups that invest heavily in ideas of toughness and confrontation find the school discipline system increasingly become a test for their hyper-masculine status. Impliedly, the probability of such boys to rebel against the school rules just to prove in public their masculine prowess is high (p.220). By defying school rules and regulations, the Big Guys dramatize their heteronormative virility and audacity of challenging the authority. Although by defying the rules they always find themselves in trouble, their persistence makes them appear tough and, thus, manly.

When Obinze joins the group, he rejects this macho masculine identity as he “came to school every day with his shirt neatly tucked in” (p. 55). Since being a man within the group means not tucking in the shirt, Obinze's going against his peers' norm may compromise his identity as he may appear cowardly—not a real man. However, since Obinze is raised to never compete for proving his being a man, he withstands the peer pressure by remaining in the group and continues tucking in his shirt. It seems his composure to withstand the pressure attracts his group members as “soon all the Big Guys tucked in too, even Kayode Da Silver”, the group leader (p. 55). Indeed, joining the group and acting differently, Obinze introduces to the group the kind of masculinity which is less

obsessive to the normalized ideas of physical toughness and domination. Here Obinze stands as a positive role model to inspire progressive forms of masculinity in the hetero-patriarchal society of the novel which lacks such exemplary male figures. Largely, how Obinze resists peer pressure for conformity in school setting positions home in Adichie's *Americanah* as the key site where masculine identities and power relations can be (re)constructed to healthier definition of self which would result to formation of less gendered power relations.

### **'New Man' and Progressive Femininity in Hetero-patriarchal Settings**

More than serving as a positive role model to inspire healthy forms of masculinity, the emergence of Obinze as progressive male protagonist in Adichie's *Americanah* re-establishes a niche for a complex female figure to belong in hetero-patriarchal African setting and makes the integrative image of the male and the female world more vivid in the novel. Adichie's *Americanah* suggests the male subject in heteronormative setting should go through a psychological transformation in the perception of self as a man to become equally progressive individual like his elevated female counterpart and thus bond together in the formation of ungendered world. Before she meets Obinze, Ifemelu finds herself unfit to live in hetero-patriarchal Nigeria as she continually finds herself in conflicting situations because of being nonconformist when it comes to hetero-patriarchal power relations.

From her adolescence, Ifemelu refuses to compromise her individual-self by playing 'good woman' like the female protagonist in the second-generation African women's writing who "though she recognises the inequalities of patriarchy, she never really fight for her 'right'" (Ogunyemi 1985, p. 76). Consequently, for being herself, Ifemelu appears a 'troublesome' girl in every social setting—an unfit girl. At school, she is "known for insubordination", the same reputation she creates in church (p. 52). Her peers consider her to be an uncontrollable girl, unfit to be one's girlfriend, as Kayode tells Obinze, "Ifemelu is fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agree" (p. 60). Focusing on this description, Ifemelu who is marked as a not-worthy-woman is an 'outsider within'—doomed either to conform to heteronormative norm or subtly be punished by being ignored and labelled as a social outcast. However, the emergence of Obinze—a progressive male, does not only (re)create a perfect match for such a

complex female character in Adichie's novel, but also (re)establishes a place for such a complex female character to fit into a hetero-patriarchal setting. The emergence of Obinze in Ifemelu's world is, thus, treated in this paper as the author's way of giving essence to Ifemelu's kind of liberated femininity, or as Nnaemeka (1994) would put it, giving existence to "that other African woman—independent, strong, and admirable woman who is celebrated in our oral traditions" (p. 141).

Principally, the ungendered world is realisable in the novel as both the male and the female get empowered enough to realise the self-actualisation that transcends the heteronormative binary of gender. As Ifemelu is a fully realised woman—"responsible, courageous, audacious, willful and whole" (Nadaswaran 2011, p. 22), the male who forms relationship with her should thus be broad-minded to recognize her personhood—perceiving her as "a person first, and a person herself" not simply a woman—an appendage of a man (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, p. 140). The bond between Obinze and Ifemelu thus revolves not only around normalized male's domination of the female other but also the ungendered mutuality supporting each individual's pursuit of his/her personhood. With Obinze's kind of progressive masculinity, Ifemelu can argue, can talk, and she can disagree without being judged; "He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease, her skin felt as though it was her right size. It seemed natural to talk to him about odd things. She had never done that before" (p. 61). With Obinze, Ifemelu can comfortably be herself as nothing forces her to suppress her personhood just to fit in to the heteronormative binary of gender. Progressive men in Mutua's (2006) explanation, are "not dependent and not predicated on the subordination of others; instead, they promote human freedom for all, both in the context of their personal lives and in the outward manifestations of those personal lives in social, cultural, economic and political contexts" (p.7). As a progressive man, Obinze's presence in Ifemelu's life gives essence to her liberated kind of femininity. With a progressive male character, the female subject guiltlessly stands on her own selfhood and agency.

In essence, the integrative image of the male and the female world in Adichie's novel is dramatized by Obinze and Ifemelu's acts of disavowal to the normalized expectations on what is to be a man or a woman. As they develop such sense of sovereignty anchored in their determination for the emancipation of selves as well as the desire for the growth of their

consciousness, they progressively come to consider manipulative game-playing disgusting, and thus investing on unpretentious, straight relationship. As they learn to treat each other as more human than a man or a woman, they end up achieving a kind of heterosexual bond that transcends hetero-patriarchal judgmentalism. For instance, when Ifemelu proposes they should kiss (on the first day of their relationship), Obinze does not consider Ifemelu immoral since conventionally, a man is supposed to be sexually proactive and a woman reactive (Sanchez et al. 2006). Obinze's response to Ifemelu's sexual advance may suggest his perception towards women—she is an equal human which means she can feel and express her feelings freely. And when Ifemelu asks him where he learned how to kiss, which “was nothing like *her* ex-boyfriend's salivary fumbling”, Obinze does not judge her for having a boyfriend before him. He does not, as well, try to take advantage of her appreciation to suggest he is more a man than her ex-boyfriend as he responds to her that “it was not technique, but emotion. He had done what her ex-boyfriend had done but the difference, in this case, was love” (p. 62). Obinze here does not present himself as more a man than other men in Ifemelu's life but simply a man in love. Their agreement to abstain from sexual intercourse until they at least get to university reveals their maturity and agency. Here Obinze reveals his ability to live with an empowered woman—bold enough to express her feelings; and through such ability Ifemelu feels at home in hetero-patriarchal Lagos where she was once an ‘outcast’.

Unlike the conventional hetero-patriarchal male-dominating-female kind of relationship, the bond between Obinze and Ifemelu is generally made of the intimacy they share—their mutual understanding, equal treatment, and open dialogues and discussion. It is made of mutual attraction, which results from un-gendered equal treatment. As Obinze later explains, although they always enjoy their sexual chemistry, their love is beyond it; “you know this isn't about sex. This has never been about sex” (p. 447). As they bond together, treating each other as equal partners in the relationship, they enjoy their togetherness while everyone pursues his or her ambitions. Through the relationship between Obinze and Ifemelu this section argues that Adichie's *Americanah* proposes that in the (re)creation of ungendered world, the male subject in heteronormative setting should go through a psychological metamorphosis to become equally liberated individual who can understand and symmetrically integrate with an

empowered female—the kind of woman who is uninterested in performing gender.

**'New Man' and Disavowal of Conventional 'Good Woman' Image**

Men's resistance to gender equality is initially because of the fact that the male gender benefits with hetero-patriarchal power relation (Connell 2005, p.1811). The reconfiguration of gendered relation can thus begin in the interruption of the male subject's normalized hetero-patriarchal psychology by making him not delight in what are traditionally considered patriarchal dividends. By doing so, the conventionally admired womanhood characterised by docility becomes unappealing to progressive men, the situation which would normalise the fully-realised kind of womanhood and the ungendered relation. Through such transformation of her progressive male character's mind-set, Adichie endorses progressive womanhood while disqualifying the normalized hetero-patriarchal femininity. Although circumstances make Obinze marry Kosi, a conventionally good woman and tastes how it is to live in hetero-patriarchal power relation, his progressive constitution makes him feel misplaced, a situation that returns him to Ifemelu to resume and enjoy the fruit of the ungendered relationship. Indeed, unlike how the normalized hetero-patriarchal male is oriented to enjoy playing dominant figure in male-female relationship, Obinze is naturalised to delight in an ungendered kind of partnership, the situation which makes him to consider male's sole dominance in male-female relationship something to tolerate—something he cannot enjoy at all.

In all dimensions, Kosi is a foil character to Ifemelu. She is conventionally beautiful (erotic beauty), and dogmatically observes the conventional definitions of being a 'good' Nigerian woman. In other words, Kosi is Stratton's (1990) embodiment of the Mother Africa trope, which according to her, is one of defining features of early African male writing. Even though Ifemelu resonates with an empowered female character celebrated in African women's writing, Kosi is an archetype of the worthy woman in early male writing. The fact that Adichie through Obinze portrays Kosi as a pathetic old-fashioned-woman reveals her attempts at disqualifying such heteronormative ideas of a 'virtuous' woman, which is to highlight the relevance of Ifemelu's image of a fully realised female character. Obinze as the author's idealized male figure in the novel is thus to interact with both kinds of womanhood to dramatize the unfitness of

conventionally celebrated womanhood; which is, indeed, to underscore the essence of the empowerment of the female character in the (re)creation of ungendered relation.

Masculinity like any other gendered identity is fluid as “there is a constant renegotiation and redefinition of masculinity—and a struggle between different masculinities” (Gottzen 2011, p.231). One’s definition of self as a man and sexual being can thus consciously or unconsciously be redefined or reconfigured depending on the circumstances one finds himself in. Indeed, although Obinze is raised to live beyond heteronormative gender order, his enactment of such soft masculinity is somewhat negotiable based on the settings and the occurrences. This marks the author’s attempt to make Obinze the same like Ifemelu—more realistic—“the agent of his own self-destruction, self-reconstruction, and self-determination” (Nfah-Abenyi 1997, p. 60). He can slip up but ultimately, he re-collects himself to live in his internalized progressive personhood. His act of marrying Kosi, not by anything but her beauty, is one of such circumstances where he tries to reconfigure his progressive masculine-self to act in normalized hetero-patriarchal ways. From the very beginning, Obinze observed the incompatibility that exists between him and Kosi, yet he pushes on the marriage in the basis of her erotic features; “he had never seen a woman with such a perfect incline to her cheekbones that made her entire face seem so alive, so architectural, lifting when she smiled” (p. 459).

Perhaps, the rough experiences—failure to get into America, the destination of his dream; the failure to reconnect with Ifemelu, the woman of his life; and his inexplicably becoming rich shortly after being deported from London as an illegal immigrant—may make the life principles that he has internalized to appear unrealistic. Finding himself in a seemingly state of disillusionment in the midst of hetero-patriarchal acquaintances, Obinze resolves to marry Kosi to fulfil his sexual needs and societal obligations to fit in—after having wealth and titles, a woman is a necessary add-on, to polish one’s hetero-patriarchal masculine status as the novel suggests; “Kosi became a touchstone of realness. If he could be with her, so extraordinarily beautiful and yet so ordinary, predictable and domestic and dedicated, then perhaps his life would start to seem believably his” (p. 459). Kosi being “a touchstone of realness” may suggest how Obinze’s hetero-patriarchal pressures, in adulthood drive him to somewhat doubt his progressive masculine—self-considering such soft

masculinity an illusion; in fact, non-existent in a typical African society. Thus, he resolves to act in the normalized ways he was raised to disavow. Such an attempt of acting in Nigerian male conventions, and what he has to endure in a conventionalised marital relation returns him to Ifemelu, which suggests his realisation that he cannot be happy and himself in heteronormative world.

As such, focusing on Kosi's performances of gender, one would find Nfah-Abenyi (1997) right when she argued that, marriage is an institution which "does not change its traditional principles, even if the woman is distinguished by her class or education" (p.38, my emphasis). Kosi is educated, lives independently in Lagos but she inflexibly observes the orthodox prescribed roles of how to be a good wife – "a woman of virtue" (Nfah-Abenyi 1997, p. 459). Obinze compares how Kosi uses the word virtue with how it is used in "the badly written articles in the women's section of the weekend newspapers; *The minister's wife is a homely woman of virtue*" (p. 459). Such a comparison suggests to Kosi, being a virtuous woman is not more than conforming to the idealized hetero-patriarchal womanhood, passive and submissive – "always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family" (Nfah-Abbenyi 1997, p.4).

Since to Kosi, being an idealised traditional wife is to uncompromisingly perform gender roles, Obinze's progressive masculine-self, which he enjoys, becomes redundant in their homestead and thus his life becomes dull. With Kosi, Obinze cannot cook anymore, "Kosi never liked the idea of my cooking. She has really basic mainstream ideas of what a wife should be and she thought my wanting to cook as an indictment of her. So I stopped, just to have peace" (p. 450). As per the quote, as Kosi considers kitchen a synonymous to her feminine identity, if Obinze occupies it, her conventional womanhood – which is the only identity she pursues, would be put into question. Obinze is thus trying to fit in to Kosi's rigid structure of hierarchical husband-wife relationship by suppressing his progressive masculinity which is to suppress his reality – his likes, his beliefs and his happiness pretending to be a man whom he is not. As he tells Ifemelu, Obinze sees living in such kind of life unfortunate; "there's a lot of pretending in my marriage'. [T]here were tears in his eyes" (p. 451). As I discussed earlier in this paper, with his mother, and Ifemelu, Obinze's progressive masculine self is embraced, and he enjoys as he becomes himself. But with Kosi, he finds an Obstacle to be a free man – free from



hetero-patriarchal prescriptions on how a man should be. With such a representation, I would, therefore, be inclined to agree with Mugambi's (2010) assertion that "the survival of any type of male identity is likely to depend on women's accommodative or subversive potential" (p.94).

In essence, the major difference between Kosi's conventional femininity and Ifemelu's progressive one is depicted on their perception and enactment of sex and sexuality. While Ifemelu owns her sexuality, Kosi surrenders it to Obinze allowing him to 'consume' her as per his heteronormative masculine ego. With Kosi's conventional sexual submissiveness, Obinze practises heteronormative sexual dominance where intercourse is, in Frye's (1992) definition "male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation" (p.113):

Ifemelu demanded of him. 'No, don't come yet, I'll kill you if you come,' she would say, or 'no, baby, don't move,' then she would dig into his chest and move at her own rhythm, and when finally she arched her back and let out a sharp cry, he felt accomplished to have satisfied her. She expected to be satisfied'. Kosi always met his touch with complaisance, and sometimes he would imagine her pastor telling her that a wife should have sex with her husband, even if she didn't feel like it, otherwise the husband would find solace in a Jezebel (p. 463).

According to Sanchez et al. (2006), sexual autonomy "is critical for women's sexual enjoyment and ability to orgasm" while sexual submissiveness is prone to sexual numbness (p. 514). In other words, even though Ifemelu enjoys the intercourse, Kosi seems to endure it. Here Kosi portrays her conformity to normalized hetero-patriarchal gender order where a wife is to submit herself sexually allowing her husband to dramatize masculine power and control over her body, which is the metonym of his power and dominance over the household. Kosi sacrifices her sexual fulfilment to make Obinze feel a man in hetero-patriarchal terms, which is to maintain her good-wife-status. However, the fact that Obinze's does not feel a real man with Kosi's conventional sexual submissiveness is thus regarded in this paper as the author's way of debunking both conventional femininity and heteronormative masculinity, an appeal for both progressive femininity and progressive masculinity.

As he is intoxicated with her beauty, when Obinze gets married to Kosi he comforts himself that her parochial worldview will somewhat improve as

they live together. Four years of marriage, however, are enough for Obinze to realise Kosi cannot change no matter what; “he imagined she would, gain a certain heft. She had not, after four years, except physically, in a way that made her look even more beautiful, fresher, with fuller hips and breast, like a well-watered houseplant” (p. 459). The fact that Kosi improves only her erotic feature—hips and breast insists subtly how Kosi’s total acceptance of the conventional subservient position reserved for a female as an ‘object’ in a hetero-patriarchal space—a ‘houseplant’ waiting to be watered. Here a woman is for decorative purposes rather than adding anything significant into the household. In other words, if Obinze wants to keep the marriage, he has to learn to pretend to be a man on Kosi’s terms—playing the heteronormative masculinity role of a man as a dominant figure in the household. However, Obinze tires of living the life of pretention, and breaks the marriage which symbolically frees him from the shackles of heteronormative masculinity, which his friends find unusual—a “white people behaviour”:

Look, The Zed, many of us didn’t marry the woman we truly loved. We married the woman that was around when we were ready to marry. So forget this thing. You can keep seeing her, but no need for this kind of white people behaviour. If your wife has a child for somebody else or if you beat her, that is a reason for divorce. But to get up and say you have no problem with your wife but you are leaving for another woman? *Haba*. We don’t behave like that please (p. 471).

The stance of Okudiba (Obinze friend’s) in summarises important hetero-patriarchal tenets on marriage and masculinity. Marriage is functional rather than emotional thus a real man is to keep his emotions out of it and focus on the major function of marriage—to make the clan’s name alive by begetting more male children. If a man wants emotional attachments he can get it outside his household by having a mistress because a real man’s virility is beyond his household. A marriage can end when either a man’s masculinity is attacked by a woman’s act of infidelity; or when the government’s law is broken by a criminal act to a woman. This is to say, hetero-normative patriarchy allows Obinze to be with both Ifemelu and Kosi—it allows him to live in both worlds—progressive and normalized masculinity as per his masculine ego’s demand. Thus, Obinze’s act of choosing to break the marriage reveals his determination to totally dissociate from hetero-normative power relation. Indeed, while Kosi is a symbol of conventional masculinity, Ifemelu is the opposite—a metaphor of unconventional masculinity. To be a complete heterosexual progressive man, Obinze should, therefore, leave Kosi to resume his intimacy with

Ifemelu, which is, indeed, to resume his intimacy with his progressive masculine-self.

### **Conclusion**

Adichie's representation of progressive masculinity in *Americanah* rejects the normalisation of the unchangeability of the male subject as the representation of her male protagonist suggests a man is the product of social orientation he gets. Thus, to realise the ungendered world, Adichie's novel suggests that both the male and the female subject should go through a psychological metamorphosis to become equally liberated individuals who can share life and support each other's pursuit of individual-selves and ambitions. In this regard, the re-invention of progressive 'new man' and 'new woman' in *Americanah* appears to be a womanist endeavour of creating an integrative Africa capable of accommodating both enlightened men and enlightened women to form ungendered relationships.

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