



AN OVERVIEW OF LABOUR AND GENDER EXPLOITATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH* THROUGH A MARXIST FEMINIST LENS.

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze labour and gender exploitation through a Marxist feminist lens in the novel Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which examines labour exploitation and gender. In the novel, Americanah, the young female protagonist is unexpectedly thrown into a life of marginalisation when she migrates from Nigeria to the American East coast. Having grown up in Nigeria her skin colour has neither been an issue nor of consideration to her, but it soon becomes apparent that elsewhere her complexion evokes expectations and functions as a breeding ground for prejudice. Americanah is a postcolonial novel that explores themes of race, gender, and identity in America, England, and Nigeria. The protagonist experiences prejudice and discovers what it means to be different from others. The paper discusses the remnants and effects of colonialism in past and present times, including how colonialism has subjugated the black migrants to untold exploitation. In doing this, A Marxist Feminist critique of Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would examine how the novel portrays class struggles, ideological battles, and propaganda. It might also consider how the novel's themes of race, gender, and identity are connected to class exploitation. Marxist literary criticism examines how literature reflects class struggles and conditions, and how it can be used as a tool for propaganda.

Keywords: Exploitation, labour, gender, marginalization, colonialism, subjugated.

Introduction

Colonisation began when outside influences gained access to sometimes otherwise quite unexplored areas of the world and imposed both themselves and their views on the natives, which fundamentally altered already established societies. Their forceful methods caused the colonised to live on the periphery and to conform. The expectation of the colonised was to be submissive, and their submission was imperative to achieve the desired colonised mindset incorporating a feeling of inferiority whether ethnically, culturally, or both. This also eliminated autonomy concerning the land and national resources and altered the map. It created serious and irrevocable negative consequences culturally, financially, and politically which are still apparent.

Although colonisation was abandoned decades ago, the mindset has lingered on both sides but has been enforced only by one of them. In an interview by the African Report contemporary, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie sums it up: 'There is a sense in which even we as Africans don't think that we're really part of the same world. It's as if we're not seated at the table but in the corner, so the rules are different for us'. It is the peripheral seat Adichie refers to above that cause people to become subservient and marginal in their native country and



even more so when they find themselves in the role of a migrant. Balancing acclimatisation and the constant fear of being caught in a web of mimicry and propitiation are challenges facing the subaltern and the effect it has on one's identity can be detrimental.

Adichie's socio-political novel *Americanah* is written from a clear postcolonial perspective, and the characters deal with issues of marginalisation, mimicry, invisibility, and conformity but also show a strong desire for transparency and a life of honesty towards themselves and others. The protagonist, Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who moved to the American East Coast to study, discovers what it is like to be different. Until the relocation, her skin colour and her race had never needed to be a consideration. The unforeseen prejudice she encounters in America shocks Ifemelu, who is used to being an opinionated and frank person. She finds she must mute her personality traits to not stand out even further. The novel has a strong focus on life as a black woman but also covers life as a person of colour on a more universal level. Race and gender differences are in the foreground throughout. In this case, Ifemelu experiences how she deals with differences between cultures, races and identities in a foreign country. The novel highlights the significance of labour as a vital component of economic growth. In an economy that prioritizes labour-intensive industries, the contribution of labour is essential for fostering economic development. Both labour and gender exploitation are depicted as social issues within the novel, although they carry distinct definitions and implications. For this reason, this study focuses on labour and gender exploitation. The mentioned narrative appears to delve into the themes of labour and gender exploitation through the portrayal of Ifemelu's character. While labour and gender exploitation are interconnected concepts, they possess distinct meanings within the context of work and employment dynamics. Firstly, labour pertains to the actions or tasks undertaken by individuals to create goods or deliver services. On the other hand, exploitation arises when someone unfairly and unduly benefits from the diligent efforts and contributions of others.

As a Nigerian woman with fraudulent identity documentation, Ifemelu struggles to find work, and through desperation and vulnerability, she accepts a job offer where she is later subjected to sexual assault. The shame of this incident causes her to stop responding to Obinze or even reading his correspondence, which leaves Obinze confused and dejected on the other side of the world. In the meantime, Ifemelu's life improves when she finds part-time work as a nanny with a wealthy American family who, in turn, introduces her to the children's uncle, Curt. Curt offers Ifemelu an insight into how the privileged American's live. He is madly in love with her, and his attitude to life is carefree and optimistic, a vantage point Ifemelu has failed to experience thus far in America. Curt offers a welcome distraction from the hardship she has had to endure being an immigrant. Although Curt is fully supportive of Ifemelu, he does not fully understand her which leads to her betrayal and the relationship ultimately ending.

Prior to meeting Curt, Ifemelu had a brief chance meeting with a man on a train. This man lingered in her thoughts and years later she meets him again. This man is Blaine, and he is to become Ifemelu's second boyfriend in the US. Blaine is an intellectual black university professor with strong views and a heightened awareness of injustices. Once again Ifemelu feels like an outsider. Although she shares many of Blaine's beliefs, he and his social circle are very intense and unforgiving to the extent that their righteousness feels close-minded and exclusive. The wedge between Ifemelu and America is widened, and she makes plans to



return to Nigeria where she feels she belongs. She longs for a life free from hypocrisy and pretence.

To balance the situational circumstances in the novel, the theoretical framework and the literary analysis will cover the more commonly discussed issues related to Marxism along with some of the intricate ones which come with living with a divided self. Ifemelu's experiences and actions can easily be applied to the cornerstones of postcolonial theory and its phases.

Finally, this study focuses on finding social and economic issues in the novel *Americanah* by using Karl Marx's theory of labour and gender exploitation – the Marxist Feminism. The novel explores the complex interactions between economic, social, and cultural factors that shape the experiences of immigrant workers. Therefore, the novel *Americanah* is focused to be analyzed through the lens of social and economic Marxists to see how the conditions of society in the novel.

Method: Marxist Criticism as a Theoretical Framework

This research employs the Marxist, particularly, the Marxist Feminist theory, to find out how labour and exploitation occur in the novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This study applied the descriptive qualitative method as it is more suitable for analyzing the data in this research (Heryanti & Kasih, 2022). Qualitative research is an introduction to a study that includes the purpose and research questions (Suprayogi & Pranoto, 2020). The data analyzed are in the form of texts narrations and dialogues from the novel (Kardiansyah, 2018) that address the topics of labour and gender exploitation.

In principle, Marxist literary criticism examines how literature reflects class struggles and conditions, and how it can be used as a tool for propaganda. Further, Marxist theories of gender analyze how class exploitation and gender inequality are connected. Marxism provides valuable insights into the role of economic factors and class struggle in shaping society and offers a compelling critique of capitalist systems.

Essentially, Marxist Feminism is amply deployed in this study. Marxist Feminism is a philosophical variant of feminism that incorporates and extends Marxist theory. Marxist Feminism analyses the ways in which women are exploited through capitalism and the individual ownership of private property. Marxist feminism recognizes the impact of social class on gender inequality. It recognizes that the oppression of women is unnatural. Marxist feminists believe that in the family, women are oppressed due to the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. This is because capitalism benefits from the oppression of women in many ways, including through unpaid labour, reproduction, reserve labour and the absorption of anger. According to Marxist feminists, women's liberation can only be achieved by dismantling the capitalist systems in which they contend much of women's labour is uncompensated. The main goal of Marxist feminists is to abolish capitalism. Through this, they believe that patriarchy itself can be tackled. Overthrowing the existing economic system is thought to liberate women. Hence, Marxism sees gender as a social construct that is intimately tied to the capitalist mode of production. The Marxist view of gender can be summarized, thus: Gender is a product of the division of labour within a capitalist society.



However, as a literary work, this book also describes complex social issues, including differences in labor exploitation and gender inequality that are hidden behind the journey of its characters. This study will also analyze in depth how the novel describes the exploitation of women as workers and gender roles play a role in shaping the life experiences of its characters. This study divides the discussion in this research into three different sections:

i. Discriminatory Payment Module/Gender Pay Gap

Men and women are often treated differently in the world of work (Blau and Kahn, 2007). The gender pay gap can be defined as the gap between wages paid to men and women. This happens when Ifemelu pays attention to the conditions that exist in waitress workers.

Ifemelu read the advertisement and thought, again, of calling, but she didn't, because she was hoping that the last interview she went for, a waitress position in a little restaurant that didn't pay a salary, only tips, would come through. (Adichie, 159)

This narrative excerpt depicts a situation where Ifemelu's character hopes to get a job as a waitress in a small restaurant that does not provide a fixed salary, but instead relies solely on tips as the main source of income. The underlying reason for her being rejected, according to her friend, was that she listed a high background only for the waitress position.

Wambui had told everyone that Ifemelu was looking for a job. Dorothy, the girly Ugandan with long braids who worked as a waitress in Center City, said her restaurant was hiring. But first, Mwombeki, the Tanzanian double major in engineering and political science, looked over Ifemelu's résumé and asked her to delete the three years of university in Nigeria: American employers did not like lower level employees to be too educated. (Adichie, 145)

In this narrative, an analysis of the salary gap based on the theory of Marxist feminism reveals deep gender inequality in the world of work. First, we look at the inequality when Mwombeki, a man, has the authority to evaluate the life history of Ifemelu, a woman, who is looking for work. This reflects gender hierarchies in the workplace which can result in significant pay gaps between men and women.

The gender pay gap is an important issue that has been analyzed from various perspectives, including feminist Marxist theory (Olsen, 2009). Marxist feminists argue that the gender pay gap is the result of the intersection between capitalism and patriarchy. Marxist feminists argue that Marxists must consider women's domestic work, their underpaid and insecure position as wage workers, and the familial ideology that contributes to their oppression. (Barrett, 1980).

According to Barrett, focus is placed on the way social systems operate to maintain gender inequality. This involves the key roles played by patriarchy and capitalism in creating and maintaining gender inequality. This theory highlights that patriarchy and capitalism collaborate to maintain gender inequality. Patriarchy creates a gender hierarchy where women tend to get lower-paying jobs and are responsible for unpaid work such as household chores.

ii. Commodification of Women's Bodies



The obvious complications of gender equality in working relationships are inappropriate comments, sexual jokes and harassment (Acker, 2006). Feminist Marxists critically examine the pervasive issue of the commodification of women's bodies within capitalist societies, emphasizing the exploitative nature of industries such as beauty, fashion, and pornography. This can be seen clearly in Ifemelu's experiences using her body.

Now what I need is help to relax. If you want the job, you have it. I'd pay you a hundred dollars, with the possibility of a raise, and you'd work as needed, no set schedule. (Adichie, 150).

The quote above explains that the tennis coach offers Ifemelu a job. However, the job the tennis coach is referring to here is assistance work which only relaxes her, and Ifemelu will be paid one hundred dollars per meeting. Not only will she be given a hundred dollars, but the tennis coach will also provide transportation costs for the train on which Ifemelu is traveling.

The phrase 'help to relax' could imply tasks associated with care-giving or emotional labour, which are often associated with traditional gender roles assigned to women. Marxist feminists would be critical of how certain forms of labour, particularly those associated with femininity, are undervalued and often unpaid or underpaid in capitalist societies. Caring body-based labour tends to resist the re-territorializing that is involved in other types of commodity production because of the unalienable value in the work relationship due to the mutually experienced pleasure or well-being produced in the caring labour process, even when other aspects are exploited (Ferguson, 2015). On the other hand, this treatment disappointed Ifemelu who felt that women could be seen as working only with their bodies without appreciating the skills they had.

'When can I start working?' she asked.

'Want to come over right now?'

'Okay,' she said.

She shaved her underarms, dug out the lipstick she had not worn since the day she left Lagos, most of it left smeared on Obinze's neck at the airport. What would happen with the tennis coach? He had said "massage," but his manner, his tone, had dripped suggestion. Perhaps he was one of those white men she had read about, with strange tastes, who wanted women to drag a feather over their back or urinate on them. (Adichie, 160-161.)

The quote describes the complex dynamics from a Marxist Feminist perspective, in which Ifemelu's character is trapped in the need to work and use her body as a source of income, illustrating how power, the economy, and gender are interrelated in society. Initial question, 'When can I start working?' reflects his aspiration to be economically independent, but his subsequent response which leads to physical encounters, 'Want to come over right now?', indicating how the body can be used as a commodification tool in unequal social situations.

In capitalism, workers receive wages, capitalists take the profit from their work, and those who reproduce daily and generational life receive no recognition for their labour, in wages or in social value. As subjects in capitalism, they are rendered invisible or a burden to the system (Armstrong, 2020).



This regime is treating us like sheep and we are starting to behave as if we are sheep. I have not been able to do any real research in years, because every day I am organizing strikes and talking about unpaid salary and there is no chalk in the classrooms.’ He was a small, dark man, smaller-looking and darker-looking beside Ginika’s large, ash-haired mother, with an undecided air about him, as though he was always dithering between choices. When Ifemelu told her own parents that Ginika’s family was finally leaving, her father sighed and said, ‘At least they are fortunate to have that option,’ and her mother said, ‘They are blessed.’ (Adichie, 66-67)

In this excerpt, an analysis from a Marxist Feminist perspective highlights the issue of the commodification of the female body through the depiction of a female character, Ginika’s mother. The quote describes the economic and social conditions that influence individual and family decisions. Someone in the quote expresses limitations in conducting research due to involvement in strike organizations and struggles for rights such as unpaid wages, indicating a problem of exploitation in the world of work: ‘This regime is treating us like sheep and we are starting to behave as if we are sheep. I have not been able to do any real research in years, because every day I am organizing strikes and talking about unpaid salary and there is no chalk in the classrooms.’ It illustrates how economic and employment systems can hinder women’s self-development potential in the context of education and academic careers and illustrates the structural inequalities that can force women to prioritize their economic needs over personal aspirations.

Feminist Marxist analysis highlights how unequal social and economic conditions can result in the commodification of women’s bodies by limiting choices and the development of individual potential, and illustrates how decision-making is often not purely based on desire but also determined by structural limitations and exploitation in the world of work.

‘My new features editor has come from America!’ she said, hugging Ifemelu. ‘It was difficult to tell her age, anything between fifty and sixty-five, but it was easy to tell that she had not been born with her light complexion, its sheen was too waxy and her knuckles were dark, as though those folds of skin had valiantly resisted her bleaching cream.’ (Adichie, 401)

In the quote above, the sentence ‘My new features editor has come from America!’ In certain situations, a person’s appearance and ethnic background can have an influence on how the individual is assessed or perceived in various contexts. For example, in the world of work, especially in appearance-heavy industries such as media or publishing, a person’s ethnic origin or nationality can be viewed as either favourable or unfavourable, depending on existing cultural perspectives and preferences. In addition, in sentences ‘her light complexion, its sheen was too waxy and her knuckles were dark, as though those folds of skin had valiantly resisted her bleaching cream’ illustrates that the use of whitening creams is a common cosmetic practice in several cultures. This is often related to social and cultural pressures that lighter skin is perceived as more beautiful or valued. Then, on to the narrative excerpt ‘It was difficult to tell her age, anything between fifty and sixty-five.’ The use of unpredictable age descriptions (between fifty and sixty-five years) reflects how a person’s age can be a factor influencing the way people perceive and value them in society.

In the context of the commodification of the female body, this means that there is strong social pressure to maintain a youthful and attractive appearance. The importance of a



‘youthful’ appearance in the context of the commodification of the female body refers to a beauty culture that often emphasizes the desire to remain young and physically attractive. Wolf illustrates how beauty is perceived as a value system that plays a significant role in social and political contexts (2002). She claims that beauty is used as a tool to maintain male domination, and in modern society, the concept of beauty is a fundamental belief that supports existing gender hierarchies, and this occurs through the influence of the beauty industry and the media that change views of the female body and make it as objects that can be traded to achieve beauty standards determined by society.

iii. Labour Dynamic

Labour dynamics refers to the various changes, interactions and related to the work environment and the way work is done in it. Through a Marxist Feminist perspective, understanding labour dynamics involves an analysis that includes aspects of gender, class, and social power. In this case, feminist and Marxist views are combined to understand how capitalism affects gender roles in labour (Hartmann, 1981). Heidi Hartmann sees solidarity between women and men and between different classes as the key to addressing gender inequality in the workplace and in society. It promotes greater social change through mutual struggles between genders and between classes.

‘Look, I’ve two more people to interview and I’ll get back to you.’

‘Okay. Thank you.’ Ifemelu knew she would not get the job and for this she was grateful. She repeated ‘I’m Ngozi Okonkwo’ in front of the mirror before her next interview, at the Seaview restaurant. (Adichie, 136).

This sentence can be interpreted as part of employment dynamics in the context of a job search or recruitment process. Although it does not clearly describe the movement of jobs as a whole, this sentence does reflect how individuals, like Ifemelu, are involved in the job-search process. The quotation ‘Look, I’ve two more people to interview and I’ll get back to you,’ reflects the power dynamics that exist in the job interview process. Employers have significant power over job seekers, and the competitive nature of the job market is evident, with many candidates competing for the same position. This reflects the unequal relations in capitalist societies, where employers wield power over job seekers, and individuals must compete for limited employment opportunities (Lopez, 2021). Ifemelu's response, ‘Okay. Thank you,’ showing resignation and understanding that he might not get the job. This reaction can be seen as a result of the historical economic discrimination faced by women, as demonstrated by Marxist feminism.

The expression ‘she was grateful’ because not getting the job shows complex emotions. In a capitalist society, some jobs can perpetuate gender stereotypes and unequal treatment, which can be detrimental to women's well-being and self-fulfillment. From a Marxist feminist perspective, this response can be seen as an awareness of the limitations of certain job opportunities and an acknowledgment of the need for a more just and empowering role for women in the world of work.

Ifemelu's repeated actions ‘I’m Ngozi Okonkwo’ in front of the mirror before the next interview at the Seaview restaurant has significance from a Marxist feminist point of view. By asserting her identity and using her full name, Ifemelu tries to represent herself confidently and challenges the potential marginalization of women's voices in the workplace.



‘I have good news. Kimberly called me to ask for your phone number. The babysitter she hired just left. She wants to hire you. She wants you to start on Monday. She said she wanted you from the beginning but Laura talked her into hiring the other person. So, Ifemelu you have a job! Cash! Under the table! Ifemelu, this is great.’ (Adichie, 165).

In this sentence, some elements reflect changes in the dynamics of work. The quotation “She wants to hire you” has the implied meaning that someone wants to invite you to work under their supervision. The term “hire” indicates that the person plans to give you a specific job or position. From a Marxist feminist perspective, the sentence can invite discussion of capitalist issues such as gender roles in the world of work, therefore, by employing women, capitalists hope to benefit from their skills and contributions. This job offer announcement has the potential to bring about changes in the way Ifemelu interacts with his work. For example, Ifemelu may need to rearrange her schedule and take on new responsibilities as a caretaker for children, which could affect her day-to-day life. In addition, the fact that this work is informal as ‘Cash! Under the table!’ pointed out that this work may not involve formal processing or tax reporting, creating a unique dynamic in the relationship between Ifemelu and Kimberly, the employer.

On the other hand, the sentence ‘Laura talked her into hiring the other person’, it notes that initially Kimberly wanted to recruit Ifemelu, but Laura managed to convince her to sign someone else. In a feminist view, this can be seen as a dynamic where women (Ifemelu) may face competition from other women (Laura, in this instance) for limited jobs. Therefore, the reproduced workers including themselves return the next day ready to sell their labor-power to the capitalist. The use-value of this reproductive labor is the daily renewal and generation of workers. However, the exchange value of women's work in the family is nothing. (Armstrong, 2020).

The following sentences describe the dynamics of gender inequality in the workplace and how this inequality can be reflected in the reasons used to make decisions. The manager said to Ifemelu,

‘I’m sorry, Ngozi,’ she said, ‘But we decided to hire a more qualified person. Good luck!’ (Adichie, 149).

On the sentence ‘I’m sorry, Ngozi, but we decided to hire a more qualified person. Good luck!’ Taken as a whole, the sentence reflects the role of labour dynamics in job-related decision-making, competition in the job search, and how candidate qualifications affect the outcome of the hiring or filling process. The manager ends the sentence by saying “Good luck!” to Ngozi, indicating that they wished Ngozi all the best in his quest.

The manager's statement also reflects the strong influence of patriarchal and economic structures, which can sometimes affect their preference for male candidates in the hiring process.

‘The first time Ifemelu went there, her counselor, Ruth, a caramel-skinned African American woman, asked, ‘What do you really want to do?’

“I want a job.” ‘Yes, but what kind?’ Ruth asked, slightly incredulous.

Ifemelu looked at her résumé on the table. “I’m a communications major, so anything in communications, the media.”



‘Do you have a passion, a dream job?’

Her interests were vague and varied, magazine publishing, fashion, politics, television; none of them had a firm shape. (Adichie, 211)

In a Marxist Feminist perspective, this sentence can also be interpreted as a description of inequality in society related to work. Hartmann argues that in the work environment, women often face injustice based on their gender (1981). These types of inequalities can vary, such as differences in wages between women and men doing equal work, limited career opportunities for women, or social norms that view women as less capable or less suitable for some types of work. Also related to access to certain jobs or the education required for those jobs. Some groups may face barriers in accessing the jobs or education needed to enter certain employment opportunities.

‘My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky.’

Later, after she breezed through the job interview, and the woman shook her hand and said she would be a ‘wonderful fit’ in the company, she wondered if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro.

She did not tell her parents how she got the job; her father said, ‘I have no doubt that you will excel. America creates opportunities for people to thrive. Nigeria can indeed learn a lot from them,’ while her mother began to sing when Ifemelu said that, in a few years, she could become an American citizen. (Adichie, 214)

In this passage, Ifemelu reflects on the intricate dynamics of appearance, racial identity, and labour disparities during a job interview. Ifemelu's thoughts about her hair reflect the social and cultural expectations placed on individuals, particularly women, in terms of their appearance. In the context of Ifemelu who accepts a job that is considered not by his qualifications, Hartmann's view of gender inequality in the workplace can provide significant insight (1981). Social norms and gender stereotypes also have a role to play in the way jobs are placed and how a person's abilities are judged. In addition, inequality in career opportunities is also an important issue. If Ifemelu is not provided with work opportunities that match her qualifications, this can limit career development and equal recognition in the work environment.

‘What do you mean, why? Why not?’

‘Better you send money back. Unless your father is big man? You have connections?’

‘I’ve found a job there,’ she said. (Adichie, 16-17)

From a Marxist feminist point of view, this narrative can be interpreted as part of the issues of inequality in the world of work and inequality in opportunities for access to decent work. In this context, finding a job and achieving economic independence are important steps to overcome the economic inequality that may occur in the capitalist system. Therefore, individuals may feel limited in their opportunities if they do not have strong economic resources or significant relationships.



Conclusion

The study discussed the issue of labour and gender exploitation in the novel *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The author explores the themes of labour and gender exploitation through the lens of feminist Marxism. The novel follows the story of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who moves to the United States to pursue her education and career. Drawing on the insights of Marxist feminism, this study examined how Adichie's novel highlights the intersection of labour and gender exploitation. It explored how Ifemelu's experiences reflect the broader issues of gender inequality and exploitation within capitalist societies, and how Marxist feminist theory can help us to understand and address these issues. Overall, *Americanah* emphasizes the importance of recognizing the social construction of gender and its impact on our identity and social interactions. It highlights the need to challenge gender-based inequalities and power imbalances in society and suggests that confronting gender exploitation is necessary for women to assert their agency and autonomy.

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