

# Fashion as an Expression of Authenticity, Identity, and Heritage in the Novel Americanah

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Čarna-Senka Kolar

**Moda kao izraz autentičnosti, identiteta i nasljeđa u romanu**

*Americanah*

Diplomski rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2023.

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## **Abstract**

The paper analyzes the way in which fashion affects people's inner and outer world. More precisely, how people view others and themselves while considering the outer appearance of a person. Furthermore, it analyzes the important topics in Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013), and considers how these topics are connected to fashion, appearance, and the way characters present themselves. This is exemplified through the experiences of the main character, Ifemelu, while adapting to the new American way of life. The first part of the paper deals with the general psychological overlook of the way fashion influences the way people see both themselves and those around them. Furthermore, it considers the consequences this can have on a person's mental health. The second part of the paper analyzes identity, heritage, and authenticity and how they are expressed in the novel. Firstly, it deals with the expression of identity and heritage through hair. Secondly, it examines the connection between authenticity, and how characters (do not) show it through language (communication), style, and difference between American and African fashion.

**Keywords:** fashion, *Americanah*, Ifemelu, psychology, identity, heritage, authenticity



## Introduction

Ifemelu, the main character of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*, moved to America from her home in Nigeria, in order to finish her studies and start a life abroad. The novel deals with many important issues, such as race, identity, authenticity, language, relationship with others, and also, how other people perceive a person based on their physical and cultural traits. While trying to adjust to the pace and life in America, Ifemelu often has to hide traces of herself. In order to learn from those around her and by copying them, she tries to adapt and assimilate to her new surroundings. Because of the way the American society is structured, this need to fit in is not a choice for Ifemelu, or the other characters, but rather a necessity. Because of this, Ifemelu has to also adapt to her new identity as a Black woman. In the novel, this process of adapting is described through language, accent, clothing, and hair.

Fashion is a constant in people's lives, whether they are conscious of the fact or not. The way people style their clothing, hair, and make-up communicates to others who they are. One of the first things people notice about each other is their outside appearance, and because of that, the way an individual looks like becomes important to how others will perceive them. This work deals with the effect fashion has on people. The first part of the work focuses on the psychological side of fashion. More precisely, it analyzes how fashion influences people's opinions (of others, and themselves), relationships, and status. The way people dress and how they portray themselves is something that can show who they are, how they feel, and what they believe in. Therefore, the second part of the work explains the connection between issues of identity, heritage, authenticity, and fashion. Furthermore, it exemplifies this connection by analyzing different situations Ifemelu has to navigate while she is in America, and also connects it to the author's own personal experience. In this second part, topics of identity and heritage are analyzed through the problem Black people have with wearing their hair in a natural way, while the topic of authenticity is analyzed both through language and the difference between African and American modern fashion.

Finally, the paper concludes that it is important to prioritize the individual's own health and identity over the social norms. While norms and rules may be a typical way for members of society to function between themselves, as well as to communicate, adapt, connect, and even understand other societies and people within them, it is also important for an individual to stay true to her or his identity. Fashion can be both a means of connecting to other people, but also

differentiating oneself from the rest of the world by creating one's own style and aesthetic. The novel's protagonist underwent many changes when she moved to America and tried to adapt to her new surroundings. She both lost and found herself while accepting how different she was from the rest of her colleagues and people who surrounded her. And with realizing that it is alright to be different, and to present herself and her own identity and heritage through her own language, accent, natural hair and style, both Ifemelu, and Adichie show personal growth, and communicate to other people, that one can strive to accept others as well as exist in the way that is the most authentic to oneself.

## 1. What is Fashion?

Fashion seems like a straightforward word, but the concept itself can be difficult to describe, considering its multiple meanings. Because of this, the beginning of the thesis will deal with defining the word, as well as some of the other terms that are closely connected to it and are relevant for the rest of the work. Generally, *fashion* is defined as a change in clothing styles and appearance which is adopted by certain groups of people (Valentić 57). It can influence “the senses of a person, who likes to wear [new popular clothing] and remain to the trends of the time. It also applies to the personal mode of expression which may or may not apply to the general public” (“Concept of Fashion” 5). It includes all aspects and styles of clothing, as well as accessories, make-up, and hairstyles. Furthermore, from a sociological perspective, the term is presented as a system of signs, a social pattern of values, or a way of acquiring collective and individual identity. It is defined equally as a social production, and as a form of art, considering that both art and production play a complex role within the phenomenon of fashion. That means that fashion can be observed as a means of identification and socialization, but also as symbolic communication (Valentić 57). For example, Israeli Nigerian lawyer and writer Hava Rosenfield, while analyzing her book *Fashion as a Means of Communication* states that “fashion transcends the everyday visuals that we find around us, and reflects our thought process, who we are, and its essentially the form of identification” (3:39-3:52). According to Rosenfield, fashion can be seen as a form of art which people have a tendency to interpret and understand. While wearing or styling certain clothes, people speak a language and try to convey certain messages, for example, communicating the kind of activities they will take part in that day, for example they can wear a suit or a uniform while working, or a gown while going to an opera or ballet. And in order to understand the meaning hidden behind someone’s choice of attire, fashion has its own global rules, grammar, and codes. These codes can be expressed in the form of color, fabrics, or design (“Fashion as a Means of Communication” 4:05-5:15).

Even though the nouns *dress* and *fashion* are often used as synonyms, scholars make certain distinctions between them. *Dress* should define anything an individual does to modify, add, or supplement the body, for example, people get tattoos, cosmetic surgeries, wear perfume, apply paint or makeup. On the other hand, as was already mentioned, *fashion* is a much broader term and a social phenomenon affecting the behavior of members of a culture or a society (Tortora 159). For example, the history of Preppy fashion is sociologically linked to academics and success (“The

Devil Wears Prada” 5:32-5:44). It can be traced to the late nineteenth century, when White Anglo-Saxon Protestant families, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and economic changes, wanted to distinguish their wealth from the “rising tide of newly wealthy families” (“History, Subculture, and Sociology”). This gave rise to the establishment of new private preparatory schools for children of such families, and in that way created the version of aristocracy that valued inheritance, tradition, and family name. This whole movement was structured around the idea of differentiation between the classes, and the “us vs. them” mentality (“History, Subculture, and Sociology”). Over the years the style has developed, however, the core theme and value of prestige, intellect, academy, strength, and leadership remained. The style is determined by its history and many people, industries, and brands (for example, Brooks Brothers, Ralph Lauren, or J. Press) that created the meaning behind the look. Fashion designers, illustrators, stylists, personal shoppers, magazine editors, and many more people who work in the fashion industry help shape the world and impact everyone within society (“The Devil Wears Prada” 5:44-5:52). As will be discussed later in the work, fashion is firmly linked to the psychology of people and affects behavior, therefore, what a person chooses to wear expresses their influences, social freedoms, and identity. In the modern world, with the influence of social media, individuals are constantly surrounded with images and videos of fashion icons, new and popular trends, pieces of clothing, and make-up choices. Therefore, even people who are not as conscious of fashion are still taking part in its development. An individual can state that they do not care about fashion, however, while styling pieces of clothing from certain brands, Ralph Lauren, for example, shows the individual's attitude and an image they wish to portray, as well as his or her own personal taste. The pieces of clothing do not necessarily have to be expensive, or from a known brand, however, the design, shape, material, as well as color, contribute to the look. For example, wearing the oxford shirt, blazers, or a topcoat, conveys a message of education, intelligence, and maturity, connected with Preppy Fashion (“Preppy and Ivy League Style” 8:57-14:00), even if the wearer does not purposefully or consciously think about it while wearing the pieces. This belief in “absolute freedom” regarding one’s own style is called pseudo-individualism, an illusion of choice: “A vast majority of products under the same category function in a very similar manner, and ultimately the utility is the same, but who made it, the look, and contribution to one’s image is what gives the product value” (“The Devil Wears Prada” 6:00-6:11).

*High fashion* refers to the unique items of clothing that are used to set and popularize new trends (for example, through fashion shows and media), and are not readily available nor easy to obtain (Draws 1). *Fashion trend* is described as a direction in which fabrics, colors, and styles, as well as designs, tend to change, and they are often influenced by social media, political, social, and sports events, as well as films and cinematic industry (“Concept of Fashion” 7). A *style* is a personal choice of how colors, materials, fabrics, pieces of clothing, hair, or makeup, will be combined (Draws 1). More importantly, it is a way of self-expression. For example, models, while on a catwalk, are a part of the fashion world, however, the way they dress when they are at home is their style. If or when a person becomes an influencer, his or her personal style can become popular and iconic, which means that they could start their own clothing line, and in such a way turn their own style into fashion (“Fashion vs. Style”). Furthermore, a style shows peculiarities in taste, builds, and structure, and acts as an inseparable whole (Valentić 59). It is considered timeless, while fashion, on the other hand, is ever-changing. A person who wears designer clothing and follows new fashion trends is considered *fashionable*, while on the other hand, someone who does not follow fashion trends but rather stays true to their own aesthetics is considered *stylish*: “Personal style is about developing a sense of self, rather than simply absorbing trends” (“Fashion vs. Style”).

## 2. Fashion Psychology

Considering that this study field is still young, there is seldom research conducted on the relationship between the dress and the authentic self in the area of fashion psychology. The self in this context represents the true, undamaged, born essence of a person (Schwartz and Sweezy qtd. in Maxey 1). Some researchers discuss and write about the direct relationship between people and their clothing styles, however, most of the research in this area focuses on public image, marketing, trends, and connection between different societies and how they perceive and incorporate fashion in everyday lives (2). Furthermore, it is observed that there are very few studies in the area of psychological research that are concerned with health, addressing the psychological language between humans and their clothing, which shows that further research is needed and required, considering how much influence fashion has on people's life as well as their self-image. Psychology within the field of fashion analyzes how fashion influences human behavior:

Fashion psychology examines the impact of fashion, including clothing and accessories, on well-being but also consumer behavior, overall performance, and much more. Beauty is also a focus of study, as well as self-esteem, confidence, body image, and the selection of models. In relation to money, fashion psychologists examine the debt that comes from excessive spending and overconsumption that leads to the disposal of unwanted garments. (“What is a fashion psychologist?”)

There are a lot of researchers who have studied exactly how the choices of clothing, accessories, make-up, hairstyle, and body changes reflect the wearer's inner emotional and cognitive world. However, the “truth is that almost all that research is made from outside of the health community” (2). It should be emphasized that both of those areas of research in fashion psychology are equally important because they provide the analysis and understanding of both how fashion influences the way others will perceive the individual, as well as how the individual will perceive and how they will feel about themselves. Ultimately, it can show what consequences this has on an individual's mental and physical health.

In their article, “Dress, Body and Self: Research in the Social Psychology of Dress” (2014), Johnson et al. analyze collected research in two areas: firstly, they analyze how dress “acts as a stimulus and influences attributions by others, attributions about self, and on one's behavior, and

secondly relationships between the dress, the body, and the self” (1). The article furthermore describes theoretical approaches which were used while conducting research in these two areas. There are four topics of research in the article that will be important to mention and analyze for this work: 1) Body supplements, 2) The physical body and the self, 3) Dress and Self as a distinction from others, and 4) Dress and Self as an influence on consumption. While talking about the first section and first topic of the article, body supplements, this work is specifically interested in the clothed body and how people dress. Dress is mostly defined as the collection of either modifications or supplements to the body: “Body modifications include cosmetic use, suntanning, piercing, tattooing, dieting, exercising, and cosmetic surgery among others, while body supplements include, but are not limited to, accessories, clothing, hearing aids, and glasses” (7). The next part of the work will deal with how both body supplements (more precisely color of clothing), and modifications (dieting and exercising) influence human behavior.

## **2.1. Body Supplements: Link Between Color and Behavior**

The first of the supplements this thesis will analyze is color. Research shows that color is one of the most crucial factors of how people are going to view the person wearing and styling pieces of clothing with a certain color. In other words, it establishes whether the choice of clothing will be attractive or unattractive, and therefore, whether the person will be considered attractive or not. Today, both men and women use color in order to be more desirable to others and “enhance their aesthetics” (Kodžoman 91). Furthermore, the use of colors in our everyday dressing choices shows who we are, how we feel, and what we believe in (92).

A theory of color psychology was developed in the 1990s and the researchers called it “Color-in-context theory.” It analyzes how humans give meanings to certain colors and learn them over time “through repeated pairings with a particular experience or message ... or with biological tendencies” (Johnson 5). To exemplify, red is constantly attributed to the sign of stopping in traffic or danger on certain (chemical) containers. In other instances, red is strongly associated with feelings of desire, sexuality, lust, and even dominance and power. People, while responding to these stimuli, can either be conscious or unconscious of how or why they react to certain colors in certain ways:

Color is the critical cue for sexual signaling, but what the preferred colors are in humans is difficult to predict. Human vision and perception contribute to how a color appears to the individual. Perception is unique to each individual and is constantly changing due to the influence of a range of variables. No two people see color or experience its effects in the same way, so color provokes different responses according to various situations. However, the use of color is indeed important in improving one's aesthetic character. (Kodžoman 91)

A good example of how color can influence the behavior of people toward the wearer is described in the research conducted by Elliot and Niesta. In their article, "Romantic Red: Red Enhances Men's Attraction to Women" (2008), they conducted five different experiments in order to demonstrate parallel effects in humans: "Red, relative to other achromatic and chromatic colors, leads men to view women as more attractive and more sexually desirable" (1150). The researchers contrasted red to white, gray, green, and blue, to observe different types of behavior in men, while they were interacting with the female wearers. This research supports the hypothesis that color (in this case red) has specific effects on people. It is shown that men were more sexually attracted to women wearing red than any other color and would proceed to ask them out on a date. However, it is important to note that this experiment was focused primarily on attractiveness, sexual desires, and the likelihood of going out with a person, and no other positive qualities (likability, kindness, and intelligence) (1159).

There are various examples of associating meanings with certain colors aside from red. Norava, in her work, *The Importance of Clothing in the Business World* (2018), states that the meaning a certain color will be assigned to differs from culture to culture. In some instances, black is associated with death and sorrow (from Europe to New Guinea), death and evil (certain parts of Africa), while on the other hand, it is also associated with power, control, elegance, dignity, and equality. From the 1960s, black became a negation color which is connected to the sophistication and notion that it can fit everyone, no matter their sex or age, and can go well with any other color. Men and women in the business world wear black suits or dresses to appear more traditional and formal. Furthermore, black, white, and silver, sometimes gray, symbolize luxury (Norava 28). Green, as it is the color of nature, represents peace and fertility. Variations of the color may be connected with either positive or negative attributes (for example, yellowish green can be



associated with nausea, poison, and jealousy), however, in most cultures, it is associated with life, nature, and growth. Yellow is mostly associated with the sun, joy, and spiritual enlightenment. White symbolizes neutrality, purity, and luxury, while orange is connected to cheerfulness, richness, joy, light, and energy (29-30). Because there are many meanings associated with certain colors, people have the opportunity to think about and use colors to their own advantage. This means that, while thinking about how a person wishes to portray himself or herself, they can style certain colors with pieces of clothing and fabrics in order to achieve the desired effect. In other words, a person can either enhance or shift certain characteristics and in that way manipulate the public eye. A person can, for example, love “quintessential ensembles,” which usually show off the strong, silent, and self-contained side of the personality, however, they can also “be sure to strategically include an extroverted garment, such as highly saturated coats, pattern headbands, or eye-catching jewelry, to give the accent of access” (“Queen ‘B’ Syndrome” 5:13-5:37). Colors are an intrinsic part of this as well, because styling brighter colors gives the impression of openness, richness, playfulness light-heartedness, and extraversion.

### **2.1.1. Dress Codes**

The way someone dresses; whether they will wear more provocative or traditional clothes, if they will abide by dress codes or lean away from them, can in many ways show person’s character, and will more often than not dictate how the rest of the world views them:

We individuals think we can wear whatever we want, without outside influence. However, fashion choices considered inappropriate, or presenting a non-professional image can take the wrong turn, especially in specific scenarios like the workplace. Fashion is also centered on people’s life as well as on culture, in the way people travel, and the way they live. It also influences how we communicate or how to determine the most popular trends. (Riaza Minaña 4-5)

For example, in the business world, business attire is a sign of respect for the institution being represented. Personal appearance shapes and imposes an opinion about the people and the company that the person represents. The goal of business attire is to present a successful image of the company. Here, images are extremely important to people, and they can be used skillfully and play a major role in communication, thereby indirectly influencing sales results (Simončić 363).

In today's world, people in business are expected to be competitive, "therefore, projecting an image of credibility and security has become a fundamental tool when promoting trust and generation authority, leadership and power" (Riaza Minaña 5).

In the modern world, the rules and codes of dress differ for men and women. Also, the dress codes vary from company to company, where some companies ask their workers to abide strictly by the rules, others may prefer for their workers to dress more casually and present themselves in a relaxed way. However, often, the rules for women dictate that they should wear shirts, jackets, trousers or skirts, and good shoes, while on the other hand, exposing the stomach, miniskirts and cleavage is not acceptable. For men, on the other hand, in most cases, it is acceptable to wear shirts, ties, suits, jackets, and pants. In banks, for example, we can see that women wear knee-length skirts, white shirts and may wear a scarf with the color of the bank (Duić Loparić *Odjevanje kao komunikacija [Dressing as a Means of Communication]* 24). Both women and men mostly wear more neutral and emotionless colors, such as black or blue, in order to look more traditional and professional. Moreover, it should also be emphasized that "dressing professionally is more than just appearance. It is a way to control identity as a member of a professional community. The way people dress changes the way they see themselves" (Norava 32). Therefore, people can dress more casually in a workplace, to express a note of elegance, and still look and give the aura of a professional person. Aside from the clothing, however, a person must have an attitude in order to fit the image he or she is trying to create with the way they dress. For example, if a wearer does not project the aura of leadership and professionalism, what they are wearing will not matter. Inversely, a person does not have to strictly wear a suit to convey a feeling of control, power, and domination, they can be dressed casually as well (Riaza Minaña 5).

Furthermore, the professional look is not limited to the workplace or a job interview. It can also be associated with the academic setting. For example, a "Preppy and Ivy League Style," which derived from the history of private, university preparatory schools and is associated with the subculture that has a nature of vocabulary, speech patterns, and etiquette, with its classic and proper elements (even when mixed with the other styles) gives a look of mastered, and relaxed confidence, and laid back, scholar type of sophistication:

This aesthetic is built from structured silhouettes, relaxed components, strong staple garments, and subtle or elegant branding, typically found in the form of embroidery.

The Ivy look possesses a color scheme that practices restraint and purpose based on natural and rich colors, such as red, emerald, and navy. (“The Guide to Preppy” 7:30-8:01)

This, of course, is one of the many styles that can be associated with the academic environment, as it largely depends on the university dress code, as well as personal choices of style. The way a student dresses does not necessarily show or influence success in their studies. However, Slepian et al. published an article, “The Cognitive Consequences of Formal Clothing” (2015), in which they test and analyze whether wearing formal clothing enhances abstract cognitive processing. The results of five different studies show that formal clothing is associated with abstract processing and a feeling of power (665). This supports the idea that the way we dress can largely influence how we feel, what we do, and because of that, how others perceive us. However, it is important to note that a person can have a lot of charisma and dress in an exceptional, sophisticated, scholarly way, “but if that is not accompanied by intellectual support it will not do much good” (Riaza Minaña 5). This means that people must have a balance in both how they dress and how they behave. Howlett et al. suggested that clothing should complement one’s personality, “which should be used as a plus, without diminishing the importance of the abilities and attitude of those who wear them” (qtd. in Riaza Minaña 6).

## **2.2. The Physical Body and Society**

People are constantly overwhelmed with the pictures of “perfect or desirable bodies,” whether it is on television, the internet, in magazines, tv shows, social media, or even while having a discussion amongst friends. Social norms often focus on promoting thin body image for women, and muscular appearance for men. This is one of the primary reasons for dissatisfaction with one’s body, and “risky appearance management behaviors including eating pathology among women, and muscle enhancement and eating behavior in men” (Johnson et al. 10). In his article, “Nezadovoljstvo tjelesnim izgledom i ponašanja povezana s poremećajima u prehrani adolescenata [Dissatisfaction with Body Image and Behavior Associated with Adolescent Eating Disorders],” Livazović describes the research that examines the frequency of behaviors associated with eating disorders in adolescents, considering relationships with parents and peers, and attitudes about physical fitness appearance. Results show that there is a difference according to gender,

meaning that the presence of behaviors and feelings with anorexia, bulimia, and overeating occurs more often in girls. Women in the research expressed much more dissatisfaction with their physical appearance and had more desire towards achieving a thinner body (74, 83).

However, it is shown that men, even though they do not strive for thin bodies like women, can be prone to exercising excessively, as well as using appearance and performance-enhancing substances, if they are not satisfied with how they look. Both men and women are objectified in society, meaning that they are “looked at, evaluated, and potentially objectified and treated as objects valued for their use by others” (Johnson et al. 3). The result of this is that people start looking at themselves from an outside perspective, worrying about what other people think when they see them and if they find them attractive. This, as mentioned, can lead to dangerous behaviors, feelings of inferiority in relation to others because of how one looks, as well as body dysmorphia, which is described as a disorder that disables people to act normally in social situations because they are worried about the flaws in their bodies. This can further lead to anxiety, social avoidance, alienation, and even refusing to look in the mirrors (“Body Dysmorphic Disorder”).

Furthermore, aside from feeling negative about themselves, people tend to spread that energy to others through conversation, and criticizing others, or themselves in front of other people may have a negative impact on how other people perceive themselves. Negative body talk results in low self-esteem and obsession with how one looks or appears to others, as well as depression (Johnson et al. 15). On the other hand, when people talk positively about their or other people’s bodies, they tend to be much more satisfied with themselves, as well as have a lot of confidence:

Healthy body image is more than simply tolerating what you look like or ‘not disliking’ yourself. A healthy body image means that you truly accept and like the way you look right now and aren’t trying to change your body to fit the way you think you should look. It means recognizing the individual qualities and strengths that make you feel good about yourself beyond weight, shape, or appearance, and resisting the pressure to strive for the myth of the ‘perfect’ body that you see in the media, online, or in your communities. (“Body Image”)

### **2.3. Distinction Between Self and the Others**

When it comes to discussing the relationship between the clothing and the sense of self, as distinct from other people, the focus is on asking and answering questions: Who am I? What makes me different from others? What makes me unique?

The research discussed up until now focused on how people's choice in dress influenced both how others perceive them, and in that relation how they will consequently perceive themselves. Also, it discussed how dress can impact people's physical behavior towards others, as well as themselves. In this part of the work, the emphasis is on "addressing the role dress might play in thinking about oneself as a unique and distinct individual (for example, self-perception)" (Johnson et al. 17). Furthermore, the same authors describe Guy and Banim's research conducted in the 2000s. They were interested to see in what way women used clothing to present themselves in their everyday life. They used three different strategies to investigate the relationship between women and their clothing choices: 1) a personal account where women were asked the question "What clothing means to me" and they had to write or record their responses, 2) a clothing diary, which was a daily vlog that participants had to keep for two weeks, and 3) a wardrobe interview where participants answered questions regarding the clothing they have in their current collection. Results showed three different perspectives on the relationship between the self and the clothing. First was "the woman I want to be." Here, participants showed a strong desire to encourage their own positive behavior and self-appreciation with their clothing choices, and in that way create a positive self-image. They used their favorite pieces of clothing in order to close the mental gap between "the woman I am today" and "the woman I aspire to become." The second perspective, as researchers called it, "the woman I fear I could be," shows that these certain participants had a strong fear regarding their fashion choices, because of the previous failed results to achieve a desired look. This fear centers around the possibility of not knowing how to dress appropriately or convey a positive image. The last perspective was "the woman I am most of the time," and here participants mostly commented how they enjoy dressing up and using clothing to show, emphasize, and realize different parts of themselves, whether it comes to their body or their personality (Guy and Banim qtd. in Johnson et al. 19). The results of this research ultimately show that people (in this case women) use clothes in order to either create, reveal or hide aspects of their identity (17).

As is shown, the way people dress and the reason behind it can show different attitudes toward the world and oneself. As fashion is not only experienced on an external, but emotional level, it can provide a strong sense of belonging in the world, as well as be used as a means of isolation and alienation from others. It is a universal, non-verbal dialogue and language that can help people both understand and connect to each other, but also differentiate themselves and create their own personal way to express themselves (“Create Your Own” 1:30-1:46). Furthermore, a lot of people strive to create their own personal aesthetics and, in that way, express themselves. Aesthetics in fashion refers “to the set of principles that deal with the nature of art, nature, and sensory experience in general, and aesthetic clothing definitions typically refer to clothing items that are well designed and create a pleasing appearance” (“What is Aesthetic” 1:28-1:43). When a person understands or has a strong feeling of who they are and what they enjoy, what they believe in, and what they aspire to achieve in life, this can ultimately be expressed through their style. What patterns, fabrics, or colors a person styles together are directly connected to one’s own individual psychology and philosophy of beauty:

To have an aesthetic is not to bow to and be defined by labels, but rather to define another channel out of many that life has to offer in regard to visual and personal expression that resonates with oneself. It’s not to mold yourself to a label to cause distress over not being a proper fit, but to simply be and creatively express your own personality, intelligence, and experience, through a lens you feel well suited to. In regard to fashion, your style is a combination of all you think, feel, and do. (“Create Your Own” 7:50-8:15)

#### **2.4. The Influence of Dress and Branding on a Person’s Inner Dialogue**

While researchers discuss clothing choices, what is most looked at is the connection between the wearer and the society to which that person belongs, and the special area of interest is how their clothing choices allow the individual to either gain more power (whether it is social, economic, or regarding self-confidence), or fit in the social norms. Maxey argues how it is possible that marketing uses fashion psychology in order to gain more monetary profit and in doing so disregards the important connection of clothing and the sense of self: “If you look around a store at any given time, patrons are usually purchasing clothing very different from the ‘level’ they are

currently wearing, and people purchasing clothing are having a dialogue with the culture around the marketing of their brand” (3).

To exemplify the relationship between consumption and an individual, the author lists two types of buyers. Firstly, those who know the exact reason for purchasing specific pieces of clothing or accessories, and those who do not. In the first instance, when people are focused on what they wear and how they look, furthermore when they take notice of which piece, fabric, or color goes well with what and put effort into their looks, they are shown to know what they are buying and specifically for what occasion. Secondly, there are those who do not know why they are buying certain pieces of clothing, aside from the fact that they needed it and the piece they have chosen is simply a choice that matches their needs. In both these cases the buyer “ignores the dialogue between the article of clothing and themselves and allows society to drive the purchase” (Maxey 4). This is because the marketing industry knows exactly how to use the psychology of consumers in order to sell their brands.

### **2.4.1. Fashion Psychology and Branding**

In his book, *Psihologija marketinga [The Psychology of Marketing]* (2007), Milas states how the basic goal of marketing is to recognize consumer needs and try to satisfy them. Marketing experts work together with psychologists in order to answer important questions, such as: why does a consumer choose one product instead of another? What do consumers think about the product, and when and why they (would) buy it? Which product should be offered to which consumer? How should a company formulate its marketing in order to attract more customers, and so on (21)? The evaluation is based on determining the importance of different desired product characteristics and their association with individual brands. After determining desirable characteristics, the comparison of different labels is approached. The brand that proves to be the best in a series of set criteria will probably be selected for purchase (40). A brand is a symbol that not only represents the label of a certain manufacturer of a product, but it represents ideas and attributes related to the manufacturer’s name. It leads to the idea that consumers do not only buy brands because they either like their physical attributes and functions, but also because they can connect to the ideas, feelings, and attitudes the brand represents (Gardner and Levy qtd. in Lee et al. 61). For example,

high fashion houses do not only sell clothing, however, they are focused on selling the “lifestyle and essence” so that those who wear the clothing can make the pieces their own. Therefore, when a person buys a piece of clothing from a certain brand, they are buying “the entire history that has shaped the aesthetic” and making that singular piece a part of their own style (“The Clever Trope” 12:30-12:39). Psychology as a science that deals with mental processes and behavior is naturally focused on trying to describe, predict, explain, and control consumer behavior. Such knowledge can be applied in marketing. If a company wants to make a profit, it will have to satisfy the needs and wants of consumers. This is only possible if there is an understanding of the consumer's needs and if the products offered by the company to the market are compatible with such needs. In any case, experts must answer fundamental questions related to their own product and the market to which it is offered. In elementary form, these are the questions: Who buys? What do they buy? How do they buy and spend? Why they buy and spend (Milas 21)?

Even though this knowledge is used in order to make people spend more money and buy products, it does not necessarily have to be a negative thing for an individual. As was discussed before, people have different reasons for why they choose clothing, accessories, and make-up, and style them in a certain way. When an individual owns their style and understands what brands they like and the reasons behind it, their style can be a powerful tool for existing in society and expressing their own identity through fashion. There is a difference between dressing for other people or using clothes to hide and alienate yourself from others, or, on the other hand, cultivating and owning your own style for yourself. The former can lead people to feelings of doubt and inferiority over others, while the latter can help a person emphasize or even discover certain parts of their personality (Efremov et al. 31).



### 3. African Fashion

In their work, *African Textile Design and Fabric Arts as a Source for Contemporary Fashion Trends* (2013), Debeli et al. state how African style, design, and textile represent symbols of African society, and usually use cultural landscapes, or natural objects in their contemporary design. Africa has various landscapes, such as mountains, deserts, valleys, and rainforests which serve as inspiration for artists. Textile designs came from the culture and background of fifty-five African countries and over eight hundred linguistic groups, and the symbols of various ethnic groups have been artistically incorporated into fabric decoration and design through elements of lines, curves, and motifs (229). One of the aspects of design that make African fashion rich is the use and symbolism of colors. In African color palettes, one can generally find warm tones, predominant with a hint of brown. However, African designers usually use a variety of colors in order to represent different states of energy and emotion that the piece of clothing can evoke in the wearer. While using a combination of warm and bright colors, such as red, yellow, orange, and purple, designers make cheerful and astounding clothing. Such warm colors are usually used in Western Africa (“The Meaning Behind”).

David Ochieng, also known as Avido, is a Kenyan designer whose “brand is making noise” in the fashion world. In his interview, he states that when he started designing, he mostly used black, chocolate brown, and gold. He states that he used these colors in order to symbolize his home: “I used black to accept that I am already black, and then I chose gold and chocolate because the roofs of the houses in Kibera look like chocolate. Because they’ve been rained on and scorched by the sun. I used these colors to symbolize that Kibera is home of talent” (“Colours Are Alive” 4:20-4:41). The influence of color in the traditional, as well as modern African fashion industry is significant, and the meaning of each color gradually developed over history. Purple, for example, symbolizes femininity, yellow and gold symbolize wealth, spiritual purity, fertility, beauty, and riches. Blue represents harmony, love, peace, and togetherness. Green is the color of growth (either spiritual or that which takes place in nature). It also symbolizes the rebirth of a land. White, like in many other cultures, symbolizes purity, and black represents mourning, however, it is also considered the color of profound spiritual energy (“The Meaning Behind”).

Color and textural patterns have an important connection to religion and personal spiritual growth. Many clothing pieces thus serve for ceremonial and ritual purposes, as religious values govern families, communities, and societies (Akinbileje, “Symbolic Values of Clothing and

Textiles Art in Traditional and Contemporary Africa” 628). African designers, furthermore, use patterns and create motifs, both for aesthetic purposes and because motifs carry their own meanings, just as colors do, for example, motifs can convey spiritual values and beliefs (Debeli et al. 231). As an example, Kente cloth, because of the patterns as well as the use of colors, represents death and purity:

The panels are sewn together and appropriate for both men and women’s clothing. The cloth is usually brightly colored with motifs representing religious or political commentary. The color patterns are especially significant as each color has a noteworthy meaning. From red symbolizing death to white meaning purity, the colors tell a story. (“African Patterns”)

In the novel *Americanah*, this direct symbolism of African design is rarely mentioned, however, while describing the way Nigerian people dress, and contrasting it to the way Americans do, readers can see the importance of both African and American fashion, as well as their different way of life, and how its differences inevitably affect characters who have moved from Africa to America. This distinction will be discussed later in the work, through Ifemelu’s view on American modern fashion.

#### **4. *Americanah* and Questions of Identity and Heritage**

Identity is a broad term, and it extends beyond the limits of the physical body and individual. It can include “the many relationships people cultivate, such as their identity as a child, friend, partner, and parent,” and external characteristics, such as height, race, and class, over which a person has no control. It can include one’s political opinions, moral and religious beliefs, and the choices a person makes in their everyday lives (“Identity”). People can also express who they are through the way they speak, write, or with their appearance and style.

On the other hand, heritage is something that is inherited and passed down for generations. Cultural heritage implies a bond and belonging to a certain community and consists of values and traditions. It represents history and identity, as well as a connection to the past, present, and future of a certain community. This can be presented in the form of photographs, documents, books, instruments, clothing, and forms of art, but also in traditions, knowledge, skills, oral history, and social practices (Franchi “What is Cultural Heritage?”). Furthermore, knowing one’s heritage, history, and past of their own civilization and community, is important for building their own personality and identity:

Being aware of your Heritage makes you more comfortable with yourself, especially when you come from a country facing hard challenges like war and poverty. It also opens your mind to other cultures and makes you a more tolerant person. How can you respect others if you don’t respect yourself? How can you accept others’ culture if you don’t know yours? (“Building Positive Identity”)

Adichie believes that identity can be a fluid thing, both internal and external, and is largely connected with both how people perceive themselves and what parts of themselves they choose to act upon. Moreover, it is also connected to how others perceive them. Depending on where a person is, some parts of their identity, or characteristics can be more highlighted. She states that in Nigeria, people surrounding her have the same color of skin as her, or in other words, look like her, and because of this there is no notion of race, nor need for it. But what people in Nigeria do consider and talk about is ethnicity and gender. In the U.S. race becomes important, and people from Africa begin to accept their identity as Black. In America “identity matters and has all of these consequences” (“Identity, Feminism”).

The main character of *Americanah*, Ifemelu, has an identical experience. After arriving in America, she realizes that there is this new idea and notion of her being a Black woman, that she must follow. With it, she experiences a lot of different stereotypes and must navigate her way around them. For example, in one of her articles, “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black Baby,” she writes how in a class she was asked to give “the black perspective” on the issue they were discussing. She calls this a “moment of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes,” and says that all Non-American Blacks experience it (*Americanah* 220). Aside from this, Adichie talks about her own experience in university classes and states how interesting she finds the situation where one day her professor calls out her name as she was the student who wrote the best essay. As soon as he looked at her and realized she was a Black woman, there was a surprise on his face: “It happened in a moment,” she said, but soon she realized that it happened because “America is a world in which black people are not expected to do the best things. And in a few cases that they do it’s a surprise” (“Hair is Political” 3:40-4:20). To emphasize this point, Ifemelu in the mentioned article writes:

You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say, ‘You are not alone. I am here too.’ In describing black women, you admire, always use the word ‘STRONG’ because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY. And if you are a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you’re about to pull a gun. (*Americanah* 220)

In class, after finishing watching a film, a discussion starts. One student asks why the word “nigger” was beeped out, and because it is an existing word, the students could not understand why it was considered impolite to use it. Professor then answered: “Well, it’s because of the pain that word has caused that you shouldn’t use it” (137). This is one of many examples Ifemelu and Adichie use to describe what it means to come to America and have to get used to and fit in with the new identity of being Black.

Another one is when Ifemelu meets Ginika, her friend from Nigeria. While they were riding in a car, Ginika describes her own experience with how differently they are expected to act, as opposed to when they are home in Nigeria:

But anyway, I was telling them about back home and how all the boys were chasing me because I was half-caste, and they said I was dissing myself. So, now I say biracial, and I'm supposed to be offended when somebody says half-caste. I've met a lot of people here with white mothers and they are so full of issues, eh. I didn't know I was even supposed to have issues until I came to America. (124)

Aside from the connection between identity and being an American, or non-American Black person, there is a strong connection to be drawn between how characters act before and after they arrive in America. In the novel, the majority of characters believe that both America and Europe offer much more opportunities than Nigeria. This is expressed through the way they speak, and dress, their attitude towards learning languages, speaking Igbo, and the schools their children attend. For example, Obinze, and his wife Kosi, had a conversation with Mrs. Akin-Cole, a woman from a famously old family, who talked positively about French schools, because she believed French and English were civilized languages that children should learn. Another woman added that the British curriculum is the best for children to learn under, to which Kosi, out of politeness agreed. As soon as Obinze mentioned primary schools that taught Nigerian curriculum, other women looked at him in disapproval: "Their puzzled expressions implied he could not possibly be serious. And in a way, he was not. Of course, he wanted the best for his daughter" (29).

A person's heritage, family, history of the society and country they come from, the language their parents speak, is important for them to be able to understand who they are and, in that way, understand their identity. The novel explains and enhances the importance of heritage and its connection to identity in the experience of every character and the way they present themselves. When Ifemelu meets Bartholomew, Aunt Uju's boyfriend, she describes him as a man wearing khaki trousers (which represents a smart-casual outfit) and speaking with an American accent filled with wholes. Ifemelu felt that he was trying to compensate for his rural upbringing with American affectation. When Ifemelu talks about Bartholomew, she says that people back in her village would call him "lost." When she looked at him, she saw a person who "went to America and never came back" (116). In other words, he was a man willing to do anything to adapt to his new way of life. This was presented through the way he spoke, behaved, and the clothes he wore. He was trying to create a new, American identity, and hide his Nigerian upbringing, in order to succeed and fit in. Many characters in this novel do this exact same thing, however, this will be discussed later on in the work.

## **5. African Heritage: Hair, Fashion, and African Identity**

In this part of the work, issues of heritage and identity will be observed through the problem of hair and segregation between White and Black people on the basis of their appearance. The term heritage will be explained and exemplified through the African history and symbolism of hair, and afterward, it will be analyzed how this affects Black people, considering they are expected to change how they look to fit in with the globalized idea of beauty.

When it comes to the relationship between fashion and identity, the two are deeply connected. Through fashion, people show who they are, or who they wish to be. Appearance style is a metaphor for identity and includes physical features, for example the color of their skin, body shape, and how they style their hair, as well as clothing (Kaiser “Fashion and Identity”). For African women, hair was considered a strong symbol and marker of cultural indications. It was used to communicate age, religion, social rank, and status, and is used in the potency of medicines and indigenous healing potions. For both men and women in Africa, hair is an intrinsic part of cultural identity, spirituality, as well as notions of beauty (Bird and Tharps qtd. in Johnson and Banhead 87). The idea of beauty that is widespread across the world, specifically when it comes to hair, states that long straight hair is what is generally considered to be beautiful. After the development of the manufacturing and media industry, the ownership of women’s hair shifted: “Hair has become public property. Its existence is continuously defined by the industry through various beauty products. Its needs are engineered in such a way by the advertisements displayed in the mass media” (Muhtar et al. 104). The idea of the perfect hairstyle that should be considered beautiful is spread on social media, television, in magazines, and in books, and this idea disregards Black women with Afro hair, and instead, forces them to conform to an aesthetic that values straight hair.

Author Emma Dabiri states that her hair was presented as a problem that needed to be managed, which she adopted and internalized throughout her life. She states that the concept of leaving her hair as it naturally grew “from her head” (“This is the Story” 1:55-2:08) was not something she could do, as she considered it strange. Because of this, she straightened her hair and hid it behind weaves, extensions, and curly and straight perms. She furthermore says that the relationship between African women and their hair goes back to the time of colonization. During colonization, hair played a role in how Black people were treated, meaning that those who had more European features, including looser textured hair, while still denied access to basic human

rights, sometimes had more opportunities. This is a concept present even in the modern world, as there is still a stigma attached to Afro hair. After slavery, in order to find ways to better fit in with the rest of American society, Black people started using straighteners. They became popular and marketized with powerful messages, such as beauty, improving position in society, creating opportunity (which was practically non-existent), and personal success (“This is the Story” 4:15-5:40).

### **5.1. Afro Kinky Hair and America**

In one of her interviews, Adichie expressed that because of the segregation in America (not just in the way people live, but how they think about race as well) and because of the American pace, way of life, and how it is set up, it is difficult for people of different races (especially for Black and White people) to connect. Furthermore, she states that one of the ideas she wanted to represent with her work *Americanah*, is that there is no such thing as color blindness, rather, people with different skin colors truly experience the world in a different way (“Hair is Political” 2:36-3:00).

When talking about Ifemelu and *Americanah*, Adichie remembers her own experience, as a person who moved from Nigeria to America to study at the university: “Very much like me, I didn’t think of myself as Black when I was in Nigeria, I didn’t need to. So, we identify on the basis of ethnicity and religion, but not race. Because we don’t need to. And I think it would be different if I was from South Africa and maybe even Kenya, but not Nigeria” (“Chimamanda” 3:10-3:31). In America, Ifemelu started learning, first from her Aunt Uju, and then later from other people, that it is important to fit in and “do what you have to do in order to succeed” (*Americanah* 109). This was the first time she has heard of having to change her hairstyle and adapt herself in that way to fit the American picture of beauty and the notion of what is proper. Later on in the novel, when she was trying to find a job for herself and talked about her experience of not having any luck, she was advised to lose the braids: “Nobody says this kinds of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job” (202). The character undergoes a painful process to make her hair seem more “American”: “Ifemelu felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer, Ifemelu’s head bent backward against a plastic sink, needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head” (103). And after the painful process was finished, she could no longer recognize herself, because with her new hairstyle, while she was looking at herself, she seemed like a completely different person.

In the previously mentioned interview, Adichie says how, even though she may not intend to, she makes political statements with her hair:

By walking in somewhere with my hair like this people make assumptions. If my hair isn't straight, people may think that you are an angry Black woman, or they might think that you are very soulful, or that you're an artist, or vegetarian. I am interested in hair as a means of talking about other things. What society may tell us is beautiful. ("Hair is Political" 5:44-6:46)

After Ifemelu's hair started falling off, she confides in Wambui, her friend from college, and is surprised when she is advised to cut her hair. Wambui warns her that because she used so many different dangerous chemicals on her head for such a long time, the only way to allow her hair to grow healthy again is to first cut it off, grow it naturally, and take good care of it. She also emphasizes that relaxing a hair is like being in a prison: "You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness ... You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do" (*Americanah* 208). After she listened to her friend, she immediately regretted it, because, after the process, she had to live a certain period of time with short hair.

This part of the novel is a good representation of what it means to look different from what society dictates is beautiful. Whether we are talking about desired body type or hairstyle, there are certain norms and rules one is expected to follow to look beautiful in this "homogenized" picture of beauty. And as was previously mentioned with body types, not having the "right type of hair" can lead to a negative self-image. After she cut her hair, Ifemelu felt ugly, like a boy, not feminine. She wanted to hide herself because she was afraid of what other people may think when they saw her. She was also afraid of what her boyfriend, Curt, would think, and no matter how many times he tried to reassure her, she still did not feel good enough for him, or for the rest of the society: "She looked unfinished, as though the hair itself, short and stubby, was asking for attention, for something to be done to it, for more. She bought oils and pomades, applying one and then the other, on wet hair and then on dry hair, wishing an unknown miracle to happen" (209).

When it comes to people's own opinions about themselves in relation to how they look, Chimamanda states that today the world defines beauty in a homogenized way. Society decided that beauty is "this one thing" and, like with the body types previously described in the work, society creates a set of rules that people think they must abide by to be considered beautiful.



Specifically, for Black women, it is “to look like Beyoncé to be beautiful, and when you choose not to, it becomes strange” (“About Love and Hair” 0:49-0:53). But Ifemelu pushes back against this idea strongly, and in one of her articles mentions that when looking at make-over TV shows, Black women natural hair is always presented in the picture “before,” while straight long hair in the picture “after.” Because of this, it is normal for people to have their hair straight, however, when Black women wear their hair natural, people often ask them what they did to make it look that way. Ifemelu states that they should ask Beyoncé what she did to her hair because the way she presents it is not how it naturally grows “from her head,” and so, people should strive to normalize natural hair (*Americanah* 297). When Ifemelu cut her hair, it was like she had lost one part of herself. Hair, as is the case with clothing, often represents an armor of femininity, and when people take the armor off, they are either called bold, or brave. But the problem is that Ifemelu did not wish to be considered bold, or brave, she simply wanted her hair back the way it was (209).

In order to get used to this new image of herself, she found an online site called “HAPPILYKINKYNAPPY.COM”, and when she started browsing it she discovered it was full of posts, notes, photos of Black women with various different Afro-kinky hair styles: “They were done pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They complemented each other’s photos and ended comments with ‘hugs’” (212). This is an important representation of how beauty and fashion rules can be challenged through social media. Today, it is hard for people to allow themselves to freely show their “imperfections” to the world. Social media and the online world have made it easy for people to post pictures or videos of themselves and gain a lot of followers. However, that also results in the fact that it is easier to construct strict rules about what it means to be beautiful. And because everyone is constantly surrounded with examples of those rules, people have no choice but to either start to follow them or feel negatively about themselves. However, the online world can also be used as a means for positive changes. One such example is this site, which is an online support group that shares honest experiences of African women, and the problems they have to face in American society. This helps Ifemelu, as she becomes more at ease with her natural hair while reading those posts and looking at those pictures. At the moment of her browsing the site, there is no “one idea of beauty” anymore, but as soon as she is reminded that she is not the only one who has insecurities about being different, she accepts her hair and starts writing and spreading her own opinions about

how Black women should embrace their natural hair (212). Her blogs serve as an example of spreading positive messages as well.

Later on, Ifemelu changes her attitude towards her hair, and this can be seen at the beginning of the novel when she comes to a hair salon, and even if the hairdresser is giving her advice on how to change her hair, Ifemelu only says: “I like my hair the way God made it” (12). This is one of the scenes where Ifemelu shows growth and character development throughout the novel, as she realizes that pretending to be someone she is not can be harmful, even when everyone around her told her it was necessary. This is also the moment where she shows she accepted her hair as her heritage and a part of her identity.

## **6. *Americanah* and Question of Authenticity**

The term authenticity does not just describe works of art, fashion designs, clothing or bags, but people as well. It is an important quality and necessity for a healthy and balanced life (“What It Really Means”). Previously, this work mentioned the importance of balancing attitudes and how one dresses. It is not enough to only be dressed for the occasion, style your hair, or do your make-up, because what a person says, how they act and who they are also plays an important role while trying to present yourself in the best and authentic way. Authenticity is the act of being in accordance with one’s true self, meaning, acting in accordance with one’s values, motives, personality characteristics, and beliefs. In people’s everyday lives, this is not easy to obtain, and it can raise a lot of questions: Who am I really? How do I act in accordance with myself? Do I even know myself? Do I have to be my authentic self all the time? and so on. The most important part of this is to be *aware* of how a person acts in front of others and when they are by themselves. Being aware of the differences in the way someone presents themselves in different scenarios is important while trying to get to know themselves. (“What It Really Means”). This part of the paper will analyze the changes in characters regarding their language, the way they portray themselves in front of others, or when they are alone, the way they adapt themselves after they move from Nigeria and how this is reflected on their external look.

### **6.1. Language and Fashion**

Clothing helps people project a self-image that they wish to convey to others, and as such, is an important tool in the fashion industry. With the way people dress and style their looks, they communicate a powerful message to those that surround them. And as non-verbal communication is an important part of people’s perception, this message is communicated clearly even when someone is not consciously aware of it. Fashion is a way to communicate without using any words, however, it can be considered a language which tells a certain story about an individual (“The Language of Fashion”). Language in itself is a powerful tool for communicating our own parts of self (our opinions, values, beliefs, emotions, and information) by using words. It is intrinsically connected to our own identity and has the ability to shape perception, and in such a way have a strong impact on people around us (“Language and self-expression”). Earlier in the work, it was mentioned how fashion can be used in a negative (using brands and marketing to get people to

spend more money, creating concepts of beauty that not everyone can achieve, making people have negative self-image, etc.), and in positive way (allowing people to choose their own aesthetics and create their own style). Same as fashion, language can also be used in a positive (self-expression, communication and ability of understanding other people), or in a negative way (means of manipulation).

## **6.2. Language as Tool for Mass Manipulation**

Karl Jaspers, a German philosopher, in his work, *Duhovna situacija vremena* [*The Spiritual Condition of the Age*] (1988), talks about the negative use of language. He says that language is used primarily as a tool. Its aim and purpose is to preserve order and to cover up that which calls the order into question, so that it supplies a mass of information, using a concise plastic expression without sentiment (50). This is done so that people would not think too deeply about the messages they are conveying, but rather only follow what are “supposed to say,” and by doing so they allow society to speak for them, and create and dictate their opinions. Society does this in order to satisfy the individuals and make them fulfill their functions in peace and order (49). Given that the masses are used to such language, communication becomes empty and is most often used to prove one's own point of view, where the individual is neither open to listening to the person they are having conversation with, nor accepting their diversity. By doing this, people stop striving to be their authentic selves and start following what everyone else is doing and saying without much thought. In the novel, Ifemelu describes this phenomenon while talking about how Americans use language. For example, she notices how Americans never say “I do not know,” but rather “I am not sure,” which does not provide anyone with any information, but still does not express the complete absence of knowledge. Furthermore, they avoid being direct as much as possible, and instead of “Ask somebody else,” they will say “You might want to ask somebody else” (*Americanah* 220). These examples show the need of being polite and non-discriminatory, however, it also shows the pathological need to never express that someone may be wrong, or may not know something).

Another example of language being used in a way that furthers a person away from them expressing what they think, how they feel, and who they are, is the American accent and the need of African people to learn it in order to fit in with the rest: “Very soon you will start to adapt to an American accent because you don’t want for customer service people to keep asking you ‘What?’

You will start to admire Africans who have perfected American accents” (140). Ifemelu had experience with this when she met Christina Thomas the day she came to her University and registered. Thomas spoke to her in a slow way that reminded Ifemelu of when mothers talked to their children. After she realized it was because of her foreign accent she felt so ashamed that she began practicing it (133). However, a big shift in Ifemelu’s life in America was a point when she stopped using her American accent, the same way she stopped straightening her hair, and accepted the way of speaking that was authentic to her (175). The need to fit in with the rest of society, and because of that, altering your own way of existing can be seen with Aunt Uju as well. She could be considered Ifemelu’s female model while growing up, as she was the one who taught her about what it means to act as a woman, showed her fashion magazines, and talked to her about growing up, and also about life in America. Aunt Uju is a good example of the need to present yourself in order to impress other people, even at the price of your own identity and authenticity. This can firstly be seen when she emphasizes to Ifemelu that she does not always have to say what she is thinking and that sometimes it is better to keep it to herself (53). Later on, this is presentable when she asks Ifemelu not to speak Igbo to her son, Dike, because he will be confused, and that will have negative consequences on his English (109).

As was previously stated, fashion is a language in its own right and a way for people to wordlessly communicate who they are. This need for adaptation in language is directly connected to how people present themselves with their looks. For example, Aunt Uju, calls Ifemelu and is in distress because her son does not want to wear the clothes she has picked up for him: “You know that if he doesn’t dress properly, they will find something to say about us. If they are shabby, it’s not a problem, but if we are, it is another thing. This is the same way I have been telling him to tone it down at school” (21). The shirt Aunt Uju wanted her son to wear reminded Ifemelu of Bartolomhew and his friends: “the two boys sitting next to [the couple] on the sofa, both buttoned-up, stiff, caged in the airlessness of their parents’ immigrant aspirations. She did not want Dike to be like them, but she understood Aunt Uju’s anxieties, making her way in unfamiliar terrain as she was” (216).

### **6.3. Ifemelu’s View on American Fashion**

The American fashion of the late twentieth century was largely influenced by Grunge. The meaning of this movement, in regard to fashion, is to have a thoughtless, uncoordinated look, with

an edge. Some iconic items were ripped and faded jeans, shorts, dirty T-shirts with outdated logos, black combat-style boots, and wool long-sleeved button-down easily removable shirts that were often tied around the waist. After the style became popular, buying clothes in thrift stores became a common theme. This was considered a style, for teenagers mostly, however, for local lumberjacks and industry employees, this was not fashion, but a necessity (Price). Furthermore, one of the largest cultural changes in the fashion industry, in the 20th century is the rising of casual dress. This is a way for people to present themselves in a way where “the lines between man and woman, old and young, rich and poor” are blurred and almost nonexistent. Old rules about luxury clothing, jewelry, etc. For the rich and practical and functioning clothes for the poor are weekend. Before, your clothes were directly expressing your class to other people, now, even businesspeople get to wear casual clothing if they wish (“When did Americans?”)

Late twentieth century American shift to casual fashion is one of the most noticeable differences between the Nigerian and American styles that Adichie describes in the novel. Firstly, Obinze describes people attending the party: “They were wearing uniforms of the Lagos youngish and wealthyish – leather slippers, jeans, and open-neck tight shirts, all with the familiar designer logos – but there was, in their manner, the ploughing eagerness of men in need” (24). Obinze observed the guests and was fascinated “by the unsubtle cowering of the almost rich in the presence of the rich, and the rich in the presence of the very rich; to have money, it seemed, was to be consumed by money. Obinze felt repulsion and longing: he pitied them, but also imagined being like them” (25). Furthermore, he wore a blue caftan with overly decorative embroidery, that Kosi had bought for a lot of money from one of the new fashion designers. He stated how he wished to wear a simple caftan instead of this, but wanted to please her, so he wore what she picked out for him.

Ifemelu lists her own experiences when it comes to clothing, for example she describes how her mother was always careful to dress Ifemelu properly for social events (e.g., church) and how every piece of clothing had to be ironed and look right (49). However, when she arrived in America, she was astonished to see that the students there wore “a jumble of stray fabric and slack collars,” (134) and their clothes looked worn. In her blog, she wrote:

When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded the courtesy of self-presentation but has turned that disregard into virtue. We are too superior /busy/cool/not uptight to bother about how we look to

other people, and so we can wear pajamas to school and underwear to the mall.  
(134)

It is understandable why she felt that way, considering that she and people who moved from Nigeria, or other parts of Africa and the world, had to work extra hard in order to fit in. Many changed the way they speak, behave, embodying the new identity, ruining their hair, while American White people were used to walking around in worn clothes, looking like they did not have the reason to dress properly. When Ifemelu very directly shares her opinion about the grunge look and states how she did not understand it, “the idea of looking shabby because you could afford not to look shabby,” it seemed superficial to her (287).

Adichie, in her article, supports this idea and shares her own experience. She states that she always loved African fashion, and that she always liked to dress. However, when she came to America, she began to dress in a way she disliked. She wished to be taken seriously as a writer, and she noticed that women who were interested in clothes and make-up and were stylish or fashionable were not being taken seriously and were considered less intelligent. Therefore, Adichie tried to adapt and began wearing clothes she thought would make her fit in the circle of people she wanted to engage with. However, after a while, she decided that this was not really who she wanted to be and began designing her own clothes. She started wearing and promoting only Nigerian designers to public events, and in that way resisted some of the standard ideas of global language of fashion (“My Fashion Nationalism”).

## Conclusion

This paper focused on the research of fashion psychology and presented certain ways in which fashion, as a phenomenon of creating, marketing, and adopting new trends, has an influence on people's personal and social lives. Furthermore, the paper was focused on Adichie's novel *Americanah*, and how the issues of identity, heritage, and authenticity were expressed through fashion. The first part of the paper gave a theoretical background, as well as listed and explained some of the research conducted in the area of fashion psychology. This part examined how people perceive color, body types, and the way an individual styles clothing, and connected it to their behavior, or in other words, how they will perceive both others and themselves, as well as some of the consequences this has on mental health. The second part of the paper examined African fashion and the importance of color and symbolism of the designs. Later on in the work, difference between the African and American modern fashion was observed. This led to the conclusion that modern American casual and grunge looks can be very confusing for African people who have moved there, considering there is a difference in people's attitudes towards clothing and its meaning. This part observed the author of the novel, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as well as her main character Ifemelu, and through both their experiences, as well as the experience of other characters such as Obinze, Aunt Uju, Ginika, and others explained how topics of identity, heritage, and authenticity were observed through the issue of hair, as well as language and fashion as means of communicating attitude, and adaptation to the new way of life. The novel shows the importance of observing and acknowledging how our outer look does matter, both in how other people will look and perceive us, but also in how we will look at ourselves. Today, especially with the help of social media, the internet, magazines, movies, and online communities, it has become easy and almost inevitable for an individual to compare themselves to the rest of the world, and the established norms of beauty. Being authentic and presenting ourselves to the world in such a way is, of course, a difficult thing to do. However, what can be concluded, through observing Adichie's novel, as well as the influence of fashion, is the importance of staying true to oneself, and not allowing the rest of the world to dictate who we should be, how we should speak, how we should dress, or style our hair.



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