



## The Diasporic Femme Fatale: Ifemelu in Adichie's *Americanah*

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### ABSTRACT

### Original Research Article

This article examines the reconfiguration of the femme fatale archetype in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the character of Ifemelu, arguing that diaspora narratives transform the figure from a morally destructive seductress into a symbol of transnational female agency. Focusing on a single text, the study justifies this choice by the novel's rich engagement with gender, migration, and identity, which allows for an in-depth exploration of character and thematic dynamics. Using qualitative textual analysis informed by Transnationalism theory and feminist literary criticism, the article employs close reading to analyse Ifemelu's relationships, bodily self-fashioning, and narrative voice, particularly through her blog and transnational interactions. Findings indicate that Ifemelu's perceived "danger" lies not in sexual manipulation but in her refusal to conform to culturally and ideologically imposed norms, destabilising patriarchal, racial, and migratory expectations. By foregrounding autonomy, voice, and mobility, *Americanah* reconstructs the femme fatale as a diasporic figure whose agency challenges inherited assumptions about femininity and belonging. The study contributes a conceptual and methodological framework for interpreting female characters in African diaspora literature as symbolically powerful rather than inherently destructive, offering insights for diaspora studies, feminist criticism, and Afropolitan literary scholarship.

**Keywords:** Diaspora narratives, Femme fatale, Transnationalism, Female agency, *Americanah*.

## Introduction

Diaspora literature increasingly occupies a central position in contemporary discussions of identity, mobility, and belonging in a globalised world. Within this body of writing, African diaspora narratives in particular draw attention to how migration reshapes subjectivity along cultural, racial, and gendered lines. Scholars note that diaspora is no longer understood solely as physical displacement but as a condition of "multi-sited belonging," where individuals negotiate attachments across national, cultural, and emotional borders (Anthias, 2018; Mbembe, 2017). Literary texts, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, participate in this discourse by highlighting the everyday experiences of race, gender, and power within transnational spaces.

At the same time, feminist literary criticism emphasises that women's bodies and choices often become symbolic sites

through which broader social anxieties about migration, modernity, and cultural change are expressed (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). In diaspora narratives, female characters are frequently read through a moralised approach that frames autonomy, sexual independence, or assertive speech as forms of excess or deviance. This tension resonates with long-standing debates around the femme fatale archetype, historically associated with male anxiety over female agency and social disruption. In its classical formulation, particularly within nineteenth-century literature and film noir traditions, the femme fatale is typically constructed as a seductive and morally ambiguous woman whose power over men leads to destruction or destabilisation. However, recent scholarship calls for the reconsideration of such archetypes beyond their Western origins, arguing that they may be reinterpreted within postcolonial and transnational contexts as figures of symbolic resistance and renegotiated agency (Nfah-Abbenyi,

2016; Ogden, 2020). It is within this expanded conceptual framework that the present study engages the notion of the femme fatale.

Despite growing interest in Afropolitanism and transnational femininity, limited attention has been given to how classical gendered archetypes are reworked in African diaspora fiction. While *Americanah* has been widely examined for its treatment of race, migration, and identity, its engagement with gendered power through characterisation remains comparatively under-theorised. Critical disagreements persist over whether Ifemelu represents empowerment, moral ambiguity, or social critique, particularly in relation to her romantic autonomy and public voice (Banjo, 2021).

This article aims to examine Ifemelu as a refigured diasporic femme fatale, arguing that *Americanah* transforms the archetype into a figure of transnational agency whose perceived “danger” lies in her refusal of cultural and gendered containment. The study achieves this aim by situating the novel within contemporary diaspora and feminist debates and demonstrating how Adichie’s narrative challenges inherited assumptions about female power in migratory contexts. While this article concentrates on a single primary text, the focus on *Americanah* is deliberate and methodologically grounded. The novel’s sustained engagement with race, gender, migration, and transnational mobility provides a cohesive narrative context for examining the reconfiguration of the femme fatale archetype in depth. By privileging close textual analysis over comparative breadth, the study seeks conceptual clarity and analytical precision. Although a comparative extension to other African diaspora texts would generate further insight into the circulation of this archetype, such an expansion falls beyond the scope of the present discussion.

## Literature Review

Recent scholarship on African diaspora literature foregrounds questions of identity, mobility, and belonging, with particular attention to how migration reshapes racial, cultural, and gendered subjectivities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* has attracted sustained critical interest for its exploration of race, migration, and selfhood.

While this study focuses on a single literary text, *Americanah* provides a rich and multilayered exploration of transnational female subjectivity that justifies its close analysis. By concentrating on one text, the study enables an in-depth examination of Ifemelu’s characterisation, narrative voice, and relational dynamics, which are central to understanding the reconfiguration of the femme fatale archetype in African diaspora literature. This focused approach allows for a detailed intersection of transnationalism and feminist theory, providing analytical depth that a comparative study of multiple texts might dilute.

Banjo (2021), for example, analyses the role of blogging in *Americanah*, showing how digital space enables Ifemelu to articulate racial consciousness and negotiate African and African American identities. While this study illuminates voice and race, it does not theorise gendered archetypes or female agency beyond political speech.

Similarly, Ndounla (2019) employs transnationalism to demonstrate how *Americanah* presents identity as dynamic and shaped by continuous border-crossing, with characters maintaining affective and cultural ties across national spaces. Yet, gender remains a secondary focus, leaving unexplored the moral interpretation of female autonomy in diasporic contexts.

Feminist scholarship further highlights how women’s bodies and choices become sites of cultural anxiety in migration narratives. Nfah-Abbenyi (2016) argues that women’s autonomy is often constructed as transgressive within both home and host societies, noting the persistence of patriarchal surveillance across borders. Although this provides a valuable gendered perspective, it does not engage directly with character archetypes such as the femme fatale.

Recent studies call for rethinking classical Western archetypes in non-Western contexts. Ogden (2020) shows that contemporary texts increasingly rewrite the femme fatale as a figure of agency rather than moral threat, detaching the archetype from sexual manipulation and framing it as resistance to social control. While theoretically relevant, this perspective remains Eurocentric and overlooks African and Afropolitan narratives.

Afropolitanism scholarship further complicates these debates by emphasising cosmopolitan African identities shaped by global mobility. Mbembe (2017) conceptualises Afropolitanism as an ethical and cultural stance grounded in openness and multiplicity, and Emejulu and Sobande (2019) note that Afropolitan female characters often attract moral scrutiny for embodying global femininity. However, these discussions rarely interrogate how women’s agency is narratively constructed as “dangerous.”

Taken together, these studies converge on themes of migration, voice, and female autonomy but diverge in focus and method. Most rely on qualitative textual analysis and diaspora or feminist theory, yet few intersect gender archetypes with transnational identity. This study addresses this gap by reading Ifemelu as a diasporic femme fatale, synthesising thematic, methodological, and theoretical insights that existing scholarship lacks. By reconceptualising the femme fatale in African diaspora literature, it offers a framework for understanding how female agency is misread as a threat in transnational contexts, thereby extending debates in diaspora studies, feminist criticism, and Afropolitan literary analysis.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Transnationalism theory, which conceptualises migration as a process that sustains social, cultural, and emotional ties across national borders rather than a linear movement from origin to destination. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that transnational subjects inhabit “simultaneous social fields” spanning nations, producing identities that are dynamic, negotiated, and relational (Anthias, 2018). In literary studies, transnationalism provides a framework for examining how characters explore belonging, exclusion, and self-fashioning across multiple locations. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s life unfolds across Nigeria and the United States, making her identity inseparable from ongoing cross-border encounters with race, gender, and power.

Transnationalism is particularly relevant for analysing gender because migration often intensifies scrutiny over women’s bodies, choices, and moral conduct. Women in diaspora contexts are frequently positioned as symbolic carriers of culture, rendering their autonomy politically and socially charged (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). This framework allows the study to interpret Ifemelu’s mobility, romantic independence, and public voice not merely as personal traits but as practices shaped by transnational conditions that challenge fixed gender expectations.

To deepen the analysis, the study also draws on feminist literary theory, especially interventions that reassess classical gendered archetypes. Ogden (2020) argues that the femme fatale increasingly represents “a figure through which cultural fears about autonomy and social disruption are negotiated” (p. 72), moving beyond narratives of sexual danger. Feminist critics emphasise that such archetypes must be read contextually, as their meanings shift across historical, cultural, and geopolitical settings (Nfah-Abbenyi, 2016). Applied to African diaspora fiction, this approach enables a rethinking of the femme fatale beyond Western noir traditions.

By combining transnationalism with feminist literary analysis, this study frames Ifemelu as a diasporic femme fatale whose perceived “fatality” lies in her refusal of containment, culturally, romantically, and ideologically. This theoretical synthesis provides the analytical grounding for examining how *Americanah* reimagines female agency as disruptive, not because it harms others, but because it exposes the instability of racial, gendered, and national boundaries in transnational spaces.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative literary research design to examine the reconfiguration of the femme fatale archetype in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research aimed to interpret meanings, representations, and narrative strategies

rather than measure variables or generate statistical data. Qualitative textual analysis is widely recognised as suitable for examining literary texts, where meaning is constructed through language, characterisation, and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary source of data was the novel *Americanah* (Adichie, 2013), selected for its central engagement with migration, gender, race, and transnational identity. The study relied exclusively on secondary textual material, including the novel itself and relevant peer-reviewed literature on diaspora studies, feminist criticism, and transnationalism. No human participants were involved, nor were any external organisations or individuals contracted or compensated.

Data were generated through close reading, a well-established literary method involving systematic engagement with the text to identify patterns, themes, and symbolic structures (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Passages relating to Ifemelu’s mobility, romantic relationships, bodily self-presentation, and narrative voice were purposively selected due to their relevance to female agency and perceived transgression in diasporic contexts. These textual segments were organised thematically to facilitate focused analysis.

Analysis was guided by Transnationalism theory and supported by feminist literary criticism. Transnationalism provided a framework for interpreting identity as dynamic and shaped by cross-border social fields (Anthias, 2018), while feminist criticism enabled an examination of how gendered power and archetypes operate within narrative representation. The integration of these frameworks allowed the study to interpret Ifemelu as a diasporic femme fatale, whose “danger” emerges symbolically rather than morally.

Analytical depth was ensured by consistently grounding interpretations in textual evidence and situating them within existing scholarship. Methodological transparency was maintained by clearly outlining criteria for text selection and thematic categorisation, thereby enabling replication or extension in future qualitative literary analyses.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals that *Americanah* consistently reconfigures the femme fatale archetype through Ifemelu, relocating “danger” from sexual manipulation to transnational female agency. Rather than functioning as a destructive seductress, Ifemelu emerges as a figure whose independence, mobility, and vocal selfhood unsettle established romantic, racial, and ideological structures. This finding aligns with contemporary feminist literary scholarship, which argues that classical archetypes are reframed in modern fiction to reflect anxieties surrounding autonomy and social disruption (Ogden, 2020).

A key result is that Ifemelu’s relationships serve as narrative spaces where masculine stability is tested rather than

destroyed. With Curt, her presence exposes the limits of white liberal privilege, as racial inequality interrupts romantic idealism despite emotional intimacy. With Blaine, her refusal to conform fully to ideological expectations destabilises intellectual authority and moral certainty. These dynamics support Banjo's (2021) argument that *Americanah* interrogates liberal racial discourses while extending them to demonstrate the stakes of gendered power. Ifemelu does not cause ruin; rather, she exposes contradictions already present within these relationships.

Another significant finding concerns Ifemelu's control over self-representation, particularly through hair, language, and blogging. Her choice to wear natural hair and articulate race openly positions her body and voice as politically charged sites. The blog, in particular, functions as a symbolic instrument of disruption, allowing her to assert authority in spaces that frequently marginalise African migrant women. This observation resonates with Anthias's (2018) assertion that transnational subjects inhabit overlapping social fields in which identity is continuously negotiated. Ifemelu's visibility within these fields makes her "threatening" not because of immorality, but because of clarity and assertive self-definition.

The discussion further shows that moral suspicion surrounding Ifemelu reflects broader diaspora anxieties about women who resist the "good migrant" script of gratitude, silence, and emotional endurance. Feminist scholarship notes that migrant women who claim autonomy are often framed as excessive or culturally disloyal (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). *Americanah* dramatises this tension by portraying Ifemelu leaving relationships, speaking publicly, and returning to Nigeria on her own terms. These actions position her as symbolically "fatal" to patriarchal expectations rather than individuals.

Importantly, this study diverges from earlier readings of *Americanah* that emphasise race or Afropolitan mobility alone. While Mbembe (2017) conceptualises Afropolitanism as openness and multiplicity, the present findings show that such freedom is unevenly received when embodied by a woman. Ifemelu's transnational agency simultaneously attracts admiration and discomfort, revealing how gender mediates responses to cosmopolitanism.

Overall, the results confirm that *Americanah* reimagines the femme fatale as a diasporic figure whose agency destabilises inherited narratives about femininity, belonging, and power. By aligning transnationalism with feminist literary analysis, this study extends existing scholarship, demonstrating that female autonomy in diaspora narratives is not destructive but diagnostically revealing. It exposes the fragile assumptions that govern race, romance, and respectability in transnational contexts.

## Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its focus on a single primary text, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. While this concentrated approach allows for sustained close reading and detailed theoretical engagement, it does not claim to represent the full spectrum of diasporic femininity across African literature. A comparative analysis involving additional diaspora novels may yield broader insights into how the femme fatale archetype is reconfigured across different narrative contexts. Furthermore, as a qualitative interpretive study grounded in transnational and feminist literary theory, the analysis reflects a particular theoretical positioning. Alternative frameworks, such as psychoanalytic, Marxist, or affect theory approaches, might generate different readings of Ifemelu's agency and relational dynamics. These limitations, however, do not diminish the study's contribution; rather, they situate it as a focused intervention within ongoing scholarly debates on gender, migration, and archetypal transformation.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* reconfigures the classical femme fatale archetype within a diasporic and transnational context. The analysis shows that Ifemelu's "danger" lies not in moral or sexual manipulation, but in her refusal to conform to restrictive cultural, romantic, and gendered expectations. Her autonomy, mobility, and public voice destabilise patriarchal assumptions and challenge inherited narratives of femininity, belonging, and power. These findings reveal that diaspora literature can transform Western archetypes to interrogate contemporary social anxieties surrounding race, gender, and migration.

The mechanisms behind these dynamics are rooted in the intersections of transnational identity and feminist agency. Ifemelu explores multiple social spheres where her decisions and self-fashioning carry significant symbolic weight, exposing the fragility of social norms in both her home and host societies. The study highlights that female characters in diasporic narratives are often perceived as threatening not because of their inherent destructiveness, but because they expose contradictions within the societies they inhabit. This highlights the importance of analysing gendered power within transnational frameworks to fully understand literary portrayals of autonomy and resistance.

While the study provides new insights into the intersection of transnationalism and gender archetypes, it has limitations. It focuses on a single text, and its conclusions may not be generalisable to all African diaspora literature. Additionally, the analysis relies on textual evidence and published scholarly interpretations, without incorporating authorial intent or reader reception, which could further enrich understanding. Acknowledging these limitations strengthens

the study's reflexivity and encourages cautious application of its findings.

Despite these constraints, the study makes a significant contribution to diaspora studies, feminist literary criticism, and Afropolitanism by offering a framework for interpreting female agency as symbolic rather than destructive. Future research could extend this approach to comparative studies across multiple African diaspora texts, exploring how the refigured femme fatale operates across different cultural, temporal, and migratory contexts. Such investigations would deepen scholarly understanding of the evolving intersections between gender, migration, and narrative representation in global literature.

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## Ethics Declaration

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced the research, analysis, or presentation of this article.

## Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)

### Usage

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT (GPT-5-mini), to assist with language refinement, formatting, and improving stylistic consistency throughout the manuscript. AI was used solely for editorial purposes and did not contribute to research design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation. Full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and scholarly integrity of the work rests entirely with the authors.

## Data Availability

All materials supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. As the research is qualitative and based on textual analysis of publicly available literary works, no original datasets were generated.

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## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article reflect the authors' own perspectives and do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of any affiliated institutions or organisations.

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