

Unscrambling the “Grammar of Violence”

Sexual Assault and Emotional Vulnerability in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

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Introduction: Charting Trajectories of Violence

Midway through the sixth chapter of *Americanah* (2013), the third novel by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the main character, Ifemelu, is slapped in the face by her Aunt Uju. The ostensible reason behind this act, which leaves “finger-shaped welts rising on [Ifemelu’s] cheek” (81), is that, moments before, the protagonist had suggested to her aunt that the latter’s verbal attack on the house help, Chikodili, was unjustified, as “the person [Aunt Uju] should be shouting at” (81) was her lover, a married army general who had cancelled his visit to her house moments before. On the surface, this scene is unambiguous: the reader is left in no doubt that Ifemelu’s interpretation of the situation is correct, and that Aunt Uju lashed out at the first person whom she could attack with impunity. In shouting at Chikodili and in slapping Ifemelu, Aunt Uju is the perpetrator of what Slavoj Žižek calls “directly visible ‘subjective’ violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (1). Yet the reasons that lead Aunt Uju to commit these two attacks are more elusive than they might appear at first. As Žižek argues, we need “to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure” of subjective violence and, instead, strive “to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts” (1). Indeed, Žižek continues, subjective violence often hides more insidious forms of “objective” violence, including that of the “systemic” type, defined as “violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation” (9).

The overall point made by Žižek is that violence seeps through the layers of society and acquires different forms and levels of visibility as it travels from institutions to individuals. Importantly, these trajectories of violence cannot be fully understood without looking at their histories. In her famous TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Adichie discusses the importance of chronology in appraising colonial violence, in particular:

The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story. ("The Danger," n. pag.)

In *Americanah*, identifying Aunt Uju as the sole culprit of the acts of violence she commits amounts precisely to starting her individual story with "secondly." Indeed, Aunt Uju's story is a clear example of how forms of systemic violence that go back several centuries converge into acts of subjective abuse and self-abuse in the present. On the one hand, it is clear that the "colonial creation of the African state," the foundational moment of collective violence that Adichie mentions in her talk, precipitated the failure of the independent Nigerian nation, commonly known to be "wracked with instability" and rife with "ethnic and religious tensions" (Falola and Heaton 8)—a consequence of the British bringing together by force "hundreds of autonomous, independent groups" (Falola and Heaton 7). In *Americanah*, this failed Nigerian state leads to Aunt Uju's dire professional prospects despite her medical degree, and thus to her decision to enter into a relationship with a man who can give her financial security and who can "create" a vacancy for her at a military hospital (45). On the other hand, Aunt Uju's affair with "The General," as he is referred to in the book, is but one of the many instances of gender oppression in *Americanah*. Thus, even if Aunt Uju exerts some form of agency in the choices she makes, she is undoubtedly a casualty in the larger scheme of events. This is suggested by the fact that, after The General's death in a plane crash, his relatives chase her out of the house that he had supposedly bought for her (but which is actually in his name), calling her a "common harlot" and a "prostitute" (86).¹

It is significant that, as Uchenna David Uwakwe points out (359), some of the people who chase Aunt Uju away from The General's house are women. Female collusion in sexism is a regular occurrence in *Americanah*. More generally, the novel is replete with instances in which the exploited morph into agents or beneficiaries of the systemic violence that they themselves endure. One such instance involves Aunt Uju herself. When, at a later stage in the novel, she has moved to the USA and tells Ifemelu that "I blame Buhari and Babangida and Abacha, because they destroyed Nigeria" (218), Ifemelu notices that her aunt invokes the names

of these former military dictators “with poisoned blame”—holding them responsible for having to leave the country and, as a consequence, endure racism in the USA—whereas Auntie Uju “never mention[s] The General” (218). Clearly, Ifemelu’s opinion that Auntie Uju used to associate with the soldiers who plundered the country and whose actions ultimately led to her departure suggests that desperate people contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of violence: even if they do so in a bid to survive, they eventually contribute to their country’s—and their own—destruction.

Towards a “Grammar of Violence”: Narrative and Linguistic Scripts

Auntie Uju’s story is but one of the many instances of violence in *Americanah* that evades easy categorization. What has thus far been understated in this chapter is that the very linguistic makeup of the novel is instrumental in producing such ambiguities, sometimes to the point of preventing interpretative closure altogether. This textual elusiveness is what this chapter will now focus on. *Americanah*, it will be argued, presents its readers with a subtle “grammar of violence” that needs to be unscrambled. In what follows, I will first clarify the meaning of this phrase, and I will use the conceptual framework that it provides to examine two narrative episodes from the novel. The first involves a white man’s sexual assault on Ifemelu during her first years in the USA, and the second her former (and future) boyfriend Obinze’s “sham marriage” arrangement with an EU citizen during his undocumented stay in Britain.

The phrase “grammar of violence” is borrowed from Sharon Marcus’s influential article “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention” (1992). In this piece, the author uses the term “grammar” as a metaphor to refer to “the rules and structure which assign people to positions within a script” (392) of gender violence. Such a script, which Marcus examines more precisely in relation to male-on-female rape in the USA, works both on a macro-level, which could be read as being congruent with Žižek’s mechanisms of “objective” violence, and on a micro-level, which more easily fits in his “subjective” category. According to this script, violence by white men—be it against women of all races or against black men—is legitimized, whereas “men of color” are positioned “as ever-threatening subjects of illegitimate violence against white men and illegitimate sexual violence against white women” (392). On the micro-level, Marcus’s “grammar of violence” regards rape “as a scripted interaction in which one person auditions for the role of rapist and strives to maneuver another person into the role of victim” (391). According to Marcus, it is important “to speak of a rape

script” because it “implies a *narrative* of rape, a series of steps and signals whose typical initial moments we can learn to recognize and whose final outcome we can learn to stave off” (390, italics in original). As these words indicate, Marcus’s focus here is above all on disrupting real-life acts of rape by “re-scripting” them—that is, by recognizing that rape is “a *process* of sexist gendering which we [women] can attempt to disrupt” even as an attack starts to unfold (391, italics in original). This statement is not unproblematic, as the “emphasis on women’s agency is reminiscent of . . . the sexist logic of victim-blame embedded in modern rape law” (Stringer 72; see also Mardorossian 755-56).² Nonetheless, Marcus’s narrative-based framework is of interest here because it contributes to the reflection of how trajectories of violence are shaped at both the objective and subjective levels. In this context, Marcus makes two points that are central for the purposes of this chapter. The first is that “gender inequalities” are “inscribed before an individual instance of rape” (390). The second is that ideologies are perpetuated not just through actions, but also through language—how we speak of rape (398-99). While Marcus largely re-mains at the level of metaphorical generalization when she speaks of a “language of rape” (390), it is possible to give the “grammar of violence” a more literal interpretation, as Susan Ehrlich does in *Representing Rape: Language and Sexual Consent* (2001). In this book, Ehrlich uses techniques borrowed from critical discourse analysis to develop the central argument—which coheres with Marcus’s—that “language does not merely reflect but also creates and maintains unequal social relations” (10). Examining the court proceedings of a rape case in Canada, Ehrlich shows how the participants in the trial, a male defendant and two female plaintiffs, either conform to, or attempt to use to their advantage, pre-existing ideological frameworks about gender. These frameworks are comparable to Marcus’s “scripts,” but Ehrlich places additional emphasis on discernible linguistic patterns through which speakers not only reproduce but also “help constitute the reality they are trying to represent” (36). Taking her cue from Patricia E. O’Connor’s use of the phrase “grammar of agency” in an analysis of the autobiographical narratives of prisoners, Ehrlich speaks of the rapist’s “grammar of non-agency” in the case she examines. In constructing this “grammar,” “the defendant draws upon a variety of linguistic resources”—such as the use of agentless passive structures—in order to “represent him[self] as innocent of unlawful sexual acts of aggression” (38).

Marcus’s and Ehrlich’s combined understandings of the term “grammar” as either a predictable script or a cluster of linguistic features will guide my close reading of the two narrative episodes from *Americanah* mentioned above—namely, Ifemelu’s sexual assault and

Obinze’s “sham marriage” arrangement. Like the story of Aunty Uju’s affair with The General, both of these incidents involve gender and financial imbalances as decisive factors in the unfolding of events. Unlike Aunty Uju’s story with The General, however, both incidents are set in the West. This is significant in the sense that, to take the case of sexual violence again, it is regularly argued—either explicitly (see Sielke) or more implicitly by paying close attention to particular national contexts (see the contributions in Gunne and Brigley Thompson)—that its manifestations are culturally specific. Therefore, it is important to take into account the types of systemic violence at work in the particular locations where subjective violence manifests.

Ultimately, the double conceptualization of the “grammar of violence” outlined above will serve two purposes in my analysis. The “script” aspect will help to think through the successive stages of events, and to perceive how one occurrence links to, and leads to, another. In its more linguistic guise, the “grammar of violence” draws attention to how the characters use certain words and grammatical structures to follow this set script and, more importantly, to what effect.

The Grammar of Sexual Violence: Reading Ifemelu’s Assault

The central plot in *Americanah* revolves around the love story between Ifemelu and Obinze, whose early stages are told in a series of flashbacks. While in secondary school in Lagos, they start a relationship, which they then pursue during their first year at university in Nsukka. Following successive strikes organized by the lecturers, Ifemelu is encouraged by Aunty Uju—now residing in New York—and by Obinze to apply for a visa and scholarship to study in the USA, which she does successfully. At this stage, Ifemelu and Obinze hope to be reunited in the future. Ifemelu moves to Philadelphia, where she is forced to find a job to supplement her scholarship, but the endeavour is complicated by the fact that she is not legally entitled to work on a student visa and has to resort to borrowing one of Aunty Uju’s friends’ social security card. In her search for a job, Ifemelu answers an advertisement to become the “*personal assistant*” (143, italics in original) of a white tennis coach in Ardmore. At the interview, held in the basement of his house, he tells her that the position “for office work” has been filled, but that he can offer Ifemelu an alternative job involving giving him massages to help him “relax” (143). With no intention of accepting the job, Ifemelu asks whether she can “think about this and give [him] a call” (144), and she leaves. Later, unable to pay the rent, and with no money to buy food, she phones him and returns to his house.

What happens next has been described by critics in terms ranging from "prostitution" (Amonyeze 7; Raboteau) to "sexual assault" (Leetsch 7), with most commentators taking a middle ground. For example, Ángela Suárez Rodríguez prudently mentions a "sexual encounter" during which "Ifemelu ends up carrying out the services requested by the tennis coach" (141), while Jennifer Terry writes of an "exchange of sexual intimacy for money," adding however that Ifemelu's "desperate return to accept the white tennis coach's offer seems a straightforward situation of exploitation" (41). Caroline Lyle more emphatically uses the phrase "sexual abuse" (102), but resists using the word "rape" because "the novel does not mention whether or not penetration was involved" (110). This issue will be briefly discussed below. More central to Lyle's argument is the fact that "it is crucial to critique labeling Ifemelu's abuse solely 'self-prostitution'" (108), a claim that the scholar attributes to Aretha Phiri, even though the latter actually identified a "*symbolic* instance of self-prostitution" in which Ifemelu is "forced to perform sexual favours" (14, my italics).³ Maya Hislop, for her part, analyses the episode from a legal perspective. Stating on three separate occasions that Ifemelu's experience does not conform to the legal definition of "sexual assault" (5, 12, 15), she chooses to recategorize it as a "sexual trauma" (13) whose "consensual nature" is "extremely difficult for the reader to determine" (14).

In my reading, the book does lean towards a scenario that involves penetration by mentioning the tennis coach's single "active finger between [Ifemelu's] legs" (*Americanah* 154) and, later on, "other women coming to his room to spread their legs for his stubby finger" (155). However, as Lyle suggests, it is ultimately impossible to settle for a clear legal definition of the attack—hence the somewhat heterogenous critical assessments presented above. The following analysis will use the phrase "sexual assault," which, according to US law (US Code §920, Art. 120), is less centred on "force" than rape but still involves a "sexual act" such as that depicted in the novel, whether it involves penetration or not.⁴ In any case, my interest here is in the dynamics of power and violence that lead to any form of unwanted sexual contact. As these dynamics are the ultimate focus of both of Marcus's and Ehrlich's studies as well, their insights into rape apply even to an elusive case such as the one examined in this chapter.

Importantly, both Marcus and Ehrlich show heightened awareness of the "cultural and institutional ideologies" (Ehrlich 4) that shape understandings of sexual assault. While literary critics who have analysed Adichie's novel are also sensitive to such "cultural and institutional" biases, they seem to be less prone to subverting them. Hislop's analysis is interesting in this

regard. When she chooses to reclassify Ifemelu's assault as a "trauma," it is not to downplay the moral responsibility of the tennis coach—who, she clearly states, "*inflicts* a trauma upon her" (12, my italics)—but rather to acknowledge that "those encounters that lie within the parameters of the legal system are often defined by individual coercion rather than by systemic coercion" (16). In other words, Hislop underscores the fact that "the forces of impoverishment and desperation which are inflicted upon her by unfair employment restrictions for people on temporary visas coerce Ifemelu to go to the tennis coach's office for a second time" (16). Hislop equally convincingly invokes systemic factors, related to this precarious status but also to inequalities in gender and race between Ifemelu and her assailant, to explain the "imbalance of power" (16) during their actual encounter (see also Lyle 108 for a similar analysis). Yet, Hislop fails to pursue a line of argument in defence of victim rights when she states that "there is no evidence—none that would stand up to a grand jury anyway—that Ifemelu does not consent to her encounter with the tennis coach" (16). Here, I would argue that, even though Hislop clearly deplores the existence of an "*ideological* filter or lens . . . through which events under scrutiny in a courtroom . . . are interpreted and assigned meaning" (Ehrlich 65, italics in original), she falls short of challenging this ideological bias head-on.⁵ This leads her to develop a less compelling argument opposing "consent" and "desire": "Ifemelu must do something that she does not desire to do but which she seems prepared to consent to doing" (17).

By contrast, Susan Ehrlich, in her work on real-life rape, attempts to redefine the contours of what constitutes the expression of "consent," exposing the ideologies that underlie some of its narrow understandings, such as the idea that, to mark absence of consent, women are supposed to "communicate [their] protests in the wake of each of [their assailant's] acts of sexual aggression" (124). Central to my purpose here is that Ehrlich pays particular attention to cases in which "linguistic descriptions are the *only* form of evidence" that an assault took place (38, italics in original). She is obviously not discussing fiction, but her words appositely describe the incident involving Ifemelu, as the episode has no strict equivalent in reality and can therefore only be interpreted through the words that describe it in the novel—the "grammar of violence" that this chapter proposes to decode.⁶ The episode starts as follows:

When she arrived at his house, his manner was brusque. "Come on up," he said, and led the way to his bedroom, bare but for a bed and a large painting of a tomato soup can on the wall. He offered her something to drink, in a perfunctory

way that suggested he expected her to say no, and then he took off his shirt and lay on the bed. Was there no preface? She wished he had done things a little more slowly. Her own words had deserted her.

"Come over here," he said. "I need to be warm."

She should leave now. The power balance was tilted in his favour, had been tilted in his favour since she walked into his house. She should leave. She stood up.

"I can't have sex," she said. Her voice felt squeaky, unsure of itself. "I can't have sex with you," she repeated.

"Oh no, I don't expect you to," he said, too quickly.

She moved slowly towards the door, wondering if it was locked, if he had locked it, and then she wondered if he had a gun.

"Just come here and lie down," he said. "Keep me warm. I'll touch you a little bit, nothing you'll be uncomfortable with. I just need some human contact to relax."

There was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted. (153)

In her analysis of this scene, Hislop notices that the tennis coach's rapid pace ("brusque," "too quickly") contributes to Ifemelu's "lack of control" (17). The novel, Hislop argues, uses "this inequality in pacing to signal that something is coercive about this exchange that cannot be set aright" (17). She comes close to describing Marcus's "grammar of violence" when she states that "the 'complete assuredness' of the tennis coach's tone demonstrates that he knows he has total control over the situation. Or, at the very least, Ifemelu *perceives* him as having control and *perceives* herself as having none" (17, my italics). In other words, Ifemelu's perception of the situation ("she *felt* defeated," 153, my italics) is the result both of systemic inequalities—in terms of race, gender, and social status—and of the ways in which these play out in the actual scene.

Both characters' perceptions of the situation are central to the unravelling of the sexual violence about to occur. The reader does not have access to the tennis coach's thoughts, but the

man's seemingly unembarrassed attitude suggests that Ifemelu is right in discerning a certain confidence on his part, even if, as Hislop implies, she may be amplifying its level. As Marcus predicts in her "rape script," it is this confidence—that is, the man's "*belief*" in his social and physical superiority, more than any actual display of physical strength (Marcus 390, italics in original)—that allows him to draw Ifemelu into an abusive situation. Ifemelu recognizes this display of power, but she is unable to resist it, demonstrating the pervasive authority of the "social structures" that "*inscribe* on men's and women's embodied selves and psyches the misogynist inequalities which enable rape to occur" (Marcus 391, italics in original). In other words, Ifemelu recognizes the dynamics of systemically induced power (she knows that "She should leave now . . . she should leave," *Americanah* 153), but she is unable to counteract them in the moment. This illustrates another important idea, formulated by feminist scholar Carine M. Mardorossian, that "social inscriptions—that is, our physical situatedness in time and space, in history and culture—do not simply evaporate because we are made aware of them" (755).

This element is important in understanding the unfolding of the "rape script" presented in the novel. The initiator of the script is clearly the tennis coach. He stereotypically conforms to it by "suggesting massage and progressing from there" (Ehrlich 33). When he first mentions this physical act during the initial interview, Ifemelu is able to discern that "he had said 'massage,' but his manner, his tone, had dripped suggestion" (*Americanah* 153). However, in dire need of money, Ifemelu decides to brush aside any dubious intentions that might be assigned to the man: "She might be imagining too much; he might just want a massage" (153). Before going to his house, a determined Ifemelu resolves to "make it clear to him" upon arrival "that there were boundaries she would not cross" (153). Yet these boundaries do get crossed. Part of the reason why the coach is able to assault Ifemelu is because he never deviates from his devious tactics, even during the scene itself. Not only does he lie to Ifemelu about his intentions ("I don't expect you to [have sex with me]," 153), but he also uses language suggestive of his need for physical comfort and emotional reassurance: "I need to be warm," "I just need some human contact to relax" (153). This eerily echoes Ehrlich's observation, related to rapists' testimonies after the fact, that perpetrators of "acquaintance rape" (as opposed to "stranger rape," Ehrlich 19), tend to use the "affectionate" (26) language of consensual sex to describe their assault. In the scene from *Americanah*, this strategy makes it possible for the tennis coach to enact the "rape script" precisely by denying that it is at play, hence adding to Ifemelu's disorientation. He is, in effect, scripting the assault as consensual intimacy.

It is because the perpetrator’s actions crucially impact Ifemelu’s mental state that the role played by emotion in her reaction cannot be neglected in unpacking this scene. While scholars have acknowledged Ifemelu’s emotional distress, little has been made of how it actually conditions her words and behaviour. More precisely, critics’ failure to recognize the full import of Ifemelu’s emotions has generated readings according to which Ifemelu is “technically, consenting” (Hislop 15) to the sexual abuse about to happen. Even adopting the narrowest—and by now largely obsolete—definition of consent, whereby permission is implicitly granted until withdrawn (rather than granted only if explicitly voiced), I contend that Ifemelu revokes such permission in the early stages of the interaction by using grammatical negation: “I can’t have sex with you” (153). Ehrlich’s study shows that responses such as Ifemelu’s—which, at first sight, might appear to present the protagonist as merely “tr[ying] weakly to stand her ground” (Lyle 107)—are anything but unusual, as the following linguistic analysis will show.

Part of the apparent “weakness” of Ifemelu’s response comes from her use of the modal “can,” which is here negated. Taking the context of enunciation into consideration, several of the meanings assigned to the modal auxiliary “can’t” in English may apply, although some are clearly more likely than others. One of the plausible interpretations of “can’t” here would assign the modal what linguists call a “dynamic” meaning, which “traditionally involves ascribing an ability or capacity to the subject participant of a clause” (Van linden 12). This ability, or rather inability in negative contexts, can be inherent in the participant (e.g. “I can’t run a marathon”) or determined by the situation, in which case it is said to be “participant-imposed” (Van linden 14; e.g. “I can’t stay because I need to pick up the kids from school”). Here, in view of the narrative context, the participant-inherent interpretation can safely be discarded in favour of the participant-imposed version, so that Ifemelu’s statement might be understood as, “I can’t have sex with you because the circumstances hinder me from doing this, that is, sex is not a service that I offer.” Importantly, if “can” is understood as a “dynamic” modal (regardless of whether it is participant-inherent or participant-imposed), it “does not express the speaker’s attitude or personal commitment” (Van linden 13).

The conversational dynamics of Ifemelu’s utterance, “I can’t have sex with you,” are equally complex if one chooses to assign the modal “can” a so-called “deontic” meaning, which “has traditionally been associated with the notions of permission and obligation” (Van linden 16) and may also indicate “the degree of moral desirability” (Van linden 18) that the speaker

confers upon a state of affairs (e.g., "I can't stand by and do nothing when I witness injustice"). In a "deontic" interpretation of "can't," Ifemelu is either assigning the impossibility of performing the action to an outside authority (which is highly unlikely here) or she is expressing her own moral assessment of the undesirability of having sex with him. Only in the latter interpretation does personal judgement come into play; yet, even then, any "volitional" overtones—that is, related to the expression of (un)willingness—are situated at the level of pragmatics (i.e. how utterances may be interpreted in context) rather than semantics (i.e. the meanings that words and sentences encode by convention). To be more precise, Ifemelu uses what is known in pragmatics as a "conversational implicature" (Grice): her utterance might be paraphrased as, "I find having sex with you morally undesirable, therefore I want you to understand that I do not consent to doing it." In other words, she voices her lack of consent as an indirect speech act (akin to a request such as "Could you open the door?" as a polite way of rendering the command "Open the door!"), which explains the doubts that some literary critics have cast on interpreting her utterance as an outright refusal.⁷

Crucially, in her analysis of real-life rape cases, Ehrlich observes that, even in "ordinary conversational interaction," refusals are "anything but direct, clear and straightforward. Rather, in the terms of conversational analysis, refusals are 'dispreferred' responses, that is, they require much more conversational work than, for example, acceptances" (145). Quoting Kitzinger and Frith, Ehrlich explains the corollary to this sociolinguistic fact in rape situations: women's "refusals" to engage in sex "rarely refer to their own lack of desire for sex and *more often to external circumstances which make sex impossible*" (Kitzinger and Frith 309, qtd. in Ehrlich 145, my italics). If Ifemelu's use of "can't" is interpreted as an instance of participant-imposed dynamic modality (the first hypothesis described above), then it fits Ehrlich's observation. This analysis even partly applies to the scenario that the character mentally rehearses before going to the tennis coach's house, in which she imagines telling him that, "'If you expect sex, then I can't help you.' Or perhaps she would say it more delicately, more suggestively. 'I'm not comfortable going too far'" (153). The first part of her imagined response, just like her actual response, uses the modal "can't," which leaves her words open to an interpretation that locates her refusal outside her own authority. The second imagined version of her refusal, which does contain an emotive adjective suggesting that she would be negatively affected by a course of action involving sex ("not comfortable"), is mitigated by the euphemism "going too far." As Marcus observes, women's responses in potential rape situations derive "as much from the self-

defeating rules which govern polite, empathetic feminine conversation as they do from explicit physical fear" (389). Thus, Ifemelu, before she is even placed in a highly distressing situation, considers abiding by those rules of politeness: "perhaps she would say it more delicately" (153). Central here is the character's concern with turning her refusal into a non-face-threatening act (i.e. an act that will not threaten the self-image of her interlocutor), as also suggested by her use of a conditional if-clause, "if you want sex" (153), which makes the accusation only hypothetical. In short, the rules of politeness that Marcus sees as expressions of gender-based systemic oppression are at play in Ifemelu's imagination even before the sexual assault scene unfolds.

During the actual event, the "fear" that Marcus mentions in her remarks adds another layer to the indirectness of Ifemelu's response. Ifemelu fears for her physical safety: "She moved slowly towards the door, wondering if it was locked, if he had locked it, and then she wondered *if he had a gun*" (153, my italics). The reader does not know if Ifemelu's fears are justified or not, but her overall perception of the situation plays a significant role in her response. Ehrlich transposes this phenomenon into linguistic terms when she states that "the indirectness of refusals as they are normatively performed by women refusing men's sexual advances is exacerbated in situations of physical and sexual violence where fear inflects 'refusals' with a different character" (145). In other words, the greater the fear, the weaker the linguistic force of the refusal is likely to be. When compared to some of the strategies of resistance that Ehrlich examines in her book, such as one involving a victim promising her rapist sexual intercourse at a later stage to ward off the immediate threat (113), Ifemelu's statement that "I can't have sex with you" comes across as verging on defiance.

If Ifemelu's perception of the situation heavily influences her linguistic response, it also determines her enactment of the traditional "rape script." Indeed, even before any form of sexual contact has taken place, she has, in her own interpretation of events, already compromised herself: "she was *already* here, *already* tainted" (*Americanah* 153, my italics). This echoes Marcus's observation that "women are always either already raped or already rapable" (386). Ifemelu's castigation of herself before the fact goes a long way towards explaining how the scene unfolds:

She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her

ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers. . . .

"Can you do twice a week? I'll cover your train fare," he said, stretching and dismissive; he wanted her to leave.

She said nothing.

"Shut the door," he said, and turned his back to her.

She walked to the train, feeling heavy and slow, her mind choked with mud, and, seated by the window, she began to cry. (154)

Reading this passage superficially, one might be tempted to ventriloquize the character's response, as focalized through the narrator's account, and conclude that the tennis coach "had not forced her" (154). Yet, a closer reading of the passage reveals that an insidious "grammar of violence" is at play, precisely because the scene is so closely focalized through the protagonist. In the excerpt, the first act of sexual violation, during which the tennis coach (at the very least) places his finger on Ifemelu's vulva, is entirely erased by means of a narrative ellipsis, possibly gesturing towards the extent of her trauma—an interpretation confirmed by Ifemelu's inability to talk about the assault for over a decade after its occurrence. All the other acts of sexual violation described in the passage are expressed using grammatical structures that mitigate the agency of the attacker (see Van Leeuwen for detailed explanations about such phenomena): "his active finger between her legs" is a case of grammatical activation by means of an attributive adjective, which leaves out an action verb altogether (and further presents a body part rather than the aggressor as the agent); the noun phrase "his sigh-moans in her ear" involves the nominalization of the verbs "sigh" and "moan," which are thus presented as more "state-like" than "action-like"; the fact that "he placed her hand between his legs" is relegated to a subordinate clause that backgrounds the action. Meanwhile, the only agent whose actions are overtly described in main clauses using action verbs is Ifemelu: "She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed . . . She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, . . . she had curled and moved her fingers" (154). Thus, grammatically speaking, Ifemelu is presented as the initiator of the sexual act, the woman who climbs "into"—not merely "onto"—a stranger's bed, even as the text makes it clear that "she did not want" the experience to take place. Her

refusal to acknowledge her physical experience may also be indicated by the systematic use of euphemisms ("between her legs," "between his legs") to refer to the site of sexual contact. This split between the mental and the physical is further signalled by Ifemelu's physiological reaction, which she significantly evaluates as being "sickening" (*Americanah* 154). In short, Ifemelu's framing of the scene, her conviction upon her return home that "she should have walked away" (154), as well as her subsequent rejection of Obinze in an attempt to "punish herself" (Adichie in Tunca 193), confirm Mardorossian's observation that "self-blame occurs systematically" in victims of sexual violence (753). Importantly, this also means that Ifemelu's assessment according to which "he had not forced her" (*Americanah* 154) cannot be accepted at face value.

While the above analysis has shown that Adichie skilfully deploys a "grammar of violence" to depict sexual assault, there is more to be said about how *Americanah* represents the dynamics of gender relationships even when dealing with consensual sex. Subtly suggestive in this regard is Ifemelu and Obinze's first experience in their late teens, recounted in the novel eight chapters before the sexual assault episode. The scene starts—perhaps not entirely coincidentally—with Ifemelu giving Obinze a massage, which he interrupts by telling her that "I have a suggestion for a better kind of massage" (93). What follows is a passage in which both Ifemelu and Obinze are presented as consensual actors, until she timidly voices her hesitation:

When he undressed her, he did not stop, as usual, at her underwear. He pulled it down and she raised her legs to aid him.

"Ceiling [Ifemelu's nickname for Obinze]," she said, half-certain. She did not want him to stop, but she had imagined this differently, assumed they would make a carefully planned ceremony of it.

"I'll come out," he said.

"You know it doesn't always work."

"If it doesn't work, then we'll welcome Junior." (93-94)

Obinze alleviates Ifemelu's fear of getting pregnant by using humour, and she consents to the act but remains "tense through it all, unable to relax" (94). On the next page, when, following pain and vomiting, Ifemelu goes to a medical centre with Obinze for her to take a pregnancy

test, the novel depicts her as “stony and silent, ignoring Obinze”: “She was angry with him” (95), even as she knew her anger to be “unfair” (95).

By making her characters’ first sexual experience “a weak copy, a floundering imitation of what [Ifemelu] had imagined it would be” (94), Adichie does not sacrifice the nuances of gender dynamics to the conventions of the romance novel.⁸ In the same vein, even if the writer declares Obinze to be “a romanticized version of what [she thinks] all men should be” (Adichie in Rifbjerg 108), the novel does not portray him as a perfectly virtuous character—he does, after all, cheat on his wife Kosi with Ifemelu at the end of the book. In the final part of this chapter, I will take this observation one step further and argue that the novel tentatively leaves the door open for the reader to perceive Obinze as a man who not only benefits from systemic gender violence but who may also be complicit in the oppression of vulnerable women by unwittingly rescripting a “sham marriage” arrangement as a romantic connection.

Invisible Violence? Scripting Intimacy

At first sight, Obinze is hardly identifiable as an agent of violence in *Americanah*. He is a victim on many levels, especially in the early chronology of events. Nowhere is this clearer than in the section devoted to his time in Britain where, as a black undocumented migrant, he first gets a job cleaning toilets and, in a telling episode, is faced with “a mound of shit on the toilet lid, solid, tapering, centred as though it had been carefully arranged” (236). Obinze interprets this act of vandalism as “a personal affront, a punch on his jaw” (237)—it is a form of psychological violence experienced as a physical blow. Obinze’s status as an undocumented migrant, which forces him to do menial jobs and face humiliations such as that described above, results from the objective violence perpetuated by an unjust legal system that is skewed against people from the global South, and this in the very country that historically precipitated his “need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness” (276) in postcolonial Nigeria. Like Ifemelu in the USA, Obinze borrows another person’s national insurance card to find work in Britain (first as a cleaner, then as a delivery man at a warehouse); in contrast to her, he is found out when the Nigerian owner of the card reports him to his boss at the warehouse, following Obinze’s refusal to give the Nigerian man more money than initially agreed on. It is against this background of merciless greed, in which fragile alliances can dissolve at any time, that Obinze decides to try and acquire residency by entering into a “sham marriage,” an arrangement overseen by two unscrupulous Angolan men. The two men charge Obinze over two thousand

pounds—an amount that they arbitrarily increase as the date of the wedding approaches (263)—to arrange his marriage to twenty- three-year-old, mixed-race EU citizen Cleotilde, the daughter of a white Portuguese mother and a black Angolan father. As Obinze and Cleotilde get to know each other in the lead-up to the wedding, they develop what appears to be a mutual physical attraction and an affinity that augurs the possibility of romance. Obinze, however, decides not to act on his feelings until he and Cleotilde are married so as not to “complicat[e] things” (230). On the day of the wedding, before the ceremony has taken place, Obinze is arrested for failing to be in possession of a valid visa. As he is being taken away by the police, he notices that

Cleotilde had flung herself on the ground and begun to cry. She might never have visited her father's country, but he was convinced at that moment of her Africanness; how else would she be able to fling herself to the ground with that perfect dramatic flourish? He wondered if her tears were for him or for herself or for what might have been between them. She had no need to worry, though, since she was a European citizen; the policemen barely glanced at her. It was he who felt the heaviness of the handcuffs during the drive to the police station, who silently handed over his watch and his belt and his wallet, and watched the policeman take his phone and switch it off. (278-79)

Following this scene, Cleotilde is mentioned only once more in the novel, in the immediate aftermath of this event, when Obinze lies to the police about his “sham marriage” and says that “Cleotilde and I have been dating for a while” (279). She then disappears entirely from the narrative, never to be seen or heard of again.

In the above quotation, Obinze as focalizer explains Cleotilde's emotional outburst by invoking her “Africanness,” using a rhetorical question that presents her origins as the only plausible reason for her display: “how else would she be able to fling herself to the ground with that perfect dramatic flourish?” (278). Due to this rhetorical trick, and because the narrative goes on to focus on Obinze's situation—as opposed to Cleotilde's, who really “had no need to worry” (278)—the reader is likely to miss the fact that Obinze's explanation does not cohere at all with what the novel had suggested so far. Indeed, in earlier scenes, it was not only made clear, as Obinze states above, that Cleotilde had never “visited her father's country” (278), but also that she had never been to Africa at all (229); in fact, she was said to speak of the continent

"like an admiring foreigner, loading the word [Africa] with exotic excitement" (229-30). Equally significantly, Cleotilde's "black Angolan father had left her white Portuguese mother when she was only three years old . . . and she had not seen him since" (230), which precludes any explanation involving a parent's cultural influence in accounting for Cleotilde's "Africanness." This incoherence in the text provides grounds to investigate whether Obinze is actually an entirely reliable focalizer, or whether he too might surreptitiously be enacting a "grammar of violence" to downplay his moral responsibility in the events.

To test out this hypothesis, one needs to backtrack to Obinze and Cleotilde's first meeting. When she is introduced to him by the Angolans, he is surprised to notice that she is not the "tough and knowing" person he had expected, but that she is "dewy and fresh, bespectacled, olive-skinned, almost childlike, smiling shyly at him and sucking a milkshake through a straw. She looked like a university freshman who was innocent or dumb, or both" (228). Obinze's initial—rather unflattering—impression of Cleotilde points to what he perceives to be a sense of naivety, defencelessness even, although the mention of her "sucking a milkshake through a straw" might be regarded as a sexual innuendo that concurrently presents her as a "childlike" temptress. When Obinze speaks to Cleotilde for the first time, he appears loath to exploit any vulnerability, as he explicitly enquires about her consent in entering the marriage arrangement:

"I just wanted to know that you're sure about doing this," he told her, and then, worried that he might frighten her away, he added, "I'm very grateful, and it won't take too much from you—in a year I'll have my papers and we'll do the divorce. But I just wanted to meet you first and make sure you are okay to do this."

"Yes," she said.

He watched her, expecting more. She played with her straw, shyly, not meeting his eyes, and it took him a while to realize that she was reacting more to him than to the situation. She was attracted to him.

"I want to help my mum out. Things are tight at home," she said . . . (228-29)

At the beginning of this passage, Obinze comes across as both respectful and protective, uttering his request for consent twice. Cleotilde, for her part, is presented as financially vulnerable, selflessly concerned for her mother, and characterized by a bashfulness possibly amplified by her attraction to Obinze. While the reader has no obvious reason to doubt the sincerity of Obinze's observations, the text does not actually allow one to establish with absolute certainty that she is indeed attracted to him, or whether this is merely his appraisal of her feelings. What can more confidently be asserted is that, through her words and actions, Cleotilde shows herself to care deeply for Obinze as the narrative unfolds: she agrees to go through with the wedding even after being given only five hundred pounds by the Angolans and she later tells him that, if not for the fact that the two men had taken her passport, she and Obinze might just get married "on [their] own" (263).

Of interest here is not so much Cleotilde's putative attraction to Obinze, but rather his response to her. Throughout their acquaintance, he appears to be attentive to her feelings, but there may be more to this rosy picture than meets the eye. For example, in the above indented quotation, Obinze is not "worried that he might frighten" Cleotilde, which might suggest empathy, but he is "worried that he might frighten her *away*" (230, my italics). In other words, Obinze's concern is not just with her emotional welfare, but also with making sure that he does not jeopardize his chances of getting residency. Moreover, Obinze's aforementioned wish to "wait until after the marriage, until the business side of their relationship was finished" (230) before starting a romance with Cleotilde could be interpreted in a similar way. The reader, in any case, is not given a plausible explanation as to why else Obinze would need to exercise such self-restraint, especially as his emotional connection to Cleotilde is supposed to be different from his casual sexual relationship with the Zimbabwean, soon-to-be-British Tendai, whom he does not want to marry because "one day she would wake up and convince herself that it had never been merely for papers" (258).

My contention is that Obinze, for all his laudable intentions, is more concerned with what Cleotilde represents—his ticket to a legal status in Britain—than he cares to admit, even to himself. Shortly before the wedding is interrupted by the police, moments before he leaves Cleotilde crying on the floor of the Civic Centre without giving her a second thought, Obinze "trie[s] to deflect his . . . nervousness by thinking about [Cleotilde and him] together after this, how in less than an hour, he would be free to walk with surer steps on Britain's streets, and free to kiss her" (277). The "grammar of violence" at play is surreptitious: Obinze's newly acquired

freedom to walk the streets of Britain with confidence is coordinated—hence associated—with his freedom to kiss Cleotilde: his romantic interest in her hinges on her ability to help him acquire citizenship. This is confirmed on the narrative level by the chain of events that follows: as Cleotilde's role as an enabling agent is dispelled by the police's intervention, Obinze's feelings and concern for her appear to suddenly vanish. This abrupt loss of interest on Obinze's part leaves open the possibility that, prior to the wedding, he had unconsciously rescripted his and Cleotilde's relationship as romantic intimacy to alleviate his unconscious guilt at entering an illegal financial arrangement with a vulnerable young woman whom he perceived to be attracted to him.

As a result of Obinze's focus on his immigration worries, Cleotilde's outburst, beyond being assigned to her "Africanness," is not speculated about by Obinze, even though the reader might suspect a form of emotional instability, due to the "difficulties in her life" (230), which include her father's absence, her financial worries, and perhaps her emotional investment in Obinze. In any case, Obinze strips her of this vulnerability in what might be for her a moment of extreme distress by bringing up her secure residential status—even though, as she "fling[s] herself to the ground" (278), not much is perceptible of the "power" (230) that Obinze had ascribed to her because of her EU citizenship. Ultimately, this elusive episode resists interpretative closure—it is highly unlikely that *Americanah* would seriously encourage readers to subscribe to a genetically determined version of "Africanness" that leads a mixed-race European woman with no cultural links to Africa to fling herself on the floor in a display of (actual or feigned) emotional distress. Thus, Cleotilde's breakdown remains a dissonant note in the text, a narrative crack in Obinze's story, through which an almost imperceptible grammar of emotional violence may well have slipped.

Conclusion

The optimistic reader might well choose to absolve Obinze of any responsibility in leaving behind Cleotilde, so discreet are the clues that point to any form of violence committed on his part. However, other episodes in the novel—such as Obinze's weak defence of the housegirl Marie after his wife calls her a prostitute—can be reinterpreted similarly in light of the "grammar of violence" that I have developed throughout this chapter. This points to the fact that this methodological framework, focused both on the idea of an ideological "script" that facilitates the perpetuation of violence and on the idea that language is deployed to sustain this

violence, constitutes an interpretative lens through which the entire novel may need to be (re)appraised.

The vastly different examples of violence examined in this chapter—ranging from sexual assault to the possible exploitation of a young woman’s emotional fragility—all obscure the lines of agency and victimhood: victims, such as Ifemelu during her assault, or even Cleotilde during her outburst, are stripped of their vulnerability, while perpetrators, be they the tennis coach or, more subtly, the well-intentioned Obinze, see their role in maintaining objective violence downplayed, so much so that the harm they inflict is hardly perceptible as being “subjective” violence at all. It is striking that these episodes have largely been backgrounded in the critical reception of *Americanah*, which, until recently, has mostly focused on more overt issues of race and migration. The differential treatment of violence in the novel—ranging from overt discussions of racism to far more ambiguous representations of gender oppression—raises questions about the literary strategy Adichie uses to represent violence. On the one hand, subtle or ambiguous representations such as those examined in this chapter can be considered true-to-life reflections of sexual and emotional violence. On the other hand, the reception of these passages has also disturbingly echoed real-life responses to such incidents, failing to recognize the full extent of the violence inflicted, perhaps because *Americanah* is otherwise perceived to be “unashamedly open about its intentions” (Lowdon 52). Ultimately, Adichie’s novel may be a far more “writerly” text than has been acknowledged so far. This chapter has argued that, in cases where the mechanics of subjective violence are not even perceptible to the naked eye, focusing on the “grammar of violence” can help us to slowly, tentatively, methodically, bring its insidious workings into visibility.

Notes

¹ This incident illustrates an idea that Adichie discusses in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), namely that what Nigerians commonly refer to as “bottom power”—that is, the “power” of “a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men” (44)—“is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a good route to tap another person’s power” (45). When this other person disappears, as The General does in *Americanah*, so does the woman’s route to power.

² As Stringer points out, Marcus’s “model of resistance” also “presumes an able-bodied adult (and not, for example, a child, someone who is differently abled, or someone who is

unconscious, drunk or drugged)" (86). For a summary of the debates around Marcus's theory, see Stringer (70-72).

³ Phiri leaves her use of the adjective "symbolic" unexplained, which may explain Lyle's overlooking of the word.

⁴ Pennsylvania law (Pa. Cons. Stat. §3121-26) categorizes types of rape, sexual assault, and indecent assault slightly differently. "Sexual assault" in Pennsylvania state law must involve "sexual intercourse," which is defined as "penetration, however slight, of the genitals or anus of another person" (§3101). When no penetration is involved, the act falls under the category of "indecent assault" (§3126).

⁵ This is all the more obvious when one considers Jean-François Lyotard's definition of a "victim," discussed by Rebecca Stringer: "one is a victim not in the moment of suffering a wrong but in the moment of being divested of the means to prove a wrong occurred, a moment in which one is *not* seen (by others, in language, by the law) as a 'victim' in the sense of being regarded as the wronged party" (Stringer 67, italics in original).

⁶ Notice, however, that the incident appears to have some autobiographical undertones, as Adichie has said that the episode was "sort of, *kind of* . . . but not really" based on her life (Adichie in Tunca 193, italics in original).

⁷ I wish to thank my colleague An Van linden (personal communication) for helping me to enrich the linguistic interpretation developed in this paragraph, especially in the section concerning the deontic meaning of "can't" and its pragmatic effects in the text.

⁸ On Adichie calling *Americanah* a romance novel, see Rifbjerg (109).

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