

(Post)Translation, Ideology and Female Body. The Translation of the Body in *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Adichie

Abstract: Nowadays, the traditional limits of Translation Studies are broadening. The emergence of concepts such as ‘post-translation’, introduced by Gentzler in 2017, has allowed the analysis of rewritings located in spaces other than conventional texts, as also pointed out by Bassnett (2012). Furthermore, Gender and Feminist Translation Studies have greatly expanded since their emergence in the ’80s, establishing relations with other areas, such as Social Studies of the Body. Considering this state of the arts, this article aims to study the translation of narratives and meanings in black women’s hair, as well as their social repercussions. In order to do so, it will analyse the novel *Americanah*, one of the best-known novels by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The academic works that will be used will primarily come from Feminist Translation Studies, Translation and Body Studies and Social Studies of the Body.

Keywords: *post-translation, black women’s hair, intersemiotic translation, race, Americanah, Chimamanda Adichie*

Translations themselves are metaphoric, multilingual, and multisensory, so too must translation studies include multisensory forms of analysis.
Edwin Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, the confluence of Gender Studies in translation research has massively increased. The first steps were made in the ’80s by Canadian feminist translators such as Susanne de Lobtinière-Harwood, Barbara Godard and Luise von Flotow, who worked hand in hand with a group of experimental female authors to subvert the patriarchal status quo. These Canadian translators are considered the pioneers in the building up of feminist translation theories. In particular, this article will explore the relation between Body Studies and Translation Studies within the framework of Feminist and Gender Translation Studies. In the last decades, there has been a growing interest in Body Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. In particular, this article will focus on the relation between the female body and translation, which is becoming a line of research per se in our discipline, as illustrated by recently published volumes such as *The Body Metaphor: Cultural Images, Literary Perceptions, Linguistic Representations*¹ and *Corps et Traduction, Corps en Traduction*.² The introduction of the body as a field for translation is possible because it is understood as a semiotic system of re-presentation.³ The body can translate meanings, which can be (re)translated. Consequently, the translation of narratives into body forms will be a type of intersemiotic translation.

¹ Eleonora Federici and Marilena Parlati, eds., *The Body Metaphor: Cultural Images, Literary Perceptions, Linguistic Representations* (Perugia: Morlacchi Editori, 2018).

² Solange Hibbs et al., eds., *Corps et traduction, corps en traduction* (Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2018).

³ África Vidal, “The Body as a Semiotic System of Representation”, in Federici and Parlati, eds., *The Body Metaphor*, 17-26.

With regards to the female body in particular, it must be remembered that identities are constructed through their re-presentation in different discursive codes. The body is a semiotic system where these identities are articulated and translated. As gender narratives condition identity, the study of the female body and its translation becomes a new path in the already established studies on gender in the translation field. In addition, these advances are understood in the context of broader definitions of translation presented by Susan Bassnett,⁴ Mona Baker,⁵ Edwin Gentzler⁶ and Susan Bassnett and David Johnston,⁷ who have opened up the field to new areas.

Considering this state of the arts in Translation Studies, this article will explore the translation of narratives in black women's hair. This is one of the main points of interest of Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie. Our hypothesis predicts that different meanings are translated and (re)translated in black women's hair. We presume that these meanings define a hierarchy of power in society. In order to defend this hypothesis, we will analyse the novel *Americanah*, by Chimamanda Adichie.⁸

2. Hair: A Semiotic System of Re-presentation and Translation

As previously pointed out, we need a broad definition of translation to understand the translation of the body. Over the past few years, a series of theorists have put forward more open visions of our field. Gentzler places the texts that have traditionally been labelled as 'rewritings' or 'adaptations' at the centre of the discipline. These texts had been relegated to the margins. In today's world, where discourses constantly cross over different contexts, these texts "may tell us more about the nature of translation than the central paradigm".⁹ In addition, they probably outnumber traditional translations. We are moving towards the era of "post-translation studies",¹⁰ where texts that have not been considered translations are in the spotlight, because, in fact "all writing is a rewriting, or better said, a rewriting of a rewriting of a rewriting, and translation – intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic – plays a significant role in that process".¹¹ We therefore understand translation as a broad process where meaning is rewritten. This idea allows us to analyse the changes performed in black women's hair as a type of translation, provided that hair carry out sense, which can thus be reinterpreted, recontextualised and reevaluated. We will then see that different narratives are translated in it and, at the same time, it (re)translates other narratives.

As we have mentioned in the introduction, the body is a semiotic system of representation. Therefore, it can be understood as a text. The conception of the body as a text has been explored by many sociologists, philosophers and cultural theorists, both implicitly and explicitly. Already in 1961, the philosopher and semiologist Roland Barthes advanced in his essay "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption"¹² that the body was a semiotic system. Later on, Spivak¹³ said that the body is a text that signifies. Hall¹⁴ presented it as a signifier, a place where discursive practices are

⁴ Susan Bassnett, "Translation Studies at a Cross-Roads", *Target*, 24.1 (2012), 15-25.

⁵ Mona Baker, "The Changing Landscape of Translation and Interpreting Studies", in Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter, eds., *A Companion to Translation Studies* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2016).

⁶ Edwin Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁷ Susan Bassnett and David Johnston, "The Outward Turn", *The Translator, Special Issue Call for Papers*, forthcoming, <http://explore.tandfonline.com/cfp/ah/rtrn-cfp-outwardturn>, accessed 20 March 2018.

⁸ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (London: 4th State, 2013).

⁹ Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*, 2.

¹⁰ Stefano Arduini and Siri Nergaard, "Translation: A New Paradigm", *Translation; A Transdisciplinary Journal*, Inaugural Issue (2011), 8-17; Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*.

¹¹ Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*, 10.

¹² Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" (1961), reprinted in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 23-30.

¹³ Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 20.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996), 11.

constructed, and Falk¹⁵ described it as a communication code that signifies. Therefore, if we consider the body to be a semiotic system that re-presents identities and reality, it can be translated as well. In this regard, Vidal argues that “[the body] is never neutral and is never only the body, but a true semiotic system, of representation and of signification, a locus of economic, political, intellectual and sexual struggles”.¹⁶ In the same line, other translation scholars have started to consider the body as a text as well. Federici¹⁷ states that the body is shaped by discourses, and Coppola¹⁸ applies this notion to literary works where women translate their past painful experiences to their body. As we can see, our body speaks for ourselves in a language that can be translated.

The textuality of the body cannot be understood without referring to the importance of re-presentation for Translation Studies. According to Vidal, reality exists because it is re-presented through different discursive codes. These re-presentations condition the way societies build meanings. Therefore, “there is not *one* reality but multiple realities”¹⁹ depending on the meaning a society attributes to a particular re-presentation. Going back to Gentzler's ideas, the act of giving a certain meaning to a particular re-presentation of reality is a form of translation – it is a “rewriting of a rewriting”.²⁰ At the same time, meanings inscribed in the body are often (re)translated. This conditions the identity of the individual. In other words, meaning, articulated through re-presentation, defines the individual. If meaning is translated to fit different needs, its re-presentation is (re)translated. Consequently, the identity of the individual is articulated through language and translated as well.

If we talk about re-presentation, discourses and meaning, we cannot forget to discuss ‘power’. The body is a textual site for the inscription of power. This has been stated by Foucault: “The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs”.²¹ In particular, women's bodies have always attended men's interests throughout history. In her 1976 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”,²² Hélène Cixous reflected on how women have to endure the confiscation of their own body. She rebelled against it, calling on women to free themselves from living *within* male discourses and to take ownership of their bodies and their sexuality. She asks women to *write themselves* through their bodies. In doing so, women's bodies, as semiotic systems of re-presentation, would speak their truth. Therefore, Cixous understands the body as a text that can subvert the dominant male discourses. This idea is also defended by Bordo, who declares that “if the body is treated as a pure text, subversive, destabilizing elements can be emphasized and freedom and self-determination celebrated”.²³

Moreover, women's identity is very much defined by their body, due to the patriarchal structures of power that condition it. The female body reproduces certain beauty standards associated with certain meanings. In this regard, Bordo wonders “[w]hat, after all, is more personal than the life of the body?” and declares that women's lives are very much centred on the body, “both [on] the beautification of one's own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others”.²⁴ However, the body patterns that have served male interests throughout history can be subverted. This is possible when

¹⁵ Pasi Falk, “Written in the Flesh”, *Body & Society*, 23.1 (2010), 97.

¹⁶ Vidal, “The Body as a Semiotic System of Representation”, 20.

¹⁷ Eleonora Federici, “Speaking Bodies: Ursula K. Le Guin's Linguistic Revision of Gender”, in Federici and Parlati, eds., *The Body Metaphor*, 7.

¹⁸ Manuela Coppola, “Scars, Tattoos, Hairstyles: Redressing Pain in the Poetry of Patience Agbabi”, in Federici and Parlati, eds., *The Body Metaphor*.

¹⁹ África Vidal, “Re-presenting the ‘Real’: Pierre Bourdieu and Legal Translation”, *The Translator*, 11.2 (2005), 260.

²⁰ Gentzler, *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*, 10.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 25.

²² Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer 1976), 875-893.

²³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* [1993] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

women take over the control of their own bodies, because “just as repressive power relations are encoded in our bodies, so they can be challenged by alternative somatic practices”.²⁵

Translation plays a crucial role in this process of subversion. It is an activity that modifies representations and exerts power. Although it may become a source of domination and help maintain social hierarchies, it may also do the opposite – transform male narratives into female (and feminist) narratives. Male ideologies have been translated in women's bodies heretofore, but, in the last years, translation scholars such as Federici,²⁶ Coppola,²⁷ and Vidal²⁸ have been studying the work of artists and writers who reconceptualise women's bodies by translating narratives that free them from the traditional male-gazed re-presentations. We cannot forget that the work of these translation scholars helps translate the patriarchal meanings inscribed on the female body as well.

One of the writers who is subverting the beauty canons imposed by the dominant patriarchal ideologies is Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She belongs to a generation of women writers who are transforming African women's image, offering alternative perspectives on different issues. Other members of this generation are Sefi Atta, Helen Oyeyemi, Unoma Azuah, Chika Unigwe or Promise Okeke. Chimamanda Adichie has published a collection of poems, a play, three novels, a collection of short stories and two short essays so far. She has also written many newspaper articles in different media and given talks that have reached millions of viewers online. Her development of certain topics —such as race, migration, ideology, stereotypes, hybridity, feminism and identity transformation, among others— questions the current status quo, opening the way for researchers to explore them through different lens. As a consequence, her works have been subject of study by scholars from diverse areas, such as African Studies,²⁹ Black Studies,³⁰ English Studies,³¹ Feminist Studies,³² Postcolonial Studies³³ and Translation Studies.³⁴ This academic interest fostered the publication of *A Companion to*

²⁵ Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics and the Body/Media Issue”, in Lisa Blackman and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Body & Society*, 16 (2010), 36.

²⁶ Eleonora Federici, “Women and Cyborgs: Transformations and Developments of a Cultural Icon”, in Vita Fortunati et al., eds., *The Controversial Women's Body* (Bologna: Bononia U.P., 2007); Federici, “Speaking Bodies”.

²⁷ Coppola, “Scars, Tattoos, Hairstyles”.

²⁸ África Vidal, *La magia de lo efímero. Representaciones de la mujer en el arte y la literatura actuales* (Castelló de la Plana: Universitat Jaume I, 2003); África Vidal, *La feminización de la cultura. Una aproximación interdisciplinar* (Salamanca: Consorcio Salamanca, 2002).

²⁹ Anthony C. Oha, “Beyond the Odds of the Red Hibiscus: A Critical Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*”, *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1.9 (2007); Ogaga Okuyade, “Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*”, *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2.9 (2009); Patrycja Koziel, “Narrative Strategy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Novel ‘Americanah’: The Manifestation of Migrant Identity”, *Studies of the Department of African Languages and Cultures*, 49 (2015); Rita Kiki Edozie, “African Perspectives on Race in the African Diaspora: As Understood by Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*”, in James L. Conyers, Jr., ed., *The Black Family and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

³⁰ Chinenye Amonyeye, “Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*”, *Journal of Black Studies* (April-June 2017).

³¹ Heather Hewett, “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation”, *English in Africa*, 32.1 (2005), 73-97; Elena Rodríguez Murphy, “New Transatlantic Writing: Translation, Transculturation and Diasporic Images of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah*”, *Prague Journal of English Studies*, 6.1 (2017), 93-104.

³² Rodríguez Murphy “Nuevas escritoras nigerianas. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, feminismo(s) africano(s) y ‘El Peligro de una sola historia’”/ “New Nigerian Women Writers: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, African Feminism(s) and ‘The Danger of the Single Story’”.

³³ Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez, “Hair Politics in the Blogosphere: Safe Spaces and the Politics of Self-Representation in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*”, *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (2018).

³⁴ Elena Rodríguez Murphy, “‘I Have Taken Ownership of English’: Translating Hybridity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Transcultural Writing”, in Karen Bennett and Rita Queiroz de Barros, eds., *Hybrid Englishes and the Challenges of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Elena Rodríguez Murphy, *Traducción y literatura africana. Multilingüismo y transculturación en la narrativa nigeriana de expresión inglesa* (Granada: Comares, 2015).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,³⁵ where authors from different areas and places offer a comprehensive insight into her creative production. Furthermore, Adichie has been awarded several literary prizes, such as the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, in particular, for her novel *Americanah*. This is the work we have chosen for our analysis. The main character is Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman who emigrates to the United States to build herself a career there, breaking away from her Nigerian teenage boyfriend, Obinze. After many years living apart, where Ifemelu lives many different life experiences, she moves back to her homeland, where she faces the challenge to readjust herself to life in the country where she was raised.

In the course of the novel, Adichie deeply reflects on questions of African identity and race, which are often translated in black women's hair. It holds such a key position because it is an especially sensitive "identity marker"³⁶ or "ethnic signifier"³⁷ for black women. It holds many meanings. In this regard, Mercer argues that:

Hair is never a straightforward biological "fact" because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally "worked upon" by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant "statements" about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or don't. In this way hair is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with "meanings" and "value".³⁸

Furthermore, its great malleability makes it a particularly good site for translation. Hair re-presents meaning. Therefore, it *translates* meaning. Adichie often reflects on these meanings in her works. Several stories from Adichie's collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*³⁹ deal with hair, as well as some fragments in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.⁴⁰ However, *Americanah* is the book which draws more attention to the topic of hair. The whole first part takes place in a hair salon and it is a recurrent topic throughout the story. In general, the author is very engaged in vindicating black women's natural hair, as she has proven in many of her interviews. She challenges the lack of visibility of issues regarding black women's hair by reflecting extensively on the topic in the novel. It is charged with a lot of historical meanings. In the United States, the issues surrounding black women's hair began with the Atlantic Slave Trade. From that moment on, the female beauty canon was established to be that of white women. However, hair had been considered an identity marker since the 15th century, "when hairstyles were markers denoting sex, tribal affiliation, age or occupation among West African tribal groups".⁴¹ According to Cruz-Gutiérrez, we are now in the third wave of the hair movements, after the first one in mid-60s and a shorter one in the late 90s. These movements started in the United States and spread across the world. Their aim was to make visible the role of black women's hair. The third wave started in the mid-2000 and it differs from the previous ones by the key role that social media played in its expansion. However, despite the rising of this movement, the situation is of course ambivalent: some black women wear straight hair and other rejects the Western imposition and wear dreadlocks or leave it natural. In both cases, they are translating meanings. This is precisely what we will address in the analysis section.

³⁵ Ernest M. Emenyonu, ed., *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* (Melton: James Currey, 2017).

³⁶ Coppola, "Scars, Tattoos, Hairstyles", 226.

³⁷ Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics", *New Formations*, 3 (1987), 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (London: 4th State, 2009).

⁴⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: 4th State, 2006).

⁴¹ Cruz-Gutiérrez, "Hair Politics in the Blogosphere", 2.

3. Hair, Race and Translation: An Analysis of the Novel *Americanah*

In this section, we will apply the previous theoretical background to explore the rewriting of meanings in black women's hair. In order to do so, we have compiled all the passages focusing on hair and we have selected those where such rewriting of meanings was particularly clear.

We will start by presenting a dialogue which takes place during the first years Ifemelu spends in America. Aunt Uju and her talk about the need to translate the symbolic meanings written in Aunt Uju's hair to increase her chances of success in a job interview for the position of a doctor:

Later, she said, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."

"So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" Ifemelu asked.

"I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed".⁴²

In this extract, we see that Aunt Uju does not want to wear braids to the interview because they convey the message of unprofessionalism in a medical setting, which shows how the body is a text that signifies. This is why Aunt Uju tells Ifemelu about her decision to take them out and relax her hair. Straight hair means professionalism and, therefore, more chances to succeed in a physician's job interview. These kinds of connotations, which are subject of translation, are defined as "second-order meanings" by renowned semiologist Roland Barthes.⁴³ Consequently, the character decides to translate these meanings to succeed in that context. Here we are applying a broad definition of translation, as over the last years the discipline "has sought to incorporate within its remit various types of non-verbal material".⁴⁴ At the same time, Ifemelu feels that her aunt is *changing*, as if her identity was being translated to fit American expectations: "Sometimes, while having a conversation, it would occur to Ifemelu that Aunt Uju had deliberately left behind something of herself, something essential, in a distant and forgotten place".⁴⁵

Although it is not explicitly pointed out, we believe that Ifemelu thinks that straight hair holds other meanings for her Aunt besides success in America. It also means leaving behind her Nigerian past and identity.

A few pages later, Ifemelu gets an interview for a public relations job. She calls her friend Ruth to give her the good news. Her friend's response was:

"My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job."

Aunt Uju had said something similar in the past and she had laughed then. Now she knew enough not to laugh. "Thank you", she said to Ruth.⁴⁶

In fact, the same recommendation was given by Adichie's sister when she went to a job interview in the United States. She declared that, from that moment on, she started wondering why she had to straighten her hair to look professional, who decides what constitutes professionalism and why it is defined so narrowly.⁴⁷ In this regard, Norwood points out that this is a reflection of "a racialized hierarchy, where features most akin to the European aesthetic are more valued, more revered, more compensated and just *mo better*" and notes that:

⁴² Adichie, *Americanah*, 119.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957] (New York: The Noonday Press, 1975), 109-119.

⁴⁴ Baker, "The Changing Landscape of Translation and Interpreting Studies".

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 202-203.

⁴⁷ Adichie, "Chimimanda [sic] Ngozi Adichie: On Hair".

The hair typing or hair texture classification system commonly used in US African American communities, which classifies hair along a scale from 1 ("straight") to 4 ("kinky"), has been criticized as replicating racist classifications that deem Afrocentric features as less desirable.⁴⁸

This, evidently, is all about 'power' and the definitions imposed by others on women's bodies, as the body is never neutral. In this particular fragment of the novel, we see that after some years of living in the United States, Ifemelu learnt the language conveyed by black women's hair as well as the meanings it conveys. This time Ifemelu is willing to translate the meanings that her natural hair conveys in order to fit in the American definition of professionalism. She adapts herself to the contextual norms, she conforms to the status quo. However, she realises that she is also losing part of her Nigerian identity:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss.⁴⁹

Here, we confirm that straight hair means 'American' and, therefore, losing part of her Nigerian identity. Ifemelu is very aware of the meanings of different hairstyles. This is illustrated in a conversation she has with her white American boyfriend:

"Why do you have to do this? Your hair was gorgeous braided. And when you took out the braids the last time and just kind of let it be? It was even more gorgeous, so full and cool."

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

Later, after she breezed through the job interview, and the woman shook her hand and said she would be a "wonderful fit" in the company, she wondered if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro.⁵⁰

As we can see, hair conveys different meanings according to the context. Braids and Afro denote unprofessionalism in a public relations job setting. Ifemelu would probably not have got the job had she turned up with braids or an Afro. She would not have been a 'wonderful fit' for the company. Meaning is articulated through re-presentations and it conditions our identities, as pointed out in the theoretical section. Although Ifemelu's degree of professionalism is the same whatever her looks, her hair defines it because it conveys meanings. Although Afro means 'coolness' for her boyfriend, the job interviewer would not think the same, because it carries opposite meanings in that particular setting. Therefore, she needs to translate these meanings so that she can access the job.

Later on, taking the advice of a friend, Ifemelu decides to leave her hair natural because relaxers are making it fall out. This takes her great effort, as she does not find herself beautiful:

"I look so ugly I'm scared of myself"

"You look beautiful. Your bone structure shows so well now. You're just not used to seeing yourself like this. You'll get used to it," Wambui said ...

"She bought oils and pomades, applying one and then the other, on wet hair and then on dry hair, willing an unknown miracle to happen. Something, anything, that would make her like her hair" ...

She reached the phone and sent Wambui a text: I hate my hair. I couldn't go work today.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, 203.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 204.

⁵¹ Ibid., 208-209.

These reflections are related to the meaning of 'beautiful', a topic that we will address later on. Ifemelu has to bear some impolite comments for having her hair natural – for example, while being with her boyfriend, a man says to her “you ever wonder why he likes you looking all jungle like that?”.⁵² In addition, she knows that this hairstyle does not mean prestige nor professionalism in the United States, but the opposite. However, it also conveys other meanings that she likes, such as health or Nigerian identity. On this basis, one day she decides to totally accept her hair:

On a remarkable day in early spring – the day was not bronzed with special light, nothing of any significance happened, and it was perhaps merely that time, as it often does, had transfigured her doubts – she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair.⁵³

During her time abroad, Ifemelu writes a blog called “Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black”. She uses this platform to reflect on racism in the United States. One of her posts deals with hair. The beginning of the blog post is particularly relevant because it talks about makeover shows and the definition of beauty in the United States:

A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor

So it is me or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right here? Hair. Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly “before” picture, and in the pretty “after” picture, somebody’s taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight?⁵⁴

Makeover shows perform intersemiotic translations. In the case of hair, they translate the meanings associated with natural or braided black women’s hair into those associated with white women’s hair. These TV shows convey the idea that black women’s natural or braided hair means ‘ugliness’, as it is described in the fragment above. Black aesthetics have always been associated with ugliness all across the world, according to Norwood.⁵⁵ Women participating in them want to attain ‘beauty’, which also means ‘prestige’. They seek to move a step upwards in the American social ladder. In order to do so, “racialized bodies are erased”.⁵⁶ Furthermore, these TV shows convey the already widespread idea that black hair means ugliness. Participants do not want to be ugly. Instead, they want to be beautiful, together with all the other meanings associated with this characteristic, such as high social status. This happens because identities are built through language and according to the meanings associated with representations.

Later on in the blog post, Ifemelu reflects on the meanings of straight and braided/natural hair in black women:

Some black women, AB [American Black] and NAB [Non American Black], would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it’s not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it’s just not damn normal. (Please, commenters, don’t tell me it’s the same as a white woman who doesn’t color her hair). When you DO have natural Negro hair, people think you “did” something to your hair. Actually, the folk with the Afros and dreads are the ones who haven’t “done” anything to their hair. You should be asking Beyoncé what she’s done. (We all love Bey but how about she show [sic] us, just

⁵² Ibid., 212.

⁵³ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 296-297.

⁵⁵ Norwood, “Decolonizing my Hair, Unshackling my Curls: An Autoethnography on What Makes my Natural Hair Journey a Black Feminist Statement”, 73, 78.

⁵⁶ Cressida J. Heyes, “Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover: A Foucauldian Feminist Reading”, *Feminist Media Studies*, 7.1 (2007), 21.

once, what her hair looks like when it grows from the scalp?) I have natural kinky hair. Worn in cornrows, Afros, braids. No, it's not political. No, I am not an artist or poet or singer. Not an earth mother either. I just don't want relaxers in my hair – there are enough sources of cancer in my life as it is.⁵⁷

As we can see, natural or braided hair in black women means lack of professionalism, sophistication or normality. These are the meanings conveyed in this kind of hair by society, which associates them with other values, as those of artists, poets or singers. Therefore, these kinds of hairstyles are not associated with physicians or public relations professionals, as we saw in previous fragments. In addition, braided/natural hair in black women also means health, as we previously established.

Lastly, we would like to mention Michelle Obama's hair, to which Ifemelu alludes in the last part of the blogpost:

Imagine if Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair, or tight spirally curls.... She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote, even the undecided Democrat vote.⁵⁸

Adichie made the same statement after *Americanah* was published, in an interview held at the Tenement Museum of New York City in 2014. This statement is extremely important for our discipline because it highlights the post-translation effect of black women's hair, which is Obama's victory. If Michelle Obama had translated different meanings in her hair, the post-translation repercussions may have been very different. Therefore, we can confirm that these translations are not at all innocent.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of *Americanah* has provided evidence that meanings and discourses are translated and (re)translated in the body and that language is involved in the process. After moving to the United States, Ifemelu realises that her hair is political. Although at the beginning she even laughs at this idea, she then becomes aware of the need to accept it in order to belong to particular contexts. This enables her to deeply reflect on the meanings conveyed by hair and to connect these ideas with her own identity. Her hair plays a key role in defining who she is. She uses it as a way of self-determination, but it is also used by others to categorise her. Post-translation studies legitimise the analysis of border texts such as hair, which is traditionally not considered to be a space where translation could be possible. Thanks to today's broader views in Translation Studies, the focus on texts such as *Americanah* is now deemed legitimate for translation scholars. Its analysis has proved to be insightful. On the one hand, it has helped us decode the power interests conditioning black women's role in society. The structures of power, both in the United States and in the whole world, strictly demarcate those who hold power and those who do not. In this case, hair is one of the re-presentations of these categorisations. The different meanings conveyed by hair re-presentations settle who holds power and who does not. In addition, they set the discipline which needs to be maintained in order to attain it, such as hair straightening. On the other hand, this analysis has increased the interest of Translation Studies, which can incorporate knowledge from other fields in order to grow. Thanks to the advances in our field, translators are increasingly aware that they translate meanings, whatever their re-presentation might be. This analysis is evidence of this.

As we have seen, Ifemelu decides to stop straightening her hair at a certain point in the story, rejecting the status quo. She starts a natural hair transition, which unfolds to be a deeply emotional process of translation for her. This decision is not innocent. Instead, Ifemelu is very aware of the meanings her natural hair will convey. She knows that some of them set her further behind in the social race. However,

⁵⁷ Adichie, *Americanah*, 297.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

natural hair has certain meanings that are more important for her, such as health or Nigerian identity. In addition, this hairstyle enables her to gain autonomy, as she will not have to care about losing hair due to relaxers. The analysis of this process of translation is a means to show academia how traditionally discriminated black women are fighting against the meanings that relegate them to an inferior role. They are subverting the system by translating their hair re-presentations and their associated meanings. In addition, the post-translation effects of these translations are also highly relevant. This is one of the most revealing points in Gentzler's argument. The analysis of *Americanah* has shown us that translation has effects in society. It has short-term consequences in Ifemelu's life, but, most importantly, it has far-reaching effects for society. Black women who refuse to straighten their hair are changing society, and they are doing so thanks to translation, understood in metaphorical terms. It is true that some of these women transition in order to gain autonomy, rather than to empower themselves. However, in any case, the result is that they are writing themselves. By translating the meanings written in their hair, they are modifying the dominant-dominated dichotomies that have been the norm in the world for centuries. This is a key post-translation effect, which will surely open the door to fascinating new research in our discipline in the future.