

Refusing to be a Copy: Mimicry and the Subversion of Western Ideals in Americanah

- Abdalaziz Alfawareh

Department of English language and translation

Amman Arab University

Abdalaziz@aaau.edu.go

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6979-9285>

- Dr. Anas Mohammad Al Tarawneh

Amman Arab University - Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities

Email : a.altarawneh@aaau.edu.jo

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7070-7616>

Abstract

Migrations is a universal phenomenon in many countries over the globe, particularly for individuals who move from one place to another. Migrants crossing borders pose a serious issue for them in terms of the concept of identity. This study reveals that identities of migrants have undergone assimilation and cultural transformation of various forms linguistically, culturally, and even behaviourally. This study explores imitation behaviours exercised by immigrants in subverting and casting doubt on the stereotypes of “native Africans” in the West and subject bias cultural representations to serious questioning according to the adaptation of the hybrid colonial theory by Bhabha. The findings show that the immigrant is able to explicitly or implicitly cast cultural questioning of the surrounding prevailed Western traditions and values by implementing imitation and outright antagonism.

Key words. Mimicry, Western Ideals , Americanah

Introduction

Americanah emphasizes the majority's desire of Nigerians to move abroad searching for the genuine geographical representation of the proverb “greener pastures”. As Nigerians struggle with declining social and economic reality, they risk their lives to enhance their opportunities educationally and financially. They are several socio-historical and political factors that play a key role in increasing the widespread of migration, especially during the second half of the 20th century. One factor is Second War World that witnessed the decline of the British Empire, and consequently excessive migrations from old colonies towards the West. Moreover,

totalitarian regimes have forced people to migrate toward other countries. Undoubtedly, poverty and joblessness have great effect in increasing frequencies of flows of migrations questing for a better future for their families.

Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and Emenike are fictitious characters in *Americanah* that symbolise Nigerians who move overseas for intellectual and economic reasons. Applying for a visa to travel poses countless problems with the embassy that prospective immigrants must overcome. When an immigrant comes in a new nation, he typically has to reorganise his thinking in order to assimilate and spread certain environmental and behavioral knowledge that he traditionally owned compared to currently accessible in the host country.

Statement of the Problem

This research seeks to define migration as a worldwide issue including the movement of people from one country to another. Navigating across a global framework and transitioning into the host country poses a number of issues for immigrants.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant since there have been no earlier critical investigations on Mimicry, revolt, and subversion of Western ideals in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, what has been discussed is more of a review of the literary work, rather than a detailed literary discussion of the migration is a worldwide issue involving the mobility of persons from one location to the other which has been covered previously.

Objectives of the Study

The research intends to show how immigrants use imitation and rebellion as survival techniques as the same as a method of interrogating and undermining stereotyped images of "native Africans" in the West in particular. It Resolves that the immigrant can successfully or Not directly question prevailing Western values and assumptions With the help of imitation and outright disobedience.

Limitations of the Study

The study is confined to Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*.

However, the author has written additional works, including,

- Purple Hibiscus (2003)

- Half of a Yellow Sun (2006)
- Americanah (2013)

Some of the books written by the author include,

- Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions (2017)
- Zikora (2020)
- Notes on Grief (2021)

Literature Review

Migration fiction is a popular genre in African literature, catching the attention of readers and generating a huge amount of creative production from writers of all eras. As a result, as more authors become immigrants, the corpus of immigrant literature continues to expand continue to reflect the continent's constant migration of people, which is mostly owing to the low and terrible socioeconomic realities in their individual nations.

Season of Migration to the North (2009) by Tayeb Salih chronicles the tale of Mustapha Sa'eed, who attends high school in Cairo and then goes on to work in finance in London (Salih, 2009). Countless white women Sa'eed encounters in Africa and the Middle East have bizarre dreams that he exploits to entice, hurt their feelings, and afterwards leave them. Although some may consider Sa'eed's activities to be ethically problematic, they do demonstrate how an immigrant might utilise these warped stereotyped ideas for personal advantage.

Fina emigrated abroad in Pede Hollists So the Path Does Not Die (2012) in search of a better future. Fina, like Ifemelu of Americanah, experienced a profound estrangement from her civilization within a few years and started to crave for her hometown. Fina's self-awareness grows as she discovers that being at residence implies expressing yourself with everybody. With this realisation, she turned down the appeal and perks of living overseas and came to Sierra Leone to help her nation's those in need (Christensen, 2013).

We Need New Names (2014) by NoViolet Bulawayo highlights the severe economic realities endured by the residents of the imaginary town of utopia. For its inhabitants the paradise city is a "hell" where they are forced to emigrate due to the government demolishing their homes and forcibly controlling their properties (Moji, 2015). Darling like Ifemelu pursues a scholarship to study in the US after

constant university strikes. She yearns to travel overseas to flee the poverty and starvation that plague her on a daily basis. Darling jumped at the chance to see her aunt Fostalina in Michigan, and she did and without hesitating.

On *Black Sister's Street* (2010) by Chika Unigwe depicts the brutal reality of black prostitution in Antwerp, Belgium. The black streetwalkers from various African nations have flocked to Antwerp in search of a better life, escaping poverty, unemployment, ethnic cleansing, and so on (Bastida-Rodriguez, 2014). For the women who roam the streets of Antwerp by day and half-naked behind shop windows at night Belgium offers to remain anonymous they need to sell their bodies for money. It takes Sisi's death for her coworkers to grasp how vulnerable their lives are and how dangerous their new job is.

The enduring theme of migration in African literature is especially evident in Adichie's prose works all colored with various shades of travel. When the hardships and onslaught of the military regime became overwhelming in *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) Aunt Amaka decided to move with her children abroad to pursue a career as a speaker. Richard Churchills subject in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) was his curiosity about how he was drawn to Nigeria by the Igbo Ukwu culture, that contributed to the commencement of the Nigeria-Biafra battle. *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) is indeed a series of short tales that explore various elements of migration. These books' topics all help to demonstrating the centrality of the migration subject in literature (Sharobeem, 2015).

The goal of this research was to look at *Americanah* closely in order to see how Ifemelu Aunt Uju and Emenike handled their abroad hybrid roles. While other characters in the Western world chose imitation and conformity as survival strategies, Ifemelu rejects American language and cultural demands; it fights against some features of western culture and makes a place for itself.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity to conduct a content analysis of *Americanah*. Mixed primary and secondary research resources are used in this article. The major source of information is the *Americanah* book, while secondary information include the library and the Internet. The novel's analysis is based on the author's interpretation of the text using literary theory.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the novel, *Americanah*, the concept of migration showed to enforce either of the hybrid identities (such as in the case of Emenike and Aunt Uju) wherein they adopted mimicry for integration and assimilation but others, (Ifemelu) used hybridity to fight against and criticise western ideals. As per Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, in which he states that new cultures emerge from interfacing of existing ones, and his concepts of mimicry and subversion, the paper will shed light on said concepts within Adichie's novel.

In earlier narratives surrounding migration, mimicry and exploitation of stereotypes appeared excessively (Salih, 2009). And *Americanah* is a source to apply the previous statement. Mimicry, as shown in the novel, is not a mere reaction to being surrounded by the west or to being an alien amongst westerns. Instead, it is a strategy adopted to survive the western culture. This is displayed through the manner in which Emenike and Aunt Uju begin to adapt the accent, social behaviour and other social cues. However, this imitation of the west done by them, as per Bhabha's "repetition with difference" is never enough. And the difference that comes from the "colonized" (in this case, Emenike and Aunt Uju, though they are immigrants not colonized civilians) is only more reason for them to be alienated. Due to this, mimicry offers no true assimilation between the two. It merely offers a short-term sense of familiarity while deepening internalised negative stereotypes. If we consider the earlier mentioned examples by (Salih, 2009) we will conclude that the main character in that novel assimilated in a much more calculated way for reasons more than just simply merging with the new culture. On the other hand, in *Americanah*, assimilation is done in order to be valued among westerns. Despite differences in goal, both characters in both novels followed Bhabha's mimicry in order to survive the new culture.

When we look at Ifemelu's reaction, however, we conclude that it is rather different. She refused to straighten her hair or adopt the American accent permanently. Instead, her approach was a mere show of civility and cooperation to bypass and live amongst the westerns. Through this and according to Bhabha's "sly civility" she was able to gain influence and direct this influence for the benefit of her people

According to (Shrobeem, 2015) our day-to-day activities define who we are and how our culture is. That being said, power is not only the result of language or cultural codes but also in spaces. We see this clearly displayed in how, for example, Aunt Uju tends to adopt American norms within certain spaces but retains her Nigerian norms in other spaces where she is surrounded by fellow Nigerians. However, if we look at how Ifemelu handled the same situation we see that she refused to let go of her Nigerian traits within lived experiences. In that manner, Ifemelu's hybrid identity is represented in space while Aunt Uju and Emenike mimicked the culture within said space. Thus, through Ifemelu's resistance, hybridity became not just assimilation into the new culture but also a way she can challenge Western values by not forgetting her own culture and norms.

Americanah, through the resistance of its characters or the manner in which the hybrid identity plants in them internalised stereotypes, the novel challenges Western culture supremacy. And through the framework adopted, we can conclude that Bhabha's theories apply not just in colonisation and occupation but when an immigrant arrives to a foreign land willingly as well. Americanah is an excellent portrayal of the role the migrants themselves have in their own situation. Such resistance is displayed throughout the novel like when Ifemelu watches fellow Nigerians replacing their accent with an American one but even though she attempts to do the same at first, she quickly reverts back to her natural accent. The characters in the novel are not mere passive victims to their circumstances but active agents in their own decisions and ultimately, lives.

Theoretical framework

Hybridity

In postcolonial studies, the term hybridity refers to the mixing of people and cultures that results in the development of new transcultural forms. People who relocate to other nations are impacted by the cultural context of that country, and their identities take on the features of that culture. The novel's title, Americanah, is the first indication of the hybrid's anabolic potential. It is the name given to people who have lived abroad for a while and then choose to return to their homeland. The title implies that

Nigerians exposed to different cultural influences exhibit hybrid identities in their cultural behaviour (Trivedi, 2021).

Hybridization is the culmination of a tactical reversing of the dominant by denying process; it is a manifestation of colonial empire creation of its moving and permanent forces. Hybridity is defined as a re-evaluation of colonialist identity based on the repetition of discriminating identification impacts.

Two features of Bhabha's concept are particularly pertinent to the current debate

- First hybridization is a tool that allows hybridization to re-evaluate colonial assumptions by repeating discriminatory recognition effects. This trait refers to hybrids attempting to imitate or imitate the voice dress demeanor and other features of Western society. Bhabha found that imitation was one of the main ways that hybridization undermined colonialism. Bhabha sees mimicry as sometimes inadvertently subversive in his article "Mimicry and Man." According to Bhabha, imitation is a kind of representation that shows the falsification of all the symbolic power displays of Ighile and Oseghale³. Importantly, the concept of imitation does not simply imply imitation or absorption into the dominant culture. According to Bhabha It is distinguished from ordinary imitation by an exaggeration of a replica of the dominant culture's ideas, languages, products, and civilizations: it is "repetition with difference." As a result, there is a feeling of ridicule to imitation, lending a comedic character to Bhabha's "sly politeness." According to Bhabha, imitation is a "ironic compromise." In this way, the hybrid immigrant's imitative strides are viewed as a means of reevaluating all notions of colonial supremacy, because imitation copies the identity of the colonist and trivializes what is considered superior.
- The second major feature of Bhabha's paper on hybridization is the hybrids tactic of confronting established colonial ideas and ideals through subversive systems in turn once again directs the gaze of those who are discriminated against to the eyes of power. By facing institutionalised colonial notions in Americanah, Adichie exposes us to Ifemelu, a hybrid figure who disrupts or undermines the necessity for colonial government replication. She does this by using logging technology to tackle hot topics such as racism and to assess the bad and unjust racial

relationships that exist in America between "blacks and whites." These activities eventually aim to shift the focus away from the blacks and onto the whites.

MIMICRY

In Americanah, we meet a number of characters who speak in an American manner. Auntie Uju is the leader of this gang. She speaks with an American accent when she needs a favour or special treatment overseas, yet she talks with a Nigerian accent at home with her family. Her behavior implies that she is simply sacrificing her accent for the sake of good not because she feels that the American accent is preferable to the Nigerian accent. It's an interesting compromise. Aunt Uju seems to have completely assimilated the adage "When you're in Rome act like the Romans." As a result "when she (Auntie Uju) talks to white Americans in the presence of white Americans listens to white Americans" "a new apologetic and self-deprecating character " was formed.

Emenike is another character who copies Western behavior to the point of mocking and taking advantage of her hybrid stance. Emenike's first tactic in England was to marry a white woman old enough to be his mother. This automatically allowed him to have a good home in Islington fashionable clothes and exposure to his wife's stylish white circle of friends whom he still entertained with an over-appreciated white culture while treating Nigeria as a jungle where all sorts of unlikely events happen. Emenike unlike Mustapha Sa'eed in Seasons of Migration to the North, does not go around shattering women's hearts, but he does accept Western perceptions of Africa for selfish reasons (Kuppusamy et al. 2020).

A meal with old schoolmate Obinze and his white wife Georgina and her friends is a perfect depiction of Emenike's pretensions. Obinze is taken aback when Emenike begins to compliment the furnishings in the way that whites often do. This surprised Obinze because the idea and discussion of "great furniture" was a European term especially since the furniture in question was old and used. Emenike's fake flair is a hoax he uses to lend into the social circle of his American wife and acquaintances. Likewise in an attempt to show wisdom Emenike praised the serving plates as "handmade and chipped at the edges". Obinze discovered that "these plates with their amateurish finishes slight bulges at the edges would never have appeared to guests in Nigeria". As a consequence, Obinze "wondered whether Emenike had become

someone who felt that something was lovely because it was handcrafted by impoverished people in a faraway place, or if he had simply learnt to pretend."

Conclusion

This research looked at how fictitious Nigerian characters, like Emenike and Aunt Uju who moved to live abroad copied the Western way of life in order to quickly integrate and integrate. The novels heroine Ifemelu who is stronger decides to transcend both the host culture and the indigenous culture. She accepts some Western behaviors such as a tenacious and punctual work culture ut denounces the prevalence of racism abroad which leads to an imbalanced and difficult relationship between "whites and lacks". Similarly Ifemelu rejects the assumption that having straight hair is attractive or that speaking with an accent is a sign of literacy and refinement. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridization reveals that one of the undesirable consequences of migrating to a formerly colonized country like the US is that crossing transnational orders creates an identity. hybrid for immigrants who are better off challenging and interrogating some of the assumptions and beliefs of the West. Emenike and Aunt Uju are able to mimic Caucasian speech and behavior even exploiting the skill to their advantage while Ifemelu uses her unusual hybrid stance to challenge values and Western assumptions. Ifemelu retains more of a unique look than Emenike and Aunt Uju due to her rebellious and inappropriate stance which allows her to have shaggy hair and speak a Nigerian accent.

Reference

Bastida-Rodriguez, P., 2014. The invisible flâneuse: European cities and the African sex worker in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49(2), pp.203-214.

Christensen, M.J., 2013. Review Essay on Selected Contemporary Sierra Leonean Fiction: *Family Affairs/So the Path Does Not Die/A Tale of Three Women*. *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 7(2), p.164.

Ighile, M.O. and Oseghale, C.O., 2021. Mimicry, rebellion and subversion of Western beliefs in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 12(1), pp.1-6.

Kuppusamy, P., Kim, D., Soundharrajan, I., Hwang, I. and Choi, K.C., 2020. Adipose and muscle cell co-culture system: a novel in vitro tool to mimic the in vivo cellular environment. *Biology*, 10(1), p.6.

Moji, P.B., 2015. New Names, Translational Subjectivities:(Dis) location and (Re) naming in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 27(2), pp.181-190.

Salih, T., 2009. *Season of Migration to the North*. New York Review of Books.

Sharobeem, H.M., 2015. Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Thing Around Your Neck". *The Rocky Mountain Review*, pp.18-36.

Trivedi, H., 2021. Post-colonial Hybridity: *Midnight's Children*. *Literature and Nation: Britain and India 1800-1990*.