

Full Length Research Paper

Mimicry, rebellion and subversion of Western beliefs in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Migration is a global issue that entails the movement of people from one place to another. Edward Said states that “our age, with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi, theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration” (2002: 138). The crossing of transnational borders and entry into the receiving country presents various challenges which an immigrant has to contend with. In the assimilatory process, identities are reshaped and reformed into something that is not quite the same and various forms of negotiations occur. This paper contends that a key concern for immigrants in the host country is the negotiation of different cultural forms such as the use of language, the expression of a particular “hair do style” and ways of behaviour which are often alien or not acceptable to the immigrant. Conformity with established codes of behaviour provides easy admission and acceptance to Western life and culture, while rebellion on the other hand poses its own challenges and ambiguities. With the aid of Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory of hybridity, this paper examines how the immigrant utilizes mimicry and rebellion as strategies for survival and as means of challenging and subverting the stereotyped image of the “native African” in the West in particular. It concludes that through mimicry and outright rebellion, the immigrant can effectively or somehow challenge dominant Western beliefs and assumptions.

Key words: Migration, mimicry, Western beliefs, Nigeria, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Americanah chronicles the yearning of most Nigerians to travel abroad in the quest of the “proverbial greener pastures”. In the face of stringent social economic realities in the nation, many Nigerians risk different life-threatening situations in order to improve their academic and economic opportunities. Several historical and economic reasons are behind this phenomenon of mass migration that has picked up speed and volume since the second half of the twentieth century. Among them are

“the second world war, the demise of the British Empire and the subsequent migration from the former colonies to the West” (Moslund, 2010: 1). Of equal bearing are “the emergence of totalitarian regimes” and “technological developments” (Frank, 2008: 1). Also, poverty and lack of decent jobs have become reasons for leaving one’s home country, and this is considered as economic migration. This is often seen in inter-country migration, especially in the movement of people from developing

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countries to developed countries in search of comfortable lives (Wickramasinghe and Wimalaratana, 2016: 15).

Some fictional characters in *Americanah* such as Ifemelu, Aunt Uju and Emenike are representative of Nigerians who travel abroad for academic and economic reasons. Procuring a visa to travel presents a myriad of problems with the embassy which the potential immigrant has to surmount. On arrival in the host country, the immigrant is often faced with the task of reengineering their mind to process and mediate certain cultural and behavioural information previously had vis a vis the one currently available in the host country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigration literature is a dominant genre in the oeuvre of African literature which has continually captured the imagination and attracted a lot of literary output from writers across different literary generations. The corpus of immigrant literature therefore continues to amass as many writers continually portray the persistent movements of people all over the continent which is largely due to the poor and difficult socio-economic realities in their respective countries.

Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (2009), narrates the peregrinations of Mustapha Sa'eed to Cairo for high school and then to London where he studies Economics. Sa'eed exploits the images of the exotica which the numerous white women he encounters have of Africa and the Middle East in order to seduce them, break their heart and later abandon them. The actions of Sa'eed which may be judged by some as morally questionable, however reveals how the immigrant can exploit these distorted stereotypical images for personal gain.

In Pede Hollist's *So the Path does not Die* (2012), Fina migrates abroad to have a better future. After some years, Fina begins to feel an acute sense of disconnection from her culture and like Ifemelu in *Americanah*, begins to long for her home country. Fina achieves complete self-knowledge when she discovers that home means sharing herself with her people. With this realization, she shuns the allurements and privileges of life abroad and relocates to Sierra Leone to help the poor of her country.

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2014), exposes the harsh economic conditions faced by the inhabitants of the fictional town of paradise. The town of paradise is for its inhabitants, the "hell-hole" which they have been forced to relocate to because of the demolition of their houses and the forceful take-over of their lands by the government. Much like Ifemelu who processes a scholarship to study in America as a result of the incessant strikes of the university, Darling also longs to travel abroad to escape the poverty and hunger that haunts her every day. So, when the opportunity comes for Darling to travel to Michigan to join her aunt Fostalina,

she grabs the opportunity without a second thought.

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* (2010), illustrates the nitty gritty of black prostitution in Antwerp, Belgium. The black street walkers, who are from different African countries, have migrated to Antwerp in order to escape from poverty, unemployment, ethnic cleansing, etc., and to have a better life. For the ladies who trail the streets of Antwerp during the day and spend their nights partially nude behind show glasses, Belgium provides the anonymity they need to sell their bodies for dollars. It takes the death of Sisi for her colleagues to realize the precariousness of their lives and the riskiness of their new-found profession.

The thematic resilience of the migration theme in African literature is seen most poignantly in the corpus of Adichie's prose works which are all coloured by various shades of nomadic movements. In *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Aunt Amaka chooses the option of relocating abroad with her children to continue her lecturing career when the hardship and assault from the military government becomes unbearable. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Richard Churchill's muse is his fascination with the Igbo Ukwu culture which brings him to Nigeria and into the gathering storm of the Nigeria-Biafra war. *The Thing Around your Neck* (2009) is a collection of different short stories that majorly dwell on various strands of migration experience. The subject matter of these fictional works all serve to portray the pervasiveness of the migration theme in literature.

The purpose of this paper is to closely explore *Americanah* in order to depict how Ifemelu, Aunt Uju and Emenike negotiate their hybrid statuses abroad. While the other characters choose mimicry and conformity as survival strategies in the Western world, Ifemelu untangles herself from the linguistic and cultural expectations of the American society; she rebels against certain aspects of Western culture and carves out a niche for herself.

METHODOLOGY

This paper does a content analysis of *Americanah* using Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. The essay utilizes both primary and secondary research materials. The primary data were from the novel, *Americanah*, while the secondary data were from the library and the internet. The analysis of the novel is based on the authors' comprehension of the text with due guidance from the literary theory.

Research questions

The following are the research questions that guide this work:

(1) How do the characters, Aunt Uju and Emenike,

employ mimicry as survival strategies to gain privileges in the West?

(2) How is Ifemelu's non-conformity with some aspects of the Western culture a means of subverting negative popular Western beliefs?

(3) How is Ifemelu's rebellion a means of achieving cultural assertiveness in the West?

Theoretical framework

Hybridity

The term hybridity is used in postcolonial studies to represent the mixture of people and cultures and the resultant birth of new transcultural forms. Hybridity is manifest in situations where people migrate to other countries, are influenced by the cultural orientation of the country and their identities consequently become entwined with elements of the foreign culture. The title of the novel *Americanah* is the first indication of the assimilatory potential of hybridity. It is a term of address for people who were abroad for some time, and who later decided to relocate to their home countries. In its usage, the title suggests that Nigerians who have been exposed to other cultural influences portray a hybrid identity in their cultural behaviour.

The Location of Culture is an important book of cultural studies by Homi K. Bhabha where he describes the concept of hybridity and its manifestations. Bhabha (1994: 159-160) states that:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal. Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but replicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power.

Two aspects of Bhabha's definition are highly relevant to the present discussion.

Firstly, hybridity is a tool through which the hybrid reevaluates colonial assumptions through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. This aspect refers to the attempt of the hybrid to mimic or imitate the accent, dress, behaviour and other aspects of the Western culture. Bhabha remarks that mimicry is one of the principal ways through which the hybrid undermines colonial power. In his essay on "Mimicry and Man", Bhabha describes mimicry as sometimes unintentionally subversive. In Bhabha's opinion, mimicry is a kind of performance that exposes the artificiality of all symbolic

expressions of power (Singh, 2009). Importantly, the idea of mimicry does not refer to mere imitation, nor does it assume assimilation into the dominant culture. Rather, to Bhabha, it is an exaggeration of a copying of the ideas, language, manners and culture of the dominant culture that differentiates it from mere imitation: it is "repetition with difference". There is, then, a sense of mockery to mimicry, giving this "sly civility," as Bhabha calls it, a particular comic quality. Bhabha asserts that mimicry is "an ironic compromise" (1994: 86). In this manner, the imitative strides of the hybrid immigrant is seen as a means of reevaluating all assumptions of colonial superiority because through mimicry, the colonized replicates the colonizer's identity and renders common place what is regarded as superior.

The second fundamental aspect of Bhabha's essay on hybridity relates to the hybrid's strategy of challenging entrenched colonial beliefs and values through systems of subversion that consequently turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. In *Americanah*, Adichie presents to us the character of Ifemelu, a hybrid character, who unsettles or undermines the mimetic demands of colonial power by challenging institutionalized colonial assumptions. She does this by using the technology of blogging to address topical issues like racism and to evaluate poor and discriminatory racial relationship existing between "blacks and whites" in America. These activities ultimately serve the role of diverting the spotlight from the blacks and fixing it on the whites. These points will be further analysed subsequently.

MIMICRY

In *Americanah*, we are faced with several characters that mimic the American way of speaking. Aunty Uju is principal amongst this group. Whenever she wants to obtain favours and get preferential treatment abroad, she uses an American accent to speak whereas at home with her family, she speaks with her Nigerian accent. Her behavioural pattern suggests that she only compromises her accent for privileges and not because she believes in the superiority of the American accent over the Nigerian. This is an ironic compromise. Aunty Uju seems to have perfectly imbibed the aphorism which says that: "When in Rome, behave like the Romans". As a result, "When she (Aunty Uju) spoke to white Americans in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans", there emerged "a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing" (Adichie: 132).

Emenike is another character who mimics Western modes of behaviour to the point of mockery and utilizes his hybrid status to his advantage. Emenike's first strategy in Britain is to marry a white woman old enough to be his mother. This immediately entitles him to a good house in Islington, fashionable clothes and exposure to

his wife's sophisticated circle of white friends whom he always entertains with an exaggerated appreciation for the white culture, while referring to Nigeria as a jungle where all sorts of improbable events take place. Although Emenike does not go about breaking women's heart like Mustapha Sa'eed in *Seasons of Migration to the North*, he however supports Western stereotypes of Africa for selfish interests.

A classic portrayal of Emenike's pretensions is at a dinner with his old school friend Obinze and his white wife, Georgina, and her friends. Obinze is dumbfounded when Emenike begins to praise the household furniture in the manner in which whites normally do. This comes as a shock to Obinze because the idea and talk about "good furniture" is a European concept, especially as the furniture in question is old and already used (Adichie: 310). The pretence at being refined is a disguise employed by Emenike to fit into the social circle of his American wife and her friends.

In the same light, in his attempt at appearing sophisticated, Emenike is full of praises for the serving plates which are "handmade and chipped around the edges". Giving a closer look at the so called beautiful plates, Obinze discovers that "those plates, with their amateur finishing, the slight lumpiness of the edges, would never be shown in the presence of guests in Nigeria" therefore, Obinze "wondered if Emenike had become a person who believed that something was beautiful because it was handmade by poor people in a foreign country, or whether he had simply learned to pretend so" (Adichie: 312).

REBELLION AS A SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY

Chinua Achebe has observed that over time, Africans have been caricatured by centuries of stereotypes and myths that have been spread through European discourse. In order to recover agency, and rectify this unfair and unbalanced representation, writers have the right to challenge their misrepresentation in what Achebe terms "writing back to the West", which has become a necessity in order to "reshape the dialogue between the colonized and the colonizer" (Achebe: 55). This is precisely the task Ifemelu performs in the novel.

Two key issues which Ifemelu addresses during her stay in America are racial discrimination and cultural stereotyping. Ifemelu discovers shortly after her arrival in America that her skin colour is considered problematic and inferior. The same applies to her accent and dark curly afro hair. These discoveries propel her towards learning more about America's racial politics in order to better tackle it, "and as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalisms: race, ideology and region, became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (Adichie: 160). Ifemelu's knowledge about the racial politics in America is

also attributable to her first-hand experience of racism in its varied manifestations and the experiences of her black relatives abroad. For instance, Aunty Uju once recounts to Ifemelu the ugly experience she had in the hospital where she worked as a medical doctor. As soon as she entered the examination room, the patient who must have been white demanded to see the doctor, and when she confirmed that she was the doctor, the patient became angry and later requested that her case note be transferred to another doctor's office (Adichie: 213). This action by the white patient implies several things. For example, it suggests that the average white person will want to be treated by a white doctor because blacks, even when qualified for the task are considered as intellectually inferior to the whites. Another related incident is when Aunty Uju laments to Ifemelu that Dike's principal accused him of hacking into the school's computer network without any shred of evidence other than the fact that he is black, and the crime seems like one which blacks are capable of committing (Adichie: 400).

One of the most dominant ways through which Ifemelu interrogates, negotiates and challenges colonial assumptions of racial superiority is through the Western technology of blogging. Dean Jodi expands on the peculiarity of blog authorship when he states: "blogs offer exposure and anonymity at the same time. As bloggers we expose ourselves, our feelings and experiences, loves and hates, desires and aversions" (2010: 72).

Ifemelu's decision to set up the blog is predicated on her pent-up emotions and misgivings about racial inequality in America. Her blogging initiative thus becomes her outlet for educating people about racial politics abroad. The blog posts are satirical in nature, her language is not judgemental or accusative, but instead it functions as a social commentary on life in Europe. Through blogging, Ifemelu shifts the spotlight from the "blacks" to the "whites" as she depicts the various ways whites discriminate against blacks on account of skin colour. Her position is that many whites delude themselves that racism ended a long time ago, but this is a blatant lie because racism exists in various shades in the American society. In one of her blog posts, for instance, Ifemelu states that, "the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not" (Adichie: 361). Racism does not manifest itself in the form of mean "white" people who lynch "blacks" in public places, rather it can be seen in instances where a crime is committed in a white neighbourhood and the blacks living there are regarded as the prime suspects or where a black woman is expected to straighten her curled hair in order to get a job. In another post, she states that tribalism is alive and active in America, and on America's racial ladder, whites are always top, American Blacks are always at the bottom and what is in the middle depends on time and place (Adichie: 216).

Ifemelu equally challenges Western assumptions when

she decides to wear her hair as an afro despite the negative connotation it attracts. On one occasion when Ifemelu is preparing for a job interview, she is advised by Aunt Uju and her friends to look “as white as possible” to better her chance of getting the job. Looking as white as possible for Ifemelu means that she has to straighten her naturally curly afro hair. Ifemelu agrees to these suggestions and eventually secures the job. But after some time, she realizes that carrying straight hair impinges on her freedom and constrains her to carry her hair in certain fixed ways. As a result, Ifemelu cuts her straight hair and starts grooming her natural hair afresh. Ifemelu’s action of cutting her hair, is symbolic of her decision to shed all forms of pretensions and artificiality in order to conform to Western standards. Although she is on a foreign soil, she decides to set standards for herself and live an unencumbered life. Ifemelu gets the support she needs to carry her natural curly hair from an online group of black women who carry their natural hair and also trade recipes on how to maintain hair. By becoming a member of this group, Ifemelu aligns herself with black independent women who assert through hair do, the freedom to live unprohibited on American soil. Through the grand agenda of these women, who are committed to deconstructing the canon which says that in America only straight hair is beautiful, Adichie asserts that whether at home or in the diaspora, everyone should have the right to look the way he/she wants to look without fear of discrimination in as much as your looks does not negatively affect the next person. Ifemelu’s hair episode reveals another shade of racism in America, where everything black is viewed with distaste and white values are exalted.

Another issue which Ifemelu contends with in America is the expectation that immigrants speak with an American accent. She discovers that on America soil, respect is accorded to non-Americans who are able to imitate to perfection, the slurred speech and accent patterns of Americans. Ifemelu experiences a particular humiliating episode with a front desk officer at graduate school, Cristina Tomas, who assumes that Ifemelu is an illiterate because she cannot speak with an American accent (Adichie: 157). On closer observation of her surroundings, Ifemelu discovers that her aunty and other blacks she interacts with abroad appear to have subscribed to this unwritten code of speech as the norm in America. In her early days in America, Ifemelu also decides to speak with an American accent in order to blend in. She carefully learned and observed the discourse of newscasters and friends; and in her private time, she perfected the blurring of the “t”, the creamy roll of the “r”, she began starting her sentences with “so” and responding with the clique “oh really”. Ifemelu so perfects her accent that a telemarketer mistakes her for a white during their telephone conversation. She however notes with dismay that speaking with an accent is an act of will and commands a lot of efforts because if she is in a panic situation or is jerked awake during a fire, her first reaction

will be to cry out for help with her natural, God given voice and accent (Adichie: 203). As suddenly as she made the decision to speak like an American, Ifemelu also decides to drop all falsifications of accent and speak like an educated Nigerian, with a Nigerian accent. These actions of Ifemelu are considered rebellious because contrary to popular Western expectations, Ifemelu chooses the path to cultural assertion. Instead of discarding certain vital aspects of her culture and identity she engages in purposive cultural selection and imbibes aspects of Western culture that are commendable while renouncing others that stifle her individuality and femininity.

Conclusion

This study has examined how some fictional Nigerian characters, like Emenike and Aunt Uju who migrate to a foreign country, mimic Western modes of life in order to quickly assimilate and blend into the host country. The protagonist character of the novel, Ifemelu who is more assertive, however chooses to straddle between host and native culture. She imbibes certain Western behaviours like a dogged work culture and timeliness but criticizes the high rate of racial discrimination abroad which leads to a lopsided and tensed relationship between “whites and blacks”. In the same vein, Ifemelu rebels against the notion that straight hair is beautiful or speaking with an accent is a mark of literacy and finesse. Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity revealed that an integral outcome of migration to a formerly colonizing country like America is that the crossing of the transnational borders invests a hybrid identity on the immigrant who is better positioned to challenge and interrogate certain Western assumptions and beliefs. Through mimicry, Emenike and Aunt Uju are able to behave and speak like whites and even use this ability to gain privileges, while Ifemelu uses her unique hybrid position to question Western beliefs and assumptions. Through her rebellious and non-conformist stance, Ifemelu retains more of her individuality than Emenike and Aunt Uju, by exercising the freedom to wear afro hair and speak in a Nigerian accent. Conclusively, this study finds that some of the characters portrayed in *Americanah* exemplify the notion that either through mimicry or rebellion, the African in diaspora is capable of challenging Western assumptions and reshaping the discourse between “whites and blacks”.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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