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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*: Of Hybrid Subjectivity, its Locations and Subverting Potential

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Abstract

This paper looks into Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* as a postcolonial text. Using the Bhabhaian constructs of "mimicry," "hybridity" and "the third space," this paper argues that Adichie's narrative portrays how the coming together of cultures induces "mimicry" of the cultural norms of the seemingly dominant culture. Owing to this "mimicry" the mimicking characters develop a "hybrid" identity characterized by "ambivalence." This paper also argues that the location/ site of mimicry and consequent development of hybrid identity are not conditional upon physical migration, or moving beyond the borders of one's homeland. The tendency to look up to the supposedly dominant culture can prevail within the confines of natives' own society as well, which is perhaps an indication of the post-colonial society still reeling under the continued colonial influence. Whatever maybe the location of "hybrid" characters, "ambivalence" invariably crops up in their identity. Although ambivalence indicates being indecisive about one's identity, and about how one looks at the identity of the other, it might also mean emancipation from the burden of restricting and discriminating categories as exemplified by Adichie's narrative. In the ambivalent state the hybrid subjects can nurture hopes to rise above the assumed purity of cultures. The native- colonial or white-black nexus in this sense may be understood to have steered away from confrontation, and found a way towards reconciliation.

Keywords: Mimicry, hybridity, third space, ambivalence, resistance, location

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a postcolonial writer from Nigeria whose novels have earned her a prominent position among contemporary novelists. Adichie, through her writing, exemplifies lingering colonial impact on politically independent yesteryear colonies.

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One telling instance and the focus of this paper is the novelist's bestseller *Americanah*, a much-acclaimed novel that revolves around the lives of characters enmeshed in the repercussion of colonial contact. This repercussion gets manifested in the characters' mimicry of the colonial ways causing them to develop a hybrid identity, one that emanates from what they preserve of their nativity, along with the traits they adopt of the foreign culture. In the "contact zone" of the native's and the colonizer's opposing cultures, Adichie's hybrid characters have chances of redemption from the superior colonizer-inferior colonized dichotomy imposed upon them by the colonial discourse. The redemption understandably follows from hybridity that capacitates the natives to get round the struggles with the hostile and condescending culture of the colonizer. In other words, *Americanah* narrates a tale that weaves together events and characters into a complex dynamic of colonial-postcolonial interrelationship, with a view to reconciling the past and the present.

Drawing on this initial discussion one might claim that *Americanah* by Adichie belongs to the canon of, "post-colonial writing [that concerns] itself with the hybridized nature of post-colonial culture as a strength rather than weakness" (Ashcroft et al., 2006, p.137) a notion close to Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybridity and the third space. This proximity of Adichie's novel and Bhabha's notions will be the focus of examination in this paper. Using the characters and events in the novel as references, the paper will attempt a critical analysis of how hybrid identities evolve, and what the postcolonial subjects stand to gain from this phenomenon. The paper proposes that Adichie declines to dwell in the past, and instead believes in negotiating and navigating through "the in-between reality" that previously colonized tend to find themselves in, unasked for, and in the process become enabled to resist the colonial influence, and build a true postcolonial identity.

Of Migration, Negotiation and Reverse Migration

*Migrants may well become mutants, but it is out of
such hybridization that newness can emerge.*

(Rushdie, 1991, p.210)

Adichie's protagonist in *Americanah* is a young Nigerian woman named Ifemelu who leaves her homeland for a better future in America. However, soon after beginning her new life the young woman begins to realize that she has become the 'Other' in the foreign land. Contrary to her American dream, in which she sees herself as a black character from the famous television show "The Cosby Show" living a comfortable and respectful life in fictional America, (Adichie, 2017, p. 99) Ifemelu in real America finds herself struggling to afford her college fees, rent, even food (pp.151-153). At a difficult time when Ifemelu

almost loses all hopes of making ends meet, her dinner is eaten by her white roommate's dog. The unapologetic roommate blurts out in racist sarcasm, "You better not kill my dog with voodoo" (p. 152). This is one of the many instances of racism and stereotyping that jolt Ifemelu out of her American dream.

Although seemingly a trivial squabble, the roots of the stereotypical sarcasm may be traced to a deeply entrenched colonial discourse. In *The Location of Culture* Homi K. Bhabha (1994/2019) explicates the nature of this discourse as one that aims at constructing the refined colonizer and ignorant colonized to justify its superiority over the latter (p.101). Evidently, a discourse of this nature is prone to inducing binaries and as such "reflects a power structure in relationships of 'We' versus 'the other'" (Kim, 2004, P.2). Adichie's focus in *Americanah* is apparently this relationship which is revealed by the "othering" experienced by Ifemelu time and again.

Initially overwhelmed by racism and stereotyping in the supposedly dominant culture, Adichie's protagonist gradually learns to survive in the alien atmosphere. Her survival tactic is "mimicry" of American norms of speech, conduct and looks that results in the construction of a "hybrid" personality. In the meeting point of cultures, beyond the borders of her homeland, Ifemelu through her "mimicry" enters what Bhabha (1994/2019) refers to as "the third space". Highlighting the emancipatory nature of this space Bhabha (1994/2019) contends that this is where the dominant discourse of the colonizer ceases to hold sway because "the intervention of the third space of enunciation...challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force" (p.54). In this "in between space" (p.4) then, no culture is either dominant or dominated, and freed from this dichotomy the colonized stand at par with the colonizer, asserting their differences from, not assimilating with the foreign culture.

It is hence evident that Adichie's protagonist Ifemelu stands to gain from her hybridity. In the "in between space" (Bhabha, 1994/2019, p.4) she is no longer the dominated. As a hybrid she shares space, and negotiates with the other culture on her own conditions. Her rewards are academic and material success in the land she has migrated to. Rushdie (1991) points out, "To migrate is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others...But the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world" (p. 210). Adichie's migrant protagonist also loses her "language and home," but in return strikes a good bargain when she makes her voice heard in America through her blogs. The transformation Ifemelu initiates may not be revolutionary enough to transform the entire western society, but in its own small way it creates opportunities for her to vent out the turmoil of emotions she experiences in the American society as a black immigrant.

However, Ifemelu's success as a blogger in the United States, her fellowship at Princeton, and a devoted African American boyfriend are not enough to make her stay on in the foreign country (Adichie, 2017, p.6). She increasingly realizes that her soul is filled with "amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living [all of which get] melded into a piercing homesickness" (p.6). As Okolocha (2016) remarks, "the pull of Ifemelu's home background proves stronger than American comforts and advantages" (p.159). So, finally Adichie's protagonist returns home where she is tagged "Americanah," that is one who returns home after a long time in America "bear[ing] the distinctive stamp of her experience in the United States [that also indicates] loss of authenticity" (Bragg, 2017, p.130). As in America, so also in Nigeria, Ifemelu is again "neither the one, nor the other" (Bhabha, 1994/2019, p.41). The aftermath of "reverse migration" (Okolocha, 2016, p.162) is thus also characterized by hybridity. Once back in Lagos Ifemelu befriends other "Americanahs" like her. They stick together in diasporic solidarity, engendered by a common understanding of things referred to about their past life in America, and their similar grudges about life in Nigeria (Adichie, 2017, p.408). Also, they are subjected to a common perception of people back home as those who are often "looking at things with American eyes" (Adichie, 2017, p.385). So together the hybrid returnees enter "the third space" in the country of their origin. And the experience this time is as much emancipatory as in the overseas location. Having experienced life in America they get over with their American dream, and being natives, they adapt to life in their homeland without much ado.

Looking Like Them to Belong: Conforming to the "racist gaze"

I only became black when I came to America.

(Adichie, 2017, p.290)

The plot of the novel begins with the protagonist Ifemelu visiting an African hair braiding salon to get her hair braided before returning to Nigeria. This is indicative of Ifemelu losing her braids during her stay in America, perhaps to make herself more bearable to the "racist gaze" (Bhabha, 1994/2019, p.131) of the white Americans. Ifemelu first hears about African natural hair being a barrier in America when her Aunt Uju passes her medical examination in America, and has to prepare for job interviews. Uju tells her niece "if you have braids they think you are unprofessional" (Adichie, 2017, p. 119). Sometime later, Ifemelu's career counselor suggests that she should get rid of her natural hair to increase her chances of getting a job (p.202). So, survival on the foreign soil demands Aunt Uju and Ifemelu to, as Fanon (2008) says, "experience [their] being for others" (p.89). With their hair styled to meet the White American standards they prepare for the "gatekeeping encounter" (Fairclough, 1989, p.47). With their hybrid looks they illustrate Said's (1985) observation of

the post-colonial scenario where “no one is purely one thing” (p. 55). In the meeting point of cultures, in “the third space” the two Nigerian women are natives carrying traces of home as well as the foreign. As hybrids their identity hinges on both: the dominant foreign culture as well as their native culture. Although “mimicry” of the values of the foreign culture might appear to be a sign of accepting domination, it may really not be so. In fact, the natives, as hybrids, indulge in the “strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha, 1994/2019, p.159). The hair change is only a strategy to serve a purpose. Once it is served Ifemelu denies its continued relevance, and reverts to her previous self. Perhaps this explains her visit to the hair braiding salon before leaving for her homeland.

In Bhabha's (1994/2019) terms Ifemelu in her American avatar is “the production of hybridization... [not the] silent repression of native traditions” (p.160). The hair change is her negotiation with the values of the foreign society. This “negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. [Rather] It makes possible the emergence of an ‘interstitial’ agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism” (Bhabha, 1996, p.58). So, Ifemelu loses her natural hair, and gains acceptance, more importantly she gets a job.

When Ifemelu becomes a successful blogger in America, she writes about a similar negotiation in one of her blogs by another black woman, a real-life character, Michelle Obama. Ifemelu claims, “If Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural...She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose” (Adichie, 2017, p.297). By referring to a real-life character in the plot Adichie makes the hair transformation issue even more relevant. Adapting to the white American standards of hair type and style is as much a negotiation for the wife of a President, as it is for an immigrant struggling to build an identity. For both the women: fictional and real, their “conformity” with the White ideology, is not merely “the manifestation of mimicry that Homi Bhabha posits to be a result of colonialism on the indigenous subject, but also the power struggle...[that is] largely determined by race and continues to manifest itself especially in Western societies” (Yerima, 2017, p. 643). One might thus discern the intertwining of domination and hegemony in this “mimicry” of white beauty standard.

What is also noteworthy in the plot of *Americanah* is that not all native characters cross borders to become hybrids by taking upon themselves the beauty regimes of the whites. Ifemelu has memories of her mother going to the salon to get her hair relaxed, which thereafter “flow[s] down her back like a celebration” (Adichie, 2017, p.41). So, the mother loses her natural hair in her own hometown in Nigeria, in much the same way as the daughter does at an offshore location. Ifemelu also recollects phases of religious influences that different Western churches have on her mother. Passing through one of these phases the

mother chops off her hair as the church she joins teaches her to deprive herself of anything that might come in the way of absolute devotion (Adichie, 2017, p. 41). Finally, the mother returns to her former self when she joins a liberal church that gives her freedom to “choose her own aesthetics standard, which she [does] blending both the Western and her own indigenous values” (Yerima, 2017, p. 644). And it is not just the mother, but Ifemelu and her Auntie Uju also who straighten their hair while still in Nigeria, where no job interviewer is likely to be repelled by their Afro hair. Apparently, for these native women, hybridity need not be the sole consequence of “border crossing”. The “third space” with all its promises of emancipation from essential categories of cultural supremacy comes into being whenever and wherever natives refuse to be at the receiving end of domination.

Speaking the American way: To Resist and Belong

*The more the black Antillean assimilates
the French language, the whiter he gets.*

(Fanon, 2007, p.2)

Reflecting on postcolonial subjects' choice of language in his book *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1991) writes, “The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment” (p.4). Adichie's characters in *Americanah* reveal Ngũgĩ's reflection aptly. Soon after arriving in America Ifemelu realizes that she needs to adopt an American accent, and pick up the regular American vocabulary. (Adichie, 2017, p.134, p. 136). Auntie Uju, who has been living in America for quite some time uses an Americanized version of her name, “you- joo instead of oo- joo”. She reasons that this is how Americans call her. (Adichie, 2017, p. 104). Adichie's immigrant characters thus indulge in “mimicry” of the American way of speaking, which might be perceived as their negotiation with the dominant culture in “the third space”, or in other words it is their negotiation with power that Foucault (1978) describes as “a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (p.93). For Adichie's characters this “strategical situation” is the subtle exhibition of the dominant culture's “power to project [its] practices as universal and ‘common sense’” (Fairclough, 1989, p.33). Ifemelu and Auntie Uju are compelled by this power to alter their way of speaking. However, they have nothing to lose from this. Rather the “mimicry” and resultant “hybridity” are their survival tactics, their “key to open doors” (Fanon, 2008, p. 21) in an otherwise hostile environment.

Frantz Fanon's (2008) observation in *Black Skins White Masks* is relevant here. Fanon argues, “To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture” (p. 21). And “[b]y appropriating the imperial language, its discursive forms...post-colonial societies

are able... to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse” (Ashcroft et al. 2007, p. 20). In *Americanah* Adichie portrays this intervention through the success of her protagonist as a blogger in America after perfecting the American “vernacular” of blogging (Esplin, 2018, p.76). In her blogs Adichie’s protagonist appropriates the American vocabulary and “addresses the issues of race, consciously promoting her African (Nigerian) identity” (Okolocha, 2016, p.158). Ifemelu is less interested in the material benefits she earns as a blogger, and more interested in the fact that blogging gives her a voice that is heard in America. Her blogs are “a strategy of subversion” (p.158). Through them Ifemelu finally is able to write back to the domination she is made to go through on the foreign soil.

Furthermore, use of the foreign tongue in *Americanah* has a tool of subversion is not just an offshore phenomenon. Ifemelu’s father in Nigeria deliberately speaks “formal, elevated English” (Adichie, 2017, p. 47) to draw people’s attention. As Ifemelu matures she understands that her father’s “mannered English [and] affected words [are] a shield against his insecurity” (pp.47-48) traceable to his self-pity for his lack of education. His pompous English gives him an assurance comparable to what the migrants feel offshore, when they adapt to a foreign accent and vocabulary. At home, the protagonist’s father is as much a mimic, and a hybrid as the protagonist is overseas. Furthermore, Adichie’s protagonist is already an Anglophone while still in Nigeria, where she speaks English along with her native tongue Igbo. Esplin Marlene (2018) draws attention to this linguistic hybridity exhibited by Ifemelu:

As a student in Nigeria, Ifemelu exhibits her proficiency in the Igbo spoken in and around her village, the British-inflected English of her secondary school and university, Nigerian English, Pidgin, and the playful language-mixing of her friends and classmates. (p. 75)

And it is not only Ifemelu, but her friends as well who are Anglophone like her. One particular incident in *Americanah* draws attention to this fact. At the party where Ifemelu becomes familiar with her love interest Obinze, the two teenagers playfully test each other’s knowledge of Igbo by trading Igbo proverbs. Impressed by Obinze’s knowledge of their native proverbs Ifemelu remarks, “How do you know all that? ...Many guys won’t even speak Igbo, not to mention knowing proverbs” (Adichie, 2017, p.62). This episode in Adichie’s narrative is crucial. Not only does it highlight the prominence English enjoys among the younger generation in a former colony, but also the fact that these young Nigerians are steeped in linguistic hybridity attained within the confines of their homeland. Bhabha (1994/2019) believes that “international culture... [evolves in] “the world of travel” (p.12). Adichie’s (2017) narrative depicts that Bhabha may only be partially right.

Conclusion

Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and
bit of that is how newness enters the world.
(Rushdie, 1991, p.394)

The analysis of Adichie's narrative attempted in this paper foregrounds the continued influence of yesteryear colonial discourse that places the previously colonized in a seemingly dominated spot. In this context Van Dijk (2001) reminds us, "If controlling discourse is a first major form of power, controlling people's minds is the other fundamental way to reproduce dominance and hegemony (p.357). The urge to "mimic" and the consequent "hybridity" may then be understood as induced by the power that controls "people's minds". However, following the critical discussion in this paper the natives as "mimicking hybrids" cannot be written off as being merely acquiescent to the power of the colonial discourse. Foucault (1978) argues that power is always faced with resistance (p.95). Viewed from the Foucauldian perspective natives' act of "assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (Fanon, 2008, p.2) through their mimicry and hybridity is resistance to the power of the colonial discourse. And this resistance Bhabha (1994/2019) suggests "is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture" (p.157). Rather this is constructive resistance that overlooks the restricting and discriminating categories (Jackson and Albrecht, n.d. p. 41) constructed by the colonial discourse, and in the process subverts the essential inferiority imposed on the identity of colonial subjects. Ania Loomba's reference to Shakespeare's character Caliban seems pertinent to the discussion here. The native Caliban (as cited in Loomba, 2018) tells his captors Prospero and Miranda, "You gave me language, and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse" (p.100). Ifemelu in America is symbolic of "Caliban" for she mimics traits of an alien culture, and in return she is capacitated enough to forge her hybrid self-identity, and indulge in creative resistance to that culture.

Adichie's *Americanah* thus presents a positivist view of Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" as a strengthening attribute of natives of previous colonies. As hybrids the natives open up "the third space" with its promises of doing away with the "refined-primitive" dichotomy. And as discussed above the location of this "space" may or may not necessitate the physical act of crossing a border. Jonathan Friedman (2015) argues that for Bhabha being located in a fixed site is "tantamount to essentialism" and to be "unhomely" is to be a true hybrid subject (p.78). Bhabha's attempt is evidently to refute the essentialism that colonial discourse sanctions, and so is Adichie's. However, where Bhabha deviates from Adichie is when he as Friedman (2015) puts it, favors "the position of a migrant... a person who is somehow in two places and maintains a double perspective on reality" (p.78). This

insistence on migration is not evident in Adichie's narrative. For her hybrid characters the crossing of borders is both physical as well as mental. For instance, the protagonist attains hybridity owing to physical migration to an offshore location, while other hybrid characters enter "the third space" and negotiate with the othering discourse within the confines of their homeland. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie apparently does not overlook the "diverse modalities" (Shohat, 1992, p.110) of hybridity.

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