

## Postcolonial Mimicry in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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### **Abstract**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie occupies an undisputed position as a globally acknowledged new generation African writer. She has marveled in the field of fiction and non-fictional writings which bring her international fame. Being published in 2013, *Americanah* is her third novel which has won National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. The editors, New York Times Book Review have chosen the novel as one of the best 10 books of the year 2013. The novel *Americanah* highlights the ways Adichie reclaims the identity and subjectivity of African natives irrespective of their acute poverty in a postcolonial society. Truly speaking, identity crisis is very much pivotal to any postcolonial society as it inherits varied economic, political, social, racial and cultural hierarchies due to colonialism and imperialism and racism. Adichie challenges the so-called beliefs regarding immigration and the immigrants' transcultural experiences in America. The present paper examines how with the help of mimicry the female protagonist, Ifemelu strives to find out her identity in America. For the methodological purpose I have basically applied Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Here mimicry serves Ifemelu as a means to survive in a highly racialized American society. Ifemelu does not adhere to stereotypical ideas, rather she moulds herself according to situations and by adopting mimic identity which finally, however, proves to be utter futile, and thereby forces Ifemelu to come back to her original African self, identity and dignity.

**Keywords:** Mimicry, postcolonial, identity, race, transcultural experience

### **Introduction**

Mimicry is as old as we are. In fact, the birth of Mimicry can be traced back to the birth of the Natural world. Many researchers like H. W. Bates and F. Muller have successfully established that aposematism of insects like butterfly or animals or birds is actually a form of mimicry. Hence, mimicry is omnipresent and ubiquitous. Human beings are not an exception. Since time unknown human beings have been mimicking each other for various reasons. Actually, persons who become involved in mimicry show a similar behavioral pattern, similar feelings, experiences, rapport and perceptions. Mimicry can be roughly classified as i) verbal mimicry, ii) emotional mimicry, iii) facial mimicry and iv) behavioral mimicry. Truly speaking, mimicry has become an inseparable part and parcel of our social existence and social behaviour. In fact, now-a-days, human mimicry has become a focal point of research in the disciplines like literature, Clinical Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Neuroscience, Social Development and Communication.

Mimicry as a term can be applied to explain different types of human gestures and behaviors like wincing while observing others' pain, muscle tension while watching a wrestling match, or imitating someone's language, facial expression and fashioning dress. Hence, conceptually we see that mimicry performs two significant roles – first, mimicry helps us to understand others, and the second is that mimicry synchronizes our social interactions. In this connection I must speak of that many clinical schools and psychologists have emphasized on the function of mimicry as a social interactions. Here mimicry has been viewed as a medium of empathy. In fact, the psychoanalytic approach to mimicry was started with Sigmund Freud, as

he commented “A path leads from identification by way of imitation [mimicry] to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life” (Freud 110).

However, in classical literary theory and aestheticism, mimicry was in the form of Mimesis. In fact, mimesis is unquestionably the most ancient and fundamental idea in western literary theory. The concept first appeared in Plato’s *The Republic*. Plato described mimesis in the following way that there are three worlds—the world of Ideas created by God, the world of appearances in Nature, and the world created by the artist. He opines that that the world of art models itself on the world of appearances and the world of appearances on the world of Ideas. Later it is reformulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Aristotle reconstructs mimesis from Plato’s tripartite structure into a dual structure of the world of universals and the world of art. Since *Poetics* the concept of mimesis has been the central to the practice of literature and art.

According to M. H. Abrams it is impossible to stop discussing about mimesis what he describes as “imitation”, “representation”, “counterfeiting”, “reflection”, “feigning”, “copy”, and “image”. Mimesis becomes so much central to the practice of literary theory, art, architecture, sculptor and painting because it raises fundamental question of artistic creation. A very recent assessment of mimesis as the basis of art and values comes with Stephen Halliwell: “... The concept of mimesis lies at the core of the entire history of Western attempts to make sense of representational art and its values” (*The Aesthetics of Mimesis*). Another classical critic Longinus too meditates over mimesis or imitation. According to him there is no basic difference between historical and literary imitation. Longinus explains mimesis as “For emotion is always more telling when it seems not to be premeditated by the speaker but to be born of the moment; and this way of questioning and answering oneself imitates spontaneously emotion” (Longinus 18).

Among all animals on earth, human beings can easily imitate skillfully anything and it is highly noticeable in all traditions. According to Aristotle:

It can be seen that poetry was broadly engendered by a pair of causes, both natural. For it is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis (indeed, this distinguishes them from other animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that he develops his earliest understanding); and equally natural that everyone enjoys mimetic objects. (Aristotle 37)

That is why M. H. Abrams conceives mimesis as ‘probably the most primitive aesthetic theory’ (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 8). Here the innate imitative faculty of human beings is referred to as “primitive” by Abrams. Hence, in western literary conception imitation primarily means the direct image of Nature, Natural world and social life; secondly it refers to the imitation of classical masters and their works. Interestingly, both the meanings become related when neoclassical critics like John Dryden and Alexander Pope profess that imitating nature is not different from imitating classical masters and their works.

## **Postcolonial Mimicry**

Let’s have a quick glance at how mimicry is applied in postcolonial literature. Bhabha popularized the idea and concept of Mimicry in his famous critical essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” in his famous book *The Location of Culture*. To put in a single sentence, in the field of postcolonial studies Mimicry is the way by which colonized subjects from Asia, Africa imitate the cultural milieu, lifestyle, language, politics fashioning of dress of the colonial and imperial western masters. Hence, mimicry can be describes as an opportunity for the colonized people to behave like the occidentals. This has become an important issue not only as an impact of colonialism but also in the context of immigration to Europe and America.

The basic cause of this attitude of the colonized people may be that when they share the culture of the powerful, they start thinking themselves having and entertaining that same power. Mostly, those colonized subjects and those immigrants consciously suppress their own cultural and social identities. Rather they start feeling and behaving like their colonial masters and try to adopt the western cultural attitudes. Mimicry entails an ironic contrast and compromise between something that eternally constant and things that are continually changing. According to Bhabha, mimicry is central to postcolonial discourse. Bhabha defines mimicry as

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excesses, its difference. (Bhabha 86)

As there is always an unmitigated gap between the western enlightenment and civil conception and their imitation by the colonized subjects, Mimicry is often thought to be as shameful. Even sometimes the colonized people imitating western culture become the target of mockery by their own people. As a result, nobody who even seriously engaged in mimicry would love to be called a mimic-man. Hence, mimicry defines a special type of relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Mimicry is beautifully described by Leela Gandhi in the following way

Mimicry is also the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience. The native subject often appears to observe the political and semantic imperatives of colonial discourse. ... In effect, mimicry inheres in the necessary and multiple acts of translation which oversee the passage from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial usage. In other words, 'mimicry' inaugurates the process of anti-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation. (Gandhi 149-150)

Again, Mimicry has often been termed with the reference to "been-to". It points out to the imitative impact of the western culture by the immigrants who after travelling to Europe and America have returned "home," thinking that they have entirely transformed themselves. Frantz Fanon beautifully mocked at this pretentiousness of Martinican "been-tos" in *Black Skin, White Mask*. Christopher Bracken has aptly described Bhabha's concept of mimicry by these words

Homi Bhabha exposes the ironic, self-defeating structure of Colonial discourse in the essay, — *Of Mimicry and Man*. He notes that when English administrators dreamed of converting India to Christianity at the end of the 18th century; they did not want their colonial subjects to become too Christian or too English. However, since India's mimicry of the English blurred the boundary between the rulers and ruled, the dream of anglicizing Indians threatened to Indianite Englishness- a reversal the colonists found intolerable. Mimicry is therefore a state of ambivalence and undermines the claims of imperial discourse and makes it impossible to isolate the racialized essence of either the colonized or the colonizer. (*The Potlatch Papers* 506)

## **Mimicry in *Americanah***

In the wake of the 21 century, the most celebrated Nigerian novelist is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. By birth she belongs to the Igbo community in Nigeria and she had her early education in Nsukka University where her parents were reputed professors. After that when she was just nineteen she went to America to take her bachelor from Eastern Connecticut State University and master's degree from prestigious Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

In the literary world, Adichie became famous with the publication of the debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* in 2004. But much before that she had been writing short stories. Due to her unbelievable achievement in the field of short stories she was nominated for the Caine Prize. Her most beautiful non-fictional writing is *The Thing around your Neck*. However, she marveled as a novelist globally and her two other most popular novels are *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*. In all her novels she has dealt deftly with the themes of immigration, Nigerian social, cultural, religious, colonial and political upheaval namely Biafran War; and feminine sentimentality, so to say sex is an inseparable part of her writing.

*Americanah* is Adichie's third novel. This novel spans across Africa, America and Europe. It tells a sweet love story of Ifemelu and Obinze, how they fall in love at their first sight, how they develop it to a deep sexual relationship in spite of Obinze's mother's warning, how they separate from each other in order to fulfill their dream which forces Ifemelu to immigrate to America and Obinze to England resulting their temporal separation, how they finally return and reunite. This novel is a beautiful social critic as it gives us a detailed picture of the American life as led by Ifemelu and her subsequent vulnerability to racial experience which she expresses through her blogging called "Raceteenth or Various Observations About

American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” (9).

In *Americanah* the female protagonist, Ifemelu becomes a significant mimic character. Adichie uses flashback narrative technique to tell the story of Ifemelu and Obinze. When the novel opens we see Ifemelu in Princeton, America waiting for a train to Trenton for her hair braiding. After staying ten years in America, She has decided to come back to Nigeria, her motherland. Here in a salon she reminisces her childhood in Nigeria. Yes, she is born and bred up in Lagos where in her secondary school she met with Obinze and fell in love with him. Then they move to Nsukka University where Obinze’s mother was a professor. In spite of Obinze’s mother’s warning they meet regularly to celebrate the warmth of teenage love and had sex for the first time. However, the paradise of their love is lost when Ifemelu immigrates to America and Obinze to Europe. Ifemelu becomes nostalgic about her motherland “Nigeria became where she supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze” (10).

Yes, Ifemelu had never been in trouble in Nigeria. She did not even feel that she is a black girl until she had reached to America where she feels racial discrimination in every sphere of life. Hence Ifemelu starts adapting herself with the help of mimicry. She comes to know from her friend, Ginika that “fat” is not a good word in America. As a result, “she had banished “fat” from her vocabulary” (10). Ifemelu adapts more beautifully when she understands why her aunty Uju pronounces her name in an American style “she pronounced it you-joo instead of oo-joo”(79). Ifemelu used to babysit for Dike, aunt Uju’s only son and sometimes she spoke Igbo with Dike. But she is reprimanded by her aunt Uju “please don’t speak igbo to him ... two languages will confuse him” (83). Again Ifemelu learns adaptation from her Nigerian school friend, Ginika who receives Ifemelu in America. When Ifemelu observes that Ginika becomes “thin with big breasts” (93), Ginika replies

I started losing weight almost as soon as I came? I was even close to anorexia. The kids at my high school called me Pork. You know at home when somebody tells you that you lost weight, it means something bad. But here somebody tells you that you lost weight and you say thank you. It’s just different here. (93)

Again, on one occasion Ifemelu learns the art of mimicry from Ginika when she says “because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things” ( 95). Ifemelu gets the worst feeling of discrimination when she goes to the international students’ office for enrolling in the university. Here she confronts with Cristina Tomas and Ifemelu’s eyes are open for ever as Tomas says: “I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?” (101). When Ifemelu realizes the way Tomas speaks to her is nothing but a humiliated treatment that each African black has to face continually. The narrator comments: “Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas’s before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf ... and in the following weeks, as autumn’s coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent” (101).

Hence, Ifemelu starts moulding her according to American standard and norms. The reason behind such adaptation can be best answered by Franz Fanon: “A white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid, simpering, murmuring, fussing and coddling” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). In fact, Ifemelu imitates and masters quickly the American accent. It takes almost one year to adopt completely the American accent. She realizes it entirely when on a July morning an American telemarketer calls her and gives her a compliment

“Wow. Cool. You sound totally American. “Thank you.”

Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words “you sound American” into a garland that she hung around her neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now. (131)

In fact, Ifemelu asks herself why she should take her American accent as a success. Rather to speak more clearly that she feels ashamed as she denies her African self by adopting American one. However, as Ifemelu now wears the ‘white mask’ of American accent consciously, it can be considered as a tool for her

empowerment. Simultaneously such empowerment can also be the form of resistance as Homi Bhabha mentions: "... Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, a sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power" (Castro 86).

Again, Bhabhian form of mimicry is very conspicuously seen in the motif of hair style. We see in the novel that Ifemelu has been advised to straighten her curly hair to get a job in America "lose the braids and straighten your hair"(150). After getting much and much information of the American norms Ifemelu finally decides to cut her hair in American style. Now Ifemelu remembers what once aunt Uju told: "Aunty Uju has said something similar in the past, and she had laughed then" (150). For straightening her hair Ifemelu attends to a salon in West Philadelphia. Here the professional hairdresser says

But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you've got the white-girl swing!

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. (151)

When the hairdresser praises Ifemelu for her 'white-girl swing', she feels disappointed and leaves the salon dejectedly. This scene is one of the finest examples of mimicry though Bhabha did not conceptualize the gender-based mimicry. In this respect Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan's observation is highly relevant

[U]nlike Bhabha's notion of mimicry [...] this form of gendered mimicry functions at the cost of harming one's self. The process of transforming the non-*white* female body into a *white* one as a form of gendered postcolonial mimicry is not a "subversive mimesis", rather it entails self-mutilation. Here, mimicry can hardly be seen as a resistance strategy produced from within dominant discourses, but a violence on the body of the one who mimics that is a result of internalized colonial regimes and racism. ( Castro 328)

Ifemelu is conscious and critical while adopting the white norm of American beauty, at the same time she knows that it will make her professional and highly competent in the job market. Being asked by her American white boyfriend, Curt "Why do you have to do this?"(151), Ifemelu replies: "My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best" (151). It is clear here that we mostly like to equate feminine beauty with whiteness. Ifemelu is probably deprived of white norms of beauty as she had black skin and curly short hair on her head. Ingrid Banks has brilliantly commented

What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blond), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women's hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. [...] Even if hair is only one of many markers of femininity, or lack thereof, it is definitely one of the most powerful. (Banks 93)

## Conclusion

Ifemelu continues practicing her mimic experience in America when she normalizes female sexual pleasure and negotiates her sexual urge simultaneously with Rob and Obinze. Ifemelu performs, to quote Foucault "nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality ..." (*The history of sexuality* 5). The blogging is also a part of her mimic identity. As Ifemelu experiences a typical racial discrimination in America, she ponders over blogging, a sense of liberty of whatever she desires to speak about race and feminine sensibility. Adichie's blogging in the text comes in formally having an entitlement in bold mostly at the end of a chapter. When the interviewer from the magazine *Ebony* charges her blogging as a "literary cheat", she replied: "I haven't thought of it that way [...] But yes, ['a cheat']. I think that's a fair characterization" (Brooke Obie, *Ebony*).

In Americanah, Adichie has succeeded in depicting the inherent inequality in American society and a general consciousness regarding race, gender and feminism. When Ifemelu decides to return to Nigeria from America, her aunty Uju can't find any explanation for Ifemelu's such decision. Aunty Uju remarks: "You are closing your blog and selling your condo to go back to Lagos and work for a magazine that doesn't pay that well" (15). Not only aunt Uju but also to everyone this is an absurd decision except her

native friend Ranyinudo who says: “Lagos is now full of American returnees, so you better come back and join them” (15). This is the true picture of any postcolonial situation. This can be best summed up in the following passage

The postcolonial is a field in which everything is contested, everything is contestable, from one's reading of a text to one's personal, cultural, racial, national standpoint, perspective and history ... that contestation will nevertheless remain sterile unless it begins and continues on the basis of a certain openness, a ... thirsty openness... (Punter 10).

To sum up, I must again quote Homi Bhabha to answer to the situation of Ifemelu and her mimic experience in America

Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance and poses an imminent threat to both “normalized knowledge” and disciplinary powers. The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in “normalizing” the colonial state or subject, the dream of post- Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms. (Bhabha 86)

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