

Mimicry in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

Mrs.P.Madhumitha,
Assistant Professor & Part Time-Research Scholar,Ph.No:

Dr.A.Padma Priya,
Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor,
The Standard Fireworks Rajarathnam College for Women,Sivakasi.

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to analyze the interplay of the concept of Homi Bhabha's mimicry in selected novels such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. The characters in both *White Teeth* and *Americanah* find themselves in critical situations due to their cultural differences from their motherland and their immigration into the western world. They try to mimic western manners to identify themselves with the culture of the West. The novels show how, during the postcolonial period of transition, the Native Africans, especially Nigerians, were inclined to mimic the culture and manners of the West. The characters in the novel try to mimic western culture, unaware of their subversive potential. Therefore, to

Study the psychology of these characters and their situations in such contexts; I have done this in-depth study.

Key words: Mimicry, Postcolonial period, transition, culture, psychology

Date of Submission: 05-05-2024

Date of acceptance: 17-05-2024

I. Introduction

Zadie Smith and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are the two most intelligent, incisive, and poised women writers in contemporary literature. Zadie Smith is known for her treatment of race, religion, and cultural identity, and in particular for the clever humor and concise dialogues of her peculiar characters in her works. On the other hand, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a reformist-feminist, whose works revolve around race, racism, identity, oppression, love, tradition, and so on.

White Teeth, a novel published in the year 2000 set in London by Zadie Smith, the migrants from many countries came to Britain, because of the shortage of people in the service industry during the war and ended up in the field. However, the former roles of the master and the servant were applied again, and the immigrants brought their culture and beliefs, which created racial tension in London. Due to the colonized migrating to Britain, they became affected by each other's presence. In the novel, Smith portrays three ethnically diverse families. Through her narrative, Smith reveals what it is like to grow up and live in multicultural London.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* tells the story of Ifemelu and was published in 2013. This novel won her the U.S. National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. Adichie is a prominent writer who effectively expresses cultural clashes, hybridity, disillusionment, nostalgia, mimicking tendencies, and so on in her works. The protagonist, Ifemelu, immigrates from Lagos, Nigeria, to the U.S. to attend university, and her life in both countries and her love story are traced in this novel. Adichie has defined *Americanah* as describing those who have been to the US and return with American affectations, how they pretend not to understand their mother

tongues, how they dress to eat Nigerian food, and how to make constant reference to their life in America in her interview.

Thus, the study set out to examine the most obvious effect of cultural legacy in the novels of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Adichie's *Americanah* using the concept of Homi Bhabha's Mimicry.

II. Methodology

In this study, I prefer to analyze the effects of colonialism in the post-colonial period as immigrants, their psyches, and their lives, which are in a state of flux. And further proceed to study the various factors, such as socio-political, economic, and other relevant factors, that have made the characters in the novels adapt to the new immigrant environment brought about by the new social order.

Therefore, to analyze these factors, Homi K. Bhabha's conception of "mimicry" is used.

III. Literature Review

Zadie Smith's debut novel, *White Teeth*, centers on multicultural Britain's relationship with immigrants from the Commonwealth. When the book was published in the year 2000, *The New York Times* on April 30, 2000, reviewed this novel, as "satirical, multigenerational family saga set during the waning of the colonial British Empire," and this novel established its author as a prodigy of the novel form. The critic, James Wood termed this genre of novel, "hysterical realism," as this novel shares a bonhomie, punning, lively, serenity of spirit.

On the other hand, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is considered one of the prominent writers of Third Generation Nigerian writers. In an article entitled "A Postcolonial Look at African Literature: A Case Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Work," the author Linda Yohannes, portrays how Adichie takes nationalistic stances in her feelings about the colonial past of Africa and Nigeria in particular. And Adichie's fiction reflects that she has a very keen eye for resisting the historicizing of Africa by westerners

The researcher Katie Alexander, in her article, "Lived Experiences of Male and Female Hybridity within Chimamanda Adichie's Diaspora", investigates a different dimension of Adichie's work. In the research article, "Fictional Representations of Contemporary Diasporas: The Case of the Invisible Diasporic Women of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", the authors Claudio Braga and Glauca R. Goncalves, foreground the uncanny of Nigerian communities living in the United States under Diaspora theory. These studies focus on the fictional characters visible in Adichie's *Americanah*.

IV. Discussions

Due to the assimilation of people from two or more cultural backgrounds to the interface, it tends to have positive and negative effects on people from different cultural communities. As contemporary writers, both Zadie Smith and Adichie effectively create awareness regarding the current issues of life, culture, and so on in the changing socio-cultural landscape through their works.

Zadie Smith's maiden novel is *White Teeth*, which focuses on the three culturally mixed families living in present-day London. The novel opens with Archie Jones, an Englishman, war veteran who experiences dismay in his life. His meager salary in a paper folding company and dissatisfied marriage life make him feel more disappointed and like an immigrant in his own country. After his suicidal attempt at the beginning of the first chapter, the chapter ends with his second marriage to Clara Bowden.

Clara Bowden was born to highly religious Jamaican parents. Clara is a black immigrant who lives in London. To free herself from her devout Jamaican mother, Clara agrees to marry Archie Jones. She even preferred to be addressed as English rather than Jamaican. The people of Jamaica who immigrated are frustrated by racial discrimination in London. So they don't prefer to get along with or marry English people. This is the reason, Clara's mother, Hortense Bowden, disagrees with Clara and Archie's marriage.

Clara prefers to break away from her life of veneration and mimic western culture. Clara indulges in drug consumption, which is one of the daily routines in western culture, even after her marriage. Then Clara gives birth to a daughter named Irie Jones, who resembles her black Jamaican mother.

Irie Jones is a hopeless young woman who feels exasperated by her own racial identity. In her attempt to mimic western culture, Irie tries to straighten her hair to meet white people. Even though she is downhearted, she is quite intelligent and bold, and she desires to seek out her own place in the world. At one point, Irie admits her big size, dark skin, buck teeth, glasses, and braces and aspires to create her identity as an English girl rather than a Jamaican.

According to the suggestion of Marcus Chalfen, a white man, Irie decides to become a dentist. However, because she lives with her grandmother and is interested in her own family history, she has a special instinctive aptitude for western culture. The Chalfen family engrossed Irie, as she felt "the Chalfens were more English than the English" (p. 328).

The Chalfen, a white upper class family, produces a sturdy impression on immigrants as they express themselves as liberal, cultured, and highly educated people in their westernized culture. Marcus Chalfen, a white Oxbridge (to mention Oxford and Cambridge) scientist, and his wife Joyce Chalfen, an eulogised botanist and writer, are in contrast to each other in their views and opinions. Marcus foments people, especially

immigrants, to follow his own culture and its ideology, whereas Joyce is beguiled by people of different ethnicities and cultures.

Then the novel focuses on Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal's family, who immigrated during the war and are currently living in London. Being a Muslim immigrant, Samad Iqbal, a World War II veteran, finds it strenuous to get employment and live in a multicultural London. He gets employment only as a waiter in his cousin's restaurant, which he feels proud of. On the other hand, his sons feel ashamed of their father's job and their position as a lower working class family in London. They decide to reconstruct their identity.

Samad Iqbal struggles to hold on to his Bangladeshi heritage, religious beliefs, culture and his role in western society throughout the novel. However, he is also attracted towards the western culture to some extent, which is evident in his affair with his children's white teacher Poppy and he loses his moral values. In order to keep his twin sons away from the corruption of western society, Samad sends his elder twin son Magid to Bangladesh to preserve his cultural ideology and beliefs.

In opposition to his father Samad Iqbal, Magid becomes an atheist and a scientist. He and his brother assimilate more to western culture. It is exposed as Fernandez's says (2009:145) "They (Second generation) are not trying to fit into a culture but rather to find their own space by drawing on the culture they have brought up in and, to some extent, either appropriating or rejecting the culture of their parents. Conflicts between first and second generation immigrants characterize the novel".

Magid deceives his father and attends the Harvest Festival in London. When he confronts his father, he expresses his desire to justify his participation in the festival by saying that it is a tradition. Magid wants to mimic western culture rather than his own, as expressed in the following lines of the novel,

"Magid really wanted to be in some other family. He wanted to own cats, and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine; he wanted to have a trellis of flowers growing up one side of the house instead of the ever-growing pile of other people's rubbish... he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter". (*White Teeth*: 198). This shows how the immigrants wish to mimic the western culture in their host land to find their identity expressed in the novel, "*White Teeth*."

Americanah

Adichie's novel, *Americanah* centres on the protagonist Ifemelu and her childhood lover Obinze and their love story. Ifemelu immigrated to America to study at a university. This novel clearly shows how migration affects the bonds of love, how it changes their viewpoint of culture, personality, and how it debases and elevates them. Ifemelu and Obinze loved each other when they lived in the southern part of Nigeria. Unfortunately, Ifemelu migrates to study in the US through her scholarship.

In the novel, the story of the protagonist unfolds in a flash-back and flash-forward manner, which makes the reader understand the uncovered details of postcolonial society.

Ifemelu is a blogger who writes an anonymous blog under the name "Raceteenth," through which she elucidates the thinking process of Nigerians in America or vice versa. And she deals with distinctive topics thrown into her blog to be hit with "likes" and "comments".

After the completion of 13 years of her life in the US, she decides to return to her hometown, Lagos, in Nigeria. After she reaches her hometown, her friends name her "Americanah". This title emphasizes her changed Americanized behavior, her American accent in English, and her attitude towards her country. These attributes are developed by Nigerian immigrants when they return from western countries. The immigrants differentiate themselves from the natives and try to mimic western culture.

In the novel, Ginika, Ifemelu's high school friend, expresses her desire to follow and wishes to be a part of American culture. She distributes her traditional fashion dresses to her friends even before her visit to America. Even she pretends as if she can't understand her native Yoruba language and has forgotten the accent of Yoruba. This behavior and attitude of Ginika show that she pretends and tries to mimic western culture. After she returns, she tells stories of America, which are listened to with wonder and awe by her other friends. She even tries to make our protagonist, Ifemelu, understand certain things about American society.

The native Nigerian people show an inclination towards western culture and demand respect like the whites. Many Nigerians dream of obtaining citizenship in the US or European countries. Obinze, the childhood boyfriend of Ifemelu, tells Ifemelu, "We'll go to America when we graduate and raise our fine children" (2014:94). It clearly expresses that the natives are captivated by and aspire to follow western culture.

In the beginning, Ifemelu decides not to mimic western fashion like her other fellow migrants do. Even after so many years, she resists the urge to mimic the fashion of white folk and keeps her hair the way it is. However, she fails to find a job even after moving from door to door, which makes her take the wrong decision. She forgot her cultural values and dignity and went on to offer herself to the person for a meagre amount of money. Thus, "he had not forced her. She had come here on her own" (2014:154).

Aunt Uju, in this novel, comes to the US with her son, Dike, to get a better opportunity and settle down. Through this character, Adichie narrates the problems faced by immigrants in the US from any once colonized country. She shares her experiences with Ifemelu, saying that once in the public library, she had forgotten to bring out the unreturned book from her handbag, and the guard mentioned, "You people never do anything right" (2014:183). Even though Aunt Uju is a doctor, she has firsthand experience of the racial difference in western countries.

The situation leads her to ultimately mimic the ideology and manners of the whites to get accepted in the western land. Although she remains conscious of her attitude, which clings to her roots in Nigeria, she hides it and tries to reflect the manners of white people. She starts to speak English with an American accent, even at home with her son, Dike. She enrolled her son Dike in an English-medium school and raised him with western culture. It is apparent that she intentionally mimics western culture to a great extent.

Through the female characters like Aunt Uju, Ifemelu, and Ginika in the novel, Adichie shows the struggle of the immigrants to find their identity. And they realize that though they are unwilling at heart to mimic and constantly feel about their cultural origin, they compel themselves to mimic western manners to live secure lives as migrants. However, this disparity leads Dike to believe that he is inferior.

Therefore, in their journey to mimic the west, there is always psychological pressure from the Nigerian immigrants on the part of the once colonized countries.

V. Conclusion

Both *White Teeth* and *Americanah* show that people who come to western countries as immigrants aspire to mimic and wish to identify themselves with the westerners amidst the race and ethnic disparity. Even though those who mimic western culture get a disturbing view both in the eyes of the natives and westerners as well, the novels end with a ray of hope for a peaceful, happy multicultural world.

References

- [1]. Amirthavalli, V., and L. Amutha. "RACE AND ETHNIC DISPARITY AND IMPACT OF WESTERN CULTURE IN ZADIE SMITH'S WHITE TEETH." *EPR International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)*: 342.
- [2]. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Americanah'. "Think India Journal 22.3 (2019): 1519-1536.
- [3]. Krolewski, Sara. "White Teeth" Litcharts. Litcharts LLC, 24 Oct 2019. Web. 30 Nov 2022.
- [4]. Lindh, Anna. "Split Identities, Hybridity and mimicry within the characters in White Teeth." (2007).
- [5]. McMann, Mindi. "British black box: a return to race and science in Zadie Smith's White Teeth." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 58.3 (2012): 616-636.
- [6]. Saikia, Giteemoni. "Mimicry in Postcolonial Nigerian literature with special reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Americanah'." *Think India Journal* 22.3 (2019): 1519-1536.
- [7]. Wallace, C. R. (2012). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the Paradoxes of Postcolonial Redemption. *Christianity & Literature*, 61(3), 465-483.
- [8]. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014833311206100311>