

Immigration, Inferiority Complex and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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Abstract This paper puts flesh on the bones of questions concerning identity deformation of Nigerian immigrants in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Adichie tries to understand the drastic effects of immigration on those who are living on the crossroads of cultures. Indeed, African contemporary literature is preoccupied with immigration and identity that are among the most important formative experiences of our era. Therefore, using Adichie's short stories as a guide and a focal point, the paper attempts to analyze and examine the cultural mixture that shapes the identity of postcolonial African immigrants in the USA. The study attempts also to offer an inside insight into the complex and often sad reality of modern-day Nigerian immigrants, and how they are transformed into fragmented hybrid individuals torn between two worlds in their struggle for belongingness. Frantz Fanon's theory of inferiority complex, Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry, Stuart Hall's cultural theories and others are quite significant to show how postcolonial immigrant subjects define themselves according to the American cultural values giving way to a hybrid form of identity through a process of mimicry and self-alienation and inferiorization. The paper concludes that immigration causes characters' metamorphosis and depersonalization. It is like an initiation into a limbo territory where immigrants are adrift.

Keywords Immigration; identity; complex of inferiority; hybridity; mimicry

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Introduction

The rate of immigration from African countries to America has increased significantly during the last century. Mostly, these people leave their countries seeking better life conditions or escaping wars and turmoil. Thus, in this study, our focus is on the impact of displacement on the lives of those African immigrants who have left their countries for better living conditions and now are entangled in the hybridization of diasporic identity.

Among the variety of African immigrants, many Nigerians have left their countries to other parts of the world for numerous reasons notably the quest for better education, commerce, political asylum and other socio-economic factors. Indeed, many Nigerians believe that the European or North American countries are the most ideal places of the earth to live in (Oroskhan & Zohdi 302-03). The French author, Laurent Gaudé, describes immigration fantasies in his novel *El Dorado* (2006). He states that Africans, similar to the Spanish Conquistadors, believe once they reach the Western lands, they will make wealth easily and realize their dreams as if they are in the mythical Latin city of *El Dorado* which is full of gold beyond imagination.

The “African Dream” thus leads people to construct this fantasy that life in a western country will be easier and filled with opportunity. Nearly always, such high expectations are never met and often a new set of problems becomes a reality for the migrants. Moreover, Hollywood films, the internet, television and popular culture have enhanced these perceptions encouraging immigrant to engage in a fruitless trek. Also, those Africans who have travelled to Western countries return home with a misleading impression of the foreign countries. They confirm the impression that there are better schools, abundance of good food and better housing. Undoubtedly, the social and material conditions of life in more developed countries are better than some African countries like Nigeria (Oroskhan & Zohdi 303). However, they should notably deal with external problems such as unemployment and unhomeliness but also should cope with some inner problems like the syndromes of identity deformation.

Other African authors like Laila Laalami in her novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) also attempts to capture the Moroccans journey of clandestine immigration in their quest of a new identity which is essentially located in the promised land beyond the border, and to wear that particular identity. Likewise, Boualem Sansal, the Franco-Algerian novelist, in his novel *Harraga* (2007) presents immigrants burning their identity papers to seek asylum in Europe. The term ‘*Harrga*’

means ‘to burn,’ Algerian immigrants thus go on an existential journey to Europe without an identity trying to find meaning for their lives. However, the real image of these African immigrants living abroad is rarely examined vividly in literature. It is in recent fiction that there has been some attempt to explore the negative side of this ever beautiful image.

Therefore, in the selected short stories, “The Thing Around Your Neck,” “The Arrangers of Marriage,” and “Imitation,” Adichie attempts to broaden our understanding of Nigerian immigrants identity formation and deformation. The stories present the nebulous hybrid nature of diasporic identity. Her stories are a vibrant testimony of immigrants’ lives. She tries to put flesh on the bones of questions regarding postcolonial immigrant subjects developing an inferiority complex which leads them to define themselves according to the American cultural values giving way to a hybrid form of identity through a process of mimicry and self-alienation.

Therefore, new identity formations found their genesis during these cultural encounters. Immigration is indeed one of the most formative experiences of our century that shape identity. Both immigration and identity are regarded to be the chief preoccupation of most African writers. The immigrant experience is widespread, and it requires understanding as people struggle to maintain their sense of themselves and their values while adapting to new cultural environments.

Theoretical Background

“Identity is one of the false friends. We all think we know what the word means and go on trusting it, even when it is slyly starting to say the opposite” (Maalouf 09).

We shall use Adichie’s short stories as a focal point and guide to understand the formation of immigrants’ identity and the hybridization process on many levels. Identity is indeed a nebulous elastic term as Amin Maalouf puts in the epigraph above that deserves academic investigations.

Adichie’s characters are torn between two cultures and belongings without any stable base for their identity. Consequently, it is shown how this cultural amalgamation has caused a hybrid identity. Indeed, over the past few decades and with the invasion of social and psychological theories and the domination of the so-called post-colonial criticism, there emerge many theories in the study of man’s nebulous complex identity (Oroskhan & Zohdi 300). Among these notions one may refer to Homi Bhabha’s mimicry, hybridity and Fanon’s inferiority complex. Therefore, we shall use these concepts to analyze the post-colonial phenomenon of immigration. It goes without saying that there is much to be learned from the examination of immigration, culture and identity within literature itself.

First, with the rising tide of the migratory movements in a globalized era, Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born British cultural theorist, argues that the post-modern immigrant has no fixed or stable identity since identity has become a “moveable feast” made of many components in a constant formation and transformation in relation to the ways we are portrayed, perceived and addressed in different cultural systems (Hall, *Minimal Selves* 46). As an immigrant, Hall sees identity as a socio-cultural product not a biological one.

Theoretically speaking, immigrants live on the crossroads of cultures torn between whether being assimilated and accepted in their host country or preserving their origin culture. Once they reach the United States, they exist in what Homi K. Bhabha, the Indian post-colonial theorist, calls ‘Third Space.’ That is to say, the term ‘hybridity’ has been most recently associated with the work of Bhabha, whose analysis of colonizer/colonized relations stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the “Third Space of enunciation” (*The Location of Culture* 56). Further, Homi Bhabha brings the term hybridity and links it to the so-called “Third Space” where the one lives between two spaces and two different cultures which bring a person a merged identity. For him “The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is “The third Space” which enables other positions to emerge” (“The Third Space” 212).

One of the most disputable terms in postcolonial context is hybridity which refers to the cultural exchange. According to Peter Barry, hybridity is “the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture” (198). By means hybridity stands in a situation where the one is caught between two different cultures, when the one leaves his/her native language, costumes, religion and goes to another. This can be applied to some African immigrants as we shall see who are culturally polyvalent.

The concept of hybridity is fundamentally associated with the emergence of post-colonial discourse and its critiques of cultural imperialism. It is characterized by the study of the effects of mixture (hybridity) upon identity and culture. The principal theorists of hybridity are Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy, whose works respond to the multi-cultural awareness that emerged in the early 1990s.

Besides, mimicry is always present in the discourse of displacement and immigration. It has been always a crucial theme for many theorists and thinkers who view this concept as a fully imitation of others in various aspects. From a

postcolonial perspective, Ashcroft et al states, “mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of behaviour of the colonised” (155). By means the colonial discourse is the responsible for the imitation of the colonized to the colonizer, when the colonized wants to be exactly like the colonizer by adopting his cultural institutions, values, habits and assumptions; the result would be extremely “blurred copy” as the so-called mimicry. This can be applied also to African immigrants who tear their souls apart, change their names, language and so on in order to be accepted in the host country. Immigrants believe that the Western culture is superior, that is why they wear the western mask at the first encounter with the host culture, it is as if they are using camouflage technique as Lacan puts it:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” 125).

Furthermore, in colonial and post-colonial contexts, mimicry is most commonly seen when members of a colonized society (say, Indians or Africans) imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonizers (say, the British or the French). In the context of immigration, mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Presumably, while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one’s own cultural identity, though in some cases immigrants are left so confused by their cultural encounter with a dominant foreign culture that there may not be a clear pre-existing identity to suppress (Singh).

In addition to that, in 1952, Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks*, which offers a potent philosophical, psychological, literary and political analysis of the deep effects of racism and colonialism on the experiences, lives, minds and relationships of black people and people of color. In his book, Fanon uses his personal experience of Caribbean immigrants in France to show how the relationship between colonized and colonizer is normalized as psychology, resulting in emotional damage to both (Custódio).

Perhaps most importantly, Fanon’s opening gambit introduces the central concept that of the “zone of non-being” (02) The zone of non-being is the “hell” (Ibid), as Fanon puts it; it describes the psycho-existential dilemma the African

suffers from. In short, Fanon reflects on why he chooses to write *Black Skin, White Masks*. He argues we must ask what “the black man” wants (01). Fanon intends to comprehend the relationship between white and black people, and argues that both groups are trapped within their own racial identities. He argues that psychoanalysis is a useful tool for understanding the black experience, and that, through analysis, it is possible to “destroy” the enormous psychological complex that has developed as a result of colonialism (Seresin). All in all, a Fanonian approach is suitable to understand the inferiority complex of modern-day Nigerian immigrants.

“The Thing Around Your Neck”

Adichie first narrates in “The Thing Around Your Neck” the challenges that Akunna, a young lady, faces once she wins the visa lottery. The story portrays how the young lady is excited to live in the land of plenty opportunities, they told her: “right after you won the American visa lottery... In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don’t buy a gun like those Americans” (115). Later, she is depicted being completely alone, aching but unable to tell her family what is happening to her. Adichie paints a sad picture of Nigerian female immigrants in the Eldorado. While Akunna tries to embrace her Igbo origin and traditions, her uncle forces her to adopt the westernized ways of life as her only option. But once again, the American Dream becomes a hurtful disappointment when she discovers that America is very different from her naïve view (Pereira 53).

The African dream gradually falls apart and Akunna starts feeling something hanging around her neck. Culture shock and the failure of getting integrated into the American society, the feeling of being the *Other* is choking her: “At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep” (119).

The symbolism of ‘The Thing Around Your Neck,’ signifies the battles faced by women to find a sense of belonging and an identity. Adichie is symbolizing the burden African women face when migrating to western nations. It also symbolizes what Bhabha call “unhomeliness.” In his important essay insightfully entitled “The World and the Home” Homi Bhabha claims that “in the House of Fiction you can hear, today, the deep stirring “unhomely” (141). Fiction, for the most part, forms a compelling ground that sensitizes us to the melancholy voices and moving complaints of unhomely selves. It goes without saying, unhomeliness is an admittedly somewhat different from homelessness. The latter, one may say, has to do with the point of not owning a home to shelter you, whereas the first is not to sense at home despite the fact that in the lived reality you are at home (Gouffi & Kaid 555). In a

similar vein, Lois Tyson confirms that “being ‘unhomed’ is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak” (421). Bhabha goes further to argue: “to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the unhomely be easily accommodated familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres” (141). Unhomeliness mark is starkly evident; an agony that pushes the unhomely immigrant to alienation, Akunna’s feeling of being choked is caused by the failure to achieve a sense of belonging with her new American home. First, she first felt happy in the house of her uncle because they share the same culture, it sounds like home. But, the feeling of unhomeliness is worsened as she is sexually abused inside the same home. She left the home directly after that incident. Immigration is indeed a difficult experience for a young lady, identity and spaces in the story are deformed in the context of immigration. She realises that this man who is supposed to be her uncle is not offering her a home for free; she says “America was give-and-take” (116). Akunna adds:

You laughed with your uncle and you felt at home in his house; his wife called you *nwanne*, sister, and his two school-age children called you Aunty. They spoke Igbo and ate *garri* for lunch and it was like home. Until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with old boxes and cartons and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning... You locked yourself in the bathroom until he went back upstairs, and the next morning, you left... (Ibid).

Concerning racial hybridity, it is portrayed when Akunna gets to know a man in the restaurant who she believes to be different. He is white American, and his culture is different from hers, but they could start a relationship. But this relation does not last long despite the struggle, she says: “You knew by people’s reactions that you two were abnormal” (125). One may see that Americanness is about whiteness, as it is the racist assumption of a shared white experience and supremacy. Hybrid relations between white Americans and black foreigners are perceived as something peculiar menacing the whiteness of America. Yet, this mixed race relationship is the only way that gives Akunna a feeling of belonging, it is only through a hybrid interracial encounter that “the thing that wrapped itself around [her] neck, that nearly choked [her] before [she] fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go” (Ibid).

Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* theorizes interracial sexuality, sexual desire, and the effects on racial identity. Fanon’s theorizations return to one and the same

theme: interracial desire as a form of self-destruction in the desire to be white or to elevate one's social, political, and cultural status in proximity to whiteness. In that sense, all depictions of interracial sexuality (exclusively heterosexual) are for Fanon fundamentally pathological. The black woman who desires a white man suffers under the delusion that his body is a bridge to wealth and access. Mayotte Capécia's novel *I Am a Martinican Woman* (1948) guides Fanon's analysis and he takes her book to be exemplary of the black woman's psyche and of the limits of interracial desire (Drabinski "Frantz Fanon"). In the same vein, Akunna interracial relationship could be a bridge to get fully assimilated within the host country, but alas the society in the story perceived this relationship as something menacing and strange. In short, under American eyes, Akunna's interracial relationship is seen as a deformity.

"The Arrangers of Marriage"

The second selected short story "The Arrangers of Marriage" tells a story of Chinaza, a newly wedded young wife, who finds that her arranged marriage to a Nigerian medical student in America is not as she had dreamt. Her hopes begin to fall apart and dreams to wither away.

Chinaza, the protagonist, talks of her Aunt Ada who compares the fact of finding "ezigbo di! A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" (171). This powerful comparison, especially the choice of the word "lottery," reveals the state of poverty of the place in which the speaker lives and the people's expectations to migrate to America to improve their standards of living.

Chinaza's husband, the main character Dave (Ofodile) epitomizes the deformed hybrid African who insists on penetrating the American society and American culture by sacrificing everything and abandoning his own culture. He believes that Americans are superior in everything, his complex of inferiority leads to the formation of a hybrid identity. He believes that the only way to fit in America is to "talk like Americans, eat like them, drink like them, use their words and erase any cultural differences" (172). Adichie presents characters changing their names altogether. Ofodile changes his name into Dave Bell and his wife's name from Chinaza into Agatha Bell to look more American, or as he says, "to be as mainstream as possible [and] not left by the roadside" (Ibid). Adichie thus presents hybrid deformed identities as something unavoidable. Dave forces Chinaza to go by her English name, Agatha, though she does not like it, "my English name is just something on my birth certificate. I have been Chinaza Okafor my whole life" (172).

This brings to mind our Algerian immigrants, a lot of them want to look more French or European rejecting their original names. *Abdelkader* turns into

Kader, *Zine el-dine* into *Zizou*, *Fatima* into *Fati* and so forth. Changing one's name is deformation par-excellence, a name is cultural marker, it carries culture and identity. James Ngugi, the Kenyan novelist, changed his name into Ngugi Wa Thiong'o which is purely African, he advocates the decolonization of the mind. For him, carrying the names that were imposed by the colonizer is like perpetuating colonialism. In the same line, post-colonial immigrants are portrayed as deformed and rootless characters, they are in Stuart Hall words the last colonials (*Familiar Stranger* 03), dark strangers and travellers in unfamiliar territories (153). Maria Gripe puts it as follows:

Preferably you should have the right to be nameless until you find your own name. Names are not something that should be given out light-handedly. A name can be too light, but also too heavy for a person to carry. And it will always be a shackle. It can be dangerous temptation or it can create self-contempt. Your own name can turn into a myth which you fall victim of. It can split your character and determine your fate. (Benedicta 280)

From a post-colonial perspective, Adichie's focus on this matter suggests that names can be a heavy burden for people; this is due to the fact that a name is a vital part of one's identity; because it conveys enormous information about one's gender, culture, and even it gives a sense of uniqueness to one's personal identity. Elsdon Smith defines names as "one of the most permanent of possessions . . . [which] remain when everything else is lost; it is owned by those who possess nothing else" (Heynmann 385). In a matter of fact, names are a core segment of our identity since they carry a conceptual, cultural, and identical weight. Post colonial critics highlight the importance of labels as indicators of identity. In this matter, Albert Memmi declares that "another sign of the colonized's depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ("They are this." "They are all the same")" (129). In fact, Camus' *L'Etranger* (1942) (*Stranger or Outsider*) was strongly criticized because of the unnamed Arab characters. Critics suggest that Camus denies the existence of an Algerian identity through the denial of names to his Arab characters, unlike the European ones who are granted the dignity of names. Indeed, even when the protagonist Meursault kills the Arab, readers would not feel that Meursault has murdered a man; he has done nothing wrong, for it was just an Arab. This sense of inhumanity is reinforced with voicelessness of Arabs who are painted as blocks of stones. Gordon Allport, an American psychologist and theo-

rist, emphasizes the importance of names and proposes that our names are the focal point around which we build a personal identity (Bendicta 275). Therefore, Adichie presents this bestowal of new names as the beginning of metamorphosis and depersonalization. One may call it also as an initiation into a limbo territory where immigrants are adrift.

Furthermore, linguistic hybridity and the deformation of language are clear in the story. Dave forcing his wife to mimic the western ways created a hybrid short story full with untranslated words in *Igbo* language. Adichie africanized and hybridized English language in her story; through her characterization, she expresses the migrant soul with a migrant style by making migrants speak different languages as a result of their hybridity. The result is a strange hodge-podge immigrant language with no linguistic elegance, natural rhythm or oral authenticity. Chinaza language in this context of immigration is a linguistic travesty. Besides, in "The Arrangers of Marriage," the new husband teaches American English to his new wife which he thinks is a sign of civilization:

"Cookies. Americans call [biscuits] cookies." ...

"Yes, but [Consultant] is called Attending here, an Attending Physician."

"*Biko*, don't they have a lift instead?" I asked. ...

"Speak English. There are people behind you," he whispered...

"It's an elevator, not a lift. Americans say elevator." (174-176)

Three languages—British English, American English and *Igbo*—have been used here and they express the reality of a change in modern society in which people speak many languages. The social identity itself begins then to take on a hybrid nature and can create difficulties to non-hybrid readers. The latter may find it difficult to understand a hybrid text in which many languages are mixed with no glossary.

Yet, hybrid readers, such as the *Americanahs*, may enjoy such migrant literatures. Writing about migration literature, Combe has shown that such double belonging to two cultures and speaking two languages are a source of creation from the artist and express at the same time an identity that is schizophrenic and deformed (Kaboré 15). Bhabha quoted from Bakhtin to clarify such hybridity of language and culture that characterizes Adichie's characters:

The...hybrid is not only double-voiced and double-accented...but is also double-langauged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two

individual consciousnesses, two voices, two accents, as there are [doublings of] socio-linguistic, consciousnesses, two epochs...that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance....It is the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms...such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words. (cited in Bhabha, "Culture's In-between" 58)

Again, Chinaza is now on the crossroads of cultures and languages, she is in Bhabha's words in-between, she exists in the Third Space. The presence of the 'double-languedness' in the story helps in the creation and generation of new world views as seen in the quote above. Chinaza is indeed at the initial stage of learning a language, to think in that language. This is the first stage of hybridization. Adichie's immigrant characters thus offer a clear view into the processes of identity formation illuminating Bhabha's notions of hybridity and the third space, they epitomize what happens in-between cultures.

The husband forces her to use some words instead of others, like "cookies" not "biscuits" and "elevator" instead of "lift," he warns her from cooking Nigerian food, instead he encourages her eating pizza. The wife describes her husband complex of inferiority vis-à-vis Nigerian food and culture as follows:

The next day, he came back with a *Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook*, thick as a Bible. "I don't want us to be known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food," he said. I took the cookbook, ran my hand over the cover, over the picture of something that looked like a flower but was probably food. "I know you'll soon master how to cook American food". (179)

In short, the husband believes that mimicry is a necessity, his wife must do this to survive—at least until she has her green card. Ofodile is not interested in hybridity—only in mimicry. And with it, as Bhabha says, he normalizes the 'colonial state' (*The Location of Culture* 123). Ofodile (Dave) does not want to be the Other; other immigrants, who refuse mimicry, are the Others—they are the ones who are inferior. He forces Chinaza into mimicry: she must be Agatha Bell, she must always speak American English. Chinaza says also: "He sounded different when he spoke to Americans: his *r* was over-pronounced and his *t* was under-pronounced. And he smiled, the eager smile of a person who wanted to be liked" (176). Indeed, in a pro-

cess of mimicry, the immigrants' complex of inferiority leads to the emergence of double, deformed and hybrid identities. Fanon questions the origin of immigrants' personality change? What is the source of this new way of being? The fact that the African who adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born, changes his name, his culture and customs is evidence of a dislocation, a separation (14).

Pr Westermann says that the inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly. Their way of doing so, he adds, is frequently naive:

The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (qtd in Fanon 15)

Indeed, Dave is an educated man yet his acts resemble one who has a deep complex of inferiority. Dave is proud and ready to wear the white mask as Fanon puts it; donning white masks over black skins resulting in a duality, and living in a schizophrenic atmosphere. He is like an 'oreo' cake in the American slang that describes this type of personality, white from the inside and black from the outside. Thus, the syndromes of inferiority occur in post-colonial immigrant groups both as a result of conscious moments of cultural suppression, or when the immigrant forces himself to 'assimilate' to new social patterns by destroying and condemning himself.

All in all, one may deduce that for Adichie, cultural hybridity is negative and has no assimilationist sense. Hybridization in Adichie's discourse of immigration means decline through the loss of identity. For her, hybrid identities are a result of globalization. She further clarifies it as the American neighbor talks to Chinaza about being adrift in a postmodern society that has no culture: "It smells really good. The problem with us here is we have no culture, no culture at all." She turned to my new husband, as if she wanted him to agree with her, but he simply smiled" (190).

"Imitation"

"Imitation" is set in Philadelphia and focuses on Nkem, a young married woman with two children. Nkem's husband, Obiora, a rich Nigerian businessman, moved them from Nigeria to the United States as a sign of status, and so that their children

could have American citizenship; however, he does not join them full time and only visits her and their two children two months a year. Nkem learns later through a friend that Obiora has moved his mistress into their home in Nigeria.

In “Imitation,” the wife expects to rise from grass to grace, i.e., from poverty to riches. Nkem, the protagonist

was pregnant when she first came to America with Obiora. (...) [they] live in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia, she told her friends in Lagos on the phone... Her neighbors on Cherrywood Lane, *all white and pale-haired and lean*, came over and introduced themselves, asked if she needed help with anything—getting a driver’s license, a phone, a maintenance person. She did not mind that *her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless to them. She liked them and their lives.* (24: 2009)

Fanon, in his book *Black Skin White Masks*, describes this concept of Americanization or Europeanization of the Black African immigrants who become truly *évolué* and take their place in the metropolis. They are mesmerized by the Western culture, the complex of inferiority is intensified when the African encounters the western culture. The immigrant *évolué* like Nkem, desires not merely to be in the place of the White neighbors but compulsively seeks to look back and down on herself from that position. Nkem’s admiration of her American neighbors lives, their whiteness and supremacy is exactly what Fanon describes in his book. These syndromes of inferiority are the legacy of colonialism and the direct results of living under the shadows of imperialism. Fanon anatomizes the colonial and post-colonial immigrant:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (09: 1986)

Besides, Obiora prefers Nkem’s hair long, as “[it] is more graceful on a Big Man’s wife” (40). He wants their children to be Americanized, so he enrolls them in schools in the U.S. and is proud of their “big-big” English, and that they are “Americanah” now acting like their American peers (38). Fanon again examines language, he argues that speaking a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Negro or the

black, who wants to be white, will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is (25). In the same line, Obiora believes that his children's mastery of American English is a sign of high social status. Ngugi also highlighted the issue of language adopted by immigrants as a self-imposed amnesia:

Immigrants into new societies, especially those who are escaping their own histories, have been known to consciously and deliberately refuse to teach their children their own language, the language of the country and history from which they are in flight, so as to facilitate their assimilation into the country and culture of adoption. Erasure of memory is the condition of such assimilation—whether forced, induced, or willing—and the new language becomes a screen against the past that they do not want their children to face. (62)

Obiora is proud of his children growing up in hybridity, in a cultural mix between Nigerian and American, and equally wants his wife to form a hybrid identity. However, when it comes to his own life Obiora stays in Nigeria; a hybrid identity in America does not gain the same level of success and respect as mimicry does in Nigeria.

Fanon describes immigrants like Obiora, who while he is in Nigeria, is regarded as a demigod. Many immigrants, after staying of varying length in metropolis, go home to be deified. The most eloquent form of ambivalence is adopted toward them by the native, the one- who-never-crawled-out-of-his-hole, the *bitaco*. The African immigrant who has lived in the West for a length of time returns radically changed. To express it in genetic terms, his phenotype undergoes a definitive, an absolute mutation (10). In a word, when these African immigrants return to their homeland they are treated as superior, which encourages them to act in a haughty manner.

Furthermore, Nkem's American house is a hybrid, border and marginal space. A hybrid space since it is a house in a modern western context, that of America, but it accommodates African antiques as well Nigerian and American lifestyles exemplified by Nkem and her Nigerian maid on the one hand, and the Obiora children on the other one (Sharobeem 31). In addition to that, although she feels homesick, she cannot go back to Nigeria. She has to preserve her social position, "America has grown on her, snaked its roots under her skin" (37). Thus, she lives on the border; she neither belongs to America nor to Nigeria. She is a tormented immigrant living in a hybrid, deformed, marginal, border space.

Again, Adichie highlights the deformation of identity in relation to hair.

Nkem is informed of Obiora's infidelity as one of her American neighbors told her. She describes the girl in this way: "Her hair is short and curly—you know, those small tight curls" (22). After this, Nkem decides to cut her hair short just like her husband's mistress, but Obiora does not like it and asks her to let it grow back "You should grow it back. Long hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife" (40). The hair incident indeed reveals the two-dimensional identity and personality split of Obiora. It is clear that Obiora behaves differently in America and Nigeria. When he is in Nigeria, he tries to look American and spends his time with a mistress whose hair is short and curly *à la Americana*. However, while he is in America, he wants his wife with a long hair. In short, Obiora's identity is ruined with mimicry and hybridity, he sounds schizophrenic.

Similarly to Nkem in "Imitation," Chinaza in "The Arrangers of Marriage" learns that Nia, their Afro-American neighbor, and Ofodile had sex before Chinaza married him; a clear indication of his hypocrisy and two-dimensional personality or identity. Ofodile married Chinaza because he wants a virgin wife from Nigeria as a traditional tribal marriage. But in America, he is different, he does not care about virginity, he is open-minded vis-à-vis sex before marriage. In the discourse of immigration, it is worth noting that hybrid identity and mimicry turn into a malady. A lot of African immigrants' characterization in literature indeed resembles the medical discourse about schizophrenia.

As a matter of fact, there are numerous psychiatric studies that provide tentative frameworks to highlight specific interactions between personality disorders, migration processes, and cultural factors. In other words, they examine the relationship between immigration and culture from a psychopathological perspective. Najjarkakhaki and Ghane for instance offer suggestions on how immigration processes could resemble several 'Personality Disorder' traits, how certain (latent) vulnerabilities could be manifested in a post-migratory context, and how pre-existing personality pathology could be aggravated. Additionally, they offer suggestions on how several cultural dimensions could resemble or mask personality pathology ("The Role of Migration").

In short, the African immigrant's mindset is worthy subject of academic investigation within the realm of literature. The psychology of Adichie's immigrant characters resembles psychiatric discourse of traditional studies like Fanon and new medical discourses as well.

Conclusion

To sum up, displacement and immigration are important formative experiences that

shape the lives of people. Literature is indeed a laboratory in which we can easily explore the impact of these experiences on identity. Indeed, the African fictive landscape and postcolonial thought have been preoccupied by the nebulous nature of identity, unlike Marxists who think that identity is not important.¹

Adichie's selected stories portray the cultural encounters between the African, who believes he is inferior, with the West. The post-colonial African immigrant, through his journey, is always looking for his identity, because for centuries the colonizer devalued and effaced the colonized past, regarding his pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo, or even as a historical void. The stories revealed that in the process of self-alienation and mimicry, hybrid and sometimes deformed identities emerge in the context of immigration.

In short, Adichie looks conservative when it comes to identity; she regards immigration, hybridity and displacement as loss. The intermingling, amalgamation and transformation of identities in the context of immigration are impure. Even if a character, like Akunna, who does not built defensive walls to protect her identity and does not feel threatened by diversity that are epitomized in her interracial relationship, fails at the end. Therefore, Adichie's selected short stories attempt to teach us about the dynamics of this new process of identity formation.

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1 For Marxists, the real struggle is a vertical clash between classes rather than an horizontal one between different allegiances, ethnicities and belongings.

skin-white-masks/

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