



MIMICRY AND THE OTHER: A STUDY OF THE IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE IN THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS AND AMERICANAH

Udita Chakraborty

Department of English

St. Xavier's College (Autonomous) Kolkata, West Bengal, India

uditachakraborty17@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

*Immigration as a phenomenon brings along with itself the complexities of social, political, economic, and demographic changes both in the country being emigrated from and the country being immigrated to. The colonial, as well as the post-colonial era, saw the immigration of people from the colonies and erstwhile colonies to the West, mainly the United Kingdom and the United States in search of better prospects and higher standards of living. For the immigrants, however, the issues of experiencing an identity flux, suffering the trauma of existing peripherally in a foreign country, facing racial segregation and a constant search for acceptance become formidable and often insurmountable difficulties in their struggle for establishing a life of stability. This research article thus seeks to examine the immigration experiences of the characters as presented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Further, it makes a comparative study of the African and Indian immigrant experience using the post-colonial tenet of 'otherness' and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry and therefore aims at delineating the differences while underlining the essential sameness of these experiences.*

Keywords. *immigration, mimicry, otherness, colonialism, post-colonialism*

A crucial aspect of the study of texts which are post-colonial in their theme becomes the exploration of the ideas of the 'other' and of 'mimicry'. The tendency to mimic the white man after realizing the undesirability of their status as the other is especially seen among Asians, Africans, and even Latin Americans who immigrate to the United Kingdom or the United States of America in search of better prospects, albeit a better life. Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah* though have written about experiences spatially, culturally and socially differentiated have however succeeded in speaking about them in a way which has curiously united them in their similarities. A comparative study of the African immigrant experience as presented by Adichie in *Americanah* and of the Indian immigrant experience as presented by Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* would evince the apparent differences but also the inherent similarities as the characters in the novels struggle to find themselves in their quest to other lands and in their inevitable homecoming.



The other in post-colonial theory is used to refer to the colonized subject who has been marginalized and “...characterized as the ‘other’ through discourses such as primitivism, and cannibalism as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and the colonized...” (Ashcroft et al. OTHER). Therefore the idea of the other for the colonizer is the colonized subject who is everything that the colonizer is not. Connected therefore to the idea of the ‘other’ is the idea of mimicry. Homi K. Bhabha in his essay *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* purports the idea that the colonizer creates a milieu of colonized people who would resemble the colonizer and make their purposes of domination and subjugation easier. The colonizer intends to make the other more like himself but he does so in a way which still maintains the difference between himself and the other. For Bhabha “...colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite.” (126) This attempt at a mimicry also provides an opportunity for the other to behave more like the colonizer. For the colonized, mimicry becomes an effort at appropriating a part of the power of the colonizer but there remains a persistent gap between what they are and what they desire to be.

In both *Americanah* and *The Inheritance of Loss* the attempts at mimicry after realizing their position as the other in the perception of the white man is seen mainly in the characters of Ifemelu, the Judge- Jemubhai Patel, while in *Obinze* and *Biju* their knowledge of themselves as the other prevent them from committing a blind mimicry of the white man. All of these characters travel to the land of the white man and come back as individuals reformed and redefined by their experiences. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai places Jemubhai Patel in Kalimpong during the Gorkhaland Movement and shows how the Judge though present in the 1980s in India is almost always absent from his immediate reality. Sent to England to study at Cambridge and to become a member of the ICS when India was still a colony, all that Jemubhai gains in his time spent abroad is the awareness of his inferiority as the other. He grew contemptuous of himself and started viewing himself the way the colonizer views his subjects. He internalized their discrimination and became a foreigner to himself.

To Jemubhai everything about himself turned odd and disgusting. His features which differentiated him from the white man- his skin colour, his accent even his smile became a reminder of the revulsion that the white man harboured for him. He started washing himself obsessively to clean himself of his otherness and began hiding behind his clothes and shadows lest he might offend the sensibilities of the white man. The alienation that he faced made him believe that he was afflicted by nothing less than plain “hideousness” (Desai ch.8). He grew distant from his immediate surroundings and Desai remarks that “He retreated into a solitude that grew in weight day by day. The solitude became a habit, the habit became the man, and it crushed him into a shadow.”(ch.8), as he tried to become a non-entity, glossing over life by being as less of a visual disruption to the white man as possible. When Desai says, “He had learned to take refuge in the third person and to keep everyone at bay, to keep even himself away from himself like the Queen.” (ch.18), the chasm that had formed between him and his identity gets delineated. By referring to himself in the third person he had



managed to disassociate from himself completely, having tried hard to wipe out his identity of that of the other.

After returning from England he tries to mimic the colonizer. The contempt which he developed for the people of his country only reflected the alienation he faced in the land of the colonizer. While his identity as the colonized inferior remained an unchangeable truth, his desire for abrogating that identity and to mimic the colonizer to appropriate a part of the colonizer's power became the fiction that he aspired to. He started to impose on those around him a routine discipline which helped him to recreate the sense of authority and sovereignty that had been snatched away from him in his time spent abroad. Empowered by his white education and newfound position as a civil servant he made it a point to impose himself on those Indians who had hitherto declared themselves his superior by virtue of their class. This incipient desire to dominate and dictate indeed stemmed from the crippling awareness that he would never be the white man and that he would forever remain, "almost the same but not quite." (Bhabha 126). To illustrate this Desai writes, "The tight calendar calmed him, as did the constant exertion of his authority. How he relished his power over the classes that had kept his family pinned under their heels for centuries..." (ch.11) Even his treatment of his wife Nimi became an act of perverse revenge against his own otherness. He saw in Nimi that which he hated about himself- the impossibility of ever being white. Therefore when Nimi refused to learn English and by doing so resisted the Judge's efforts at making her anglicized and made a mistake in her speech, the Judge physically abused her, and by doing so tried to beat out of her the disgust that he felt for his race. In fact, the Judge subjected Gyan, his granddaughter's tutor to a similar humiliation that he had experienced at Cambridge to recreate the scene which had made him feel helpless as the other, but reenacting which made him gain a sense of kinship with the colonizer. He asked Gyan to recite a poem, just the way he had been asked to during his ICS exam and after Gyan had completed reciting his poem "The judge began to laugh in a cheerless and horrible manner." (Desai ch.18) just the way his examiner had chuckled after he had completed reciting Lochinvar. He chose to reside in Cho Oyu, a bungalow bought from a Scotsman and feasted on the delicacies of the English cuisine, trying to obliterate from his memory his Gujerati origin and palate. He tried to live a life mimicking as closely as possible the life of the white man, but crumbling much like Cho Oyu, under the knowledge and memory of his own lowliness.

Ifemelu, on the other hand, a young Nigerian who moved to America in 1990s to study at Princeton, in Americanah has a different experience in her status as the other. For Nigerians devoid of a choice, migration to the land of the white man is the rite of passage one has to undergo before one is to experience the promise of a life of unquestioned security and prosperity. After moving to America, Ifemelu found herself longing for the real American life- a life full of wealth and stability. Living with her Auntie Uju, "She ached for the lives they showed, lives full of bliss, where all problems had sparkling solutions in shampoos and cars and packaged foods, and in her mind they became the real America, the America she would only see when she moved to school in autumn." (Adichie ch.10)



However unlike the Judge, her education made her aware of the status of black people as the other in America and it also gave her the gumption to voice her views on the complexities of racial segregation in America. Constantly vigilant of the attempts at mimicry by herself and other Nigerians like herself, she eventually reconciled herself to her identity as a Nigerian. Her observation of the people around her made her aware of how Nigerians were only too eager to let go of their otherness to merge seamlessly with the American way of life. Her Aunt Uju she observed, pronounced her name as "...you-joo instead of oo-joo" (Adichie ch.9) and that her friend Ginika had metamorphosed into the average American youth, letting go completely of her Nigerian traits. It surprised Ifemelu to see, "...her (Ginika's) American accented words sailing out of her mouth and (she) was struck by how like her American friends Ginika has become" (Adichie. ch.12) It seemed to her that all races had become one amorphous amalgamation of the universal American identity with each one trying to mimic whiteness to the best of their abilities. At a party Ifemelu noticed how the Japanese, Chinese, Indian and Nigerians were "well-choreographed" (Adichie ch.12) as they "...laughed at the same things and said "Gross!" at the same things;" (Adichie ch.12).

Immediately after reaching America it was required for her to assume the identity of one Ngozi Okonkwo for her to work and sustain herself having to jettison immediately an important part of her identity- her name. Later in her relationship with her white boyfriend Curt, Ifemelu surreptitiously struggled to discern who she truly was. Even though Curt never willingly made her conscious about her otherness Ifemelu wondered whether she wanted to be authentically African-American or that which the white American expected her to be. The only advice she was given before an interview for a job was to "Lose the braids and to straighten your (her) hair." (Adichie Ch.19). Ifemelu continued wearing her hair the way white people expected her, in order to be less of an aberration to the unaccustomed eye of the white man. Later however she would decide to wear her "thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro." (Adichie ch.19) the way it was naturally supposed to be. She grew into her identity as the black woman and even tried to "...convince other black women about the benefits of wearing their hair natural" (Adichie ch.1).

This acceptance of the otherness of her physicality is in sharp contrast to the Judge's repeated efforts at decimating the physical attributes which made him the other. In fact, Ifemelu would also decide not to sound American anymore in order to distinguish herself as the other and to discontinue the mimicry which she deemed necessary for survival in the land of the white man. She had mastered her American accent but she realized that even though she had achieved what she had aspired for and had aced at mimicking the speech of the American, "...her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory had left in its wake a vast, echoing space, because she had taken on for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers. And so she ...resolved to stop faking the American accent." (Adichie Ch.) She returned to Nigeria not because she was expected to, but because she wanted to, empowered by an epiphany about the worthiness of her own culture and country. Unlike the Judge, she did not return with an incapacitating self-loathing and scorn for her country and the people it housed



but with a willingness to find her identity stripped off the pretentiousness and expectations associated with being the other.

The conundrum and disillusion associated with immigrating to another country are also seen in the characters of Biju and Obinze who have identical experiences. Biju the son of the cook, Pannalal, in *The Inheritance of Loss* immigrates to America in search of a life that would save him from the stymieing indigence in India. However, his earliest realizations of his status as the other occurred in India itself. The process of procuring a visa for him became as daunting a task as that of surviving in the United States. The Americans approving the visas assumed the position of the colonizer, refusing to let the colonized a glimpse of their superior existence. They exacted their will on the Indians, subjecting them to a fate-like arbitrariness. Desai writes, “Some officers seemed amiable than others, some scornful, some thorough, some were certain misfortune, turning everyone away.” (Ch.30) Yet to Biju, humiliation was a small price to pay in exchange for chance to build one’s life in the land of the white man, and “...it was a fact accepted by all that Indians were willing to undergo any kind of humiliation to get into the States. You could heap rubbish on their heads and yet they would be begging to come crawling in...” (Desai ch.30).

But once in the States, Biju became aware of the undesirability of his presence. Turned away from one employment prospect to the other, Biju hungered for the green card that would establish him as a citizen of America. He existed in the liminal state between that of being a legitimate citizen of one country and the unaccounted for, unrecognized burden of another country. The sheer necessity of survival forced him to give up bits of all that which made him an Indian. Stripped off his legality he made desperate attempts at asserting his identity in small, unremarkable ways. He began to hunt for places to work at which did not require him to cook beef as a reification of his identity as a Hindu. Yet America with its promise of a life of ceaseless bliss, failed to keep Biju tied to itself and Biju’s return to India becomes an avowal of his preference for the life he left behind. His return to India however was not marked by the celebration of his success in America but by the robbing off of all that he had gained in America. He was parted of his American dollars and even his habiliments until he was simply spared his dignity. He came back to his father physically exposed deeply symbolic of the speciousness of his quest to America. His voyage to the land of the white man made him aware of his identity as the other. Rather than attempting a mimicry of the white man, he tried to cling to his identity of that of an Indian Hindu. He returned to his homeland having gained neither the mannerisms nor the capital that would have marked his proximity to the white man.

Obinze too immigrates to the UK in search of opportunities, but unlike Biju, he was educated and belonged from a middle-class family. Adichie describes how Obinze essentially suffered from “the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness” (ch.29) in Nigeria. People like Obinze were, “...raised well fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real life happened in that somewhere



else...” (ch.29) and it was for this conviction of a better life somewhere else that he risked faking a marriage with a European woman for the papers which he needed to continue staying in the UK long after his visa had expired. The crisis of his identity started when he too like Ifemelu had to become Vincent to work in the UK. His disconcertedness with his identity like Biju’s was two-fold; not only was he black, but he was also illegal and therefore he was the other that needed to be removed. Obinze accepted his deportment from the UK without protestations, as he felt “The last shard of his dignity was like a wrapper slipping off that he was desperate to retie.” (Adichie ch.30). Obinze’s experience in the UK as the other was one that he had expected and one which did not tempt him to attempt a mimicry of the white man. So acute was his awareness of himself as the other who was unwanted and so deep-seated was the resultant humiliation that he returned to Nigeria without any aspirations for building his life anywhere other than his own country. While Obinze eventually built his fortune in Nigeria, Biju probably returned to his life of persistent pecuniary troubles in Kalimpong.

Augustine Uka Nwanyanwu in his essay, Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile, and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* writes, “Migration, involving navigation across socio-spatial thresholds, is also a movement across historical spaces; one leaves the baggage of one (sic) history behind as best one can in order to enter another dimension of history.” (391) and all of the characters initially try their best to jettison their socio-cultural identities to achieve an obsequious amalgamation with the white way of life. Jemubhai Patel, tries to mimic the white man to the best of his abilities but fails because of his realization of its impossibility. Ifemelu succeeds at mimicking the white man and in becoming that which appeals to the white sensibilities but gives up her apparent achievement in favour of her own culture and race. Obinze and Biju become aware of their own awareness but never attempt a mimicry, having understood the falsity of the white way of living. Therefore both in the works of Desai and Adichie the presentation of the immigrant issues of alienation, loss of identity, otherness and attempts at mimicry delineate the essential sameness of these experiences across the colonial and predominantly post-colonial world order.

REFERENCES

1. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. e-book, Alfred A. Knoff, 2013.
2. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. e-book, Penguin Books, 2006.
3. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Taylor and Francis e-library, 2007.



5. Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, vol. 28., 1984, pp. 125-133.
 6. Nwanyanwu, Augustine Uka. "Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Matatu*, vol.49, no. 2, 2017, pp. 386-399.
-