

Doubleness of Identity in Adichie's "Imitation"

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Abstract: *The rate of migration from the third world to America has increased considerably during the last century. Mostly, these people leave their country for a better situation of life in the other country. However, when they arrive in such countries like America, they should not only deal with the external problems such as unemployment and homelessness but also should cope with some inner problems like the doubleness of identity. As a result, they are torn between two cultures without any stable base for their identity. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer, has portrayed the various difficulties situated before the Nigerian emigrants who have emigrated to America. In her short story "Imitation", she has followed the life of a Nigerian couple living in American. She has tried to portray the difficult situations they encounter when they are entangled between two different cultures. Consequently, it is shown how this oscillation between the two cultures has caused the doubleness of identity in the male character of the story.*

Key Words: *Doubleness of Identity, Stuart Hall, Globalization, Diaspora.*

I. Introduction

Over the past few decades and with the invasion of social theories and the domination of the so-called post-colonialism criticism over the people's contexts, there appear many notions in the study of man's identity. Among these notions one may refer to the 'diaspora' and 'globalization' as not only the key thoughts in the interpretation of post-colonial texts, but also, substantially, as a significant concept in the field of cultural studies.

Human world is subject to be interrelated by the circuits of immigration and exchange. With the rise in the number of international immigrations and the extension of the socio/geographical boundaries the new people of the communities face a variety of complex cultural challenges.

Peter Wade in *Cultural Identity: Solution or Problem?*, calls this phenomenon "globalization" (Wade, 1999, pp. 7). Being affected by the advancement of technology, the process of globalization makes the people interact with each other freely and rapidly. But it eradicates local identities from their stems. It makes the "cultures to be 'deterritorialised' as the overlapping of people, property and places become less stable"(Wade, pp. 8). Here the man is supposed to accord his idealistic horizons with those of the host society to build an identity. Therefore, the self, through losing his freedom, makes a new identity. In such a context, one may not expect the appearance of indigenous cultural identities. In turn, with regards to this dislocation, everybody would take refuge in the shadows of new identities; he/she may not care whether these identities are "local, ethnic, racial or national"(Wade, pp. 8).

Tangled in a situation like this, people deal with finding a comprehensive sense of identity and home. In addition to the dominion of the "ideology" over the construction of identity, Stuart Hall asserts that, the looseness of the concept may be a result of "globalization". By uttering globalization, Hall reminds the individuals of the fact that the boundaries of the cultures have been expanded, this process connects different ethics to each other, as he says: "people are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of nation as represented in its national culture" (Hall, 1996, pp. 612). He enhances that "modern nations are all hybrids" (1996, pp. 617). To maintain this hall's view of a definition of identity, the researcher brings James Procter's commenting on Hall: "Hall addresses how globalization disrupts the relatively settled character of traditional cultures and collectivities structured around ideas of nationality, race, class, and gender. The use of the word 'relatively' here is significant. Hall is not arguing that we have moved from a time of stable, unified identities to unstable plural ones but, rather, that identities have become increasingly unsettled" (2004, pp. 109).

Considering the other factor, diaspora is a derogatory term with a loose reference to the immigrants, expatriates, travelers, and the exiles. Based upon its origin, diaspora means "scattering of seeds" (Anthias, 1998, pp. 560). However, as a concept, diaspora has a long history which is initially used to illustrate the dispersal of the Jewish people from their homeland. Thus, the concept "underwent an amazing inflation that peaked in the 1990's, by which time it was being applied to most of the world's people" (Dufoix, 2008, pp. 1). Nowadays,

diaspora is an all-embracing term that signifies those people who are uprooted from their native place through migration, immigration or exile. Therefore, this can be said that diaspora implies a “dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation- states, territories, or countries” (Briziel and Mannur, 2003, pp. 1). When the diasporic subject crosses the geopolitical border, he encounters wide-ranging new experience and reality.

Here once again, Stuart Hall steps into the stage and expresses that the diasporic man "is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature" (Morley et al, pp. 444). It is obviously tangible that what is important for Hall is the domination of the hostage over the construction of the subjects. He adds that "in the light of global power relations, the significance of diasporic identity lies in its force as a symbolic declaration of liberation from the abject position of 'ethnic minority' in 'an oppressive national hegemony" (Ang, pp. 2). He continues that "diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1990, pp. 235).

Arising from this claim, this point is acquired that diasporic identity has a double layer. The first one has a psychological root; and that is the self's deracination from his homeland and his ideals, and the second one is a taking of self's individuality by the domination of power. For the diasporic people, it is an anguished experience to be dispersed from their homelands, whether voluntarily or unwillingly. The doubleness of diasporic identity is, on the one hand, the lack of any stability, and on the other hand it could be the domination of power.

Thus in this study our focus is in the lives of those African migrates who have left their countries for a better situation of living and now are entangled in the doubleness of diasporic identity. Among the variety of African migrates, many Nigerians have left their countries to other parts of the world for reasons as diverse as the quest for better education, commerce, political asylum and other socio – economic factors.

Indeed, many Nigerians consider the European countries or North American countries as the most ideal places of the earth to live on. Moreover, Hollywood films have enhanced these perceptions on which the best sides of overseas countries are shown. Also, those Nigerians who have emigrated from their own country to other countries for some time, comes home with a misleading impression of the overseas 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. However, the real image of these emigrate living abroad is rarely described vividly. It is in recent fiction that there has been some attempt to explore the negative side of this ever beautiful image.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a young voice who has decided to show these negative aspects of living abroad. She is mostly famous for his award-winning novels of *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013). However, more recently her short story collection entitled *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009) has attracted some attention. Thus, in this article, it is tried to investigate one of the short story of this collection entitled "Imitation" from the viewpoint of the doubleness of the identity affected upon the two main characters of this story due to their emigration to the United State.

II. Discussion

A. Hall's Theory of Identity

During the last century, migration has become a worldwide phenomenon. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM) migration can be defined as “the movement of persons who leave their country of origin or the country of habitual residence, to establish themselves either permanently or temporarily in another country” (International Organization for Migration, 2005). There exist numerous causes for people migration. Above the list of these causes is the socio – economic issues like political discontent and the search for economic empowerment “the absence of peace and security, human rights violations and the varying degrees of development of judicial and democratic institutions are all factors affecting international migration” (The UN International Conference on Population and Development,

1994, par. 10.1). Moreover, for the African countries, the environmental factors such as drought, flood and so on should be taken into account as some compelling reasons for migration.

In this case, the African countries which are always doomed to failure to achieve the suitable conditions for allowing their people live freely without any fear of surviving. However, the reality of migration is not always painful only due to difficult situations of migrants at home; it needs careful consideration because it creates a wistful longing for the lost roots, homeland and the identity loss of the migrants when they are in the other country. The migrants are faced with an on-going process of identity loss for they are uprooted from their tradition and local place. The appropriate response to such situations is a search for identity and the self-discovery or self-realization. In this respect, Stuart Hall argues that the process of identity making is “never singular but multiple, constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, 1996, pp. 4).

He points out objectively that by the notion of identity one may bring into being two different sections. The first outcome of the identity is what the essentialists shed light upon. This is the vast complex of costumes and behaviors that people of the same ethnicity share with each other. This definition is a highlight of the "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us as one people"(Hall, 1990, pp. 223). This form of identity is constant and definitely a matter of being. The essentialists remind one of the facts that identity first appeared as primordial. Archetypically, this kind of identity cannot be transformed or problematized and they appear naturally. People of the same race, homogeneously are condemned to share these subjectivities in the same manner.

However, Hall's contribution to the very definition of the identity is that he looks at the formation of identity from the lenses of an anti-essentialist. In this perspective identity deals with the matter of 'becoming'. This identity is not a predetermined concept by which a group of people can share common horizons of expectations. Like any historical event, it undertakes alteration. What arises from Hall's ascription of identity is the objectivity of the term that always takes shape and reshapes in the hands of such discourses as "history, culture, power"(1990, pp. 225). In accordance with this view of Hall toward identity, one would touch the instability of cultural identity. He strictly believes that cultural identity is not a 'universal and transcendental'

definition. "It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return"(1990, pp. 226).

Contradictory with what the essentialists considered as the conceptualization of identity, Hall prefers the notion of identity as a 'sociological subject' which is not independent and self-reliant. For Hall, *In Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (1995), identity is a formation of the subject due to its relationship with 'significant others' (pp. 597). Here one comprehend that for Hall "identity has no essence; it only has meaning by virtue of that which is excluded as different or other. Similarly, Hall argues that 'race' should be understood not as referring to some genetic essence, but as a 'floating signifier', whose meaning is never fixed" (Hammond, 2007, pp.12).

In this regard, identity is constructed when the self interacts with the society. The subject may have 'an inner core or essence', but this 'essence' is a result of the encounter of the self with the external world (1995, pp. 597). Hall brings to the light the fact that today's meaning of identity is far from what the essentialists considered as the subjectification of identity. On the other hand, essentialists held strongly upon the centrality of man and his or her unification of individuality. This man is at the center of the universe "with capacities of reason, consciousness, and action" (1995, pp. 597). They add that these potentials "first emerged when the subject was born, and unfold with it, while remaining essentially the same-continuous or identical with itself throughout individuals' existence" (1995, pp. 597). The essential center of the self was a person's identity. On the contrary with this view and from Hall's perspective, identity is a continuous form of our representation in our relationship with the social/cultural systems around us. "It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumed different identities at different times, identities which are not unifies around a coherent self" (1995, pp.598).

Accordingly, it seems that Hall in his influential book, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), proposes that identity is a loose, variable, and fragmented concept that might be considered "in the process of becoming rather than being" (pp. 4). Stuart Hall maintains that identities are produced in the context of history and society. Identity is not shaped as an 'essence', but it is being accepted by individual as a 'positioning'. As a result, in this study, our focus is on process

of identity making of the male character, Obiora, when he has emigrated to the United States and how this doubleness of identity is affecting his life.

B. Double Identity in Adichie's "Imitation"

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on 15 September 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. When Chimamanda was nineteen, she left Nigeria for the United States to continue her studies in the field of communication at Drexel University in Philadelphia. Afterwards, she pursued to take a degree in communication and political science at Eastern Connecticut State University. It is during this time that she started working on his first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which was finally released in October 2003. After this success, she published her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in 2006 in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Following these novels, she published a collection of short stories, *The Thing around Your Neck*, in 2009. Pondering upon these stories, one can notice Adichie's concerns about the lives of diasporic African especially in the United States. This enthusiasm is mainly shown in six stories out of twelve stories of the collection *The Thing around Your Neck*. These are "Thing around Your Neck", "Imitation", "On Monday of Last Week", "The Shivering" and "The American Embassy". She has touched on Nigerians' foreign experience in these stories. Adichie begins to investigate the strings that hold the shattered dreams when the idealism and optimism of this dream of a great life abroad has begun to fade away and is replaced by disillusionment, despair and the need to survive.

Though Adichie's works is mainly filled with feministic attitudes, "Adichie's works wholly indict the patriarchal oppression of women and also encourage women to assert themselves irrespective of cultural norms and archaic traditions which have denied them their human rights and have largely promoted their subordination" (Aziku, 2009, pp. 80, 81), one can see some other underlying aspects on her writings, for example in Adichie's "Imitation", the doubleness of the male character is causing the breaking of the family.

This story is regarding a family who has decided to leave their country, Nigeria, for Philadelphia in the United States. The first implied impression of this family from the United States is that it is filled with better schools for their children, and also better housing which can serve their

everyday needs. In this case, Obiora's wife Nkem describes the United States as "this country of curiosities and crudities, this country where you could drive at night and not fear armed robbers, where restaurants served one person enough food for three... America has grown on her snaked its roots under her skin" (Adichie, 2009, pp .37). This view expressed by Nkem shows the luxurious state of United States which is believed by most African foreigners. It is a perfect country to live on comparing to their homeland.

Luckily, for this family, money does not matter because the husband is a successful businessman and he can afford buying a good house in both America and Nigeria. However, the wife, Nkem sees their life on the verge of collapsing when she hears that her husband is having a girlfriend in the United States and during the time that Nkem is in Nigeria, he is living with his girlfriend in their house in America. Nkem is informed of Obiora's disloyalty when one of their neighbors in America calls her. She describes the girl in this way "Her hair is short and curly—you know, those small tight curls". After this, Nkem decides to cut her hair short just like the girl, but Obiora doesn't like it and asks Nkem to let it grow back "You should grow it back. Long hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife" (Adichie, 2009, pp .41).

By this simple event of cutting hair, the doubleness of Obiora's identity is revealed. It is clear that Obiora behaves differently in America and Nigeria. When he is in America, he tries to act like American and spends his time with a girl whose hair is short and curly. However, while he is in Nigeria, he expects her wife to wear a long hair. In other word Obiora's new identity is reconstructed through his interaction with a new culture, America.

In another part of the story, Nkem is remembering the time when she first arrived at the United States. They, Nkem and Obiora, settled in "a lovely suburb near Philadelphia" (Adichie, 2009, pp .31). She remembers how she bragged about with her friends in Nigeria and sent them their pictures of the sightseeing from the historical parts of the Philadelphia, "She sent them pictures of herself and Obiora near the Liberty Bell, proudly scrawled *very important in American history* behind the pictures, and enclosed glossy pamphlets featuring a balding Benjamin Franklin" (Adichie, 2009, pp .35). In fact, she remembers the time that she used to be proud to have a chance to take a picture from the historical parts of America whereas she has forgotten their valuable and precious history and tradition.

Indeed, during the narration of this story, we are faced with two different narratives. The first one is about the Nkem and Obiora's domestic problem and the other one is the story of the "Benin mask" which Obiora has bought for Nkem. This is a precious duplicate mask whose original version has been stolen by the British "One of the best imitations, Obiora had said when he bought it a few years ago. He told her how the British had stolen the original masks in the late 1800s" (Adichie, 2009, pp .38). Actually, the second narrative shed some light upon the first one. By the narrative of the second story, Adichie is trying to show not only the imperial powers stealing their valuable things but also their stealing of culture and identity. At some time Nkem picks up the mask and touches it and feels as if it is "cold, heavy, lifeless" (Adichie, 2009, pp .36). This cold and lifeless feeling that she experiences is indeed what she experiences in her life. That explains why at the end of the story, Nkem decides to leave America and find a school for their children in Lagos, "We have to find a school for Adanna and Okey in Lagos" (Adichie, 2009, pp .41), even she repeats this sentence several times to not only convinces him but also herself.

As it is clear, Nkem cannot tolerate living in America anymore. She is frustrated and ambivalent toward her life and finally she makes her mind and decides to leave for Nigeria forever. Through the story, one can see how her positive attitude toward America has changed to a negative attitude. It is best portrayed when she uses the term 'Americanah' to describe the behaviors of those Nigerians who have just settled in America, "I hope you understand the big-big English they speak; they are 'Americanah' now, oh" (Adichie, 2009, pp .38). In an interview, Adichie defines 'Americanah' as a "Nigerian word that can describe any of those who have been to the US and return American affectations; pretend not to understand their mother tongues any longer; refuse to eat Nigerian food or make constant reference to their life in America"(Adichie, 2013).

III. Conclusion

During the last century America has become an ideal place to live in for the African people. With the high rate of migration to America from Africa, the emigrants face new challenges which have resulted in some alteration in their inner life. The emigrants are entangled in a doubleness of identity. Once they are settled in the new country, they decide to imitate their behavior; however, after some time they sense their lifeless situation because they are not truly from that place. The

sense of lost pervades their life and compels them to take action because the man's sense of security of identity, to some extent, is potential just in a society with a unified culture. It is arguable that our beliefs and identities are determined by the narrative of the society. Socio/cultural contexts and the so-called phenomenon of 'globalization' and 'diaspora' put oneself in a situation that cannot gain a secure sense of belonging. In an elaborate attempt and trusting upon the scopes of identity accorded with Hall's theory, identity is believed to be a conglomerated concept. Therefore, the self can be diagnosed through the hegemony of his/her 'difference' in relation to the ideology and demarcation of his/her ethnic communal identity.

In this case, emigrants, in a close encounter with the natives, cannot convert or be adopted thoroughly. Thus, these people feel, due to their racial differentiation, they are not understood or they are obstinately different. This alteration will be inferiority-making, "... this process of new adoption... in the host country... means to establish one's identity within a foreign public space as to define the immigrants self in relation to the local other..."(Hall, 1995, pp.22).

At last, as it was mentioned earlier one may get to this point that the base of identity construction is in touch with the culture and cultural exchanges. For that reason, the diversity of human behavior and the identity of human psyche, accordingly, would be claimed as a result of various socio-cultural contexts. In this respect, Adichie's "Imitation" can be considered as a good example. As the title shows, it is about those people who have put a distance between themselves and their own culture and roots so as to imitate the other one "the other signifier". In the story, Obiora is a man who leads a double life and suffers from the doubleness of identities. Once, he is in America, he behaves as an American and as soon as he arrives in Nigeria, he becomes another person who cannot stand his wife's hairstyle whereas this is the same hairstyle which is worn by his girlfriend in America. Therefore, at the end, his wife decides to leave America altogether and settle in Nigeria for ever to end this situation.

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