

Original Article

Language as Identity: A Postcolonial Reading of Language in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate relationship between language and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah, focusing on the experiences of African immigrants in the United States and Britain. It examines how linguistic practices such as accent, vocabulary, and naming serve as powerful tools in negotiating identity in diasporic contexts. Through the protagonist Ifemelu and other immigrant characters, the study highlights the tensions between cultural preservation and the pressures of assimilation into Western society. The analysis foregrounds how language operates both as a marker of difference and as a means of social mobility, often compelling individuals to modify their speech in pursuit of acceptance and opportunity. Drawing on postcolonial perspectives, the paper argues that such linguistic adaptations may lead to a sense of dislocation and fragmented selfhood, while the reclamation of native speech becomes an act of resistance and self-affirmation. Ultimately, the study underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of identity, shaped by both external social forces and individual agency in a globalized world.

Keywords: Identity, Language, Diaspora, Assimilation.

Introduction

Language and accent are the important tool to construct one's identity. Language plays a significant role in assimilation because accents often reveal the national origins of the immigrants. As immigrants in America, they feel pressured to follow American ways of speaking. Ifemelu discovers the ways in which language shapes her cultural identity and also the ways in which she can reinvent herself through linguistic self-fashioning. Adichie addresses how language can be used as a façade or can reveal a more authentic version of an individual's identity. English language is a kind of costume for Ifemelu's father. He always tries to teach her to speak in English from her young age in order to have good accent so that she can seem educated and also it can impress others. "His mannered English bothered her as she got older, because it was a costume." (47). But Ifemelu always prefer to speak in Igbo language. Even in America she teaches her cousin Dike Igbo language in order to communicate with him. This shows her desire to maintain her African identity. In America, Ifemelu is forced to adopt a whole new language and new accent of speech. Like many other immigrants, she struggles to assimilate into a new culture without losing her Nigerian identity. This initially makes her feel uncomfortable. She felt that her identity was subdued by the power of America. When Ifemelu tries to register in the university, she meets Cristina Tomas, a white woman who starts to speak slowly because for her she is not capable to understand English as she is black. When Ifemelu says that she can speak English, Cristina says, "I bet you do. I just don't know how well." (133). This pushes Ifemelu to start adopting an American accent in speaking English language. By doing so she begins to realise the value of having a perfect accent. But she no longer decided to give up her American accent because she understands that this accent was just "a pitch of voice and a way of being that she was not hers" (175). Language is used to construct and symbolise one's identity. The individuals use language to perform their identities.

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The internal and external pressures for the African immigrants are so severe that they have to adopt to American identity. They had been pressurized to change their accent to get a job in America. In Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, Jack Taylor argues that "Language is a marker of difference signifying one's outsider status and changes in one's language are indicative or changes to oneself" (74). Thus, changes of one's language leads to transformation of one's identity structure. Language allows Ifemelu to create a sense of belonging which helps her make sense of her own identity and discover what it means to be an African in a globalised world. When Ifemelu realizes that she is alienated by the adoption to the linguistic form, she stops faking an American accent. She switches back to Nigerian English because she does not feel comfortable when she speaks American English. Perhaps this is the moment she realizes that she cannot want to sacrifice her Nigerian identity in order to please Americans: Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American It was convincing the accent. She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the creamy roll, the sentences starting with "so", and the sliding response of oh really, but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds. And so she resolved to stop, on that summer day, the weekend of Dike's birthday. Her decision was promoted by a Telemarketer's call... (173) Ifemelu decides to stop faking American accent after three years. Her decision comes as a result of a telemarketer's call, the operator is surprised how good her accent was. She is overcome with shame, feeling that it should be a moment of victory to sound American and switches back to her Nigerian accent. Ifemelu shows that an American accent does not come naturally to her and that after spending several years in the United States, it still takes an effort to perform the accent. She realizes the moment as "the day that she returned to her voice to herself" (175). Returning to her Nigerian accent, Ifemelu feels that "this was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from deep sleep during an earthquake" (175). Thus, language plays a major role in Ifemelu's journey towards self discovery which helps her to express her identity. Language is the most significant factor affecting each individual's identity. The novel directly addresses the concern of language for transnational individuals. Like

Ifemelu, Aunt Uju assimilates the American accent to follow with the American standards and so can gain social acceptance. Her character transformation is witnessed by Ifemelu in many situations. In the grocery store, when Dike takes a candy from the shelf, Aunt Uju adopts a purely American accent when she tells him "Dike, put it back" (108). Ifemelu notices that Aunt Uju says the phrase "with the nasal sliding accent she put on when she speaks to white Americans.... Pooh-reet back" (108). At that time, Ifemelu notices the transformation in Aunt Uju's identity. In fact, Aunt Uju tries hard to hide her African identity, while fitting to the American social standards in attempt to gain social acceptance and to avoid criticism. Aunt Uju even changes the pronunciation of her name to make it a little bit familiar to the American way of pronouncing it. This can be seen in the scene when she answers a phone call: Aunt Uju's cell phone rang. "Yes, this is Uju." She pronounced it you-joo instead of oo-joo. "Is that how you pronounce your name now?" Ifemelu asked afterwards. "It's what they call me." Ifemelu swallowed the words "Well, that isn't your name". (104) This incident makes Ifemelu angry. When Ifemelu exclaims why Aunt Uju changes the way she pronounces her name, she reveals that it is the way Americans call her and she is following it to their expectations. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon addresses the dual consciousness of the colonized people by considering language, "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 its face to face language of the civilizing nation" (18). Moreover, Aunt Uju tries to cut her son Dike from his African roots to sound fully American. When Ifemelu first sees Dike in America after many years, he has grown up to be a "first grader with a seamless American accent and a hyper happiness about him." (105). When Ifemelu speaks to Dike in Igbo, Aunt Uju warns her. This can be seen in the scene,

"Dike, I mechago?" Ifemelu asked.

"Please don't speak Igbo to him," Aunt Uju said, "Two languages will confuse him."

"What are you talking about, Aunt? We spoke two languages growing up."

"This is America. It's different." (109)

Ifemelu is surprised how Aunt Uju has changed. The time Aunt Uju spend in America teaches her that certain American standards is essential to succeed and it helps to gain social acceptance. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon says that, "When an individual adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born in which the result is a dislocation, a separation" (25) The statement suggests that when an individual adopts a different language than the one spoken by the group they were born into, it can create a sense of dislocation and separation. Languages symbolise identities and are used to signal identities by those who speak them. People are also categorised by other people according to the language they speak. People belong to many social groups and have many social identities. Nicholas, Obinze's friend who immigrated to Britain has faced the same as Aunt Uju and most of the immigrants have the same anxiety to raise their children. Because speaking Igbo language will harm their future. "He spoke to them only in English, careful English, as though he thought that the Igbo he shared with their mother infect them, perhaps make them lose their British accents" (239). Halima, among the immigrants also faced the same problem upon her arrival to

America. In the salon, she narrates an incident which happened to her son in school. She says, “When I come here with my son they beat him in school because of African accent. In Newark, If you see my son face? Purple like onion. They beat, beat, beat” (187). Thus, in the novel language serves as a dynamic tool through which characters negotiate their identities. Linguistic choices serve as a mirror reflecting the internal struggles and external interactions of the characters. Each word becomes a statement of identity. In America, Ifemelu learns to adapt new vocabulary. For example, the word fat is a word with a negative meaning in America but it is a neutral statement in Nigeria. “Ginika told her that fat in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgements like stupid or bastard, and not a mere description like short or tall. So she banished fat from her vocabulary “ (5-6). On the other hand, the word thin is a good word in America, but definitely it is not a compliment in Nigeria. Also, the word half-caste is an insult in America, whereas in Nigeria it is merely a description. In fact, in Nigeria the word half-caste has a positive meaning because it signifies one’s skin is lighter. Ifemelu learns to avoid the word half-caste and she uses biracial instead. When Ifemelu attends a class in university, a discussion happens whether one can say the word nigger. An African American says that it is acceptable when used by an African American. When a female asks why nigger was bleeped out. The teacher replies, “nigger is a word that exists. People use it. It is part of America. It has caused a lot of pain to people and I think it is insulting to bleep it out” (137). These examples shows that Ifemelu adapts not only her accent, but also learnt what words can be replaced by other words. Thus, Ifemelu struggles a lot in choosing the words to speak in the beginning. She has to think more before she speaks. This affects her own identity by adapting a new vocabulary. Thus, the novel shows how language becomes a battleground where the characters negotiate their identities. The act of changing one’s name serves as a poignant symbol of the struggle to reconcile personal identity with societal expectations. It signifies a detachment from cultural roots and a loss of authenticity. Ifemelu has to hide her own identity by changing her original name. Upon her arrival to America, Ifemelu had to become NgoziOkonkwo, the name on the Identity card Aunt Uju gave her so that she could look for work. When Ifemelu attends an interview, she hardly remembers her new name. She relates the trauma of that experience to her friend Ginika, who said her : “You could have just said Ngozi is your tribal name and Ifemelu is your jungle name and throw in one more as your spiritual name. They’ll believe all kinds of shit about Africa” (131). Through the character’s journeys, the novel underscores the importance of embracing one’s true identity, including the name that carries generations of heritage and meaning.

Identity crisis is not only faced by African women immigrants but also by the African men immigrants in the novel. Obinze, a rich businessman in Nigeria. He was the lover of Ifemelu. He studied with her in the university of Nigeria. Due to the political problems in Nigeria, both of them got separated. After his studies, he moved to London to find a job. Life in London was not a bed of roses for Obinze. He faced identity issues and other hardships too. He was unable to fit himself with the new culture of the country. It is a rule in London that a man cannot work without National Identity. So Obinze decided to get the National Identity by marrying a British girl. But he was unable to succeed in it due to some legal problems in the Green card marriage. He decided to find a job there until his sham marriage. Vincent Obi, a small man was ready to help him by giving his NI number to get a job with the demand of giving forty percentage of his earning. Obinze accepted the offer given by Vincent Obi. He got his National Identity number and obtained a job in London. With his fake identity, Obinze changed his name as Vincent Obi and started earning money. He struggled with his identity in the new land of London. There was a sense of strong longing for his own self. Typically, name change is a powerful symbol which shows the depth of identity crisis. With all his depression and discouragement, he used to go to a book shop for reading. Through reading alone he was able to discover his original sense of self. After many sufferings in the immigrant land ,Obinze decides to move back to his homeland Nigeria. However, before he could return he was caught by the police as his visa got expired. The police had sent him back to Nigeria. After reaching Nigeria, Obinze felt free and independent. Thus, Adichie shows that true freedom lies within and it comes from one’s own identity and firmness. In conclusion, Adichie masterfully weaves together the threads of identity, illustrating the complex interplay between culture, beauty standards, language, and personal agency.. Through the lens of characters navigating the complexities of culture and assimilation, the novel sheds light on the profound impact of societal expectations on individual self-perception. By examining the character’s struggles and triumphs, Adichie masterfully portrays the multifaceted nature of identity formation and negotiation in a globalized world.

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