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Postcolonial Identity Crisis in Selected Contemporary Novels

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Abstract

The study argues that postcolonial novels can offer valuable insights into the nature of identity and the challenges of living in a postcolonial world. Homi Bhabha's theoretical framework is used in this study to analyze the complexities of cultural identity and the challenges that actors face as they navigate between their background and new cultural identities. The concept of hybridity, mimicry, and cultural difference developed by Bhabha are utilized to examine and comprehend these themes. It explains how novels such as *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie emphasize the contradictions between cultural hybridity and the need to adhere to mainstream cultural standards. The study also looks at the role of literature in developing our perception of

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cultural identity and encouraging empathy and understanding across cultures. The study employs an analytic approach for evaluating the postcolonial identity crisis in chosen contemporary novels, which entails an in-depth reading and analysis of the text. This may imply identifying essential themes and motifs relating to identity, cultural hybridity, and colonialism, as well as investigating how characters manage their sense of self in the face of cultural diversity. The study's findings emphasize the necessity of comprehending and appreciating the complexities of cultural identity in the context of globalization. It promotes constant postcolonial debate and reflection on identity as we confront the problems of cultural hybridity and try to build a more inclusive and just society that acknowledges and respects cultural differences. As a result, this study adds to our knowledge of postcolonial identity and its continuing importance within modern literature

Key Word: Post colonialism, Identity, Contemporary Novel, Homi Bhabha, Hybridity, Mimicry.

أزمة الهوية ما بعد الاستعمار في روايات معاصرة مختارة

اري سيامند ظاهر

كلية الفنون التطبيقية جامعه أربيل

و

ا.د. سامان عبدالقادر حسين

وزارة الثقافة

المستخلص

تؤكد الدراسة أن الروايات ما بعد الاستعمار يمكن أن تقدم نظرات قيمة حول طبيعة الهوية وتحديات العيش في عالم ما بعد الاستعمار. باستخدام الإطار النظري لهومي بابا، تقوم الدراسة بدراسة تعقيدات الهوية الثقافية وصعوبات التوازن التي تواجهها الشخصيات في توازن تراثهم مع هوياتهم الثقافية الجديدة. وتشرح كيف تؤكد الروايات مثل "خروج غرباً" لمحسن حميد و"أميريكانا" لتشيماماندا نجوزي أديشي على التناقضات بين التعددية الثقافية والحاجة للالتزام بالمعايير الثقافية الرئيسية. كما تتناول الدراسة دور الأدب في تطوير فهمنا للهوية الثقافية وتشجيع التعاطف والتفاهم بين الثقافات. تعتمد الدراسة نهجاً تحليلياً لتقييم أزمة الهوية ما بعد الاستعمار في الروايات المعاصرة المختارة، مما يشتمل على قراءة وتحليل معمق للنص. وقد يعني ذلك تحديد المواضيع والرموز الأساسية المتعلقة بالهوية والتعددية الثقافية والاستعمار، وكذلك التحقيق في كيفية تدبير الشخصيات لشعورها بالذات في مواجهة التنوع الثقافي. يتم استخدام الإطار النظري للتعددية والتقليد والاختلاف الثقافي الذي

وضعه هومي بابها للتحقيق وفهم هذه المواضيع. تشدد نتائج الدراسة على ضرورة فهم وتقدير تعقيدات الهوية الثقافية في سياق العولمة. إنها تعزز النقاش المستمر والتأمل في مسألة ما بعد الاستعمار والهوية، حيث نواجه مشاكل التعددية الثقافية ونحاول بناء مجتمع أكثر شمولية وعدالة يعترف بالاختلافات الثقافية ويحترمها. ونتيجة لذلك، تضيف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفتنا عن الهوية ما بعد الاستعمار وأهميتها المستمرة في الأدب الحديث.

1. Introduction

Identity is a prominent theme in postcolonial literature. The complicated and diverse nature of identity is frequently explored in postcolonial literature, particularly in the context of colonialism's legacy and its impact on individuals and society. According to Dizayi, "the topic of identity is a highly debated and contested issue in postcolonial times and literature." It is seen as particularly important since it is a dilemma that affects all postcolonial societies." (2015, p.1000). The question of "identity arises only when it is in a state of turmoil," Mercure contends, "when something that is believed to be permanent, consistent, and reliable is challenged by the feeling of hesitation and unpredictability." (1995, p.43) Furthermore, colonialism entailed the imposition of Western cultural norms and values on colonized peoples, resulting in cultural identity loss and a sense of exile. Postcolonial literature seeks to reclaim and redefine these identities by challenging dominant narratives and providing different viewpoints on history and culture. It also investigates the intersectionality of identity, such as how race, gender, class, and other factors interact to shape individuals' experiences.

Young contends that despite the process of decolonization, the dominating global powers remained basically intact throughout the twentieth century. (2003, p.3) Colonialism often included the dominance of one culture over another, often by force, and it frequently entailed the imposition of Western cultural values and beliefs on the civilizations that were colonized. According to Ashcroft, a fundamental component of postcolonial literature is its depiction of dislocation and a feeling of belonging. There is a worry in the context of the postcolonial identity crisis about developing or recovering a strong link between the individual and their sense of place. This frequently resulted in a loss of cultural identity, as well as a sense of displacement and dislocation from conventional ways of life (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.8).

Smith maintains that "postcolonial authors often draw on their own experiences of cultural dislocation and alienation to explore the theme of identity in their works" (p. 45). This is seen in their use of folklore, mythology, and oral storytelling (Gupta, 2018, p. 72). These authors question hegemonic narratives and provide alternate perspectives on history and culture, reflecting colonized peoples' continued struggle to express their own identities in the face of colonial oppression and its long-term consequences (Singh, 2015, p. 28). This is because colonialism frequently resulted in the imposition of Western cultural norms and values on colonized peoples, triggering a loss of cultural identity and a sense of displacement (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56). According to postcolonial theorists, the legacy of colonialism has resulted in constant disputes over identity, as colonized peoples seek to recover and redefine their own cultural identities in the face of historical and ongoing

colonial oppression (Spivak, 1985, p. 72). Furthermore, postcolonial theory emphasizes the intersectionality of identity, acknowledging that people's identities are affected by a variety of elements such as race, gender, class, and sexuality (Mohanty, 1984, p. 95). This emphasizes the need of recognizing and valuing cultural variety, as well as diverse ways of life and perceiving the world (Said, 1978, p. 84). As a result, postcolonial novelists and theorists alike investigate the issue of identity in postcolonial literature, drawing on their personal experiences as well as other literary and cultural traditions. This represents the continual fight of colonized peoples to claim their own identities in the face of colonial oppression and its long-term consequences, as well as the need of recognizing and honoring cultural variety and intersecting identities. In an article, Dizayi states, "While there may be differing perspectives and debates among theorists regarding the formation of identity and its crisis in the postcolonial era, there appears to be a general agreement that the existence and complexities of this issue are a direct result and manifestation of the effects of colonialism." (2019, p.80)

Postcolonial theorists have also criticized essentialist ideas of identity, which see identity as stable and unchangeable. Instead, they highlight the fluid and situational aspect of identity, stating that it is affected by historical, cultural, and social circumstances and that it is always growing and moving through time. Postcolonial theory also emphasizes the role of power in constructing identity, acknowledging that dominant groups have the authority to define and influence the identities of subjugated groups. As such, postcolonial philosophy strives to question dominant narratives and allow oppressed people to construct their own identities on their own terms. In a nutshell, postcolonial theory has helped us grasp the complicated and multidimensional character of identity, particularly in the context of colonialism's legacy and continuing struggles for cultural and political sovereignty.

Homi Bhabha is a postcolonial theorist who has contributed significantly to postcolonial studies. One of Bhabha's central ideas on the issue of identity is that it is a mixed and ambiguous construct created by the meeting of multiple cultures. According to Bhabha, colonialism creates a hybrid kind of identity that is neither entirely colonial nor entirely indigenous, but rather a complicated blend of the two. He coined the word "hybridity" to characterize this process of cultural mixing, claiming that it creates a space of "in-betweenness" that defies the binary of colonizer and colonized. By recognizing the split-space of enunciation as a theoretical concept, we may be able to develop a new perspective on creating an international culture that is not centered on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the mere celebration of cultural diversity, but rather on recognizing and embracing cultural hybridity. The substance and meaning of culture are held in the gap between cultures, and by digging into this Third gap, we might avoid binary thinking and emerge as a new version of ourselves. Bhabha (2006, p.1).

Bhabha also highlights the importance of ambivalence in identity development, claiming that identity is constantly molded by a conflict between the need for recognition and the fear of dominance. This tension stems from the reality that identity is created through power dynamics, and as such, it is always disputed and unstable. The role of cultural translation and interpretation is also emphasized in Bhabha's theoretical approach to identity. He contends that cultural meanings are subject to translation and interpretation and that the translation process is critical to the formation of hybrid identities. Bhabha emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the cultural specificities of various groups,

as well as the manner in which cultural meanings are continually in flux and vulnerable to interpretation. Thus, for Bhabha, developing cultural identity is an act that connects with the past that is more than just remembering social causes or imitating aesthetic patterns. Instead, it reimagines the past as a fluid and transitory 'in-between' area that confronts and undermines the conventions of the present. Instead of being a sentimental desire for a bygone age, the past-now relationship becomes an integral aspect of present reality. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7)

consequently, Bhabha's theoretical argument emphasizes the hybrid and ambivalent nature of identity, which is a central issue in postcolonial discourse as a result of the violent subjugation of one culture by another during the colonial era, frequently involving the imposition of Western cultural values and norms on the colonized society. This frequently resulted in a loss of cultural identity, as well as feelings of displacement and dislocation from conventional ways of life.

Furthermore, postcolonialism understands the intersectionality of identity, recognizing that people's experiences of identification are affected by a variety of characteristics such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. As a result, it is critical to acknowledge and oppose the ways in which these overlapping identities may generate power and privilege hierarchies, and to fight toward greater equality and justice for all. In a nutshell,, most of arguments highlight the importance of identity in postcolonial discourses by emphasizing colonized populations' continual struggle to affirm their identities in the face of colonial oppression. It emphasizes the value of cultural variety and the need of acknowledging various cultural ideas and customs. Furthermore, it acknowledges the role of power relations and cultural translation in developing an individual's sense of identity.

2. Critical Analysis

In this study, we examine two contemporary novels, *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to see how both authors addressed identity issues in the postcolonial period.

2.1. Identity Crisis in Exit West

Exit West is a postcolonial work by Mohsin Hamid that tackles the issues of migration, displacement, and cultural identity. The novel follows the narrative of Saeed and Nadia, two young lovers living in an unknown city ravaged by civil conflict. As violence and turmoil envelop the city, Saeed and Nadia decide to flee, embarking on a risky trip through a series of mysterious doors that transfer them to other corners of the world.

Exit West explores the complexities of cultural identity in the context of displacement and migration. As Saeed and Nadia travel throughout the world, they meet a variety of people who are similarly looking for a sense of belonging and identity in a rapidly evolving world. While they strive to reconcile their memories of their country with the realities of their new surroundings, they grapple with issues of cultural identity and belonging. The novel also emphasizes the intersections of identity, as Saeed and Nadia's migration and displacement experiences are impacted by their gender, color, and class.

The character of Saeed's father in *Exit West* is another example that emphasizes the complexities of cultural identification. He is a devoted Muslim who prays five times a day and dresses traditionally. However, when the civil war breaks out and violence explodes in the city, Saeed's father begins to question his religion and identity. As the violence grows, Saeed's father becomes increasingly disillusioned with the faith he has always held dear. He comes to believe that the violence in the name of Islam is a betrayal of the Prophet

Muhammad's benign and devoted teachings. Meanwhile, he struggles with his Muslim identity, as his traditional attire and beard make him a target for assault and discrimination. This story exemplifies the intricate and complicated nature of cultural identity in the midst of displacement and conflict. Saeed's father's identity is molded by his faith and cultural traditions, but it is also shaped by his environment and the violence and turmoil he is seeing. His effort to reconcile these many facets of his identity echoes the novel's bigger themes, which investigate the conflict between tradition and modernity, as well as the ways in which relocation and migration may confuse our sense of self and cultural identity. Homi Bhabha's theoretical views on identification may be used in Mohsin Hamid's examination of identity difficulty in *Exit West*. Bhabha contends that identity is not set or stable, but rather is molded by a variety of social, cultural, and historical circumstances that are always changing. He contends that identities are formed via the act of mimicry, or emulating the prevailing culture or power structure in order to achieve approval and respect.

In *Exit West*, the protagonists Saeed and Nadia struggle with concerns of identity and belonging as they travel throughout the world. They are continuously challenged to reconcile their cultural identities with the reality of their new environment. Nadia's decision to wear a black robe and veil in public, for example, helps to protect her from harassment and discrimination while simultaneously reinforcing her identity as a Muslim lady in a Western culture.

Nadia's desire to wear traditional Muslim dress might be interpreted as an attempt to emulate the dominant culture in order to achieve acceptance and attention, according to Bhabha's idea of mimicry. Her imitation is compounded, however, by the fact that her dress also serves as a method of proclaiming her cultural identity and as a visual sign of her distinctiveness from the prevailing culture.

As previously stated, the character of Saeed's father is an evident example of identity complexity in *Exit West*. Saeed's father is a devoted Muslim who tries to reconcile his faith with the city's violence and disarray. As Saeed's father's identity is formed by a variety of cultural and historical variables, including his beliefs, cultural traditions, and the reality of his surroundings, Bhabha's idea of hybridity may be applied to this situation. Ultimately, *Exit West* delves into the complicated and diverse nature of identity in the context of displacement and migration, highlighting the various social, cultural, and historical variables that may create identity. Bhabha's theoretical theories on identity give a valuable framework for examining how identity is produced and negotiated in the novel, as well as emphasizing the need of recognizing the fluid and dynamic character of identity in a fast-changing world. "Because the Earth is moving," Hamid says. And you have the sensation of resting on a gigantic spinning ball in space" (2017, p.21).

Mimicry is an integral concept in Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, referring to the act of imitating or duplicating the dominant culture or power system in order to obtain recognition or acceptability. In *Exit West*, the characters of Saeed and Nadia struggle to reconcile their cultural identities with the realities of their new surroundings, and they frequently turn to imitation to negotiate the dominant cultures and power systems they meet. Nadia's decision to wear a black robe and veil in public, for example, can be considered as an act of imitation, since she is adopting the attire of the dominant Muslim culture in order to obtain acceptance and attention; "when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (Hamid, 2017, p.94). Her decision to wear the veil, however,

is compounded by the fact that it also helps to affirm her cultural identity and separate her from the dominant culture.

Similarly, when Saeed and Nadia leave for London, they confront a society that is significantly different from their own, and they must navigate the dominant culture and power structure in order to live. "He doubted he'd return...amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home" (Hamid, 2017, p. 90). They take on professions and adopt behaviors that are more acceptable to the "Exit West" emphasizes the difficulties of navigating cultural identity in the age of globalization, as well as the conflict that arises between keeping cultural traditions and adjusting to new circumstances, through these mimicking actions. The novel also emphasizes the need of recognizing the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, as well as embracing variety and uniqueness, in order to build a more inclusive and just society.

"As usual, disaster attracted the most outside interest, such as a nativist raid that disabled machinery or destroyed dwelling units nearing completion or resulted in the severe beating of some workers who had strayed too far from camp." (Hamid, 2017, P. 69) *Exit West* emphasizes the difficulties of navigating cultural identity in the age of globalization, as well as the conflict that arises between keeping cultural traditions and adjusting to new circumstances, through these mimicking actions. The novel also emphasizes the need of recognizing the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, as well as embracing variety and uniqueness, in order to build a more inclusive and just society. Saeed's father exemplifies how identity may be influenced by a variety of cultural and historical elements, resulting in a sense of internal conflict and confusion. *Exit West* is a fascinating and thought-provoking examination of the challenges of identity in a quickly changing world. It emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, as well as the need to accept variety and uniqueness in order to build a more inclusive and just society.

2.2. Identity Crisis in *Americanah*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* deals with the challenges of identity in the contexts of race, immigration, and diaspora. It follows Ifemelu, a Nigerian lady who goes to the United States to seek higher education, and her journey of self-discovery as she navigates the problems of cultural and racial identity in a new and foreign society. One of the novel's central themes is the concept of cultural identity and how it is molded by race, class, and nationality. Ifemelu struggles with her personal identity as a black African woman in America, as well as the manner in which her experiences with race and racism impact her identity. She also suffers from the conflict between her Nigerian origin and her new cultural identity in America.

The concept of code-switching, or the capacity to shift between several cultural and linguistic identities, is another component of identity intricacy in *Americanah*. In order to blend in and be accepted by people around her, Ifemelu becomes expert at code-switching, assuming different accents and mannerisms depending on her environment. This emphasizes the difficulty of juggling several cultural identities while also feeling pressured to adhere to society norms. The novel additionally focuses on the concept of belonging and the influence of displacement and migration on one's sense of self. Ifemelu's experiences with displacement and cultural diversity cause her to doubt her own identity and feeling of belonging. She also considers returning to Nigeria and how it could affect her identity and sense of self.

Americanah, like *Exit West*, is a dramatic investigation of the complexity of identity in a worldwide society, as well as the ways that cultural, racial, and socioeconomic variables impact our sense of self. The novel emphasizes the significance of accepting variety and uniqueness, as well as the need to build a more inclusive and just society that respects and embraces the complexities of cultural identity. Ifemelu's struggle with her hair is a clear illustration of identity difficulties in *Americanah*. Ifemelu struggles with her hair and how people see it throughout the story. Ifemelu's hair is braided in a traditional way in Nigeria, which is considered normal and acceptable. When she arrives to the United States, she is met with a new standard of beauty that prioritizes straight hair, and she feels pressure to adhere to this ideal.

As a result, Ifemelu spends a lot of time and money attempting to obtain the "right" hairstyle, using relaxers and weaving to blend in with the dominant culture. However, she eventually finds this method onerous and exhausting, and she chooses to cut off all of her hair and adopt a natural haircut. This incident with her hair represents the difficulties of negotiating cultural identity and the pressure to conform to conventional norms. Ifemelu's hair difficulties emphasize the conflict between her Nigerian background and the new cultural identity she is creating in America, as well as the manner in which cultural differences may affect one's sense of self. Consequently, Ifemelu's experiences with her hair in *Americanah* show the complexities of identification in a worldwide society, as well as the ways in which cultural, racial, and socioeconomic variables impact our sense of self. The tale urges readers to embrace variety and uniqueness, as well as to identify and cherish cultural identity's complexities.

The identity issues in *Americanah* may be analyzed using Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity and cultural mimicry. Cultural identity, according to Bhabha, cultural identity is a dynamic and fluid process that is always changing via the interaction of diverse cultures. He also highlights the concept of mimicry, or how dominant civilizations produce imitations of other cultures in order to preserve their control. According to Jessica Arévalo Hidalgo's thesis, "throughout the novel, various characters exhibit attitudes of superiority and dominance, indicating numerous instances of covert racism."(2015, p.11) Ifemelu's experiences of cultural difference and displacement in *Americanah* show the intricacies of cultural identity as well as the friction between her Nigerian ancestry and the new cultural identity she is creating in America. Ifemelu's experience of living in a hybrid cultural environment where she is continuously negotiating and managing the various cultural influences around her may be related to Bhabha's idea of hybridity. Ifemelu's experiences with code-switching and societal expectations may also be examined through the perspective of Bhabha's theory of mimicry. Ifemelu's attempts to fit in and be liked by people around her might be seen as mimicry, in which she imitates the prevailing culture in order to acquire acceptance from society.

Bhabha, on the other hand, says that imitation is a kind of resistance since it permits minority cultures to undermine and challenge the dominant culture from inside. Ifemelu's decision to accept her natural hair and reject the dominant culture's beauty standards might be interpreted as a type of cultural assimilation resistance. Bhabha's hybridity and mimicry theory may be applied to the complexity of cultural identification in *Americanah*, as well as the ways in which cultural, racial, and socioeconomic elements create our sense of self. In the novel, she imagines that "it's possible that they don't genuinely prefer fair skin, but they do appreciate the ability to enter a store without being shadowed by a security guard."

(Adichie, p.254) The novel emphasizes the necessity of accepting variety and uniqueness, as well as the need to establish a more inclusive and just society that respects and embraces the complexities of cultural identity. It informs readers to accept diversity and to value ethnic differences. It emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and just society that recognizes the complexities of cultural identity and allows for many voices and opinions. Hence, *Americanah* is a powerful exploration of the complexities of identity and the ways in which cultural, racial, and societal factors shape our sense of self. It emphasizes the importance of cultural hybridity, resistance, and the need to embrace diversity as we navigate our changing world.

Exit West by Mohsin Hamid and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as mentioned above, both address postcolonial identity problems via the experiences of their protagonists. While there are some parallels in how the novels depict these themes, there are also some significant distinctions. Both novels are similar in that they explore the complications of cultural identity in a globalized society and show protagonists negotiating the friction between their background and the dominant culture in which they find themselves. Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West*, for example, struggle to reconcile their conservative Muslim background with the secular, Western culture of the countries they visit. Similarly, Inemelu struggles with her Nigerian identity as she attempts to establish a life for herself in America in *Americanah*. Another similarity is that both works highlight the function of cultural hybridity in developing characters' sense of self. In *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed find themselves merging into other cultures as they journey across several nations, adjusting to their new environment in various ways. Similarly, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu develops a hybrid cultural identity as she travels between Nigeria and the United States.

However, there are notable distinctions in how the novels tackle postcolonial identity problems, particularly in how they show migration. The people in *Exit West* are forced to escape their land owing to a violent war, whereas Ifemelu decides to leave Nigeria in quest of better chances in *Americanah*. The protagonists' experiences of displacement and sense of identity as they navigate their new environs are shaped by this variation in circumstances. Furthermore, these approaches to race and racism are distinctive. While both works address similar topics, *Americanah* dives deeper into the experience of being black in America, delving into the systematic racism and injustice that Ifemelu encounters. In contrast, *Exit West* focuses on the universal feeling of displacement and the sense of loss that comes with leaving one's home.

Thus, while both *Exit West* and *Americanah* confront postcolonial identity challenges via the experiences of its protagonists, they do so in distinct ways. *Exit West* digs more extensively into the general feeling of displacement and cultural hybridity, whereas *Americanah* delves more profoundly into the unique experience of being black in America.

3. Conclusion

Postcolonial identity has emerged as a major issue in modern writing, notably in the novel. Many contemporary novels, like *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have addressed the challenges of cultural identity in a globalized society. Homi Bhabha's theoretical framework of hybridity, mimicry, and cultural difference has been a helpful lens for analyzing and comprehending these identity issues. Bhabha's theory urges us to accept variety and appreciates the significance of cultural distinctions by emphasizing the dynamic and flexible character of cultural identity.

Characters in these modern works frequently traverse cultural hybridity, striving to reconcile their background with the new cultural identities they are forming. These characters are also subjected to demands to adhere to dominant cultural norms, which leads to identity problems and conflicts.

We recognize the significance of cultural hybridity, resistance, and the desire to establish a more inclusive and just society that respects and embraces the complexities of cultural identity in these works. These novels also show how literature may shape our perception of cultural identity while simultaneously encouraging empathy and understanding between cultures. Finally, modern novels continue to investigate and question the complexity of postcolonial identity, emphasizing the importance of continual discourse and reflection as we navigate our changing environment.

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