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# Cultural Mimicry and the Erasure of Self: A Postcolonial Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* (2009)

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## ABSTRACT

The main protagonist in Chimamanda Adichie's *Imitation* (2009), Nkem, is the subject of this analysis, which further explores the postcolonial theme through symbolism throughout the short story. The aim of this study is to examine how diasporic identity, gender expectations, and cultural displacement contribute to identity erasure and the formation of mimicry in the story. This analysis uncovered Nkem's experiences regarding identity deletion and the cultural alienation that happened after her move to America. This research is part of a study of intrinsic elements using a qualitative descriptive method that focuses on symbols and their meanings. Several symbolic elements in the story reinforce this, namely the Benin mask as a symbol of cultural heritage that has lost its sacred meaning, reflecting the diaspora's disconnection from its cultural roots. Also, the body of the diaspora woman becomes a space of conflict between past memories and the realities of life she faces. The symbol of beauty is no longer about one's taste but about the demands that must be met in order to be considered sufficient. Furthermore, the new environment, designed to be an ideal place to live, actually becomes a symbol of a place where cultural alienation occurs. The results of this finding emphasize that through the character of Nkem written by Adichie, characters who live far from their place of origin often experience erosion of their identity. The pressure to adapt to the dominant culture and forced *Imitation* (2009) can be quite complex, as it harms personal identity, especially for diasporic women. Through this, adaptation without the freedom to choose is not a path to acceptance, but rather another form of erasing one's identity. This study contributes to literary and postcolonial studies by highlighting how cultural mimicry works as a form of adaptation and a mechanism that reinforces identity loss, specifically among diasporic women.

Keywords: diaspora, gender, standard, identity, culture

## ABSTRAK

*Protagonis utama dalam cerita Imitation (2009) karya Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nkem, menjadi subjek pembahasan utama dalam tulisan ini yang mengeksplorasi tema poskolonialisme. Penelitian ini menyelidiki pengalaman Nkem terkait penghapusan identitas serta alienasi budaya yang terjadi pascakepindahannya ke Amerika. Penelitian ini merupakan bagian dari studi tentang unsur intrinsik dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif yang berfokus pada simbol dan maknanya. Beberapa temuan simbolik dalam cerita memperkuat hal ini, yaitu topeng Benin sebagai simbol warisan budaya yang kehilangan*

*makna sakralnya, yang mencerminkan keterputusan diaspora dari akar budaya. Serta, tubuh perempuan diaspora menjadi ruang konflik antara ingatan masa lalu dan realitas hidup yang dihadapi. Simbol kecantikan bukan lagi soal selera seseorang, melainkan tuntutan yang harus dipenuhi agar dianggap cukup. Lebih lanjut lagi, lingkungan baru yang dirancang sedemikian rupa untuk menjadi tempat tinggal yang ideal justru menjadi simbol terjadinya alienasi budaya. Hasil penelitian ini menekankan bahwa melalui karakter Nkem yang ditulis oleh Adichie, karakter yang tinggal jauh dari tempat asalnya sering kali mengalami pengikisan identitas. Tekanan untuk beradaptasi dengan budaya dominan dan imitasi yang dipaksakan bisa jadi cukup rumit karena merusak identitas pribadi, terutama bagi perempuan diaspora. Melalui ini, adaptasi tanpa kebebasan memilih bukanlah jalan menuju penerimaan, melainkan bentuk lain dari penghapusan identitas seseorang.*

*Kata kunci: diaspora, gender, standar, identitas, budaya*

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity erasure describes the process by which someone loses or suppresses the key elements of their cultural identity. These key elements include language, cultural practices, and the symbols that represent them, among others. This often occurs due to external or internal pressures from dominant cultures. Migration is also an example (Hall, 1990; Bhandari, 2021). In postcolonial contexts, cultural identity erasure is often experienced by diasporic individuals who may perceive assimilation into dominant cultural norms as unavoidable, resulting in a fragmented sense of self (Hall, 1990). This condition is closely related to the way individuals construct meaning about themselves, others, and their surrounding environment through internal cognitive frameworks (Safitri et al., 2023). As these frameworks are continuously shaped by social and cultural forces, identity loss becomes more than an individual struggle; it reflects the enduring social consequences of colonial legacies (Bhandari, 2021). As mentioned, cultural identity erasure is a multifaceted and subtle case that is widely discussed in postcolonial literature to demonstrate its impact on humanity. Scholars have highlighted the emotional and psychological trauma caused by cultural absence. This trauma often emerges as individuals struggle to maintain or regain their cultural identity, a process frequently expressed through narrative retellings and existential negotiations (Bhandari, 2021; Hall, 1990). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation* (2009) uses the main character, Nkem, a Nigerian woman living in the United States, to demonstrate the erasure of cultural identity. Adichie uses Nkem's predicament to show that, despite her attempts to connect with her culture, Nkem must adapt to the demands of American society and the social and beauty standards of the time. The Benin mask, prominently displayed in Nkem's Philadelphia home, serves as an illustration of this erasure of cultural identity. The Benin mask was once an important symbol of ancestral identity and spiritual authority in Nkem's culture, but now, in Nkem's space, it is little more than decoration. The Benin mask and Nkem's possession of it symbolize the transformation of her identity. Once rooted in cultural and spiritual significance, the mask is reduced to a decorative object shaped by Western consumer culture. As a result, it becomes a memento of imitation rather than an identity grounded in lived cultural experience.

Plenty of studies have explored the themes of mimicry, identity, and alienation in literature. Alahmad and Hashim (2023) emphasize that mimicry reflects the overlapping influences of East and West, raising questions of identity, while Ighile and Oseghale (2021) show that mimicry can serve as a survival strategy and a form of resistance. Similarly, Herwiana (2023) highlights how alienation manifests as psychological and existential estrangement. More specifically, studies on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's works further demonstrate how these issues intersect

with gender and diasporic experience. Fuentes Antras (2021) argues that imitation can become a space of resistance, while Yunnam and Laisham (2025) reveal the struggles and empowerment of Black women as they navigate identity across cultures. Rodrigues (2017) adds that Adichie's works challenge Western dominance by exposing its contradictions in the lives of African women. These studies suggest that mimicry operates in complex ways, both as a strategy of adaptation and as a source of identity tension, yet they tend to examine these aspects separately. Building on these perspectives, this paper examines how *Imitation* (2026) reflects the suppression of cultural identity through Nkem's sense of displacement, the significance of heritage, the regulation of women's bodies through beauty standards, and her spatial and emotional alienation. It further argues that acts of cultural mimicry weaken the authenticity of identity within diasporic contexts.

This paper argues that *Imitation* (2009) critiques the erasure of cultural identity through Nkem's emotional dislocation and the pressures to conform imposed by her husband and her adoptive society. This argument is developed through three main discussions: the Benin mask as a symbol of dislocated heritage, beauty standards as a means of controlling women's bodies, and spatial as well as emotional dislocation as forms of cultural alienation. Through these discussions, the paper demonstrates how cultural mimicry undermines the integrity of identity in diasporic contexts. Serves as an illustration of this erasure of cultural identity. The Benin mask was once an important symbol of ancestral identity and spiritual authority in Nkem's culture, but now, in Nkem's space, it is little more than decoration. The Benin mask and Nkem's possession of it symbolize her identity's transformation. Once rooted in cultural and spiritual significance, the mask is reduced to a decorative object shaped by Western consumer culture. As a result, it becomes a memento of imitation rather than an identity grounded in lived cultural experience.

## METHOD

Qualitative description was used in this study in its application to the analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation* (2009). Qualitative description is widely used in the social sciences and humanities because it aims to provide an elaborate and precise description of a phenomenon in its natural context (Mohajan, 2018). It focuses on straightforward description with room for interpretation, which makes it the best fit for literary critique. Qualitative research, however, is concerned with exploring meanings, perspectives, and subjective experiences without the need for numbers or statistics, while also emphasizing methodological rigor and reflexivity, which allow researchers to record both complexity and depth in human experience (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022; Levitt et al., 2023). Besides, it allows researchers to build understanding through close engagement with participants or texts, ensuring the findings remain grounded in context (Lenberg et al., 2023). For these reasons, the qualitative descriptive method is appropriate for this study, as it allows examination of cultural mimicry and identity erasure through the narrative's symbolic features.

The data used in this study were drawn from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2009) and other relevant books, journals, and online articles on postcolonial theory and cultural identity. The primary data were narrative and descriptive, capturing cultural mimicry, alienation, and identity loss. The data specifically consist of selected textual passages, narrative descriptions, and symbolic objects such as the Benin Mask, Nkem's body, and domestic space, which are treated as data for analysis. The data-gathering process was carried out in several steps: first, the short story was carefully read and reread to fully grasp it completely; second, the text on mimicry and identity issues was located and identified; third, symbols such as the Benin mask, the body of Nkem, and domestic space were selected as primary data; and finally, additional theories by postcolonial scholars were drawn upon. Next, the information was organized, categorized, and interpreted. The data were categorized into themes such as cultural mimicry, alienation, and identity loss. It also analyses using a thematic approach to identify patterns across selected symbols. The second stage involved analyzing the symbolic findings to elucidate how mimicry influences identity erasure. These

symbols are not merely decorative but function as representations of Nkem's fragmented identity, illustrating how mimicry leads to a sense of cultural displacement. Finally, the findings concluded to address the study's purpose, applying postcolonial concepts proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, particularly mimicry, to explain how imitation operates as a strategy that simultaneously reflects adaptation and identity instability. This analytical process ensures that the interpretation is systematically grounded in both textual evidence and postcolonial theoretical frameworks.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation* (2009), the character Nkem embodies a complex narrative of cultural imitation, revealing how identity and self-worth can become trapped by Western influence and by very distant domestic ideals. Nkem's own life is built around mimicry: she replicates and mimics the aesthetics, values, and domestic routines of American suburban life while presenting an impression of herself as the ideal wife—quiet and very accepting from thousands of miles away. Her suburban Philadelphia home, full of replicas of African artifacts and very much a symbol of the American dream itself, paradoxically contradicts her very existence: she is surrounded by imitations of both her heritage and the life she is told to value. This analysis will uncover how the symbols in the story reveal the process of cultural imitation and its great impact on our very own identity.

### 1. Benin Mask as Symbols of Dislocated Heritage

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* (2009) sharply shows the experience of a Nigerian diasporic woman living in a very high-tension balance between her rich but physically distant origin culture and her modern but emotionally empty new life. The main character of the book, Nkem, lives a life that feels inauthentic. This is evident in her preference for decorative objects that imitate African art yet lack cultural authenticity, as well as her emotional detachment from her Nigerian Background. Both inside her very long-distance marriage and in her own search for her identity as a woman, wife, and immigrant.

Through material symbols, particularly its *Imitation* (2009) of Benin cultural artworks, Adichie presents powerful visual metaphors for Nkem's falsity in her life. Nkem's own home in Philadelphia, even though it's luxurious and filled with great, exotic-looking art objects, symbolizes her alignment with her home culture. The artworks are not original objects but copies and Imitation (2026)s made to cater to tourists and foreigners, reflecting Nkem's position as a figure adapted to fit into a foreign cultural environment, losing her original identity and attachment to her cultural roots.

The main symbol in this narrative is the Benin mask displayed on the wall of Nkem's house. This is not an authentic mask used in rituals or that represents the rich history of West Africa, but rather a version made for commercial sale to foreigners. This object indirectly reflects the character's identity, since the Benin mask signifies a person's identity through its cultural context. For example, where the object comes from and what values are contained in it. In this context, Nkem is from Nigeria, as is the Benin Mask. Adichie writes, *"…she stares at the Benin mask, coppercolored, its abstract features too big. Her neighbors call it "noble;" because of it, the couple two houses down have started collecting African art, and they, too, have settled for good imitations. ".* This sentence immediately places the mask as a visual symbol of a seemingly cultured but fake life. As Edward Said describes Orientalism, it is the reinterpretation and reformation of non-Western cultural objects to fit Western expectations and consumption. Consequently, the mask is seen not as a spiritual artifact but merely as merchandise for the expatriate market. This reflects how African culture is commodified in the Western world, reduced to a lifestyle object, not a living heritage. This symbolic reading is expanded when Adichie takes the reader into Nkem's inner imagination. As she gazes at the masks, she imagines the maskmakers of Benin of old:

> *Nkem imagines the Benin people carving the original masks…the proud*

> *young men wishing they did not have to behead strangers to bury their king, wishing they could use the masks to protect themselves, too, wishing they had a say. (Adichie, 2009, p. 1*)

Through this depiction, Adichie subtly inserts Nkem's longing for agency-the right to "have a voice" in her own life. Nkem's imagination of the Benin youth directly reflects her alienation as a diasporic woman who is made an object of beauty but not given power in her home life.

Adichie's critique of these domestic dynamics does not stop at personal relationships but also extends to the realm of colonial culture and history through the figure of Obiora. When the Benin mask is referred to as "one of the best imitations," the reader is confronted with a sharp irony: "One of the best imitations, Obiora had said when he bought it a few years ago." The mask, a carefully chosen imitations of the real thing, becomes a metaphor for Nkem's position in her married life: a diasporic woman groomed and polished to fulfill an idealized image, yet with no control over the narrative of her life. Obiora chooses the mask as he chooses life for Nkembeautiful, exotic, yet completely in control. It suggests that Obiora reduces both culture and Nkem into objects of display and control, reinforcing a pattern of commodification rooted in a colonial logic. Additionally, Adichie's statement becomes even more ironic when Obiora himself has a historical awareness of colonial violence. In one scene, she explains, *"He told her how the British had stolen the original masks in the late 1800s… regarded as "war booty" and were now displayed in museums all over the world."* Obiora knows that his ancestral culture has been plundered, but instead of rejecting the system, he repeats it in a new form-not as a colonizer, but as a consumer of culture. He buys fake masks not for their spiritual significance, but as global status symbols. In this case, domestic culture is not only commodified through art but also through women-Nkem becomes an element in Obiora's narrative of success, not as an individual with autonomy but as an ornament in a diasporic patriarchal aesthetic. The irony is that Obiora seems unaware that his treatment of the mask mirrors his treatment of Nkem. He takes something that was once sacred-both a cultural artifact and a marriage-and turns it into a visual representation for an image. Home, wife, and art become elements in the symbolic architecture of diasporic male power.

This phenomenon is in line with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry in The Location of Culture (1994), which explains that imitation in a colonial context is never perfect and in fact presents a threat because it shows that the "original" can be faked: *"Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace."* In Nkem's case, near-perfect imitation did not guarantee acceptance. Despite playing the role of the idealized diasporic wife, she does not gain intimacy, equality, or wholeness of identity. She loses connection to her cultural roots and is not fully accepted in her new world. This view can be extended with a stylistic approach that emphasizes the role of material objects as reflections of fragile inner landscapes. In this regard, Susan Stewart (1993) emphasizes that objects such as souvenirs do not simply function as markers of space or time but rather as reflections of loss and deep longing. She writes, "The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia." The Benin mask on display in Nkem's house is not just an artifact of Nigerian culture but a symbol that speaks of inner dislocation and fractured identity. The object, which should be a symbol of ethnic pride, instead functions as a "souvenir" of a fractured and rootless identity. It becomes a material form of unanswered longing and silent alienation, while reflecting unspeakable inner wounds in the diasporic space.

Furthermore, Stuart Hall (1990) asserts that diasporic identities are always in a continuous process of formation and transformation. He writes, "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." This statement

reinforces the meaning of the Benin mask as a symbol of Nkem's identity, constantly reproduced in the tension between the cultural roots she carries and the diasporic reality she inhabits. Her identity is forced to flex: she must be a 'modern' and 'established' wife in the American context, yet still display Nigerian symbols in order to maintain a sense of cultural authenticity that has been manipulated and tamed. Like the fake mask, Nkem's identity becomes an aesthetic of imitation-layered, fractured, and far from whole.

At this point, the reading becomes more complex when we consider how gender is also entangled in the diaspora system. In her article, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2008) emphasizes that the diasporic experience cannot be separated from the body, which is historically and socially situated in networks of power. The diasporic body, especially the female body, becomes an arena where dislocation, memory, and power structures are intertwined. She states, " factors of gender, race, class, generation, location, and language insert themselves within the warp and woof of diasporicity." Thus, gender is not just an additional item of variation in the diasporic experience but a very essential dimension that it infiltrates, mediates, and creates to shape the way the individual's separation experience, detachment, and identity unfold. Women, in this context, became a field of projection of a negotiation zone between the cultural heritage they carry and the diasporic realities they now face.

The Benin mask in the story *Imitation* (2009) becomes a powerful symbol of disconnection and the separation of cultural heritage from changing diasporic identities. Through these masks, Adichie, the writer, shows how culture and women are often exploited in diasporic life, which becomes a series of imitations for the sake of appearance and status. The character of Nkem, like the mask, embodies an identity that has lost its authenticity and is trapped in the role of a diasporic wife with no control over her life. This symbol also connects the issue of cultural disengagement with issues of gender and colonialism; therefore, it shows how cultural heritage that was once considered sacred is now just a decoration, and how diasporic women's bodies become a place of conflict between memories of the past and the realities of life that must be faced.

## 2. Beauty Standards and Control of Women's Bodies

Nkem, the main character of this short story, was originally Nigerian, but she moved to America with her children. Meanwhile, her husband, Obiora, stayed in Philadelphia. Since she moved to another place, Nkem felt compelled to conform to certain norms, particularly Western beauty standards that demand a specific hair aesthetic. She also had to fulfill the diaspora community's expectations of the role of a respected man's wife, who should appear graceful and submissive. She was sure that the beauty standard was not negotiable for her. This issue is not explicitly mentioned. But it shows in the husband, Obiora's, response to his wife's new look, Nkem. *"…Long hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife."* Obiora's assertion that long hair is more "graceful" for the wife of a "Big Man" is not simply a personal aesthetic preference but rather a manifestation of patriarchal control that treats women's bodies as extensions of men's social status. In this context, the label "Big Man" serves as a symbol of power and prestige; thus, Nkem's appearance must be commodified in such a way as to reinforce her husband's image of success in the public eye, even though Nkem still has the rights of her body, but the unbalanced excitement makes her feel under pressure. These ideals significantly affect how people view themselves and others, shaping both conscious and unconscious judgments about appearance (Paudel et al., 2025).

Another reason she cut her hair was the difficult feelings she felt after her conversation with Ijemammaka, her Nigerian friend. "Her hair is short and curly—you know, those small tight curls. Not a relaxer. A texturizer, I think. I hear young people like texturizers now." Ijemamaka's comment serves as a benchmark that triggers awareness of Nkem's appearance. By framing the use of 'texturizer' as something trendy or popular among young people, it indirectly suggests that

Nkem's current appearance is seen as old-fashioned or outdated. This peer influence puts pressure on the notion that social acceptance in a given environment is highly dependent on the adoption of modern beauty standards, thereby making ordinary conversation a pragmatic demand for change. (Faheim et al., 2020). This social pressure eventually poisoned Nkem's self-perception, leading her to view her natural hair through the lens of these standards; for Nkem, her hair now feels too thick, too old. The use of the words 'thick' and 'old' here is not simply a physical description but rather an internalization of cultural shame; her natural hair is seen as a barrier to achieving the 'youthful' and 'smooth-textured' image praised by Ijemamaka. Thus, this feeling of 'oldness' is a manifestation of identity alienation, where her original physical attributes are now seen as burdens to be shed for the sake of conformity. She was trapped in a moment of doubt, and eventually she cut her hair short and transformed into short, curly hair.

In the end, the husband was still not satisfied with her new looks and said, "You should grow it back." Beauty standards are not just about appearance but rather a tool of social control that limits women's freedom to express themselves. Even though she has moved to a new environment and is trying to adjust, pressure from those closest to her, including her own husband, only strengthens the demand to follow certain standards. The changes she made were not for herself, but in response to other people's expectations.

In *Imitation* (2009), society not only forced women to be perfect but also encouraged them to accept their husbands' physical changes. It was unfair. There are so many rules about how women maintain their beauty even after marriage, but there is no single written standard for married men to keep their eyes on their own appearance. At the end, the wife should be kind enough to accept them. This statement arises from this narration: "She *has softened like his belly, becoming pliable, accepting." (Adichie, 2009).* The metaphor reflects gendered expectations by suggesting male freedom from beauty standards. On the other hand, the wife's "softening" symbolizes the pressure on women to be submissive and compliant.

Therefore, it demonstrates the huge discrepancy in gender expectations among diaspora households. Her husband's stomach tenderness reflects a physical representation of a man's ease and position when he is no longer needed to keep up appearances. The words 'pliable' and 'accepting' indicate that Nkem has internalized the role of a passive wife. In patriarchal constructions, a woman is expected to be elastic—psychologically 'softening' to absorb her husband's mistakes or changes in order to maintain family harmony. This reinforces the double standard in which society tends to be lenient toward men's shortcomings, but demands assertiveness and sacrifice from women to remain attuned to their partners' desires. Nkem's "softness" indicates a loss of willpower and autonomy.

Moreover, The reason Nkem did not tell about it was to avoid any problems. This difference in treatment is a concrete manifestation of gender role expectations that place women in a submissive position. According to Texeira et al. (2020), this dominance is considered part of the natural order, leading society to be more critical of women but more permissive of men. Therefore, Nkem's unwillingness to protest her husband's changes stems from internalizing societal norms that grant men moral leeway but demand physical perfection from women. It is influenced by culture, religion, and tradition, and to a large extent, determines the level of gender inequality in society (Churchill et al., 2019).

She feels like she did not have any concern about being vocal. Meanwhile, the husband freely protests her right away and dictates her. "*But I liked your long hair better*." Compared with his first sentence, "*Anything will look good with your lovely face, darling.*" However, it sounds contradictory. In this case, Nkem will always accept her husband's physical changes, no matter what, without

saying anything. Indirectly, he is trying to emphasize that she should get her previous look back. According to Loscocco & Walzer (2013), evidence suggests that, even in developed societies that claim to have progressed with regards to gender and gender role expectations, women are still expected to be much more submissive and less capable than their male intimate partner. The domination is seen as being part of the natural order of things, and thus bypasses the need for legitimation (Texeira et al., 2020). That is why all husbands' orders sound valid and non-negotiable. Individuals tend to have expectations for their partners in intimate relationships (Ali et al., 2020).

The disparity between expectations towards wives and leniency towards husbands reflects a reality that still occurs frequently in society. Through Nkem's story in *Imitation* (2009), it is clear that women are often the ones most burdened by social standards. Nkem is characterized by her restrained response and tendency to adapt to her husband rather than confront him; thus, she represents what society expects of women when it comes to understanding, accepting, and tolerating injustice to maintain harmony at home. Through Obi's controlling behavior, Adichie critiques the patriarchal culture that exists within Nigeria. Adichie illustrates this through how he makes all the important decisions in the couple's lives without consulting Nkem first, and, moreover, by having a mistress, which conveys the power imbalance in this couple's relationship. This suggests that Nkem is not truly making her own choices, as they are shaped by social pressures that influence how she views herself and her role in her relationship.

### 3. Spatial and Emotional Dislocation as Cultural Alienation

In the short story *Imitation* (2009), the symbol of Nkem's cultural and gendered alienation is her Philadelphia home, which embodies both her physical and emotional isolation. As a Nigerian woman living in the United States due to her husband's decision, Nkem never felt integrated into the community around her. She lives in a large, comfortable house, but it feels empty, devoid of the warmth of family ties and connection to her native culture. Her home is an indirect reflection of the modern Western ideal created by her husband's actions and assumes that she values the same ideals as the "ideal," which has material comforts, stability and status. Nkem, however, does not find it possible to view this "ideal" as part of her personal identity; thus, the physical comfort in the house does not provide her with true belonging or fulfillment. Nkem does not become emotionally attached to the house; she is cut off from connecting to others in the house, and she has to rely on cultural items to recreate her identity and connect to her real self from a distance, thus illustrating that the lifestyle to which Nkem is accustomed does not align with her emotional needs. Therefore, the home is an emblem of her alienation.

One part that shows the alienation experienced by Nkem is evident in the narrative as she reflects on the changes that have occurred in her life since the beginning of her marriage: *"She used to think she was lucky that Obiora had chosen her, that he sent for her, that he gave her this life in America."* Now, she was no longer sure. This part shows Nkem's inner conflict, from forced gratitude to realizing that the life she is living now is not the result of her own decisions and desires, but rather a projection of others onto her. The dislocation that Nkem experiences also occurs geographically. Her husband, Obiora, remains in Lagos and only visits occasionally, while Nkem and her children live in America. This separation highlights the power imbalance occurring in her family; her husband decides how they live, and Nkem, as the wife, can only comply. The condition reinforces the concept of cultural alienation, in which someone is separated from their original environment and denied space to form a new, authentic identity.

In the context of postcolonial theory, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) explains that in the process of mimicry (imitation of the dominant culture), the colonial subject not only loses access to their original culture but is also never fully accepted in the culture they imitate. This reflects when Nkem attempts to recreate her Nigerian identity in the United States with

seemingly authentic "Nigerian things" and cultural artifacts. Instead of being a lived experience, these artifacts represent her Nigerian identity from a distance. Her life in America is characterized by emotional isolation and disconnection because she is unable to connect to American society, but instead finds herself isolated in a domestic environment based on her husband's wishes. In addition to being alienated from her American experience, she is also alienated from her previous life in Nigeria; this is evident when her husband brings his mistress into their home, which causes her to be removed emotionally from the cultural and marital space she created for herself in Nigeria.

The division of Nkem's experiences demonstrates Bhabha's definition of mimicry, as she lives out her life in America as a performance of identity rather than as someone who authentically inhabits that space. This view also aligns with Avtar Brah's (1996) thinking in Cartographies of Diaspora, where he explains that migration does not always involve a sense of connection, but often instead results in a new form of alienation. This view also aligns with Avtar Brah's (1996) thinking in Cartographies of Diaspora, where he explains that migration does not always involve a sense of connection, but often instead results in a new form of alienation. Brah writes that "diasporic space is the space where the migrant's body is present, but the self is suspended." Nkem's experience demonstrates how external actions represent mimicry of the identity, while Brah's idea shows the internal effects of this condition. Despite her physical presence in the United States, Nkem's ongoing dissociation from her self-image suggests an absence of emotional connection to both the United States and Nigeria. As a result of her continued state of psychological suspension, the emigration process for Nkem reinforces that she is culturally and psychologically displaced.

In the story, Nkem's emotional dislocation is further emphasized by her experiences in her new home in Philadelphia, where physical interactions are limited and close social support is absent. Even the long-distance communication with her husband could not fill the emptiness she felt. When she found out that her husband was living with another woman in Lagos, Nkem, who had been feeling isolated, realized she had been in a passive role and that there were unequal power dynamics in her relationship. The discovery causes Nkem to experience alienation because the emotional security that is associated with her life in Philadelphia is revealed to be fragile and constructed. The distance also represents her psychological displacement, leaving her stuck in the middle of spaces that fail to provide a stable sense of belonging.

In the story, Nkem's emotional dislocation is further emphasized by her experiences in her new home in Philadelphia, where physical interactions are limited and close social support is absent. Even the long-distance communication with her husband could not fill the emptiness she felt. When she found out that her husband was living with another woman in Lagos, Nkem, who had been feeling isolated, realized the passive role and the unequal power dynamics in her. The discovery causes Nkem to experience alienation because the emotional security that is associated with her life in Philadelphia is revealed to be fragile and constructed. The distance also represents her psychological displacement, leaving her stuck in the middle of spaces that fail to provide a stable sense of belonging; choice will only result in emptiness and the erasure of one's identity.

## CONCLUSION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Imitation (2009) examines the ideas of diasporic identities, gender expectations, and cultural displacement through the life of Nkem. It argues that this process creates a life rooted in mimicry rather than authenticity. The Benin mask symbolizes the dislocated heritage and imposed beauty standards as a form of patriarchal control. Nkem's home and body become empty spaces of imitation, shaped not by her choices but by the desires of her husband, her community, and the wide Western social ideals. She is expected to correspond,

leaving herself trapped between two cultures without belonging to either. The story critiques how the problem of colonial history, patriarchal power, and diasporic alienation exploit both women and culture, turning them into ornaments of status rather than living, autonomous living being. Yet Nkem's eventual longing to return to Nigeria signals both resistance to this alienation and a reclaiming of herself, showing that diasporic identities, though fractured, are always negotiating between memory, heritage, and the struggle for self-definition. More broadly, Imitation (2009) depicts how literary work can demonstrate culture, gender, and power within diasporic experiences. Despite being set in the American-Nigerian context, Nkem's stories exemplify a broader pattern of identity negotiation that persists in a postcolonial context. By underscoring the consequences of mimicry and alienation, Adichie not only critiques the enduring colonial structure but also highlights the ongoing vulnerability of women's identities in transnational space. This analysis contributes to literary studies by placing *Imitation* (2009) within a broader theoretical framework on how gender shapes diasporic identity. More broadly, this analysis emphasizes the continuing relevance of postcolonial critique by highlighting the urgency of reclaiming authenticity within diasporic contexts shaped by assimilation pressures, while revealing the significance of gender inequalities.

Within this context, this story serves as a specific case study and a universal reflection on the costs of adaptation without autonomy. Thus, Imitation (2009) extends beyond its immediate narrative, offering knowledge into the complexities of cultural study and the importance of reclaiming the authentic identity in the face of assimilationist pressures. Therefore, this analysis contributes to postcolonial literary studies by examining how gender and identity intersect to shape diasporic identity. It also highlights the need to reconsider assimilation not merely as cultural adaptation but as a process that can reproduce inequality and erasure.

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