First-Generation Afropolitan Identity Reformation: A Comparative Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference*(*)

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Abstract

'Afropolitanism' is an integral concept that contributes to diaspora studies that celebrate the concepts of globalization, transnationalism, and multiple belongings. Popularized by Nigerian-Ghanaian author Taiye Selasi in her 2005 essay "Bye-Bye Babar", the term refers to a generation of the diaspora raised between global metropolises after their parents left Africa in the 1960s-70s, shaped by both African and non-African cultures. By extending Selasi's definition to include first-generation Afropolitans, the research examines the dynamic reformation of Afropolitan cultural identity in the context of migration, focusing on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2013). It explores how the migration journeys of first-generation Nigerian women, Ifemelu and Deola, to the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, shape their evolving Afropolitan cultural identity. Drawing on John W. Berry's acculturation theory and Stuart Hall's concept of identity as continuous 'production', the research examines how both characters negotiate their identities within the dominant cultures of their host societies, with specific focus on language and hair styles. The research argues that their shifting acculturation strategies reflect the malleability and hybridity of Afropolitan

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cultural identity, challenging Afro-pessimism and essentialist notions of Africanness.
Keywords: Afropolitanism, Afro-pessimism, Cultural identity, Acculturation

الملخص

تُعد "الأفروبوليتانية" مفهومًا جوهريًّا يُساهم في دراسات الشتات التي تحتفي بمفاهيم العولمة، وعبر الحدودية، والانتماءات المتعددة. وقد شاع استخدام هذا المصطلح على يد الكاتبة النيجيرية–الغانية تايي سيلاسي في مقالها المنشور عام ٢٠٠٥ بعنوان "وداعًا بابار"، حيث استخدمته للإشارة إلى جيل من أبناء الشتات الأفريقي الذي نشأ بين مدن كبرى حول العالم بعد أن غادر آباؤهم أفريقيا في ستينيات وسبعينيات القرن الماضي، متأثرين بثقافات أفريقية وغير أفريقية على حد سواء. ومن خلال توسيع تعريف سيلاسي ليشمل الجيل الأول من الأفارقة العالميين، يتناول هذا البحث إعادة تشكيل الهوية الثقافية للأفارقة العالميين في سياق الهجرة، مع التركيز على روايتي **أمريكانا**(٢,١٣) لتشيماماندا نغوزي أديتشي **وقليل *من الاختلاف*** (٢,١٣) لسيفي أتا. ويستكشف كيف تسهم رحلات الهجرة للنساء النيجيريات من الجيل الأول، إفيميلو وديولا، إلى الولايات المتحدة والمملكة المتحدة، في تشكيل هوية ثقافية أفروبوليتيانية متطورة. وبالاعتماد على نظرية إستراتيجيات المثاقفة لجون بيري، ومفهوم ستيوارت هول بأن الهوية الثقافية في حالة دائمة من الصناعة المستمرة، يناقش البحث كيف تتنقل الشخصيتان بين ثقافات المجتمعات المضيفة وتتفاوضان حول هويتهما، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على اللغة وتصفيفات الشعر. ويخلص البحث إلى أن إستراتيجيات المثاقفة المتغيرة تعكس مرونة الهوية الأفروبوليتيانية وهجنتها، بما يتحدى التشاؤم الأفريقي والتصورات الجوهرانية للهوية الأفريقية.
الكلمات المفتاحية: الأفروبوليتيانية، التشاؤم الأفريقي، الهوية الثقافية، إستراتيجيات المثاقفة

Over the course of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, migration has generated the influx of new waves of Africans into various locations in the West. Tanure Ojaide (2008) remarks that "[w]hile migration to the developed West is a relief from the economic discomfort of Africa, it burdens the individual with psychological, spiritual, and other problems" (p. 46). More often than not, a significant number of first-generation African migrants encounter increasing difficulties in adapting to the lifestyle of the hostland compared to their younger, i.e. second-generation, counterparts (Knudsen and Rahbek, 2016). First-generation African migrants arrive to the West holding strong ties to their home countries, engrained in their traditional and cultural belief systems, which makes it more difficult for them compared to the younger counterparts to rethink their identities in a new environment that is culturally conscious. The challenges encountered by first-generation African migrants open up a space for the development of Afropolitan identity that is globally mobile, yet critically rooted. Defying essentialist conceptions of Africanness, Afropolitanism emphasizes the dynamic and evolving essence of cultural identity in response to Afro-pessimis[(1)] which tends to portray African identity as rigid and static. Rather than perceiving identity conflicts as limiting, Afropolitanism interprets them as components of a dynamic, hybrid identity formation. Afropolitans go through a process of acculturation and negotiate transnational experiences that necessitate continual redefinition of identity amidst diverse cultural influences in new hostlands. In light of this, the paper highlights Afropolitan cultural identity reformation through examining two Anglophone Nigerian novels, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2013). It traces how migration shapes Afropolitan cultural identity of first-generation female immigrants by exposing the challenges of culture clash that arise upon their immigration to the West, the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively. Drawing on John W. Berry's acculturation strategies, the article explores how Afropolitan cultural identity is malleable upon the characters' immigration to the West. Through the characters' shift from one acculturation strategy to the other, their experiences prove that Afropolitan cultural identity is in a constant process of reformation. Ultimately, their identities embody Stuart Hall's second position of identity, illustrating Afropolitan identity as fluid, contested, and continually reshaped.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2013) examine the cultural experiences of first-generation Nigerian women adapting to life in the West. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu relocates to the United States for her education and confronts racism and cultural pressures that necessitate modifications to her speech and appearance. Eventually, she reasserts her Nigerian identity by embracing her genuine voice and natural hair, ultimately opting to return to Nigeria. *A Bit of Difference* follows Deola, a Nigerian residing in London, as she grapples with cultural dislocation and the compulsion to assimilate, notably by adopting an English accent for professional integration. A return visit to Nigeria compels her to reflect on her sense of belonging and identity, prompting her to interrogate the necessity of adhering to Western norms. Both narratives emphasize the characters' evolving cultural identities, reflecting the negotiation of a hybrid Afropolitan identity that resides between cultures rather than within fixed national boundaries.

Borrowing from the philosophy of cosmopolitanism, the main tenet of Afropolitanism is that of cultural hybridity. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts that no culture or identity exists in isolation entirely uninfluenced by others, and proposes the concept of 'contamination' as the most accurate representation of modern culture. By 'contamination', Appiah refers to lack of purity. He regards 'cultural purity' as "an oxymoron" explaining that "culturally speaking, [one] already live[s] a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more" (2006, p. 113). In a similar manner to Appiah's idea of cultural 'contamination', Taiye Selasi in "Bye-Bye Babar" (2005) identifies Afropolitans by "[their] funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of [them] are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts" (para. 3).

Thus, Appiah and Selasi both dismiss the concept of cultural purity; Appiah characterizes 'contamination' as the inherent amalgamation of global influences in daily existence, whereas Selasi extends this idea to Afropolitans by portraying them as hybrids whose identities are formed through a synthesis of varied geographical and cultural factors. Even though Selasi mainly uses the term 'cultural mutts' to refer to second-generation Afropolitans, namely Africans who are born and raised outside the African continent, this paper extends Selasi's definition to include first-generation African migrants as Afropolitans who become 'cultural mutts' as a result of their immigration journeys.

In accordance with Selasi who stresses on Afropolitans' cultural hybridity, Simon Gikandi in the foreword of the book *Negotiating Afropolitanism* (2011) contends that Afropolitanism situates individuals inside African communities while enabling them to surpass geographical and cultural limitations, with hybridity as a fundamental trait. He asserts that Afropolitanism is motivated by the aspiration to conceptualize African identities as anchored in particular 'local geographies' yet transcending them: "To be Afropolitan is to be connected to knowable African communities, languages and states. It is to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity – to be of African and other worlds at the same time" (2011, p. 9). Thus, similar to Selasi, Gikandi recognizes Afropolitans as Africans who integrate diverse cultural influences, amalgamating African and global components into their identity. However, while Selasi characterizes Afropolitans as 'cultural mutts', emphasizing their fluid, transnational identity and personal connections to diverse cultural realms, Gikandi's definition underscores a significant link to African communities and languages, suggesting that Afropolitanism encompasses not only mobility, but also the preservation of ties to Africa.

John W. Berry in "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures" (2005) describes acculturation as the "dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of

contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p. 698). Thus, immigrants' identity development is shaped by a process of acculturation. Berry (2005) maintains that the process of acculturation faced by immigrants presents them with diverse options: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. When individuals choose to abandon their cultural identity and actively pursue daily cross-cultural engagement, they adopt the assimilation strategy. This reveals their inclination to forsake their own cultural background and assimilate into the host society. When individuals prioritize the preservation of their own culture and desire to minimize social interactions, they employ the separation strategy, which entails withdrawing towards their heritage culture and distancing themselves from other cultural groups in the host society. The integration strategy refers to individuals who have a dual interest in keeping their heritage culture and actively interacting with other groups on a daily basis. This strategy enables immigrants to uphold their cultural identity while also functioning within the wider social network. Finally, Berry explains that marginalization manifests when individuals find little motivation or opportunity to preserve their heritage culture, typically as a result of an imposed gap between their culture and the host culture, and also lack interest in engaging with others, often due to exclusion or prejudice. Thus, Berry's formulations underscore the intricate and multifaceted character of acculturation, underscoring its continuous nature of cultural exchange and psychological adjustment arising from extended intercultural communication.

In his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Stuart Hall delineates two distinct positions of cultural identity. On the one hand, the first position characterizes cultural identity as being rooted in a fixed or stable collective history. It springs from "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' … which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall, 1990, p. 223).

Hence, the first position is an essentialist one as it relies on the identification of patterns of similarity among a certain group of individuals "with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of [their] actual history" (Hall, 1990, p. 223). Hall's argument posits the existence of a genuine cultural identity, an authentic self that individuals with a common history and lineage perpetuate indefinitely. This cultural oneness is perceived as a static, fixed, and ongoing frame of reference that embodies the shared cultural traditions and historical experiences. Hall's notion of a stable, collective cultural identity corresponds with the principles of Afro-pessimism, which frequently perceives African identity through the prism of historical trauma, persistent oppression, and fixed cultural narratives. Both viewpoints underscore a lasting cultural essence influenced by a shared history; however Afro-pessimism interprets this continuity primarily via a lens of marginalization.

On the other hand, Hall's second position of cultural identity exists as a continual process of being and becoming, encompassing the past, present, and future. He characterizes the second position as "related" to the first but distinct: "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed on some essentialized past, they subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (1990, p. 225). This implies that cultural identity encompasses not only one's present condition, but also the continuous process of transformation and growth shaped by their previous and forthcoming encounters. Hall regards cultural identity as a product of history and culture that constantly transforms, rather than a complete or finished product. He contends that identity is not transparent: "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never

complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990, p. 222). Both Selasi and Gikandi's views of Afropolitanism as a dynamic, continually evolving identity shaped by migration, diverse cultural connections, and the ongoing negotiation between African heritage and global influences concur with Stuart Hall's second position of cultural identity. Similarly, Berry's acculturation strategies highlight how identity is reformed through ongoing engagement with new cultures, where strategies such as assimilation and separation exemplify the malleability of identity development, either by adopting a dominant culture at the cost of the original or by intentionally distancing oneself to preserve cultural heritage, each reflecting that identity is a product of cultural transformation rather than a fixed entity.

Since the main tenet of Afropolitanism is cosmopolitanism and a world view that is shaped by immigration processes, it opens up a space for Afropolitans to negotiate their cultural identities, adopting different strategies through their acculturation process, which leads to the reformation of their identities. Ifemelu and Deola's immigration to the United States and Britain, respectively, exposes them to cultures markedly different from their Nigerian culture. Ultimately, this cultural contact initiates a process of acculturation that transforms the two into Afropolitans as they become transcultural beings in the diaspora. As a result, their cultural identities are continuously shaped as a result of their immigration journeys to the West and the different acculturation strategies they adopt which make them live in between two cultures: the Nigerian culture and the American or English culture. Their immigration journeys to the West entail their adoption of two acculturation strategies that Berry refers to, that of assimilation then that of separation. However, based on Berry's acculturation strategies, there is no mention of those who upon immigration are forced to assimilate. In other words, the assimilation strategy, according to Berry, focuses on the immigrants' willingness and choice

to pursue cross-cultural engagement in the host society, partially abandoning their cultural identity. However, some immigrants have no choice but to partially forsake their original culture and absorb that of the host society in order to fit in, as mirrored by the two Afropolitan characters, Ifemelu and Deola.

In Americanah (2013), Ifemelu goes through two stages of acculturation. The first stage is what this paper proposes to be labelled as forced assimilation strategy. According to Berry (2005), assimilation entails an immigrant's choice to relinquish their cultural identity in favor of integrating into the dominant culture of the host society. This indicates that, according to Berry's argument, assimilation is a question of individual choice rather than compulsion. Nonetheless, forced assimilation contests this viewpoint by emphasizing that external forces, such as discrimination, social exclusion, or systemic barriers can push individuals towards assimilation, rendering it a less a genuine choice. If immigrants are driven to integrate for survival rather than a sincere choice to relinquish their culture, their experience contradicts Berry's concept of voluntary assimilation, categorizing it as forced assimilation. Ifemelu is forced to adopt the assimilation strategy at the beginning of her stay in the United States to be able to access the benefits exclusive to American citizenship. This is first seen in changing her name in order to find a job because she cannot work with her student visa. She uses the social security card of Aunty Uju's friend Ngozi Okonkwo, a Nigerian American who has traveled to Nigeria to establish a business. According to Louisa Uchum Egbunike (2017):

> Within Igbo culture, an individual's name serves as a form of incantation or prayer which is repeated each time that person is called. The importance of naming is entwined with the belief in the power of the spoken word, as to repeatedly enunciate an intention is to conceivably usher it into being. (p. 25)

The Igbo culture emphasizes the sacred nature of names, viewing

them as essential to understanding an individual's cultural identity. In the light of Ifemelu changing her name, Adichie highlights how this fundamental feature of cultural identity can be obscured by the pressures of assimilation and survival in a foreign land as some immigrants experience pressure to alter their names for the sake of assimilating into the host country. In *West African Migrations* (2012), Titilayo Ufomata examines the detrimental impact of losing a name, contending that "there is the distortion of people's names for the convenience of others. Naming is a very important aspect of identity. Stripping a person of their name hits the core of their personhood and can result in psychological trauma" (p. 235). Thus, Ifemelu undergoes a sense of loss when compelled to use Ngozi Okonkwo's as an alternate name. During her interview at the Seaview restaurant, she forgets her alias and pauses while answering the interviewer's questions. The fact that Ifemelu forgets her new name in a temporary lapse in memory before responding to the interviewer's questions, which results in her failure to secure the job, shows how she feels pressured to assimilate into the American culture by changing her name. This challenges Berry's argument that assimilation is always done by choice; in the case of Ifemelu, it is born out of desperation to fit in, which marks it as forced.

Unlike her friend Ginika, Ifemelu cannot fabricate a deceptive persona due to her recent arrival to the United States. While Ginika has resided in the United States long enough to adapt and cultivate a persona that aligns with the American society, Ifemelu is a newcomer and lacks the capacity or experience to alter her identity for easier assimilation. When she tells Ginika about her failure in the interview upon her return home, Ginika advises her to exploit Americans' lack of knowledge about Nigeria to conceal her mistakes during interviews: "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" (Adichie, 2013, p. 160). Ginika is more experienced about how things work in the

United States because of her prolonged stay compared to Ifemelu, as she is aware that all Africans look the same to White Americans. Her ability to exploit Americans' ignorance to her advantage shows her voluntary assimilation because she comprehends the social dynamics involved and deliberately chooses how to present herself to conform to the American society. Conversely, Ifemelu lacks the same agency in her assimilation process; she grapples with the urge to comply and initially lacks the experience or understanding to play along as Ginika does. Rather than choosing to assimilate, she is compelled to assimilate as a survival mechanism, rendering her experience analogous to forced assimilation.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1967), Frantz Fanon contends that employing a language signifies "assum[ing] a culture" (p. 17). Fanon posits that language functions not only as a tool for communication, but also as a carrier of cultural values, historical context, and power relations. When someone communicates in a language, they are not merely assimilating its structure and lexicon, but also internalizing the accompanying cultural and ideological context. Fanon's argument correlates with the notion that in the United States, an immigrant's manner of articulating English plays an important role in Americans' deciding the Americanness of immigrants. Despite hailing from Anglophone Nigeria, Ifemelu grapples with the issue of language, specifically in terms of her accent in the United States. This is highlighted when she goes to apply to the University of Philadelphia in her distressing encounter with the White American registration clerk, Christina Thomas. Upon hearing Ifemelu's accent, Christina alters the pace of her speech. She deliberately enunciates every word very slowly as she explains to Ifemelu how to fill in the application: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" (Adichie, 2013, p. 163). Christina's condescending remarks to Ifemelu illustrate Fanon's assertion that the use of a language implies the adoption of a culture. Her tendency to decelerate and simplify her

speech highlights the presumption that speaking English with an accent signifies cultural otherness. This corresponds with Fanon's critique of language as a mechanism of power in post-colonial and racially stratified societies, where individuals who deviate from the prevailing linguistic standards are marginalized or regarded as inferior. Ifemelu and Christina's interaction underscores the contradiction that, although America lauds cultural diversity, White Americans may be prejudiced against foreign students, treating them as mentally slow and inferior, based on the assumption that they lack understanding or cannot communicate effectively in English. This shows that accents frequently serve as a basis for discrimination and exclusion, strengthening the notion that Ifemelu's assimilation is forced rather than voluntary, in order to gain social acceptance.

Ifemelu's adoption of forced assimilation strategy is seen in practicing an American accent in an attempt to assimilate into the American culture and protect herself from potential xenophobic treatment by White Americans who would regard her as less intelligent because of her foreign accent: "And in the following weeks … she began to practice an American accent" (Adichie, 2013, p. 164). Ifemelu's forced assimilation in acquiring the American accent is also seen in her phone call with an American telemarketer who expresses his surprise when she tells him that she is Nigerian: "Wow. Cool. You sound totally American" (Adichie, 2013, p. 215). This example highlights how immigrants may assimilate by adopting an American accent, perceiving it as an accomplishment rather than an erosion of their original cultural identity. The telemarketer's congratulatory tone supports the notion that assimilation via language is anticipated and rewarded, underscoring the pressures of assimilation. His astonishment and endorsement indicate that adopting an American accent is regarded as an accomplishment, suggesting that individuals who maintain their native accents are perceived as outsiders.

As in *Americanah*, accents in *A Bit of Difference* (2013) serve

a crucial role as identity markers. Atta depicts the efforts of several African immigrants to assimilate into Western hostlands by adopting artificial behavior and speech to fit into Western cultures. Since achieving a flawless English accent is deemed essential for success after immigration to London, Deola adopts an English accent to assimilate into English culture. For example, at work, she is obliged to adopt an English accent to avoid being out of place, and tries to blend in by "rounding her vowels" and speaking "phonetics" which is Nigerians' euphemism for accents (Atta, 2013, p. 175). Thus, like Ifemelu, Deola's adoption of an English accent serves as a strategy of survival in London where social power dynamics are unfavorable for African immigrants. Deola's assimilation is not born out of choice, but is forced because she knows that she will not be able to fit into the English culture without sacrificing her own. *A Bit of Difference* also refers to the dominant view that Black people are inherently inferior on the intellectual level. Like Ifemelu in Philadelphia, United Sates, Deola in London stresses her English accent to avoid discriminatory treatment in her workplace: "she plays up her English accent … so that people might not assume she lacks intelligence" (Atta, 2013, p. 15). This shows, as Sunshine Kamaloni in *Understanding Racism in a Post-Racial World* (2019) contends, that Black people were historically perceived as lacking intelligence, whilst Whites were regarded as the essence of physical and mental evolution (p. 58). Deola's experience in London reflects racial bias, as she exaggerates her English accent to counteract assumptions regarding her intelligence, demonstrating how Black immigrants in predominantly White environments frequently feel compelled to alter their speech or conduct to attain respect and evade discrimination.

Like *Americanah*, *A Bit of Difference* emphasizes the myth of cultural diversity in London, showing how British people who supposedly take pride in London's cultural diversity are prejudiced against immigrants in work environments. For example, Deola describes the antagonistic environment of one of the accountancy

firms where she trained as "Stuckupsdale" and remarks on the discriminatory hierarchy directed at immigrant employees that she witnesses (Atta, 2013, p. 153). Certain colleagues are tolerated, while others are terminated amid a pervasive lack of respect for diverse backgrounds. This demonstrates that although London is celebrated as a multicultural metropolis, institutional discrimination in the workplace against immigrants endures. Deola's experiences exemplify how racial and cultural hierarchies govern treatment in professional environments, where certain immigrants are only tolerated rather than wholly embraced. In another incident in the same accountancy firm, Deola notes the disrespectful treatment of an elderly Nigerian employee by British employers who communicate with him in patronizing tones and casually refer to him as "Jimmy" (Atta, 2013, p. 155), an act inconceivable in Nigerian culture due to the profound reverence for elders. The patronizing behavior of the old Nigerian employee highlights Western indifference to cultural values such as respect for elders, emphasizing that immigrants must contend with both racial prejudice and the undermining of their cultural norms in the workplace. Thus, the prejudiced work environment that Deola encounters in London perpetuates forced assimilation, as immigrants are compelled to adhere to working norms to gain acceptance and evade marginalization. They are also expected to repress their cultural values, such as respect for elders, to conform to a system that diminishes their heritage, compelling them to adapt rather than assimilate on their own terms.

Just as language is a manifestation of cultural identity, so do hairstyles act as a physical marker of cultural identity. Hairstyles are malleable as they can be modified more readily through cultural expectations. According to this perspective, hair, as Kobena Mercer (1990) notes, becomes a "sensitive area of expression" (p. 250) situated at the intersection of self, society, and culture. Mercer suggests that hair transcends mere physicality. Situated at the convergence of self, society, and culture, hair embodies personal

identity, societal norms, and historical influences, rendering it a profoundly symbolic and occasionally contentious element of representation, especially within racialized and diasporic contexts. In her article, "Hair Politics in the Blogosphere" (2019), Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez asserts that the 'good/bad' hair dichotomy, wherein the former pertains to the straightened hair of white Western women and the latter to natural Afro hair, is perpetuated within American mainstream culture (p. 1). Afro natural hair is disparaged, but straight hair is seen as the epitome of femininity (Cruz-Gutiérrez, 2019). Cruz-Gutiérrez's examination of the good vs. bad hair dichotomy corresponds with Mercer's concept of hair as a 'sensitive area of expression', demonstrating how hair serves as a site of cultural and social conflict. The preference for straightened hair in American mainstream culture perpetuates Eurocentric beauty standards, marginalizing natural Afro hair and compelling Black individuals to contend with societal constraints that dictate how they should present themselves. This validates Mercer's assertion that hair transcends personal preference, being influenced by extensive historical, cultural, and racial meanings. Thus, African immigrants change their natural hairstyles in order to assimilate into American culture. This is seen in Aunty Uju who endeavors to conform to the American beauty ideal of hair styling to gain acceptance in job interviews. Upon successfully passing the medical licensing exams on her second attempt, Aunty Uju informs Ifemelu of her intention to relax her hair in order to enhance her chances of being accepted in the job interview: "If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional" (Adichie, 2013, p. 146). This indicates that Afro braided hair is associated with unprofessionalism and is deemed suitable exclusively for occupations perceived as unprofessional, such as that of jazz singers. Despite not initially agreeing with Aunty Uju, Ifemelu later straightens her hair in order to appear more American. Ifemelu's decision to straighten her hair, despite her initial reluctance, exemplifies forced assimilation, as she adheres to American beauty ideals to attain social and professional

recognition in a milieu that disparages natural Afro hair.

Ifemelu's experience of hair relaxing highlights the typical manifestation of physical and emotional distress associated with such an acculturative act. The narrator recounts her initial attempt to attend to the task herself, "but her hair remained kinky, its denseness unchanged" (Adichie, 2013, pp. 250-251). Mirroring her own experience throughout the initial phase of her stay in the diaspora, her hair resists giving up its natural form. At a later point, when Ifemelu is discussing job prospects in the United States with her friend Ruth, the latter suggests that she should consider losing her braids: "My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job" (Adichie, 2013, p. 250). Ifemelu then visits a hair salon to chemically straighten her hair. At the hair salon, she feels "only a slight burning, at first", but once "the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer", "needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head" (Adichie, 2013, p. 251). As indicated by the manifestation of physical pain on her skin as "scabs on her scalp" (Adichie, 2013, p. 252), this procedure signifies an emotional turmoil. The pain experienced by Ifemelu, stemming from her effort to downplay her visible strangeness within American society, ultimately causes her to become a stranger to herself:

> Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (Adichie, 2013, p. 251)

This reflects forced assimilation, as her chemically straightened hair, characterized by the burning odor and a feeling of loss, signifies the obliteration of her natural identity to conform to American beauty

ideals, reflecting the necessity for non-white individuals to adhere to American standards for social and professional acceptance. After she is accepted in the job, Ifemelu wonders if "the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro" (Adichie, 2013, p. 252). Ifemelu's observation underscores that her acceptance is contingent upon her straightened hair, indicating that success in America is determined not by merit but by the extent to which non-whites conform to American ideals.

In a similar manner to Ifemelu, Deola in *A Bit of Difference* tries to assimilate into the English culture by altering her hairstyle, as she "had to get her hair chemically relaxed for interviews. A partner in her accountancy firm commented that her braids were unprofessional" (Atta, 2013, p. 46). This shows that Deola, like Ifemelu, alters the way she looks in an attempt to assimilate into the English culture and secure a job, which implies that her assimilation is forced. Like Ifemelu, she notes that English people use hair style as an excuse to refuse African employees, emphasizing the myth of accepting cultural diversity in London, as is evident in the narrator's words: "Not once did she think her hair was the issue at hand" (Atta, 2013, p. 46). This reflects how hairstyle functions as a form of discrimination, where African employees in England, akin to Ifemelu in the United States, encounter rejection not due to their qualifications but for not adhering to Western hair-grooming norms. The loss of natural hair by Ifemelu and Deola signifies forced assimilation, as they are obligated to adhere to Western beauty standards at the expense of their African cultural identity. Catherine M. Frangie in *Milady Standard Cosmetology* (2008) explains that braided hair is rooted in African heritage and embodies meanings that extend beyond physical appearance as it reflects "a person's social status … [and] communicate[s] important signals about a person's self-esteem and self-image" (p. 528). In a similar manner, Mercer highlights the role of hair as "a key 'ethnic signifier' because, compared with bodily shape or facial features, it

can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening" (1990, 250). By straightening their hair, Ifemelu and Deola are not only altering their appearance, but also obliterating a tangible link to their African heritage, illustrating how forced assimilation frequently necessitates the relinquishment of cultural symbols to achieve social and professional acceptance.

While Ifemelu adopts forced assimilation strategy at the beginning of her stay in the United States, she later shifts to Berry's separation strategy. This is seen in her decision to cease imitating an American accent and return to her Nigerian accent. In agreement with Fanon (1952/1967), Elleke Boehmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2005) contends that "to be cut off from a mother tongue implied a damaging loss of connection with one's culture of origin" (p. 197). This reinforces the idea that language is deeply tied to identity, heritage, and belonging, and that forced assimilation often comes at the cost of cultural loss. Ifemelu's phone call with the telemarketer opens her eyes to the fact that she is not being herself and thus signifies a pivotal moment that she utilizes to reclaim her real accent. After the telemarketer congratulates her for sounding American, she feels ashamed as the narrator notes that she begins to "feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words 'You sound American' into a garland that she hung around her own neck" (Adichie, 2013, p. 215). For her, the situation is thorny as she regards native-like speech as a legitimate achievement, realizing how, by adopting an American accent, she has embraced the superiority of American English over Nigerian English: "Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American? She had won; Cristina Tomas, pallid-faced Cristina Tomas under whose gaze she had shrunk like a small, defeated animal, would speak to her normally now" (Adichie, 2013, p. 215). The quotation illustrates Ifemelu's moment of epiphany as she recognizes that she is mimicking a voice that is not authentically hers to evade bias from White Americans like Christina Thomas. Thus,

returning to West African English not only implies a greater measure of authenticity to herself and her Nigerian culture, but also resistance against prejudice by Americans, marking a turning point for her. She has mastered the American accent, yet opts not to use it because she rejects the adoption of a false identity. By reverting to her Nigerian accent and ceasing to roll her "r", Ifemelu perceives 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" (Adichie, 2013, p. 216). It feels for her like returning from a "vast, echoing space, because she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers" (Adichie, 2013, p. 216). Ifemelu's choice to maintain her Nigerian accent signifies her rejection of assimilation and corresponds with the assertion by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) that language serves as a fundamental indicator of identity in post-colonial contexts: "you are the way that you speak" (p. 53). By declining to modify her speech, Ifemelu affirms her Nigerian identity, contesting the belief that one's value or sense of belonging is contingent upon adopting a Western accent.

Ifemelu's adoption of the separation strategy is further highlighted through her foil Aunty Uju who fully adopts the assimilation strategy throughout her stay in the United States. Uju does not appear to be committed to preserving her Nigerian identity and cultural heritage. She undergoes a complete language transformation to fully conform to American culture, since she perceives the American accent as a suitable strategy for gaining acceptance within the prevailing American culture. Upon her initial encounter with Aunty Uju in America, Ifemelu recognizes that "America had subdued her" (Adichie, 2013, p. 135). Ifemelu notices that her aunt pronounces her own name as "you-joo" instead of "oo-joo" (Adichie, 2013, p. 128). Uju fully adopts an American accent even with her son, Dike. In one incident at the supermarket, upon seeing Dike take an item from the grocery store shelf, she tells him:

"'Dike, put it back'… with the nasal, sliding accent she put[s] on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans. *Pooh-reet-back.* And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing" (Adichie, 2013, p. 133). This indicates that Ifemelu associates Uju's manner of speech with her identity, her "new American self" (Adichie, 2013, p. 231). She reveals her identity as a performance, suggesting that she can potentially "shrug out of" it in environments not designated as 'American' (for instance, in her home or among fellow African immigrants) (Adichie, 2013, p. 231). Ifemelu's perception of Uju's identity as something she can 'shrug out of' in non-American contexts highlights that forced assimilation frequently serves as a survival strategy rather than an authentic transformation, thus emphasizing that conformity is imposed rather than voluntarily embraced. Moreover, Uju only switches to Igbo when she is scolding or threatening Dike, turning it into "a language of strife" (Adichie, 2013, p. 211). Uju does so as she hopes that only speaking English will facilitate his assimilation. For example, when Ifemelu speaks to Dike in Igbo, Aunty Uju tells her, "Please don't speak Igbo to him … Two languages will confuse him," and when Ifemelu asks why, Uju tells her, "This is America. It's different" (Adichie, 2013, p. 134). This shows that Uju discards her Nigerian language and culture in the process of her assimilation into American culture. Even with Dike, she tries her best to cultivate his identity as an American rather than a Nigerian. Uju's intentional rejection of her Nigerian language and culture indicates forced assimilation, as she is forced to sever ties with her indigenous culture in pursuit of the perceived prestige and social benefits associated with American identity. This corresponds with Fella Benabed's explanation of 'negative cultural hybrids' who "break with their native culture, and embrace the foreign one, in which they see more prestige" (2011, p. 85). Whereas Uju assimilates entirely and thus becomes a negative hybrid, disconnected from cultural rootedness, Ifemelu's active resistance by adopting the separation strategy and her ongoing

negotiation of cultural belonging align her with Selasi's vision of the Afropolitans as individuals who remain critically engaged with their African heritage while navigating global spaces with self-awareness and agency.

While Deola in *A Bit of Difference* does not adopt the separation strategy in reverting to her Nigerian accent, she draws on a similar path to Ifemelu by criticizing Nigerian immigrants' assimilation strategy reflected in adopting an English accent and discarding their Nigerian ones. She remarks that Nigerians speak with English accents identical to Europeans, noting that her friend Bandele "sounded completely English and all she knew about Nigerians who spoke that way is that they looked down on Nigerian's who didn't" (Atta, 2013, p. 32). Her remark shows that Deola does not only perceive linguistic assimilation as a problem, but she also ties the problem to Nigerians. Deola highlights the ongoing legacy of colonization evident in Africans' discrimination against one another based on a language that is not originally theirs. In a moment of reflection after years of her linguistic assimilation, she refers to speaking phonetics as an act of mimicry, maintaining that "only performers enjoy mimicking. Performers and apes" (Atta, 2013, p. 15). Deola criticizes mimicry and expresses her dissatisfaction with enunciating a language that mirrors the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, and values. Her return visit to Nigeria brings her to the realization that "[e]ven to her own ears she sounds fake and she is tired of rounding her vowels. Rounding her vowels hurts her mouth. She wonders what would happen if Nigerians refused to speak phonetics for one day" (Atta, 2013, pp. 175-176). Deola's critique of phonetics directly resonates with Bhabha's concept of 'colonial mimicry'[(2)]; a colonial strategy that demands the colonized to imitate the colonizer, yet marks them as perpetually different (1994, p. 86). Her framing of phonetic speech as a degrading performance underscores the dual function of mimicry as both a mechanism of colonial control and a site of subversive critique. Thus, Deola is

acutely aware of how language shapes postcolonial identity, a self-awareness that reinforces her Afropolitan identity as one grounded in critique. This aligns with Selasi's view of the Afropolitan who interrogates cultural influences while asserting a confident, evolving African identity. Deola's subsequent dissatisfaction with her modified accent shows similarity to Ifemelu's understanding that forced assimilation frequently undermines native culture and eradicates the authentic self. As Afropolitans, Ifemelu and Deola traverse various cultural spaces but eventually acknowledge the linguistic and cultural mismatch stemming from the prioritization of Western cultures over their Nigerian roots.

While Uju acts as a foil to Ifemelu in *Americanah,* Subu acts as a foil to Deola in *A Bit of Difference.* Even though Subu succeeds in securing a prestigious post in London, she adopts Berry's separation strategy throughout her stay there. Subu's love for her Nigerian culture and aversion to English culture can be viewed as a manifestation of her separation strategy. As a Nigerian living in London, Subu actively maintains her indigenous Nigerian culture by rejecting British influences, which is evident in her choice to retain her Nigerian accent and her refusal to adopt a British one, even if it means that she will lose her job. Deola describes Subu's voice as "thick and slow. She will not alter the pace of her voice or her accent for anyone, not even at work. She will keep repeating herself until she is understood" (Atta, 2013, p. 22). Subu's separation strategy is also seen in her strict adherence to religion, in contrast to Deola. For example, she decides to become a born-again Christian and is a member of a Pentecostal church led by a Nigerian preacher. She is also an active participant in the Nigerian diaspora community, unlike Deola. As Deola notes, "Through her church family, Subu gets invited to their *owambe*[3] functions, where they dress up in *aso ebi*[4], play juju music, spray money and eat jollof rice and fried goat meat" (Atta, 2013, p. 24). This is also seen in her going to the funerals of Nigerians that she is not even acquainted with. Her actions show that she

recreates a Nigerian home for herself within the diaspora through her religion and Nigerian rituals. Her emotional connections to her hometown remain intact through the separation strategy, as London serves as a secondary home via the habitual practices that evoke a sense of familiarity. Subu's rejection of cultural exchange and refusal to incorporate new influences limits her identity to cultural preservation rather than transformation. Therefore, her exclusive use of the separation strategy prevents her from embodying Afropolitanism, which, as Selasi and Gikandi argue, involves not only mobility, but also the capacity to critique, adapt, and reform identity across borders.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's separation strategy is also seen in her decision to stop straightening her hair and embrace its natural kinky form which reflects African culture. When her hair begins to fall out due to the relaxer, she decides to cut it. This decision serves as a clear expression of her refusal to conform to a system that demands the erasure of her identity. The narrator emphasizes the act of stopping hair relaxing, since it marks the birth of an individual who is acutely conscious of being an outsider to American culture. The recommendation from Ifemelu's friend Wambui to join HappilyKinkyNappy.com, a community dedicated to celebrating natural hair which is tailored exclusively for Black women, plays a crucial role in Ifemelu's emotional maturation towards embracing her natural hair. By joining this group, Ifemelu restores her self-respect and steadfast conviction in the ancestral Afro tradition of hair braiding. According to Cruz-Gutiérrez (2019), Adichie is referring to the "third wave of the Natural Hair Movement", the "most distinctive feature [of which] is arguably its close association with the proliferation of social networks as spaces of 'participatory culture'" (p. 2). Cruz-Gutiérrez's reference to the 'third wave of the Natural Hair Movement' underscores the role of social networks in fostering cultural reclamation and resistance, paralleling Berry's strategy of separation. By embracing her natural hair and participating in online

communities that honor Black identity, Ifemelu consciously rejects American beauty ideals and reclaims her African heritage, exemplifying a deliberate separation from prevailing cultural norms instead of pursuing forced assimilation. Ifemelu's appreciation of her natural hair becomes evident when, after a period of time following HappilyKinkyNappy.com, one day in particular "she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way" (Adichie, 2013, p. 264).

Ifemelu and Deola's ongoing negotiation of identity and the fact that they do not consistently employ a single acculturation strategy throughout their immigration journeys show the continuous and dynamic nature of acculturation and their ongoing quest for identity. As Afropolitans who reject static or essentialist perspectives of African identity and adopt a fluid identity influenced by international experiences, they adopt different strategies that open up space for their hybridity, emphasizing the malleability of Afropolitan cultural identities. As Afropolitans, they criticize the notion of complete assimilation into the host societies' culture. Ifemelu contests the idea that assimilation necessitates the relinquishment of one's cultural identity, promoting a more sophisticated comprehension of belonging that permits the coexistence of various cultural identities. Likewise, Deola's experiences encourage her to evaluate the expectations imposed upon her as an immigrant and underscore the significance of maintaining a connection to her heritage culture. Their transition from forced assimilation to separation exemplifies Stuart Hall's second perspective on identity, where identity is perceived not as static or anchored in a particular past, but as an ongoing process of evolution, influenced by history, culture, and diversity.

To conclude, the analysis of the two characters elucidates the intricate connection between identity reformation and acculturation among first-generation Afropolitan female immigrants. Ifemelu and Deola testify that first-generation Afropolitans experience a persistent

tension between the aspiration to assimilate into the host society and the apprehension of forfeiting aspects of their Nigerian values and identities, resulting in forced assimilation. Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Deola in *A Bit of Difference* face forced assimilation, since their initial encounters in the West necessitate conformity to prevailing cultural norms to evade social and professional marginalization. Nonetheless, their immigration journeys do not culminate in total assimilation; instead, over time, both characters gravitate towards the separation strategy as delineated by Berry, deliberately reasserting elements of their Nigerian identity that they had previously repressed. Based on their experiences, the article asserts that the forced factor pertaining to their assimilation plays a great role in the adoption of Berry's separation strategy later. This in turn may lead to the generalization that when assimilation is forced, Afropolitans may initially adhere to the prevailing culture out of the need to integrate. Nevertheless, sustained pressure can lead to cultural distancing from the hostland and embracing the separation strategy, reaffirming their African cultural roots. Ifemelu and Deola's shifting acculturation strategies prove the malleability and fluidity of Afropolitan cultural identity, highlighting the intersection of diverse cultural influences in the reformation of African cultural identities.

Notes:

1. Simon Gikandi (2011) defines Afro-pessimism as: "the belief that the continent and its populace is hopelessly imprisoned in its past, trapped in a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions. Afro-pessimism, which emerged as the figure of representing Africa during the political and economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, has become the dominant idiom through which African experiences are recuperated and filtered" (p. 9).

2. Homi K. Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 86).
3. Popularized by renowned juju musician Ebenezer Obey, the concept of *owambe* highlights the social prestige of individuals who are frequently invited to major social events and publicly honored by praise singers for their prominent status within the community (Decker, 2014).

4. The term literally translates to "affinity garment" and refers to clothing made to show solidarity with a celebrant and to mark a special occasion. Traditionally tailored in indigenous styles, *aso-ebi* outfits have increasingly evolved, particularly among younger generations, to incorporate modern or hybrid designs that blend local and Western fashion influences (Ọmọbọwale and Olutayọ, 2010).

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