K1 – Postcolonial Studies Synopsis

Acculturation Processes in First and Second Generation Female
Characters from Americanah and White Teeth

Introduction

This synopsis aims to analyse how immigrants acculturate successfully between adopting and retaining elements from the heritage and receiving culture. The focus is on two female first and second generation immigrant characters from Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (2000) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Americanah (2013). Irie, from the first book, lives in London and is a second generation immigrant born of a Jamaican mother and a British father. From the second novel, Ifemelu is a Nigerian woman who lives in her home country until her late teens and afterwards decides to move to America to study university there. The books debate, among others, such notions as: identity, immigration and acculturation. The character’s different life realities give a pathway to a rich comparative analysis of various acculturation processes.

Problem definition

What are the differences between Irie’s and Ifemelu’s acculturation processes from heritage culture to received culture and how can these differences be comparatively analysed?

Theoretical clarifications

Different conceptual notions are applied in these pages. As an operational concept, acculturation is seen as a process of adaptation which is dependent on two components: adoption of receiving culture practices and ideas and retention of culture ideals and practices from the heritage culture (Schwartz et.al, 2: 2006).

A postmodernist interpretation of ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ is used. Much writing has been done on defining these terms and a consensus has yet to be reached on which of them is better. The attempt here is not for universal definitions, but ones that are flexible enough to fit diverse situations. Individual and social identities (which are in focus in the synopsis) are ‘resulting from the dynamic interplay between individual and context’ between goals, values and beliefs, and group inclusion and exclusion processes (Erikson in Schwartz et.al, 5-6: 2006).
Culture is defined as a society’s set of ‘shared standard operating procedures, unstated assumptions, tools, norms, values, habits about sampling the environment, and the like’ (Triandis & Tuh, 136: 2001). It can be deduced from this definition that each society has a majority group who defines what is represented though culture. Of course, this also presupposes the existence of marginal groups that do not adhere perfectly to dominant discourse.

Centrality and displacement of the gaze

Richard Drier writes that the ‘claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity’ (310: 1997) and that white people are most always seen as inhabiting a ‘non-raced’ perspective because they speak from the norm, they are and have been creators of the majority discourse for a very long time. Because of that they tend to represent the accepted perspective from which the racial other is constructed. This is generally true, but not always. In Americanah, the normative gaze is displaced. The reader follows Ifemelu who is proud of her roots and sees the world through those eyes. She moves to America and although she mostly admires and sometimes acculturates elements from that society, she does not identify with the white or black American gaze. Because of this the novel presents a shifted gaze: the Western subject changes from viewer to viewed, and he also becomes a function of comparison for the non-western subject and not vice versa.

Irie, on the other hand, stands in a more problematic position. Because she knows almost nothing about her roots (‘De past is done wid. Nobody learn nuttin’ from it.’) (Smith, 410: 2000) and she has no contact with other Jamaicans; she can only identify her roots through the gaze of the other, because of this mimicking but never embodying the white dominant gaze or as Bhabha refers to it ‘almost the same but not white’ (89: 1994). One can conclude from this that her notion of being Jamaican comes from her interactions with other white and black British people, not from interactions with other Jamaicans. Home is identified in opposition to London and most only through this dimension.

Boundaries and unhomeliness

Irie and Ifemelu are thrown into a world in which they need to navigate social norms and unspoken assumptions to discover for themselves what it means to have a black ‘other’ identity. They do this differently, but constantly get confronted with epistemological boundaries. These boundaries are represented by the voices of the others and the limits to
their ideological discourses; but they also presuppose the existence of the voiceless, those who cannot have the ability to make themselves heard, who have been colonized. Bhabha considers that the boundary is the place where something ‘begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond’ (76: 1994). Irie is the one who has the most anxious struggles between boundaries because although she has two cultures in her blood, she is given the ability to voice her existence just in one – the receiving culture. To reach a proper articulation of the beyond, she must first be able to map the boundaries.

Her position is one of ‘unhomeliness’ due to her personal history, her initiation in displacement. In White Teeth, the narrator writes: ‘There is no proper term for it – original sin seems too harsh; maybe original trauma would be better’ (161: 2000). The unhomely is the space in which the private and the public confuse places: ‘the personal-is-the political; the world-in-the-home’ (Bhabha, 78: 1994). And indeed most of the book’s characters suffer from this problem. But Irie has the clarity of mind to make cold judgements and not throw herself into the extremes. She observes them (Chaulfenism, Bowdenism, FATE and KEVIN) but she does not take someone else’s answers for being hers; she wants to go back to the roots (Jamaica) and see for herself what the truth is.

Ifemelu adopts another position. She knows who she is and she does not necessarily want to change. She is more like a precise observer. In her personal blog ‘Raceteenth or Curious Observations about American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black’ she writes frank, funny but many times cutting observations of what it means to live in the receiving culture. She considers that she ‘came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America’ (Adichie, 359: 2013). She is confronted with the reality that the concept of race permeates the everyday life in the US. She works against these unspoken, accepted ways of being by pushing against biological determinist assumptions and presenting actors as individuals and not as groups considered to be genetically constituted (the black – the thieves, the poor, the lazy) (Oyewumi, 93: 1997).

Mimicry and the third space

In White Teeth and Americanah, immigrant identity, black internationalism and black identity are discussed. These notions are seen as fluid and are made sense of in the everyday of the multifaceted and complex postmodern. The point underlined by Cameron in his blog
about black international identity is that a subject’s expression of social and individual identities are dependent on situational context, social categories through which people view and are viewed and their dialogical connections (2014: AAIHS). So, identity cannot be considered as only being fluid in and of itself, its fluidity is also constituted in the continual choosing of how it is to be expressed in contexts.

Bhabha has a similar point when he describes the third space or the in-between space, were hybridity enables other positions to emerge (Rutherford, 211: 1990). The mechanisms through which the subject’s identification with the third space is created are cultural translation, mimicry and hybridity (the latter of which in this paper is further specified as acculturation because this enables a more specific analysis of subject retention and adoption processes from receiving and heritage cultures). Bhabha defines mimicry as being the representation of ‘presence in terms of ‘otherness’, that which it disavows’ (89: 1994). Especially when Ifemelu had just moved to America, she mimicked so as to fit better into society. To blend in she gave up her Nigerian accent until she realized ashamed that she was starting to value more American rather than Nigerian culture. Afterwards, she stopped using the learned accent, relishing in her new appreciation of her language.

She discards this form of mimicry but retains others that she can appropriate without renouncing parts of her heritage culture she does not wish to give up. Still, the paradox with mimicry lies in the subject’s constant state of ambivalence, in a tug of war, between the heritage and the receiving culture. She is concomitantly the originator and the performer mimicking authenticity. But then, mimicry presupposes authenticity becoming mirrored – different, uncanny, alien of itself. Bhabha considers that cultural hybridity does not assume that aspects of a culture which are put together with another ‘are prior in the sense of being original: they are prior only in the sense of being anterior’ (Rutherford, 211: 1990) and this is the helping hand that guides Ifemelu to navigate the third space.

But is Irie in the same position? As people view her as being the other they consider her to be mimicking British culture. That is the dilemma of being a second generation immigrant. Irie is not mimicking because she has been acculturating from infancy that culture. Rather the issue is that she is seen as mimicking and therefore seen as the outsider. This leads Irie to identity distress because for her the receiving culture has become the heritage culture, as it is the one that she knows most about and identifies with. Her ethnic
identity performance becomes alienated from itself, false and so, the third space that she inhabits becomes even fuller of ambivalences.

**Acculturation and first and second generation immigrants**

Schwartz et al. in their paper about teenage immigrant acculturation specify that creating an efficient balance between heritage and receiving culture can be difficult. The number of barriers, variability and benefits to a successful acculturation depend on how many hard concessions the immigrant will need to make to be accepted into the receiving culture’s in-group and what these acculturations mean for her continuation in her heritage culture in-group (10: 2006).

In Walters’ quantitative study on identity construction for first and second generation immigrants, it was shown that immigrants do not identify equally with the heritage or receiving culture. Depending also on the length of the acculturation period, second generation immigrants with relative success in the new culture will identify more with the receiving culture; those who have struggled more with the receiving culture will identify more easily with the heritage culture. In regards to the recently immigrated teens (3-8 years), they do not particularly identify with either of the groups, ‘not feeling as much pressure to ‘choose’ between identifying with or distancing from’ them (Walters, 802-803, 809: 1994). Due to these different identifications, the three groups also see themselves in different positions in relation to the cultural majority group (Walters, 811: 1994).

In the case of Ifemelu, she identifies best in the third immigrant identity group. Although she has strong feeling toward Nigerian culture, she does not construct this identity in opposition to the other groups. She writes half jokingly half truthfully about the way that she inhabits the middle ground between white and black while still being required to be socially appropriate:

‘You must show that you are offended when such words as ‘watermelon’ or ‘tar baby’ are used as jokes, even if you don’t know what the hell is being talked about […] You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area […] In describing black women you admire, always use the word ‘STRONG’ because that’s what black women are supposed to be in America.’ (273-274: 2013)

This shows the complicated and many times messy acculturation processes that she goes through in order to balance her two cultures. Cultural translation happens for Ifemelu and due
to her Yale education she has a socially and economically stable position, but she still lives in
a society in which ‘race’ is one of the primary factors of differentiation between people, and
at a certain point would need to shed her immigrant identity in favour for one of the other
groups. In fact she receives envy from black people (for keeping her Nigerian accent and
having a well-paid job); acceptance from other black people that have the same social position
as her as long as does not disrupt the discursive boundaries; and mixed reactions from white
people (for her hair style or having a blond boyfriend). To avoid acculturating even more and
inevitably distancing herself from her heritage culture, she moves back to Nigeria where she
is seen by most as ‘Americanah’ – a nickname given lovingly and admiringly (this time
almost the same, but more white).

Irie is confronted with the question ‘Who am I?’ and has no specific answer. This is
problematic because she lets herself be defined by her two cultures, but no culture is complete
in itself. This is not only because the existence of one presuppose the existence of other
cultures, but also because through its ‘symbol-forming activity, its own interpellation in the
process of representation, language, signification and meaning-making, (it) always
underscores the claim to an originary, holistic, organic identity’ (Rutherford, 210: 1990).
Culture is in a continual process of translation. So Irie relates to her ethnic identity through a
mirrored gaze. In trying to solve her identity distress she needs to ‘identify the personal
significance of, and the individual’s feeling about, the receiving and heritage cultures’. This
would enable her to define, rather than be defined by her cultural identifications (Schwarts
et.al, 23: 2006) and to do that she would need collective help from family but also other
Jamaicans belonging to the in-group.

In regards to Walters’ three categories, she balances in between wanting to identify
more with the heritage culture and desiring to be insider in the receiving culture’s in-group.
Her position is tricky due to her not knowing about her roots. In the end of the novel she is
shown returning to Jamaica but it is not revealed if she inclines towards any of the groups. In
fact she maintains this attitude for the whole duration of the book. Most of the others are
fundamentalists or have had such tendencies at a certain point; Irie does not go in any of these
directions possibly because she does not know who she is in relation to these groups and
because of that her plea at the end comes from a moderate, global perspective. She dreams
about: ‘a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t
because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re buried to
damn deep. She looks forward to it’ (Smith, 527: 2000).
Conclusion

Irie and Ifemelu acculturate differently because of their being different generation immigrants. Irie is a second generation immigrant but her positioning in Walters’ three groups category is confused because she does not know about her roots or have connections to other Jamaicans. It appears from here that immigrant acculturation and identification with other groups must be seen through a flexible, fluid continuum. Mutability but also identity crises lead to the subject’s positioning in the in-between, in the third space. Bhabha (who writes about the third space) and Walters (who goes further by characterising how individuals group in this third space depending on social-psychological factors) complement each other for the mapping and understanding of their immigrant realities. As Bhabha provides relevant theoretical framing and Walters provides factual data for the analysis. This insight creates a constant defining and questioning of the boundaries of immigrant acculturation and retention processes that is much needed for a fluid, multifaceted understanding of social and individual identities.

Because Ifemelu in the receiving culture identifies with an immigrant identity, she moves in-between the boundaries of heritage and receiving culture without aligning herself with any of them. Due to the ambivalence which comes with inhabiting the third space, she has a thorough insight into both of the groups and their relation to the culturally dominant one. The observation that she makes in her blog capture this perspective. She struggles to make the invisible unspoken assumptions about how race is to be inhabited in America visible and to make others question them. Ifemelu herself relates differently to her heritage and receiving culture throughout the book. Sometimes she connects with communities of African Americans, other times she distances from them. She sees the receiving culture as good in some aspects but lacking in certain others in comparison to her heritage culture. Returning to Nigeria, she is seen by others as ‘Americanah’. This makes relevant Bhabha’s view that social and individual understanding of identity is constructed in a perpetual process of mirroring, continually asking for some form of translation or mimicry.

Perspectives

Had this been in the format of a semester project, a few changes would have also been made. Firstly, a genealogic analysis of the female character’s family members would have been made. Through doing this a historical macro understanding of the evolution of colonialism and immigrant identity would have been accessible. Secondly, more social-
psychological academic papers on first and second generation immigrants would have been used, as these give a rich insight into comparative immigrant realities. Thirdly, more research would have been put into discovering the limits to which academics have covered Irie’s case (rootless second generation immigrant and how they manage a successful acculturation). Her case would have been possibly compared with Ifemelu’s cousin, Dike, who tries to commit suicide because of this.

Reference list:


Lindh, Anna. *Split Identities – Hybridity and Mimicry within the characters of ‘White Teeth’*. Högskolan i Halmstad, Sektion för Humaniora. Engleska 41-60. 1-21


