



CULTURAL CRINGE REFLECTED IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS* AND *AMERICANAH*

P. Madhumitha¹, Dr. A.Padma Priya²

¹Assistant Professor and Research Scholar (Part-Time) of English, Mepco Schlenk
Engineering College, Sivakasi.

²Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for
Women, Sivakasi.

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.3.286](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.3.286)



Article info

Article Received: 30/08/2024
Article Accepted: 26/09/2024
Published online: 30/09/2024

Abstract

An internalized inferiority complex that causes the people of a country to dismiss their own culture as inferior-tinge when compared to the cultures of other countries, especially "superior" colonizing countries. The impact of colonialism, immigration, and displacement are the causes of this belief of inferiority. Native culture, religion, language provides ethnic identity and the sense of self, however those can also appear to be cringe which result in alienation from the host culture. This incomplete adaptation gives rise to cringe towards one's own culture. This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural cringe reflected in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Americanah*. Adichie's debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* set in postcolonial Nigeria. The story is viewed from the point of view of fifteen year old Kambili about the disintegration of her family and struggle to grow to maturity. *Americanah* tells the story of Ifemelu who immigrated to the United States to attend the university and about the people who seek to leave the country.

Key words: Culture, Cringe, Immigration, Identity, Colonialism

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most prominent Nigerian female writers in the contemporary period. Adichie went to Nsukka, Nigeria, with her Igbo parents as the fifth of six children when she was a young girl. She adored *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe when she was a little girl, and it had a profoundly altering effect on her. She briefly studied medicine in Nsukka before departing

for the United States in 1997 to attend Eastern Connecticut State University, where she majored in political science and communication (B.A., 2001). She studied African history at Yale University while dividing her time between Nigeria and the US, earning a master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University.

The multifaceted and complicated characteristics of interpersonal interactions and relationships in a dystopian society is captured

in Adichie's novels. In 2005, Adichie's debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Africa) as well as the overall prize for Best First Book. Additionally, it was on the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction shortlist. She is the author of *Americanah* (2013), as well as a collection of short stories, "The Thing Around Your Neck", and other works. Her writings have been published in numerous magazines, including The O. Henry Prize Stories (2003), The New Yorker, Granta, the Financial Times, Zoetrope, and Farafina magazine, and have been translated into thirty different languages.

Cultural cringe in African literature

"Cultural cringe" was coined in Australia after the second world war by the Melbourne critic and social commentator A.A.Philips. It explored the ingrained feelings of inferiority that were evident in a 1950 essay of the same name in the Australian theater, music, art and letters. This essay is not considered as a cornerstone in the development of post-colonial theory in Australia. It could be potentially applied to all colonial nations including Africa.

The concept, cultural cringe, deals with the perceived sense of inferiority of shame regarding one's own culture as subjugated in comparison to another dominant culture which is perceived as superior. It is common in colonized countries where the dominant culture is imposed and affects the perception of the subjugated culture. This cultural cringe could lead individuals or societies to depreciate their own culture expressions, traditions, language to favor the dominant culture. Cultural cringe could be exhibited as cultural alienation too by fostering a sense of detachment from one's cultural identity.

Cultural Cringe-In African literature

Cultural cringe could be spotted in the context of African literature too. During the colonial period, Africans were often marginalized and looked down as inferior to the dominant colonizers. Africans faced difficulties

as they grappled with the challenges of postcolonialism in terms of inadequate employment opportunities, poor access to quality education, corruption and poverty. This made them dream and flee to other countries especially to Europe and American countries.

Therefore, Africans desire to immigrate to the developed West, especially to become Americans or British citizens to solace from the economic discomfort in Africa. However, it burdens the individual psychologically, spiritually and other problems which we refer to as cultural cringe and alienation in this study.

Purple Hibiscus

The concept of cultural cringe in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is evinced through various characters and themes which reflects a critical view of the perceived inferiority of local culture compared to Western standards. The key aspects are the religious extremism of Eugene Achike (Papa), language and communication in the native tongue, and the contrasting living style of Eugene and his sister Auntie Ifeoma which plays a vital role in the development of the teenage narrator Kambili in this novel.

Eugene Achike (Papa) is a cryptic character who embodies the phenomenon of cultural cringe which leads to a rejection of his native customs in favor of Western culture as superior. He demonstrates his cringe towards his native culture through his religious Zealotry and rejection of traditional beliefs, his rejection of Native foods and practices, his preference for Western culture in the education and upbringing of his children, his criticism towards Nigerian society and so on.

Eugene is a zealous person towards catholicism who practices his faith with fervor and expects the same from his family members. He vehemently rejects and condemns his traditional Igbo beliefs and practices. He considers those who follow Igbo beliefs as pagan and backward. For instance, he forbids

his family from visiting his father, Papa-Nnukwu, because he follows the traditional Igbo religion.

"Heathen," Papa said quietly, "Godlessness. That is what you people live in. Godlessness." (Chapter 6)

In this scene, Eugene refers to those who adhere to traditional Igbo beliefs as living in "godlessness," which reflects his disdain and view of these practices as inferior and pagan.

Eugene runs a successful factory and owns a well-known newspaper, both of which adhere to Western practices. His newspaper, *The Standard*, castigates the corruption and inefficiencies in Nigeria, contrasting them with the perceived superiority of Western systems implicitly. The following lines from the novel, illustrates his criticism of Nigerian society which implicitly expresses his belief in the superiority of Western systems :

"We will take back our country, we will build a society where a man cannot buy a plot of land with one hundred naira. We will make our leaders accountable to those they lead. We will do it by changing the way we think, the way we live, the way we do business. We will do it like the white people". (Chapter 4)

It succinctly shows his implicit cultural cringe as he views Western systems as a model for improvement.

Eugene's children, Kambili and Jaja attend St.Nicholas, a strict Catholic school underscores Eugene's commitment to provide his children with a Western-style education and religious upbringing, reflecting his preference for Western values over indigenous ones. And he strictly controls their upbringing to align with his rigid views of what he perceives as morally and culturally superior.

"Papa was sitting at the dining table when we got home. 'You are eating ten minutes

late,' he said quietly. 'Do you know how many minutes are in ten minutes?'" (Chapter 6)

This extends to punishing them severely for any deviation from his rules, which are heavily influenced by his adoption of Western values over their indigenous culture.

Eugene sends his children, Kambili and Jaja, to a strict Catholic school, ensuring they receive a Western-style education. He strictly controls their upbringing to align with his rigid views of what he perceives as morally and culturally superior. This extends to punishing them severely for any deviation from his rules, which are heavily influenced by his adoption of Western values over their indigenous culture.

"He unbuckled his belt slowly. It was a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle. 'Malu, you are eating ten minutes late,' he said. 'Has the devil asked you all to go on errands for him?' He lifted the belt and then landed it on Jaja's back. Jaja did not make a sound; it was I who screamed." (Chapter 6)

These lines demonstrate Eugene's harsh punishment for what he perceives as disobedience, reflecting his strict and oppressive enforcement of his values and rules within the household.

Eugene prefers to speak English over his native language. He views the use of English as a sign of intelligence and worth, thereby devaluing his own cultural and linguistic heritage.

"Papa liked it when the villagers made an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed they had good sense." (Chapter 1)

This observation of Kambili demonstrates his belief in the superiority of Western culture and his internalized cultural cringe. He insists his children speak English and often reprimands them for speaking Igbo.

" Why do you walk into this house and speak Igbo?" Papa asked, standing up.

“Do you want to Like those people outside?” (Chapter 1) These lines highlight his cultural cringe and desire to distance and rejection of his family from their indigenous roots.

The fifteen-year-old narrator, Kambili sees the world through the lens of her father in the beginning of the novel. She is raised in her home where her father’s authoritarian and religious beliefs shape her worldview. Due to her upbringing, a sense of fear and obedience as well as a tendency to view her own culture with a sense of inferiority are instilled in her mind. In this way, she experiences the world through the lens of “cultural cringe”.

However, her exposure to Aunt Ifeoma’s household shifts her perspective and helps her to understand herself and the world better in the end. Her Aunt Ifeoma is an independent and strong-willed woman who fosters a warm and open relationship with her children. She works as a Professor at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka who is not afraid to criticize her brother , Eugene, the University, or the Nigerian Government.

She is a catholic but she understands her father Papa-Nnukwu’s traditionalist beliefs. She encourages her children to speak Igbo and promotes their cultural pride in them. After Kambili witnesses her Aunt Ifeoma’s household which is more liberal and embraces both traditional Nigerian culture and Catholicism in a more balanced way she shifts her perspective. Kambili is introduced to a different way of life where experiences freedom, self-expression and love.

Americanah

The award- winning author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s third novel, *Americanah* , is intricately explored through the experiences and transformations of its characters, especially Ifemelu and Obinze. In this novel, the concept of cultural cringe refers to the internalized inferiority complex towards

their culture that leads individuals to overvalue Western culture. The title of the novel, *Americanah*, encapsulates the immigrant experiences, the impact of different environments on one self and the struggles of reconciling those experiences.

Many characters in this novel, who wish to or have left Nigeria, romanticize the West and view their homeland through a lens of disdain. Adichie prudently contrasts the lives of Nigerians in Nigeria with those who have emigrated in this novel. The concept of cultural cringe is intricately woven into the narrative and the experiences of the characters. It is illustrated through Ifemelu's initial perception of America, her pressure to assimilate with American culture, Obinze’s experience in England, Ifemelu’s blog, “The Non-American Black”, and so on. In the end, Ifemelu recognizes the flaws in her perspective and rediscovers her Nigerian identity.

The protagonist, Ifemelu, initially dreams to live in America, sees it as a land of opportunity and a place where she can escape the limitations she feels in Nigeria.

“America was where she was supposed to be, the place she had pined for...” (Chapter 9)

This line from the novel, reflects Ifemelu’s anticipation and hope that America will offer her the freedom and new opportunities in a different cultural context. This perception is influenced by the global cultural hegemony of America, which promotes its culture as superior.

Ifemelu’s blog called ‘Various Observations about American Blacks by Non-American Black’, becomes her platform to critique and dissect the cultural cringe she observes among African immigrants in America. She highlights the pressure of non-American Blacks to assimilate the Western culture which distances themselves from their cultural roots in order to get acceptance in the

society. Several blog entries are interspersed in this novel which illustrate this cringe.

For instance, in a post, Ifemelu writes about the concept of “racial disorder syndrome” to express how race is perceived and discussed in America.

“Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become Black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t ‘black’ in your country? You’re in America now... (p-273)

Her observations and candid reflections on these issues help her to grow awareness and to reject cultural cringe in the end.

Ifemelu’s friend, Ginika epitomizes cultural cringe through her efforts to assimilate into American culture which influence Ifemelu’s initial perception. She adopts an American accent and mannerisms, and her appearance to align with Western ideals in America. This adaptation shows an implicit devaluation of her Nigerian identity.

Then Auntie Uju exemplifies cultural cringe and her dissatisfaction towards her Nigerian identity through her attempts to assimilate into American culture. After she moves to the US, she quickly adopts American norms and attitudes. She is a doctor, who struggles to maintain her professional status in America. She faces racism and professional hurdles, however she never voices pride in her Nigerian qualification.

Auntie Uju tries to sound more American through her alteration in her accent and insists on using English in every conversation with Ifemelu:

“Auntie Uju had, finally, after many false starts, perfected her accent. She spoke almost like an American... (p.133)

This line highlights her efforts to adapt her accent to fit in with American culture and her desire to distance herself from her Nigerian roots. Uju raises her son Dike, focusing on his integration into American society. She discourages him from speaking Igbo which reflects her belief to tie with American cultural norms.

Her son, Dike embodies the effects of cultural cringe through his identity struggle and cultural detachment. He grows up in America but feels neither fully American nor Nigerian. He experiences alienation and confusion about his heritage which leads to a complex identity crisis. His detachment from Nigerian culture leads to a sense of emptiness and confusion:

“Auntie Uju had been determined to raise him American. She had refused to teach him Igbo because ‘Americans don’t understand bilingualism,’ and ...” (p 205)

This culminates in a mental health crisis which underscores the detrimental effects of cultural cringe:

“Dike attempted suicide. It had happened a few months ago, and auntie Uju had cried over the Phone to her, in broken sentences that made Ifemelu’s ears swell with grief.” (p 286)

Then, Ifemelu’s childhood lover Obinze’s experience in the UK and his return also shed light on cultural cringe. He experiences the dehumanizing aspects of an undocumented immigrant in the UK. He returns to his native and becomes a famous businessman. He becomes a part of the Nigerian elite who display a form of cultural cringe by adopting Western lifestyles and values:

“ The table was filled with people who were all, as Ifemelu would later describe them, ‘Nigerians who had gone abroad, done well for themselves, and come back to do well for themselves at home.’ They slipped in and out of accents, their laughter rang out easily, they drank

champagne and talked about the property they had bought in London and in New York..." (p 39)

But, he searches for authenticity amidst these Westernized Nigerians and resist cultural cringe:

"Obinze felt a coldness toward them, these people who made such a show of their acquired foreignness, who were so impressed with their own surfaces and expected others to be impressed as well. He had met them, and he had admired them, but now he felt a sharp disinterest. He felt a hollow, darkening gap between himself and this new Nigerian elite." (p 36)

Conclusion

In both novels, cultural cringe is marked by a journey toward self-discovery, acceptance and pride in one's cultural heritage. Characters learn to embrace their identities, finding strength and fulfillment in their roots in the end.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the narrator Kambili grows more mature and confident to question her father's beliefs and recognizes the importance of cultural heritage. Kambili and her brother Jaja's exposure to Aunt Ifeoma's household which marks the balance of traditional Igbo culture and open-mindedness helps them to reconnect with their heritage. And they feel a sense of belonging and identity. And Jaja's rebellion against his father's tyranny symbolizes a rejection of the oppressive aspects of Eugene's colonial mentality. It marks the beginning towards self-acceptance and cultural pride.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's journey of self-acceptance is evident in her decision to stop straightening her hair and accept her natural curls. Then she openly discusses the realities of race and identity in America through her blog. She returns to Nigeria to embrace her heritage, and identity. Obinze's return to his Nigeria too shows that he understands the true self-worth

and dignity are not tied to Western validation and aims to live authentically in his native. In the end, Ifemelu and Obinze reunion reflect a mutual acceptance and celebration of their cultural background.

References

- [1]. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Algonquin Books, 2003.
- [2]. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- [3]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_cringe#Origin
- [4]. Nebeife, Cassandra Ifeo, and Queen Nneoma Kanu. "Trauma of Migration: A Psychoanalytical Study of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." *Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies* 1 (2022).
- [5]. Pourgharib, Behzad, Asl, Moussa Pourya and Esmaili, Somayeh. "Decolonized Trauma: Narrative, Memory and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" *arcadia*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2023, pp. 16-34.
- [6]. Andermahr, Sonya. "'Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism' – Introduction." *Humanities* 4.4 (2015): 500-505.20
- [7]. Asika, Emmanuel Ikechukwu, Nneka Anastasia Osigwe, and Bridget Ngozi Madu. "The Trauma Of Exile And Migration In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*." *Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies* 2.1 (2021).
- [8]. Abubakar, Sadiya. "Traumatic experiences of Nigerian women: An archetypal representation in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*." *Social Sciences* 4.03 (2016): 2016