

MIMICRY AND HYBRIDITY IN NKEM’S IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE’S *IMITATION*

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Article History:	Received	Revision	Accepted	Published
	May 20, 2026	June 28, 2026	July 2, 2026	September 28, 2026

Abstract

Postcolonial literature provides a significant space for examining how diasporic subjects negotiate cultural identity across different social and cultural environments. Although previous studies of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Imitation* have addressed displacement, resistance, cultural ambivalence, and linguistic negotiation, limited attention has been given to the processual relationship between mimicry and hybridity in Nkem’s identity transformation. This study examines the representation of mimicry and hybridity in *Imitation* and explains how these interconnected processes contribute to the negotiation of Nkem’s postcolonial identity. Employing a qualitative literary research design, the study applies textual analysis guided by Homi K. Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, and the Third Space. Data were collected through close reading and textual documentation and analyzed through indicator-based coding. Mimicry was identified through imitation or adaptation to dominant cultural practices; ambivalence through contradictory cultural responses and tensions between adaptation and cultural attachment; alienation through experiences of estrangement, displacement, dissatisfaction, or lack of belonging; and hybridity through the coexistence and negotiation of Nigerian and American cultural positions. The coded passages were subsequently interpreted within their narrative contexts to trace the relationships among cultural adaptation, ambivalence, alienation, hybridity, and identity transformation. The findings reveal that mimicry is manifested through Nkem’s adaptation to American material culture, social conventions, and expectations of femininity and marital life, while the resulting ambivalence and alienation expose the limitations of cultural accommodation. Hybridity emerges as Nkem increasingly negotiates Nigerian and American cultural positions through domestic practices, bodily transformation, and changing marital relations, enabling greater self-definition and agency. The study concludes that mimicry and hybridity are dynamically interconnected rather than separate or strictly sequential processes through which Nkem’s postcolonial identity remains fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed.

Keywords

Hybridity, Identity Negotiation, Mimicry, Postcolonial Identity, *Imitation*

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial literature provides an important space for examining how colonial histories continue to shape cultural identity, social relations, and individual experience after the formal end of colonial rule. Literary representations of postcolonial identity demonstrate that colonial legacies continue to influence cultural negotiation, displacement, and identity formation across generations (Aurangzeb & Saeed, 2025; Wulandari, 2025). Accordingly, postcolonial studies approach colonialism not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a continuing structure of power manifested through cultural hierarchies, racial assumptions, language, representation, and social practices. Colonial discourse constructs cultural difference through stereotyping, ideological binaries, and representations of the “Other,” thereby sustaining unequal relations of power (Saeed, 2025). Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism provides a foundational framework for understanding how such unequal relations are sustained through interconnected structures of knowledge, representation, and power (Shahadat, 2024). Later postcolonial perspectives further questioned fixed categories of cultural identity and authority, emphasizing that the effects of colonial power continue to shape how postcolonial subjects position themselves across different cultural contexts (Martono, 2012; Syuropati & Soebachman, 2012). This continuing negotiation of cultural identity provides the conceptual basis for examining how postcolonial subjects respond to dominant cultural practices through processes such as mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity.

Within this context of cultural negotiation, Homi K. Bhabha’s framework is particularly relevant because it explains how identity is formed and transformed through encounters with dominant cultural practices. Mimicry describes a process through which colonized or postcolonial subjects imitate the language, behavior, values, and lifestyles associated with dominant cultures (Bispo, 2021; Ratnasari et al., 2024). Such imitation, however, is never entirely complete. The colonized subject becomes “almost the same, but not quite,” creating an ambivalent relationship in which imitation simultaneously facilitates adaptation and unsettles the authority of the dominant culture (Loke & Owen, 2022). Mimicry, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an act of submission. Its inherent incompleteness may create possibilities for resistance because the partial reproduction of dominant cultural practices can destabilize established cultural hierarchies and challenge colonial authority (Bispo, 2021; Loke & Owen, 2022). This ambivalence is particularly important to the present study because it provides a conceptual link between cultural adaptation and the emergence of a negotiated, hybrid identity.

Closely related to mimicry is Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, which refers to cultural interaction and negotiation through which elements associated with different cultures are combined and transformed into new cultural forms and identities (Fatima & Durr-e-Nayab, 2025; Khalifa, 2025). Hybridity challenges the assumption that cultural identities are fixed, stable, or culturally pure. Instead, identity is continuously reconstructed through cultural interaction, translation, and transformation. Bhabha conceptualizes this process through the “Third Space,” an in-between or liminal space in which cultural meanings and identities are negotiated and reconstructed (Mohaisen, 2025). Within this space, conventional binaries such as East/West and colonizer/colonized become unstable because individuals negotiate multiple cultural positions rather than belonging exclusively to a single category (Bhabha, 1994; Syuropati & Soebachman, 2012). Hybridity can therefore function as a counter-narrative to colonial discourse by enabling previously marginalized subjects to participate in, reshape, and challenge dominant cultural narratives.

The conceptual relationship between mimicry and hybridity is particularly relevant to literary representations of migration and postcolonial identity. Mimicry may initially function as a strategy of cultural adaptation, whereas the ambivalence generated by such imitation can contribute to the development of hybrid identities (Güven & Ejder, 2025; Rokaya, 2023). Postcolonial and diasporic subjects may adopt the language, clothing, behavior, values, and lifestyles associated with dominant cultures to negotiate unfamiliar cultural and social environments (Nisa & Farlina, 2025). Nevertheless, these adaptive practices do not necessarily produce genuine cultural belonging. Instead, mimicry may intensify alienation, cultural displacement, and internal fragmentation by positioning individuals between different cultural worlds (Aydemir & Uysal, 2026; Güven & Ejder, 2025). Thus, the movement from mimicry to hybridity can be understood as a dynamic process through which adaptation, ambivalence, and cultural negotiation contribute to the reconstruction of postcolonial identity.

This process is strongly represented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short story *Imitation*, which portrays migration and diasporic life as sites of cultural displacement, gendered tension, and

identity negotiation (Karkun, 2022; Lascelles, 2020). The story centers on Nkem, an upper-class Nigerian woman who lives with her children in a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia while her husband, Obiora, spends most of his time in Lagos. Although Nkem's American life provides material comfort and socioeconomic privilege, these advantages do not produce a genuine sense of belonging or personal fulfillment. Instead, her diasporic experience is characterized by alienation and dissatisfaction (Karkun, 2022). This displacement becomes increasingly apparent after she discovers Obiora's infidelity, which destabilizes both her marriage and a transnational lifestyle largely determined by her husband's decisions. The discovery prompts Nkem to reconsider her position within the marriage as well as her relationship with America and Nigeria. Consequently, the diasporic space that initially signifies dependence and displacement gradually becomes a site in which she develops female agency and resistance (Lascelles, 2020).

Nkem's diasporic experience illustrates the ambivalence inherent in mimicry because her adaptation to American life does not lead to complete cultural assimilation. Her adoption of an American lifestyle can be interpreted as an attempt to accommodate the cultural environment in which she lives; however, this adaptation fails to provide a genuine sense of belonging. Despite the material comfort associated with her affluent life in America, Nkem continues to experience alienation and displacement, while her memories of Nigeria repeatedly reconnect her with her cultural roots (Karkun, 2022). Her continuing attachment to Nigerian language and cultural consciousness further demonstrates that her identity cannot be reduced to assimilation into American society (Edward et al., 2025). Instead, she occupies an in-between position in which Nigerian and American cultural experiences coexist and interact. From Bhabha's perspective, this position represents hybridity because Nkem is neither completely detached from Nigeria nor fully integrated into American society. Her identity is therefore reconstructed through an ongoing negotiation between these cultural positions rather than through the replacement of one identity by another.

Previous studies of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* have examined Nkem's identity from several perspectives. Lascelles (2020) approaches Nkem's diasporic experience through Black feminist resistance and the possibilities of agency within diaspora and post-diaspora, but does not specifically trace how cultural imitation develops into hybridity. Antrás (2021) examines material objects, spatiality, and the construction of a resistant Third Space, showing how Nkem's relationship with African artifacts contributes to her resistant subjectivity; however, the study does not systematically explain mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity as interconnected processes in her identity transformation. Karkun (2022) emphasizes alienation, appeasement, displacement, and Nkem's eventual refusal to remain compliant, yet does not theorize how her accommodation to American cultural practices generates ambivalence and subsequently contributes to a hybrid position. Edward et al. (2025), meanwhile, demonstrate how code-switching and indigenous Igbo expressions negotiate cultural identity and resist linguistic erasure, but their linguistic focus does not account for the broader relationship between cultural mimicry, hybridity, and the development of agency. Thus, while previous studies have identified important aspects of Nkem's displacement, resistance, cultural negotiation, and self-assertion, they have largely examined these dimensions separately. What remains insufficiently explained is how Nkem's adaptation to dominant American cultural practices produces ambivalence and alienation, how these tensions contribute to the negotiation of Nigerian and American cultural positions, and how this hybrid position creates possibilities for greater self-definition and agency. This study addresses that gap by examining mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, and agency as interconnected rather than isolated aspects of Nkem's postcolonial identity transformation.

Accordingly, this study examines the processual relationship between mimicry and hybridity in Nkem's postcolonial identity transformation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* through Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial framework. The analysis is centered specifically on Nkem as the primary subject of identity transformation. Obiora and the African artifacts are examined only insofar as they function as relational and symbolic elements that shape, constrain, or illuminate Nkem's cultural negotiation and emerging agency, rather than as independent subjects of analysis. Specifically, the study investigates how Nkem's adaptation to American material culture, social conventions, and gendered expectations reflects mimicry; how such accommodation generates ambivalence and alienation; and how her negotiation of Nigerian and American cultural positions contributes to hybridity and increasing self-definition. Particular attention is given to her bodily transformation, domestic practices, changing relationship with Obiora, and eventual decision to return to Lagos. Her return is interpreted not simply

as a geographical movement or a recovery of an authentic Nigerian identity, but as part of her attempt to renegotiate the cultural and marital conditions that have structured her life. Agency is therefore understood specifically in relation to Nkem's increasing capacity to question, negotiate, and redefine these conditions, rather than as an attribute inferred from Obiora or the artifacts themselves. By maintaining this analytical focus, the study explains how mimicry, ambivalence, alienation, hybridity, and agency interact in the continuing reconstruction of Nkem's postcolonial identity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative literary research design to examine the representation of mimicry and hybridity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation*. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows literary texts to be examined through the systematic interpretation of textual meanings, patterns, and their cultural significance. More specifically, the study adopted qualitative textual analysis, which enables researchers to interpret textual evidence within its literary and cultural contexts (Belsey, 2013). This approach has also been applied to literary texts to investigate postcolonial identity through Bhabha's theoretical framework (Syamsuddin & Endah, 2026). The analysis was theoretically guided by Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence, and the Third Space, which provide a framework for examining cultural negotiation and identities formed across different cultural positions (Shamshad & Hashmi, 2022). In this study, textual analysis involved close reading, the identification and classification of relevant textual passages, and their contextual interpretation using Bhabha's concepts as analytical categories. These procedures were used to examine how Nkem's adaptation to American cultural practices generates ambivalence and alienation and how her negotiation of Nigerian and American cultural positions contributes to hybridity and the development of agency.

The primary data source was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation*, published in the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The story was selected because it portrays the diasporic experience of Nkem, a Nigerian woman living in the United States whose materially privileged life is nevertheless marked by alienation, marital tension, and a limited sense of belonging (Karkun, 2022; Lascelles, 2020). The units of analysis consisted of words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, descriptions, and narrative passages that represented mimicry, hybridity, cultural ambivalence, alienation, and the negotiation of Nigerian and American identities. Particular attention was given to textual representations of Nkem's adaptation to American life, her continuing attachment to Nigerian cultural values, her responses to Obiora's authority and infidelity, and her eventual renegotiation of her cultural position. Previous analyses have similarly identified the tension between Nkem's American setting and Nigerian consciousness and have interpreted her in-betweenness as an important site of cultural and identity negotiation (Antrás, 2021; Edward et al., 2025).

Data were collected through close reading and textual documentation. The short story was read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, characterization, setting, conflicts, and postcolonial issues. During subsequent readings, passages indicating cultural imitation, adaptation, ambivalence, alienation, cultural mixing, and identity negotiation were identified and documented. Relevant textual evidence was then selected and classified according to the analytical categories of mimicry and hybridity. The data collection process was also supported by the reading of relevant theoretical and scholarly literature to strengthen the interpretation and reduce the possibility of unsupported readings of the selected passages. Accordingly, the collection procedure involved repeated reading, identification and marking of relevant textual evidence, documentation of the selected passages, and preliminary classification based on the theoretical framework.

The data were analyzed through qualitative textual analysis informed by Bhabha's postcolonial framework. First, the selected textual evidence was coded according to indicators associated with mimicry and hybridity. Mimicry was identified through representations of imitation or adaptation involving language, behavior, values, lifestyle, social practices, and other manifestations of dominant cultural influence. Hybridity was identified through cultural mixing, ambivalence, in-between positioning, identity negotiation, and the emergence of identities that could not be categorized as exclusively Nigerian or American. Second, the coded data were organized according to the principal analytical categories and examined in relation to their narrative contexts. Third, each passage was interpreted by connecting the textual evidence with characterization, setting, conflict, and changes in Nkem's cultural position. Finally, the relationship among mimicry, ambivalence, alienation, and

hybridity was examined to determine how these processes contribute to Nkem's identity negotiation and transformation.

To strengthen the credibility of the interpretation, the study employed theoretical triangulation and repeated textual verification. Interpretations of the selected passages were repeatedly compared with the complete narrative context and with Bhabha's theoretical concepts to avoid interpreting isolated quotations independently of the story. Relevant scholarly studies on postcolonial identity, mimicry, hybridity, diaspora, and Adichie's works were also used as interpretive references. This procedure enabled the analysis to move beyond merely identifying instances of mimicry and hybridity by examining their processual relationship in Nkem's identity transformation, particularly her movement from cultural adaptation and ambivalence toward an increasingly hybrid and self-negotiated identity. In this way, the analytical procedure was aligned with the study's objective of providing an integrated interpretation of postcolonial identity construction in *Imitation*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis identified two major postcolonial patterns in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation*: mimicry and hybridity. Mimicry is represented through Nkem's adoption of American material culture, social behavior, and standards of femininity, as well as through Obiora's engagement with reproduced African artifacts. Hybridity emerges through Nkem's negotiation between Nigerian and American cultural positions, particularly in domestic practices, bodily representation, and her gradual assertion of personal agency. The findings are presented according to the analytical sequence described in the method, beginning with representations of mimicry and proceeding to hybridity, identity negotiation, and agency.

Table 1. Representation of Mimicry, Hybridity, and Identity Negotiation in *Imitation*

Category	Textual Representation	Main Character	Evidence	Interpretive Finding
Mimicry	American suburban house and consumer goods	Nkem	Excerpt 1	Western material culture marks socioeconomic success but fails to provide emotional fulfillment or cultural belonging.
Mimicry	Adjustment to American conversational norms	Nkem	Excerpt 2	Nkem consciously modifies her communication to conform to American social expectations while remaining aware of her cultural difference.
Mimicry	Replica Benin artworks	Obiora	Excerpt 3	The replicas symbolize the tension between imitation and authenticity and provide a symbolic parallel to Nkem's performed domestic identity.
Mimicry–Ambivalence	Idealized identity of an affluent diasporic wife	Nkem	Excerpts 1–3	Material privilege and cultural accommodation coexist with dissatisfaction, exposing the instability of Nkem's imitative position.
Hybridity	Nigerian cooking in an American kitchen	Nkem	Excerpt 4	Nigerian and American cultural elements coexist within the same domestic space, transforming cultural difference into active negotiation.
Hybridity / Identity negotiation	Hair transformation	Nkem	Excerpt 5	Bodily transformation signals a shift from accommodation toward self-definition.
Agency	Renegotiation of her relationship with Obiora	Nkem	Excerpt 5	Nkem's hybrid position enables her to question previously accepted marital expectations and assert greater control over her life.

Mimicry through Material Culture and Social Adaptation

The first pattern identified in the text is mimicry through Nkem's material environment. Her American home represents the visible success associated with an affluent Western lifestyle. The narrator describes the house as follows:

Excerpt 1

The house is a heavy house, with too much dry-walled space, too many trees blocking the sun, a kitchen with a sub-zero refrigerator and granite countertops that are a cold, swirling gray.

The description emphasizes recognizable markers of American affluence, including spacious interiors, expensive appliances, and carefully designed domestic space. However, these material possessions do not correspond with Nkem's emotional well-being. The contrast between material privilege and emotional dissatisfaction suggests that Western material culture functions as an outward marker of socioeconomic success without producing an equivalent sense of cultural belonging or personal fulfillment. In this context, mimicry operates through material consumption because Nkem inhabits and reproduces a lifestyle associated with upper-middle-class American domesticity. Mimicry is also represented through Nkem's adaptation to American patterns of social interaction. After living in Cherry Hill, she becomes increasingly aware of the communicative norms that structure everyday interaction:

Excerpt 2

She has learned, in the three years she has lived in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, that Americans do not like to be asked open questions. They like to be asked narrow questions that require short answers.

This passage shows that Nkem consciously observes the behavior of people around her and modifies her communication accordingly. Her adjustment is not presented as an unconscious change but as a learned strategy for functioning within her American social environment. Mimicry therefore extends from material consumption to interpersonal behavior. Importantly, however, Nkem's conscious awareness that these conventions have to be learned preserves a distinction between adaptation and belonging. Her ability to perform American social norms does not eliminate her awareness of cultural difference. This gap between successful adaptation and incomplete identification constitutes the first form of ambivalence produced by mimicry. This ambivalence becomes significant because it exposes the limitation of imitation as a means of establishing identity. The more effectively Nkem accommodates the material and social expectations of her American environment, the more visible the discrepancy becomes between her outwardly successful diasporic life and her internal experience of displacement and dissatisfaction. Mimicry therefore does not simply precede ambivalence chronologically; it produces the contradiction from which ambivalence develops.

Mimicry through the Replica Artworks

A second manifestation of mimicry appears through Obiora's interest in reproduced African artworks. The replicas function as symbolic elements rather than independent subjects of analysis because they foreground the tension between authenticity and reproduction that also characterizes Nkem's experience. Nkem observes:

Excerpt 3

It is a copy, a perfect imitation... It looks just like the one in Lagos, the original one, which Obiora says is worth more than their Mercedes-Benz, the one a British museum returned to the palace in Benin.

The passage explicitly distinguishes between the original artifact and its reproduction. Although the artwork derives from African cultural history, the replica is displayed within an affluent American domestic environment and evaluated partly through comparison with material wealth. The object is therefore separated from its original historical and cultural context and transformed into an item of possession and display. The symbolic function of the replica parallels Nkem's position. Her life appears externally successful because she occupies the social position of a wealthy Nigerian wife living in the United States. However, this appearance becomes unstable when she confronts Obiora's infidelity and

her dissatisfaction with the marital arrangement. Like the replica that resembles an original while remaining separated from its original context, Nkem's performance of an affluent diasporic identity produces the appearance of successful cultural accommodation without resolving her emotional and cultural displacement. The resulting contradiction deepens her ambivalence into alienation: the identity she has learned to perform increasingly fails to provide either belonging or personal autonomy.

Alienation is therefore not treated here as an independent consequence of migration. It develops from the limitations exposed by mimicry. Once Nkem recognizes that material privilege, social adaptation, and the performance of an idealized marital identity cannot resolve her dissatisfaction, maintaining an exclusively imitative position becomes increasingly untenable. This recognition creates the need to negotiate, rather than simply reproduce, the cultural positions available to her.

Hybridity through Nigerian and American Domestic Practices

The next pattern identified in the text is hybridity. Rather than appearing independently of mimicry and alienation, hybridity develops as Nkem begins to respond to the limitations of cultural accommodation by bringing Nigerian cultural practices into active interaction with her American environment. One significant example occurs when she prepares Nigerian food:

Excerpt 4

She is making the soup because she wants something heavy and hot, something that will sweat out the restlessness that has been in her body... The scent of the ground crayfish and the unrefined palm oil fills the kitchen, overpowering the vanilla scent of the room deodorizer.

This passage brings Nigerian and American cultural elements into direct contact. Ground crayfish and unrefined palm oil represent familiar Nigerian culinary practices, while the suburban kitchen and vanilla-scented room deodorizer belong to Nkem's American domestic environment. Neither cultural context completely eliminates the other. Instead, they coexist and compete within the same domestic space. This coexistence marks an important change from mimicry. Whereas Nkem's earlier adaptation involves reproducing practices associated with her American environment, the domestic scene in Excerpt 4 shows her actively inserting Nigerian cultural practices into that environment. Her ambivalence and alienation are therefore productive in the analytical sense: by exposing the inadequacy of simple accommodation, they create the conditions under which Nkem begins to negotiate between cultural positions. Hybridity emerges from this negotiation, not merely from the simultaneous presence of two cultures.

The domestic space consequently functions as an in-between cultural environment. Nkem neither abandons Nigerian practices because she lives in the United States nor rejects the American environment that has become part of her everyday experience. Hybridity thus represents her response to the instability generated by mimicry: instead of seeking belonging through conformity to one cultural position, she increasingly constructs identity through the negotiation of both.

Bodily Transformation, Hybridity, and Emerging Agency

Nkem's changing hairstyle provides a further representation of this transition from cultural negotiation to self-definition. Earlier in the narrative, her appearance is shaped partly by social expectations associated with femininity, class, and Obiora's preferences. Her decision to cut her chemically straightened hair therefore marks a visible shift in the way she positions herself. After the haircut, Ama comments:

Excerpt 5

"It looks good," Ama says, touching the back of Nkem's head. "Very bold. You look like an art student."

The description of the haircut as "bold" gives the transformation significance beyond physical appearance. Nkem is no longer merely accommodating expectations imposed by her social and marital environment; she begins to make choices concerning her own bodily representation. The haircut therefore connects hybridity with agency because the negotiated identity emerging from her experience of cultural ambivalence begins to inform concrete acts of self-definition.

This development does not mean that hybridity automatically produces agency. Rather, Nkem's hybrid position gives her a standpoint from which previously normalized expectations can be reconsidered. Because she no longer defines herself solely through successful adaptation to American life or through the marital identity structured by Obiora, she becomes increasingly able to question both. Her later determination to renegotiate her relationship and return to Lagos develops from this altered position of self-understanding. Agency consequently emerges through her capacity to act upon the contradictions that mimicry and alienation have made visible.

Importantly, Nkem's decision should not be interpreted as a simple rejection of America or a return to an unchanged Nigerian identity. Her years in the United States have already transformed her cultural and personal position. Her return therefore represents an attempt to renegotiate the conditions of her life from an identity shaped by both Nigerian and American experiences.

Identity Negotiation and Emerging Agency

The findings further show that Nkem's hybridity develops through an ongoing process of identity negotiation. Her attachment to Nigeria remains strong even as she adapts to life in the United States, placing her in an in-between position in which neither cultural context fully defines her. This position does not represent a stable balance between two cultures. Rather, it emerges from the ambivalence and alienation generated by her earlier attempts at cultural accommodation. Although mimicry enables Nkem to accommodate American material and social expectations, such accommodation does not provide a stable sense of cultural belonging or emotional fulfillment. The discrepancy between outward adaptation and inner dissatisfaction consequently makes the limitations of her imitative position increasingly apparent.

As this contradiction intensifies, ambivalence develops into alienation from the cultural and marital identity Nkem has been performing. Material privilege, social adaptation, and conformity to marital expectations no longer provide sufficient grounds for defining herself. Alienation therefore does more than express dissatisfaction; it makes continued accommodation increasingly untenable and creates the conditions for a more active negotiation of her Nigerian and American cultural experiences. Hybridity emerges through this negotiation as Nkem brings Nigerian practices, memories, and values into interaction with an American environment that has also become part of her experience. In this sense, hybridity is not simply the coexistence of two cultural influences but a response to the tensions exposed through mimicry, ambivalence, and alienation.

Her increasing agency becomes particularly visible when this cultural negotiation extends to her bodily, marital, and personal choices. Obiora's infidelity intensifies the dissatisfaction associated with Nkem's diasporic and domestic position, prompting her to reconsider the arrangement that has structured her life. Rather than continuing to accept decisions made primarily by Obiora, she increasingly asserts her capacity to determine the conditions of her own life. Her changing bodily representation, continued engagement with Nigerian cultural practices, and reconsideration of her marriage demonstrate how her negotiated cultural position contributes to greater self-definition. Hybridity thus provides a position from which Nkem can question expectations associated with both Nigerian and American contexts rather than simply reproduce them.

The findings consequently reveal a causally connected but overlapping process of identity transformation rather than a simple sequence of postcolonial categories. Mimicry exposes the limitations of cultural accommodation when adaptation fails to produce belonging; ambivalence and alienation make these limitations increasingly apparent and create the need for cultural negotiation; and hybridity provides an in-between position from which competing cultural and personal expectations can be reconsidered. Agency emerges as Nkem increasingly translates this negotiated self-definition into choices concerning her body, marriage, and future. These processes are not rigid or entirely separate, but interact throughout her experience, demonstrating that Nkem's postcolonial identity remains fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed.

Discussion

The findings show that mimicry and hybridity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* are closely connected in the development of Nkem's postcolonial identity. Her accommodation to American cultural and social practices does not result in complete assimilation but generates ambivalence and alienation as she becomes increasingly aware of the distance between adaptation and

belonging. This tension contributes to the emergence of a hybrid position in which Nigerian and American cultural experiences are continually negotiated. Importantly, this negotiation also occurs within gendered relations of power. Nkem's cultural adaptation is intertwined with her position as Obiora's wife, whose material environment, bodily appearance, and transnational domestic life are substantially shaped by her husband's preferences and decisions. Her identity transformation therefore involves the negotiation of both cultural difference and patriarchal authority.

From Bhabha's postcolonial perspective, Nkem's experience illustrates the instability of cultural mimicry. Her American suburban home, consumer lifestyle, and adaptation to American conversational conventions demonstrate her adjustment to the cultural environment in which she lives. However, this adaptation does not lead to complete assimilation or a stable sense of belonging. Nkem remains connected to Nigeria through memory, food, cultural practices, and her continuing awareness of displacement. This tension between adaptation and cultural attachment produces ambivalence, as her outward participation in an affluent American lifestyle contrasts with her emotional dissatisfaction and continuing connection to Nigeria. Mimicry therefore enables Nkem to adapt to her diasporic environment while simultaneously making the limitations of that adaptation increasingly visible. This interpretation corresponds with Rokaya (2023), who argues that mimicry can produce an ambivalent hybrid subject rather than straightforward assimilation. Kifayatullah & Rasool (2021) similarly describe diasporic identity as undergoing continuous construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction between cultural positions, while Shamshad and Hashmi (2022) associate cultural hybridity in Adichie's fiction with alienation and identity crisis.

The significance of this ambivalence becomes clearer when Nkem's diasporic experience is understood as both cultural and gendered in-betweenness. Dobrinescu (2025) interprets her movement from enthusiasm for American life toward loneliness and estrangement as a process of self-translation associated with Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness. The present study extends this interpretation by showing that Nkem's alienation is produced not only by geographical displacement but also by the conditions under which her diasporic life is organized. Her material privilege depends upon a transnational marital arrangement largely controlled by Obiora, while expectations concerning femininity and appearance further shape the identity she is expected to perform. Ambivalence therefore destabilizes both her cultural accommodation and her compliance with a gendered domestic role. As these contradictions become increasingly visible, alienation creates the need to reconsider the cultural and patriarchal expectations that structure her position.

The replica African artworks reinforce this instability by problematizing the distinction between imitation and authenticity. Rodriguez (2017) argues that Adichie's imitation motif destabilizes essentialist distinctions between authentic and inauthentic African identities, thereby challenging binary constructions of Africa and the West. Stefanova (2023) similarly interprets the Benin mask as a symbolic disruption exposing the inauthenticity underlying Nkem's marriage, while Lascelles (2022) connects African artifacts with Nkem's diasporic body and the patriarchal constraints surrounding it. The present findings extend these interpretations by relating the replicas specifically to Bhabha's logic of incomplete resemblance. Like mimicry itself, the replica is recognizable as "almost the same" while its status as a reproduction simultaneously marks it as "not quite" the original. This tension parallels Nkem's performed identity: her affluent diasporic life reproduces recognizable signs of cultural and marital success, yet the emotional alienation and unequal power relations beneath that appearance expose its instability. The artifacts therefore illuminate rather than independently constitute Nkem's identity transformation.

Hybridity emerges from this instability as a process of negotiation rather than as a harmonious mixture of Nigerian and American cultures. From Bhabha's perspective, this negotiation takes place within the Third Space, where cultural meanings and identities are continuously reconstructed rather than organized around fixed cultural boundaries (Bhabha, 1994). Kifayatullah and Rasool (2021) similarly conceptualize diasporic identity as an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction, while Gaur et al. (2026) emphasize that cultural negotiation is expressed through everyday practices involving language, food, clothing, bodily appearance, and other markers of belonging. In Nkem's case, this process becomes visible within her American domestic environment, where Nigerian practices, particularly food and cultural memory, continue to shape her everyday life. Her preparation of Nigerian food in an American kitchen is significant not simply because Nigerian and American cultural elements coexist in the same space, but because their interaction reflects her continuing negotiation between the

two cultural contexts. Nkem therefore belongs exclusively to neither position; instead, her identity is continuously reconstructed through her engagement with both. Her hybrid position can consequently be understood as a negotiated cultural space in which Nigerian and American influences coexist, interact, and acquire new meanings.

However, Nkem's Third Space is also gendered. The domestic environment in which cultural negotiation occurs is simultaneously a space structured by Obiora's economic authority, marital decisions, and expectations of femininity. Hybridity therefore cannot be understood solely as freedom from cultural binaries. Nkem may negotiate Nigerian and American cultural positions while still remaining constrained by unequal gender relations. This qualification corresponds with Lascelles (2022), who emphasizes the patriarchal structures surrounding Nkem's diasporic experience, and with Shamshad and Hashmi (2022), who show that hybridity may coexist with alienation and marginalization. The Third Space in *Imitation* consequently functions as an ambivalent space: it opens possibilities for identity reconstruction while remaining shaped by existing relations of power.

This intersection of cultural negotiation and gendered power becomes particularly visible through Nkem's bodily transformation. Previous scholarship has frequently interpreted hair in Adichie's fiction as a site where conformity, cultural identity, and resistance intersect. Yerima (2017), for instance, demonstrates through *Americanah* that conformity to Western beauty standards can operate as mimicry, whereas alternative bodily practices can become a means of identity negotiation. More specifically in *Imitation*, Drost (2016) associates Nkem's haircut with movement away from performing gender according to her husband's expectations, while Cruz-Gutiérrez (2017) interprets her hair transition as part of a gradual acquisition of self-determination. Stefanova (2023) similarly regards the haircut as an act of disobedience against prescribed bodily norms. These interpretations support the present finding that Nkem's body becomes a site where cultural identity, femininity, and marital authority intersect.

The contribution of the present analysis is to locate this bodily transformation within the broader relationship among mimicry, hybridity, and gendered agency. Nkem's chemically straightened hair can be understood within the logic of mimicry because it participates in externally defined expectations concerning respectable femininity and appearance. Her decision to alter it does not simply replace one cultural identity with another. Rather, it represents an increasing capacity to determine how her own body is represented. In this respect, the Third Space extends beyond cultural affiliation to provide a position from which gendered expectations can also be questioned. Nkem's body becomes one of the sites through which the "not quite" of mimicry develops into a possibility for self-definition: her incomplete conformity exposes the instability of the norms she has been expected to reproduce.

This process becomes more explicit when Nkem begins to reconsider the conditions of her marriage and diasporic life. Obiora's infidelity is important not merely as a personal betrayal but as an event that exposes the unequal distribution of decision-making power within their marriage. Previous studies similarly recognize the relationship between Nkem's transformation and emerging agency. Misra and Shrivastava (2017) associate her response to displacement and marital crisis with increasing self-assertion, while Palapala (2018) regards her decision concerning the family's return to Nigeria as a significant movement toward personal agency. Stephen (2021) likewise interprets Nkem's development as a transition from submissiveness toward assertive transnational womanhood. Viewed through the present framework, Nkem's insistence on renegotiating her family's future represents an attempt to transform her position within a relationship in which Obiora has previously exercised greater control over mobility, domestic arrangements, and marital expectations.

Agency, however, should not be equated with complete emancipation. Lascelles (2022) cautions that Nkem continues to operate within patriarchal structures that restrict the possibilities available to her, while Mustafić (2026) similarly interprets her resistance as quiet and ambiguous rather than absolute. Nkem does not simply escape either Nigerian patriarchal expectations or the contradictions of diasporic life. Her agency is better understood as an increased capacity to question, negotiate, and redefine her position within these constraints. This distinction is important because it prevents hybridity and the Third Space from being treated as inherently liberating. They create possibilities for renegotiation, but those possibilities remain conditioned by gender, marriage, socioeconomic privilege, and transnational power relations.

The most significant contribution of these findings lies in explaining mimicry and hybridity as dynamically interconnected processes operating within both cultural and gendered relations of power.

Previous studies have examined individual dimensions of Nkem's experience, including cultural displacement, ambivalence, bodily transformation, marital resistance, and female agency. Gautam (2019), for example, connects diaspora with ambivalence and hybridity in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, while Ogunbayo (2017) identifies Nkem's movement from alienation and passivity toward affirmative action through a Jungian and Igbo psychological framework. The present study extends these interpretations by explaining Nkem's transformation through the interconnected processes of mimicry, ambivalence, alienation, and hybridity. From Bhabha's perspective, mimicry produces instability because adaptation to dominant cultural practices does not eliminate cultural difference or guarantee a stable sense of belonging (Bhabha, 1994). The Third Space provides a conceptual basis for understanding how this instability creates possibilities for cultural negotiation and the reconstruction of identity rather than requiring a choice between fixed cultural positions (Bhabha, 1994). In Nkem's case, however, this negotiation extends beyond her relationship with Nigerian and American cultures to the gendered expectations governing femininity, bodily representation, marriage, and decision-making authority. Her hybrid position consequently creates possibilities for reconsidering both cultural and patriarchal expectations, although it does not completely free her from these constraints. Agency therefore emerges not as an abrupt or complete transformation but as an increasing capacity for self-definition developed through her continuing negotiation of cultural difference, displacement, marital power, and personal choice.

Mimicry, ambivalence, alienation, hybridity, and agency should therefore not be understood as rigid or successive stages. Mimicry continues to shape Nkem even as hybrid negotiation develops, while hybridity does not eliminate either cultural ambivalence or patriarchal constraint. Instead, these conditions coexist and reshape one another throughout her identity transformation. Nkem's postcolonial identity lies neither in becoming fully American nor in recovering an uncontaminated Nigerian identity, but in developing an increasingly self-defined position through the negotiation of both cultural contexts and the gendered power relations embedded within them. *Imitation* thus presents postcolonial identity as fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed, while demonstrating how the incompleteness of mimicry can create the instability from which new possibilities for cultural negotiation and gendered agency emerge.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that mimicry and hybridity are interconnected processes in the transformation of Nkem's postcolonial identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation*. Nkem's adaptation to American material culture, social conventions, and gendered expectations enables her to accommodate her diasporic environment but does not provide a stable sense of belonging. Instead, the limitations of this adaptation generate ambivalence and alienation, creating the conditions for her to negotiate rather than simply reproduce the cultural and social expectations surrounding her. Hybridity emerges through this negotiation as Nkem brings her Nigerian cultural attachments into interaction with her American experience and increasingly reconsiders expectations concerning her body, marriage, and personal choices. Her growing agency is therefore reflected in her increasing capacity to question and redefine these conditions rather than in complete freedom from cultural or patriarchal constraints. The main contribution of this study is to demonstrate that mimicry and hybridity are not separate or strictly sequential states but dynamically interconnected processes in Nkem's identity transformation. It further shows that this transformation involves not only the negotiation of Nigerian and American cultural positions but also the reconsideration of gendered and marital power relations. *Imitation* consequently represents postcolonial identity as fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed through cultural negotiation and changing forms of self-definition. Future research may examine these interconnected processes across other works by Adichie to determine how cultural negotiation and agency are represented in different diasporic contexts.

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