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Linguistic Imperialism: Accent and Identity in Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This article portrays how linguistic Imperialism is prevalent in the contemporary world. It demonstrates how accent is politicised as a site of identity and power. This novel, Americanah, powerfully highlights the claim of selfhood over language and accent. Also, it calls for decolonising the psyche that predominantly supports the superiority of colonial accent styles. Linguistic imperialism is a problem that remains unsolved in many countries. The Europeans leave our nation, but the politics of language and linguistic imperialism prevail in the psyche of the natives. Such politics of accents creates tension between the civilised and the uncivilised among the people of third-world countries. Americanah deals with the politics of accents and linguistic imperialism in the mindset of people. The novel also presents a struggle to decolonise accent politics and claim one's true self. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote this novel to present resistance to the colonial mindset that considers the accents of the colonisers beautiful and superior, while embracing native accents as valid and not inferior.

Keywords: Psychological Alienation, Linguistic Performance and Adaptation, Accent Pride, Inferiority, Epistemic Decolonisation

Introduction

Homi K. Bhabha detects in his foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks*, "the Negro enslaved by his inferiority, . . in accordance with the neurotic orientation" (Bhabha xiv). Bhabha, interpreting Fanon's critique of colonialism, highlights how political and

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psychic violence operates within the guise of civic virtue, producing alienation and psychological fragmentation in the colonised subject (xxvii). Colonised subjects are naturally alienated from their self-identity and lost in the colonial imposition of civic sense and mannerisms. This idea is argued in Adichie's *Americanah*. Accents play a pivotal role in speech mannerisms. Bhabha also points out that it is "white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body" (Bhabha xvi). The Whites inscribed their culture and called it a civic sense, whose victims are blacks and Asians. They used the Black's willingness to become masters and drew them to be enslaved through bodily and accent colonisation. The novel discusses how speech and accents are used to project the culture of colonial subjects as civilised to other natives. Therefore, this aims to prove their civilisation as valid, and others, especially the natives, are in a state of depersonalisation of their own nature and self-identity.

Several academics have examined the relationship between language, identity, race, and a sense of cultural belonging in *Americanah*. Their work provides a useful basis for understanding how language can mark social power and identity in postcolonial and diasporic settings. For instance, Chinenye Amonyeze (2017), in "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah", examines how the protagonist negotiates her cultural identity between Nigeria and America. She looks at Ifemelu's decision to drop her American accent as an act of asserting her Nigerian identity. The piece is about the relationship between linguistic conformity and cultural resistance, and how the protagonist negotiates her identity in two very different cultural contexts.

Consequently, Michel Tinguiri (2023), in "Linguistic boundaries, subjectivity and representations in *Americanah*", examines linguistic insecurity, identity, and the question of social distinction. Language is viewed as a form of symbolic capital which people use to gain recognition, legitimacy, and social standing. Tinguiri's analysis points to how foreign languages are often seen as a marker of modernity and superiority, while the indigenous language is devalued.

Despite the fact that these studies look at linguistic identity, cultural negotiation, and accent-based discrimination, the present study is specifically concerned with linguistic imperialism as a form of psychological colonisation. It examines how the internalisation of Western accent norms leads to linguistic insecurity, self-alienation, and an inferiority complex in postcolonial subjects. This study is therefore about the importance of psychological and epistemic decolonisation in challenging the perceived superiority of the colonial accent.

Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to investigate how linguistic imperialism operates through accent, language, and identity. This will examine how Western accent norms cause insecurity and psychological alienation in postcolonial individuals. Additionally, the study analyses Ifemelu's act of resistance against colonial linguistic dominance and psychological decolonisation. For instance, the characters Ifemelu and Aunty Uju adapted the Western accent to meet the pressures they encountered. This is due to

the fear that induces psychological alienation, which has resulted in internalising a sense of colonial superiority. This is viewed through the work of Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha. The work will show how Ifemelu rejects the American accent, reflecting her acceptance of herself, fighting against culture, and decolonising her mind.

Discussion

All the colonised individuals are giving importance to accents and diction and spend more hours learning them. It is only to match the white tone and culture, which is indirectly a colonial imposition on the psyche to have been civilised. Accent and linguistic adaptation are common in contemporary society. Schools insist on proper phonetics while learning from the beginning. It is normal to learn accents, and the society we live in now appreciates the perfect pronunciation of English words. Society considers only people who speak with a good accent to be intellectual in nature. And a person with a poor accent in his oration is often considered poor on the basis that he is judged by his appearance and his cultural background. In some places, society forgets to accept those individuals' qualifications and their civic humanity.

For instance, in chapter 1, there arises tension because of accent. Ifemelu encountered a taxi driver who had a Caribbean accent. People judge others based on their accents and give them respect. Here, the taxi driver is noticed for their accent, and that accent shows how educated they are. A taxi driver, after listening to Ifemelu's accent of English, opens up that, "once he heard her accent, he would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, or the taxi was a second job" (Adichie 15). He clarifies his education and how he works as a taxi driver. He also understands that she is from Nigeria. This shows how accent mirrors the identity of people living in America. Through the pronunciation of English words, people identify which nation they belong to. Likewise, accent plays a pivotal role after colonisation. People from different entities are noted for their accents and linguistic level and have been judged.

Humans adore individuals who have stayed in a foreign land and adapted to its culture, accent, and beauty standards. In the same way, it is a privilege to say that individuals live for 15 years in America. This adds a standard for people who say they survived there. To go abroad and adopt a Westernised accent is seen as respectable and well-educated by the natives. Ifemelu's psyche of being respectful is understood by the lines, "to earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America" (Adichie 23). She wants to set her standards high and be respected by others. This leads her to lie to Aisha that she lived for fifteen long years in America. Eventually, she sets a high view on her living as a privileged Nigerian woman. This is how society normalises colonial linguistic adaptation and its styles. Here, the novel portrays the politics of accent adaptation in the West.

English literature scholars are always expected to speak with a good accent, syntax, and morphemes. To speak English with proper linguistic stress is considered

privileged and respected in society's view. Moreover, society forgets that English is a second language, and it is not mandatory to imitate Westerners and lose our own standards. This automatically creates a self-insufficient feeling of living in society. Sometimes, all the English classes for speaking and accent correction tutorials unconsciously insist that we lose our jobs and our lives without proper linguistic adaptation. Likewise, we are colonised day by day, unconsciously adapting to the colonisers' accent. This is what the novel *Americanah* describes: how the settlers are differentiated from the people whose accents match the Western accent.

In chapter 9, Ifemelu meets Aunty Uju in America. Ifemelu notices Aunty Uju talking on a cell phone and saying her name with a different pronunciation, which is surely not Igbo. The lines, "Yes, this is Uju." She pronounced it you-Joo instead of oo-joo. "Is that how you pronounce your name now?" Ifemelu asked afterwards. "It's what they call me." (Adichie 108) reflects how the names have also been changed entirely into something which is not them. Her name is her identity. The shifts in name pronunciation symbolise people's willingness to accept a different identity for them in order to be seen as respectable for a job. They call it modern and feel it is civilised.

Also, in another place, the lines are as follows.

> Dike, put it back," Aunty Uju said, with the nasal, sliding accent she put on when she spoke to white Americans, in the presence of white Americans, in the hearing of white Americans. Pooh-reet-back. And with the accent emerged a new persona, apologetic and self-abasing. (Adichie 112)

It reveals how Uju takes the accent seriously and performs it. This earns the respect of fellow citizens. Also, when Ifemelu uses the Igbo word with Dike, Aunty Uju warns Ifemelu not to use two languages with her son, because she feels that "two languages will confuse him (Adichie 113). Uju feels that it is really hard to learn the pure accent of Westerners to make her life professional and privileged. She does everything to fit into the community and earns respect among citizens. She doesn't want to give her son the struggle of learning accents. She wants her son to have a pure accent like Westerners. However, this accent is a political activity that creates indifference among individuals based on pronunciation. This ultimately creates a superiority complex in those who speak a colonial accent.

Bhabha argues that people are in a 'state of depersonalization' (Bhabha ix) towards their native land. It is not because of their nature, but the social reality of culture forces individuals to be civilised. Fanon's book, in its foreword, argues that to behave in a civilised way is a psychological representation of colonial rule. From the beginning of literature and historical narratives, laws and culture are taught as good manners under colonial rule. Indirectly, this imposes an inferiority complex about the nature of blacks or others. As Fanon stresses, "Forms of social and psychic alienation and aggression, (Bhabha xiv) – madness, self-hate, treason, violence can never be acknowledged as determinate and constitutive conditions of civil authority" (Bhabha xiv).

This depicts that psychic alienation is madness and self-hate, and it is not acknowledged properly. Here, the colonised subjects have self-hate after reading the narratives of colonial subjects. When they face the whites, this creates a tension of inferiority. It is a psychological disturbance that makes them uneasy and inferior to the Westernised cultural standards. Being inferior is unconsciously stored in the minds of individuals.

In chapter 14, Ifemelu starts practising the American accent. Insecurities always lead to finding solutions or destruction. Ifemelu decides to make herself feel supreme by learning the accent. Because of the accent, people treat others as inferior. For instance, in the registration office, Cristina Tomas speaks slowly to Ifemelu. Ifemelu later realises that Tomas was mockingly slow with her speech because of Ifemelu's accent. This incident troubles her and makes her want to learn the American accent. People don't voluntarily choose to adapt colonial linguistics; rather, the environment makes them feel uneducated and inferior. This demonstrates how Tomas made Ifemelu uncomfortable with her own accent in English. The people around are colonised by the psyche to think that speaking with a colonial accent is sophisticated.

In chapter 18, an immigrant from Senegal explains about her son, who has no proper accent. She claims, "They beat, beat, beat him. Black boys beat him like this. Now accent go and no problems." (Adichie 189). The condition of not having a proper Westernised accent results in unfair treatment. This situation shows how international schools train children for a Westernised level of accent. They give importance to accents but not to quality education or treating others as human. It is not wrong to have a pronunciation like colonisers; however, it is brutal behaviour to colonise the language. English is not the native language of everyone. English is a language used for communication. People have different languages, and the different pronunciations are called accents. However, the politics behind the accent is invalid. It is not a punishable offence to use a native accent. To understand meaning is enough when humans speak a language. And it is not a language to judge people's qualifications to survive in the world.

People see each other differently based on accent and language. For instance, a person is appreciated for giving the correct pronunciation of his invalid argument. Simultaneously, the person is seen as a disgrace and unacceptable because of his accent, even though he has a valid argument. This is an indirect colonial imposition on the colonised subjects. The human psyche has been colonised. Having a simple accent is professional. Society should see the knowledge the language produces, not the accent that makes people inferior. Many countries, even though they have received independence, have a psyche that is enslaved. Moreover, Frantz Fanon argues in his work "Black Skin, White Masks" that, to remove all the negative narratives imposed on blacks, the blacks choose to adapt to colonial enlightenment, including bodily beauty standards and changes in linguistics and accents. The novel *Americanah* describes the linguistic imperialism on people's psyche, and it brings changes in people's true selfhood.

Individuals should decolonise their perspective on language. The social system of Tamil culture admires the White individual's accent-variant Tamil. The same social system calls the one who adapts his own Indian accent of English inferior. The only solution is to decolonise the psyche. Chapter 29 refers to Emenike in London, who notices the different attitudes to American and British accents. He understands that Americans don't make an effort to pronounce foreigners' names properly, whereas Brits try to pronounce them properly. Here, the two sets of people have different attitudes toward language. Therefore, language has a vast politics. It can be a politics between two countries, many countries, or within a country. There have been several accents; however, understanding each and every individual is essential rather than suppressing others by accent. Ifemelu's father considers, "One finds the British manner of speaking much preferable." (Adichie 298). This shows Ifemelu's father prefers the Brit accent to the American. This shows how people are considering preference over accents and proves that politics prevails in language. This clearly suggests that, though Brits have left our land, they have occupied people's minds through their language and accents. People consider the Brit accent, syntax, and diction original and embrace them as standard English. People who learn in standard schools and standard education always have access to the standard English accent.

This study argues that it is not wrong to speak like Brits or native English speakers. However, colonising one's mind with the idea that British language and linguistics are sophisticated and highly recommended accents is degrading. It's a degradation of individuals' culture, language, and their own selves. Therefore, this study calls on readers to decolonise the psyche that complicates human existence with language and accents.

Conclusion

To conclude, Ifemelu shows her resistance by accepting herself and her own accent. Initially, she practices an American accent to fit into society. Later, she stops caring about others' opinions of her accent. She embraces herself and finds her true self by accepting her accent. She decolonises her own mindset. Ifemelu, after speaking a sentence to an Amtrak clerk, "felt a rush of pleasure from giving the t its full due in 'advantage,' from not rolling her r in 'Haverhill.' This was truly her" (Adichie 178). This shows her happiness and freedom in her colonial mindset of not normalising the different accent from her own and claiming her identity back.

Epistemic decolonisation is a collective theoretical framework against colonial struggles. The term derives from the Greek word for knowledge. Nick Shepherd, an associate professor in the Department of Culture, argues, "The notion of an episteme is a philosophical term from the ancient Greek word of similar pronunciation which refers to knowledge, science, and understanding". Here, knowledge is violated by Western imperialism in language and accent. Moreover, he argues that "To talk of epistemic decolonization, then, is to suggest that knowledge itself has been colonized, and needs to be decolonized." Similarly, the novel discusses how Indigenous people believe their knowledge of accent is inferior and develop a desire to study abroad,

like America, which they see as the source of the greatest knowledge. This is how the mind is colonised in the name of knowledge. Ifemelu's rejection of Eurocentric linguistic conformity represents a process of epistemic decolonisation, through which she dismantles colonial ways of knowing and reclaims an authentic African identity by accepting her own linguistic performance. Similarly, the novel discusses how linguistic imperialism renders non-Western accents informal and degrading. Individuals with non-Western accents are frequently marginalised. The rejection of Westernised accent performance embodies the formation of selfhood against Western supremacy.

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