

THIRD SPACE, MIMICRY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY: POSTCOLONIAL DISPLACEMENT IN SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

*A piece of literature can deal with issues of characters being displaced, and transnational or cultural identity being conflicted and negotiated. These postcolonial experiences are shown in short stories demonstrating the living conditions of individuals between cultures and locations. Although there is an increased interest in post-colonial narratives, limited research exists on the comparative application of post-colonial themes to short story collections from distinct cultural contexts. The current study thereby aimed to explore the comparative representation of post-colonial themes in the English short stories of Sefi Atta's *News from Home* and Julian Barnes's *The Lemon Table*. The findings of the study revealed the existence of post-colonial themes of mimicry and third space in both the selected texts. Mimicry is found to operate as a survival strategy, as characters imitate dominant cultural behaviors and voices to mask insecurity and marginalization. The third space is found originating through migration, transitional locations, emotional in-betweenness, and symbolic settings where identity remains suspended rather than resolved.*

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, mimicry third, space, identity*

Introduction

In the realm of postcolonial literature, the questions of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation have always been predetermined, especially where the colonial past and its afterlife are at play. The identity in postcolonial texts is seldom permanent and stable but is an ongoing process that is created through constant engagement with the dominant cultural, political, and ideological forces. When colonial power formations enforce language, behavior and systems of values, the colonized and marginalized subjects are often left with no choice but to bargain on their own identity within the imposed structures. The resulting nature of this negotiation is complex identity formation that is characterized by ambivalence, contradiction, and fragmentation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2002). Instead of stating identity as a substance, postcolonial writing reveals it as a fluid process contingent on power relations.

One of the most important contributions to this interpretation of identity is the ideas of Homi K. Bhabha whose notion of mimicry and the third space undermines dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha contends that mimicry occurs when the colonized subject replicates the cultural activity of colonizer and ends up being the same, yet not entirely identical (Bhabha, 1994). This addressed imitation is both compliance and subversion that indicates how unstable the colonial power is. The third space, meanwhile, denotes a position in between, where meaning and identity are always negotiated and claims cultural purity or origins are destabilized. In this location,

neither is identity entirely indigenous nor entirely assimilated but exists as performance in the form of an ongoing process that is influenced by historical and social forces (Bhabha, 1994). This third space is often enacted in postcolonial literature, where the contradiction between exteriority and interiority is played out.

Such hypothetical issues become especially apparent in short fiction, which is a genre that is best adapted to the task of recording the instances of psychological conflict, social constraint, and unresolved identity struggle. Because of their focus on marginal lives, brief experiences, and silent negotiations, short stories are frequently useful in terms of examining mimicry and third space. The current paper uses the postcolonial theory developed by Bhabha to the chosen stories of *The Lemon Table* by Julian Barnes and *News from Home* by Sefi Atta. Barnes is not a classic example of the postcolonial writer, but the attempt to deal with the issues of cultural restraint, social performance, and emotional repression can be fruitfully read as a postcolonial writer, especially when regarded in terms of mimicry and third space.

The Lemon Table is a short story collection that is mainly focused on aging, memory, isolation in emotions, and social conformity. The characters of Barnes frequently have a strict social system which requires their adherence to restraint, politeness, and emotional silence. In stories like the story of Mats Israelson, people are superficially fitting in social demands and holding back the individual desire and emotional reality. This act of social norms is a mimicry business where characters emulate acceptable ways of behavior to be stable and respectable. This conflict of an inner desire and outer conformity establishes the symbolic third space in which the identity is not fully developed or lost. The cautious manner of narration that Barnes employs support this feeling of emotional displacement, the silence of social conformity.

News from Home, in turn, is a direct response to postcolonial realities of migration and cultural dislocation, and transnational identity. Atta stories revolve around the Nigerian and diasporic themes which negotiated the Western cultural spaces based on racial, cultural, and gender power relation. Mimicry is a common survival strategy among her characters, who change the language, behavior and the way they represent themselves to integrate into the majority cultural settings. Nevertheless, this adaptation does not cause total assimilation, but it creates the third space with uncertainty, alienation, and mixed forms of belonging. The narrative voice of Atta predicts the daily experiences of displacement that people face and exposes the ongoing redefinition of identity in the process of relating to various cultural systems.

The two collections taken together can be used to provide a complementary view on identity formation under pressure. Whereas Barnes explores the practice of mimicry in the ostensibly stable Western social terrain, Atta predicts its functioning in the overtly postcolonial and diasporic arena. The concepts of mimicry and the third space presented by Bhabha can be used to read these texts and learn about identity struggles of characters in a more subtle way, unveiling the notion of displacement as a physical state and as a psychological and cultural experience that is inherent in the routine life.

Problem statement

Post colonial literature reflects the experiences of characters navigating across cultural, geographical, and ideological boundaries, thereby shaping and reshaping individual and collective identities. The representation of such border-crossing narratives in short fiction plays a crucial role in evoking reflections on third space, displacement, and belonging. Despite this, limited research exists on the comparative application of post-colonial themes to short story collections from distinct cultural contexts. The current study thereby aimed to explore the comparative

representation of post-colonial themes in the English short stories of Sefi Atta's *News from Home* and Julian Barnes's *The Lemon Table*.

Research objectives

- To explore the role of mimicry in identity struggles of the characters in the selected texts.
- To explore the formation of third space in identity struggles of the characters in the selected texts.

Research questions

- What is the role of mimicry in the identity struggles of the characters in the selected texts?
- How is the third space formed in the identity struggles of the characters in the selected texts?

Significance of the study

The study can contribute to academic discussions on post-colonial identity, diaspora, and trauma, offering new insights into how literature reflects global movement and cultural conflict. The findings can support educators and scholars in teaching literature that reflects global, multicultural perspectives, helping students connect with real-world migration issues. Through its focus on personal and cultural dislocation, the research offers narratives that build empathy, challenging dominant national narratives and promoting inclusive storytelling. It will enhance literary transnationalism theory by applying it to short fiction, a form often overlooked in transnational studies.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the postcolonial theory of Homi K. Bhabha, especially his perspective of mimicry and third space, as explained in *The Location of Culture* (1994). These two perspectives offer a critical approach to understanding identity struggles in literary characters who bargain with the dominant culture as they feel displaced and marginalized.

Mimicry as a Strategy of Identity Negotiation.

Mimicry is a conceptualized idea in which Bhabha views the colonization as a complex strategy where the colonized is imitating language, behavior, values, and social codes of the colonizers. This imitation is, however, never complete, it is characterized by the difference and excess and creates an object that is nearly identical, but not the same (Bhabha, 1994). The mimicry, therefore, creates the effect of ambivalence: on the one hand, it seems to strengthen the colonial power, making people conform; on the other hand, it shows the unnaturalness and instability of that power. From this perspective, mimicry is not merely an act of imitation but a mode of survival and negotiation. The characters that practice mimicry use the socially acceptable identities to be recognized, secured or fit in the dominating structures. However, the consequence of this performance is often psychological tension between the mimed identity and inner desires, emotions or cultural memory. Bhabha claims that mimicry disturbs the discourse of power since it shows that the cultural power is not based on its superiority but on repetition and staging.

Mimicry in literary works is carried out through restrained speech, controlled behavior, emotional repression, or the adoption of dominant cultural values. These performances accentuate identity as being performed and not owned. The current paper uses the notion of mimicry by Bhabha to discuss how the characters in the story survive through the identity conflicts by trying to conform to the outward appearance and be displaced internally. Mimicry in this context is turned into a place of encounter where identity is not made but made fragmented.

The Third Space and the Formation of In-Between Identities

Closely related to mimicry is the concept of a third space of Bhabha, meaning the in betweenness of cultures and mind where the meanings and identity are constantly bargained. The third space, according to Bhabha, disrupts binary oppositions, which include colonizer/colonized, self/other and tradition/modernity. It is within this space that new forms of identity emerge identities that are unstable, contingent, and resistant to fixed definition (Bhabha, 1994).

The third space is not where harmony and synthesis occur, but a place of ambivalence and uncertainty. It is created by the instances of cultural translation, silence, hesitation and contradiction. People that occupy the third space are not entirely on one side of the other; they are in between, making negotiations between several expectations at the same time. This state tends to lead to a sense of alienation, lack of emotional attachment and unfulfilled desire.

The third space has often been represented in a literary form, often in the form of characters who seem to be socially integrated but emotionally or psychologically withdrawn. Their identities are moulded by conflicts of silence and the repressed possibilities and not by definite actions. Third space permits studying identity as not a permanent phenomenon but as a process that is continuously being constructed under the influence of power relations and social restrictions.

This paper utilizes the concept of the third space to analyze the issue of identity struggles in a moment of silence, restraint, and missed possibility in the chosen short stories. It is through this in-between that the research brings out the mechanism in which displacement works not just in terms of geography or culture but also in the interior worlds of characters.

Literature review

Postcolonial theory gives valuable instruments for exploring the cultural, political and psychological impact of colonialism as portrayed in literature. You can find in the works by Shaikh et al. (2023) that Bhabha and his approach to the issue of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence can be considered central in the analysis of articles describing the lived realities of the formerly colonized societies. The authors assume that hybridity comes about when cultures come in contact and develop new identities, neither purely native nor purely colonial, as the result of the complication in terms of social mixing formed during historical contacts. The other important idea that has been brought out in the article is the concept of mimicry, which involves the colonized subject trying to replicate the colonizer, but he/she does not fully transform into him/her, a process that produces resistance and vulnerability. The concept of ambivalence described by Shaikh et al. (2023) is the representation of the tensions existing when the colonized people internalized and simultaneously opposed the colonial values but could not stabilize and consequently shift identities. Using their postcolonial approach to House of Stone, the authors illustrate the ways in which characters bargain in their power, identity and cultural memory within these theoretical frameworks, proving that postcolonial analysis can unveil the greater levels of displacement, trauma and cultural re-creation in the new body of literature. In general, the article highlights that the ideas introduced by Bhabha are still relevant to explaining how the significance of colonial power has been unveiled in postcolonial contexts.

The recent postcolonial studies have shown more scrutiny of identity formation in the terms of mimicry, hybridity and third space especially in South Asian context. As an illustration of how the elite stratum of Pakistani society internalizes the colonial values, Khan and Nayab (2025) compare the works of Moni Mohsin, a novelist, the Diary of a Social Butterfly and Between You, Me and the Four Walls. Using the postcolonial theory of Bhabha, the research will focus on mimicry as an imitation and criticism of indigenous identity, which brings out an ambivalent identity that is not

completely Western nor completely indigenous. The authors also point out the third space that exists between the two cultures where colonial backgrounds still influence the hierarchies and self-perception in society. Although this research provides useful contributions to the understanding of elite postcolonial identity and postcolonial satire, it pays much attention to hybridity and cultural performance based on classes. Psychological displacement and identity struggle are not given much attention at the individual level, which shows a gap that the present study aims to fill.

Earlier research on the fiction of Sefi Atta has placed much emphasis on gender, patriarchy, and marginalization of women in the Nigerian socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. Gagui (2023) explores Hailstones on Zamfara in her master dissertation, as she focuses on opposing roles that African women are enforced by patriarchy, religious institutions, and social traditions. The paper shows how women characters are limited in their gender expectation, withheld education, and placed in different legal and moral standards, especially when Sharia law is applied. According to Gagui (2023), the story of Atta reveals the injustice of the system by highlighting the cruel treatment of women compared to the impunity of the men, and the deep gender bias of domestic institutions. Although this paper is valuable in illuminating the issues of female oppression and resistance, it majorly embraces the feminist approach and fails to examine the postcolonial identity development with reference to images of mimicry or liminal spaces of identity. This is where postcolonial theory can be applied to develop various analysis of identity struggle that is not limited to gender.

Homi K. Bhabha has greatly been involved with the concept of third space by recent postcolonial criticism as it seeks to understand identity negotiation in diasporic and postcolonial stories. In their analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah, Shalini and Batta (2023) observe the novel *Admiring Silence* in a Bhabhaian approach by making the case that identity in the novel is predetermined as fluid and negotiated based on colonial displacement, migration, and cultural encounter. Their analysis shows that the unnamed narrator occupies a third space of reluctance, silence and cultural dissonance in which the unnamed narrator cannot be assimilated or can turn back to her cultural roots. The authors underline that due to the destabilization of binary oppositions that include colonizer/colonized and home/exile, this in-between space enables the possibility of other forms of selfhood to develop. Although the paper provides a more elaborate discussion of hybridity and global identity as described by Gurnah in his novel, it mainly covers the aspect of diasporic experience. There is a lack of interest in the mechanism of mimicry as a psychological tactic in normal social life, and this is a subject of future investigation.

Analysis

Julian Barnes's *The Story of Mats Israelson* focuses on the inner world of the protagonist Anders Boden whose identity is conditioned by silence and restrained emotions. Anders is very much involved to Barbro Lindwall, but he never tells of his attachment to her. He does not follow his feelings but chooses not to react and lets significant moments go unanswered. Memory is used to narrate the story and thus highlights the role of the self that Anders develops because of missed chances instead of decisive action. Barnes introduces a character whose identity is built into hesitation, being the kind of life that is developed rather by what is avoided than by what is sought. This nature of the character of Anders is quite evident as he remembers the request of Barbro: "*She had said, 'I would like to visit Falun' and all he had needed to reply was, 'I shall take you there'*" (Barnes, 2005, p. 43). Anders does not do anything even though it only takes a simple response. This scene tells us about his inclination to suppress his emotions, and to follow social norms of emotional control. Speech and response according to the character model presented by Murphy is

very critical in character development. The fact that Anders remains silent indicates that his identity is constructed through self-restraint and no corporeal expression. His actions can be considered as mimicry, as defined by Bhabba, since he takes a socially acceptable masculinity which appreciates restraint and composure.

Barnes accentuates the same tendency by means of the alternative reaction Anders imagines: *“Perhaps if she had indeed said, flirtatiously... ‘At nights I dream of Venice’ he would just have thrown his life at her”* (Barnes, 2005, p. 43). In this reflection, we can see that Anders can desire, but only when there are no conditions that expose him to emotional risks. He acts out of expectation but not heart. Murphy emphasizes action, and then it is apparent that Anders has created his identity through repetitive avoidance. Such imitation does not permit subjective gratification; it strengthens his emotional loneliness.

This identity clash is further enhanced as Anders settled to meet Barbro several years later. *“At last, after all these years—twenty-three, to be precise—they had finally seen one another’s handwriting”* (Barnes, 2005, p. 43). The fact that this connection is delayed is a representation of the continued emotional aloofness of Anders. The third space is here situated in the person of Anders. He cannot completely get back to the past or go forward in the present. His existence is also suspended between reality and memory, and this brings about a feeling of emotional displacement.

Barnes strengthens this situation by demonstrating that Anders envisions his life as a theatrical performance that he does not live. He prepares to tell his story *“In the version he had perfected”* (Barnes, 2005, p. 43). This is an indication that repetition and self-control are the forces that define Anders rather than change. Even though his displacement is not colonial, it is like the identity struggles of postcolonialism in its focus on imitation, indecisiveness, and unsettled identity. Barnes, through the character of Anders Boden, illustrates the third space that is internal and the identity is never complete because of the mimicry.

News from Home describes the situation of the migrants of Nigeria who reside in the United States and have to coordinate the belonging, cultural preservation, and adjusting to a diasporic environment. The story centers both on daily life in the Nigerian society, which brings out identity conflicts that arise due to displacement and cultural imitation. The focus on everyday social events, like the use of language, dress, and social gatherings, is instead of dramatic confrontation as a place of enacting and negotiating identity. These scenes prefigure the experiences of postcolonial subjects navigating the cultures of domination, but as individuals with a sense of difference.

Mimicry comes out in the story with partial use of American language, habits and social behaviour of the characters, exposing a partial and awkward imitation. This is especially shown in terms of linguistic performance where the narrator notes that *“Nigerian men have their limits to being Americanized. Some have not quite mastered their wannas, gonnas, shouldas”* (Atta, 2004, p. 216). The bid to sound American is an intentional attempt to match with the mainstream culture but the inadequate attempt to do so only reveals the difference and does not eliminate it. Language turns into a visible sign of difference and mimicry serves as a form of similarity, which is not fully embraced to strengthen the precariousness of cultural affiliation.

Mimicry is also enacted visually and culturally through appearance and social practices. The narrator notes, *“We are homogenized in our T-shirts, baseball caps and sneakers. What gives us away as Nigerians is the way we barbecue our hotdogs and hamburgers”* (Atta, 2004, p. 215). While outward appearance imitates American norms, subtle cultural behaviors reveal persistent difference. This contrast demonstrates that mimicry does not result in full assimilation; instead, it

sustains identity tension by producing subjects who look like the dominant group yet remain culturally distinct. The act of imitation thus highlights the limits of belonging and underscores the performative nature of cultural adaptation.

From this incomplete mimicry emerges a third space where Nigerian and American identities intersect, creating an in-between site of negotiation rather than fixed belonging. The psychological pressure of this space is articulated when the narrator reflects, *"In this country it's so easy to forget your identity"* (Atta, 2004, p. 220). This statement captures the instability experienced by migrants who must constantly renegotiate their sense of self within the host culture. Identity in the third space is not abandoned but rendered fluid, shaped by competing cultural expectations and the demands of adaptation.

The contradictory nature of the third space is further illustrated through the character of Dr. Darego, whose relationship with America is marked by both attachment and detachment. The narrator notes, *"He loves his children, and they are American. He loves his dream home in America, but America the place is nothing more than a giant mall and workplace to him"* (Atta, 2004, p. 219). In this passage the third space is a state of split belonging where both emotional investment of the American life is present as well as cultural distance. The character does not fully exist in Nigeria, nor America or anywhere; he has his identity that is formed in a middle ground that is characterized by contradiction. The third space is therefore made out to be a place of negotiating identity and not its resolution, representing the incomposite nature of the postcolonial displacement.

The tension created by imitation is also seen in the fact that the narrator notices the social behavior in the Nigerian diaspora, in which the imitation of the American norms is still incomplete and self-aware. She notes that *"Everyone laughs loudly and talks as if they haven't been out in years"* (Atta, 2004, p. 216). The characters are engaged in an American kind of social event, but their behavior is exaggerated making them to seem to be over performing instead of relaxing. Mimicry, in this case, does not lead to comfort and natural belonging, it just shows anxiety about fitting in the hegemonic social space, affirming the difference with the help of excess as opposed to its lack.

Mimicry can also be noted in the selective use of the American domestic norms adopted by the characters though they do not lend well to the Nigerian cultural expectations. According to the narrator, Dr. Darego also grumbles about the Americans the same way, as in *"complains about Americans the same way, saying how rude they are, how arrogant and prejudiced"* (Atta, 2004, p. 216). This paradox reveals the insecurity of imitation. As the character spends time living and working in America, he is both embracing and opposing the American lifestyle at the same time by being both an American and an opposer. Mimicry consequently generates a fragmented stand in which imitation and rejection co-exist.

The third space is especially obvious in those situations when the narrator finds herself in a situation where her inner reaction contrasts with her external behavior. Through the lines, such as, *"Sometimes a shop assistant follows me in a store, and I want to turn and scream"*, she admits that there are moments when she feels like being harassed by a shop assistant who follows her to the store and she wants to turn around and scream (Atta, 2004, p. 216). The narrator does not follow this urge; still, the tension between restraint and resistance is an expression of in-between identity because of racial surveillance. The third space in this case is both cultural and psychological in which the subject is a negotiator of self-control, identity of difference, and historical memory in daily experiences.

This intermediate state is solidified as the narrator compares national realities, seeing the failures of Nigeria as well as the order of America without drawing any absolute parallels between them. She writes of how she looks around and she thinks that “*Well, Gawd bless America*” (Atta, 2004, p. 217). This scene does not mark the total acceptance of the American identity, but it is a conditional one influenced by contrast. The third space gives the narrator the chance to have a contradictory perception simultaneously, which places America as the place of refuge and the place of displacement.

The lack of permanence in belonging to the third space is also defined by the communal identity. According to the narrator, “*These people... are lonely people, I think*” (Atta, 2004, p. 216). Although the migrant community is united with its nationality and cultural background, it is not united and disturbed. Such loneliness highlights the fact that solidarity or coherence does not necessarily emerge out of the third space. On the contrary, it usually enhances a sense of isolation because people find it difficult to balance between imitation and belonging.

Collectively, these instances support the functioning of mimicry in *News from home* as an unfinished and anxious performance and the third space as a location of contradiction, restraint and negotiation. No one has their identity held intact and no one is completely transformed, it is constantly being made by imitation, observation and self-surveillance in the foreign cultural terrain.

Findings

The analysis of *News from Home* and *Temporary Position* indicates that mimicry is a tactical but volatile strategy according to which the Nigerian characters are negotiating the cultural power in the Western settings. Mimicry in the two stories is mostly played out in language, accent, dressing and social conduct especially in work and community places. The imitations are never full, and instead, they are partial and self-conscious, reveal difference, and do not dissolve it. One of the most essential indications of this instability is linguistic mimicry, in particular, the borrowing of speech patterns that are inherent to the Americans or the British. The characters are trying to sound Americanized or English, but their accents and pronunciations expose the boundaries of assimilation and their status as outsiders even though they want to be accepted.

The findings also reveal that imitation does not result in cultural erosion and total assimilation. Rather, it maintains an ongoing conflict between similarity and dissimilarity. The characters that are able to use Western modes of speech and appearance can receive conditional access to the institutional and social spaces, but this access is weak and negotiable. Mimicry therefore becomes more a means of empowerment rather than a means of survival in unequal power relations. The consciousness of imitation, e.g., the fact that the narrator himself refers to the fact that he is speaking with a fake accent, is a reminder of the performance of identity and the fact that the characters are very conscious of the colonial and postcolonial orders of things.

Out of this partial imitation, the third space is created as one of the key points of identity negotiation. The third space is no longer demonstrated as a balanced place in the middle; it is a conflicting and usually uncomfortable place where the characters are both attached and at the same time detached. In *News from Home*, migrants show emotional investment in the American life but are culturally distant as they connect belonging, showing it as fragmented instead of unified. Likewise, in *Temporary Position*, the professionalism and the language that the narrator performs place her in an in-between position where she could gain power momentarily and never entirely. The third space is thus an active place of negotiation which is mediated by displacement, surveillance and self-monitoring.

In general, the results indicate that identity in these texts is not determined or solved. Mimicry brings out the unstable nature of dominant cultural norms as it reveals them as performative and the third space becomes the state in which postcolonial subjects constantly negotiate their belonging, power, and self within diasporic situations.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how mimicry with the creation of the third space contributes to identity struggle in the chosen short stories of *News from Home* by Sefi Atta. Having explored this by taking a close textual analysis, it has demonstrated that mimicry is a partial and nervous act that Nigerian characters seek to negotiate in the Western cultural and institutional domain. Instead of making the full assimilation possible, imitation will always demonstrate the difference which strengthens the precariousness of belonging of the postcolonial subjects in the diasporic context. The paper also finds that the third space is a result of this unfinished mimicry and acts as an in-between place whereby identity is constantly negotiated but not fixed. In both *News from Home* and *Temporary Position*, characters find themselves in a role of contradiction, both being a part of, yet not part of the prevailing cultural systems. The third space is therefore not a place of resolution, but rather an environment of constant tension as influenced by language, accent, memory and institutional power.

Through foregrounding normal, daily practices, including speech, social practice, and professional activity, the short fiction authored by Atta shows that the construction of postcolonial identity takes place through continual adaptation and does not involve replacing culture. Mimicry enables the characters to live in the systems of dominance, and third space unveils the limitations of the systems by revealing the provisionally, performance, and contested nature of identity. Finally, this paper highlights the point that identity in postcolonial diasporic literature can be more interpreted as a process rather than an actual essence, which is influenced by imitation, negotiation, and displacement.

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