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Post-Colonial Female Identity: An Examination of the Twentieth Century Narrative Between Nation and Identity in *A Question of Power, See Then Now, and Americanah*

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**Post-Colonial Female Identity: An Examination of the
Twentieth Century Narrative Between Nation and
Identity in *A Question of Power*, *See Then Now*, and
*Americanah***

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies

by

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Introduction

In the introduction of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes*, she reflects on the various meanings of the word "colonialism." This term, when used in Mohanty's essay, refers to Western culture in the wake of colonial conquest and the cultural politics that came about as a result. But in order to grasp the full meaning of colonialism (and post-colonialism), the reader must delve into a larger context of cultural discourse. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* explains post-colonial theory as the moment when "once colonized peoples had cause to reflect on and express the tension that ensued from ... this powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience" (Ashcroft 1-2). This passage establishes the importance of understanding post-colonialism as an event that begins with the reflection and expression of the colonial experience. The "post-colonial condition" seeks to adapt and interpret the meaning of cultural independence from colonialism. Theorists can isolate the post-colonial condition to the specific details of historical periods and locations but later springboard into a wider philosophical argument based on articulating the beginning and ending of the post-colonial experience.

The post-colonial debate works to decipher cultural ideology still influenced by colonial politics. Although societies modernize and establish independence, "post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to ... subtle forms of neo-colonial domination" (Ashcroft 1-2). *Under Western Eyes* joins this conversation on how Western politics creates "forms of neo-colonial domination." Mohanty's essay directly addresses the binary between Western and Non-Western categorization by focusing on social norms that "divide peoples based on ... discrimination" (Ashcroft 1-2). Mohanty's evocative title *Under Western Eyes* implies the

philosophical weight of Western culture as its gaze casts judgment over all other cultures by comparison. The essay implies the idea that cultural independence is an illusion that does not provide a solution but instead shows post-colonialism as an ongoing process to subvert power between dominant and subordinate cultures.

The systematic analysis of the third-world woman in Mohanty's feminist dialogue raises alarm about the dangers of misrepresenting identity. *Under Western Eyes'* stance asks "Can Western feminism really understand and aid non-Western feminism?" which urges the post-colonial audience to realize homogeneous characterizations that exist across cultures. Thus, the post-colonial conversation of the non-Western narrative can provide a remedy to the threat of imbalanced cultural politics. *Under Western Eyes'* critical intervention is interested in zeroing in on the post-colonial condition that arises after the nineteenth century. The scope of Mohanty's argument relays twentieth-century post-colonial features that relate to phenomena such as decolonizing geographic locations, immigrating from post-colonial nations, and migrating in a globalized setting. Her conversation is not so much interested in the historical ramifications regarding the introduction of colonial culture; instead, she takes a more innovative approach and looks to the flow of culture in a contemporary presentation of Western ideology and practice. Twentieth-century post-colonialism is a time when the previous nineteenth-century discriminations of race, class, and gender appear in more nuanced incarnations.

Mohanty specifies how the onset of colonialism creates an ongoing recapitulation of cultural prejudice that continues today. She posits how Western culture exhibits a monolithic nature through use of ideology to codify and limit the marginalized subject (333-334). *Under Western Eyes* speaks to the insular concepts that continue to manifest themselves through social forces. Mohanty specifically draws attention to the Western idea of the third-world woman. She

explains that a woman is “a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses” (Mohanty 334). Mohanty’s definition of the third-world woman shows how Western social politics create a binary that offers the disparaging construction of an “other.” *Under Western Eyes* explores how the cultural discourse between the West and non-West is heavily skewed. This imbalance originates from a lack of equal power distribution between West and non-Western cultures.

As Mohanty spotlights the unequal power dynamics between Western and non-Western cultures in *Under Western Eyes* and gives a particular twentieth-century intervention of post-colonialism. The essay uses the example of the third-world female narrative as a prototypical example of how the influences of colonial ideology are now engrained into global cultural politics. Thus, the post-modern social inventions of consumerism, urbanism, and globalization of the third-world still function as agents of the same oppressive nineteenth-century binary of colonial thinking. The roles of colonizer and colonized are remodeled to fit the terms of capitalism and industrialization. Mohanty makes this cautionary inference, “colonization has been used to characterize everything—however sophisticated or problematical its use as an explanatory construct, colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression—often violent—of heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (Mohanty 52). With this comment, Mohanty gives an interpretation of colonialism that underscores how the hegemonic dogmas of the nineteenth-century propel into the post-modern era. The term colonialism expands from being simply limited by a particular geographic region or the span of historical events and becomes an “explanatory construct.” The claim that colonialism has not ended holds true for twentieth century cultural politics. The historical binary between the West and non-West still exists yet has revamped into new expressions under the same despotic

tendencies that may be labeled as “colonialism.” This thesis aims to investigate these permutations of the relationship between the colonizer/colonized by following the example given in *Under Western Eyes* by following the progress of the narrative of the third-world woman.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis track the evolution of post-colonial moments, considering twentieth-century progression. The argument of this project is that by using three literary novels as models, the reader can track the advancement of the post-colonial condition as seen in the example of the female post-colonial subject. Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*, Jamaica Kincaid’s *See Now Then*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* give insight into the unfurling of African diaspora, beginning with local movement and moving to a global outlook following the twentieth-first-century background. These works of fiction allow for geographical and temporal snapshots of post-colonial progression. Each novel provides an example of the re-making of colonial discrimination by using the voices of third-world female authors who seek to empower and stabilize the marginalized post-colonial subject. These authors use the narrative form as a means of decentering the hegemonic colonial story. The central themes of local movement, the immigrant experience, and migrancy and return show post-colonial movement as a means of seeking independence from the polarizing binary outlined in *Under Western Eyes*. The task of traversing the breadth and complexity of twentieth-first-century decolonization is streamlined through the third-world female narrative. By comparing their examples of female identity in various post-colonial locations and time periods provides a method with which to analyze and resolve the post-colonial condition through post-modern fictional narrative.

Bessie Head’s 1973 novel, *A Question of Power*, establishes a starting point in this trajectory of decolonization with the exploration of local movement. Head’s novel examines the

progression of post-colonial development in the unique circumstances of twentieth-century South Africa. Head intervenes into the dense cultural, historical, and national ideology that builds on the tension between dominant and marginalized countries. The text considers post-WWII South Africa in the wake of gaining freedom from British rule with the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism (1948) and the birth of an independent nation established by a white minority of European descendants. The political ramifications of South African independence, under the white minority, created an environment of systematic segregation (White, Black, and Asian) that was normalized by governmental legislation and the institutionalization of apartheid.

As a narrative text, *A Question of Power* is able to analyze and critique South Africa's dependence on failed colonial ideology manifested in apartheid. Apartheid ideology judiciously stifled any concept of multi-ethnic culture based on the bigoted notion that through the isolation of distinct ethnic groups, South African national identity could be preserved and strengthened. *A Question of Power* functions as an act of post-colonial progression through its use of a mulatta protagonist (Elizabeth) who disrupts the standards of Western hegemony expressed in the skewed ideas of apartheid nationalism and assimilation. Instead, Head's narrative encourages new expressions of national culture in South Africa with Elizabeth's re-appropriation of her categorization (and rejection) as madwoman and mulatta. *A Question of Power's* incongruent narrative provides a preliminary moment in the trajectory of twentieth-century post-coloniality. This approach allows for serious questioning of the concepts of national identity, native ethnicity, and geographic location. This alteration allows for the conception of post-colonial identity that can move away from the dominance of Western history, and thus, introduces a reinvention of the cultural politics of decolonization.

Bessie Head, as a third-world female author, provides an example of local movement as connected to the question of nativism in post-colonial South Africa. *A Question of Power* undertakes the lengthy task of cataloguing the development of independent South African cultural politics throughout tumultuous incidents of tyranny, corruption, and industrialization. Head communicates these themes through the abstract narration of Elizabeth the mulatta protagonist. Head is able to deal with these complex topics by creating a protagonist with an identity splintered by mental anxiety.

A Question of Power avoids a one-dimensional presentation of a mad protagonist. Instead, Elizabeth's mental illness weaves her story into the novel's portrayal of South Africa's political history. Elizabeth characterizes South Africa's national narrative with two imagined personas, Sello and Dan, to represent different stages in the country's growth. The novel artfully layered complications of race, national identity, and modernizing cultural politics. The text considers the difficulties of moving into an independent South Africa reliant on apartheid nationality. This political system created a caste system tradition that trickles down onto the native subject who functions under prejudiced national identity. Head communicates how the pressure of these factors bear down on Elizabeth's identity formation.

Bessie Head's main symbol of cultural progress in *A Question of Power* is the protagonist Elizabeth. Elizabeth's identity functions allegorically as a means of examining both South African citizenship and South Africa's identity as a country. She embodies the confrontation between apartheid and multicultural politics. *A Question of Power's* narrative format reflects the protagonist's experiences of mental breakdown that splits the novel into sections where Elizabeth breaks from the reality of the novel to express abstract internal hallucinations representative of the cultural history of South Africa. The novel centers on the moment that induces Elizabeth's

madness that is the crucial event of Elizabeth's societal labeling as mulatta and madwoman. As a South African woman, Elizabeth inherits apartheid's legacy of racial discrimination. Head uses the storyline of Elizabeth's white mother's act of miscegenation to exemplify the conflicting tension present in twentieth-century South Africa: "You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll end up insane just like your mother" (Head 16). This statement expresses Elizabeth's defining moment, as her identity is both a threat to colonial ideology yet also symbolic of the phenomenon of post-colonial and post-modern hybridity. Head uses Elizabeth's personal story of madness to expose and critique the harmful effects of racial bigotry and South African apartheid. *A Question of Power* hinges on the unique perspective given by Elizabeth through her hybridity, she not only narrates a story of personal identity but also addresses the building of independent South Africa's national story. Head's novel creates a powerful counter-narrative that works to resolve the repressive ideology first imprinted on South Africa by Western colonialism.

A Question of Power reveals how the oppressive influence of Western ideology functions as an embedded social practice. The phrase "to be careful" warns Elizabeth that she will "end up just like her mother," and indicates an instance of cultural interpellation. As theorist Anissa Talahite explains, "*A Question of Power* attempts to redefine 'illness' and 'madness' as constructions of the 'other'" (2). Head purposefully navigates the context of this othering of hybrid/postcolonial subjects. She shows how the discriminatory misconception of hybridity comes from the ideology reminiscent of previous nineteenth-century philosophy. As Amar Achieraiou's explains that the nineteenth-century definition of hybridity is limited to a "purely biological dimension" and expanded to include "racial degeneration." Head's storyline of a distorted heritage of madness and exile is rooted in historically prejudiced ideas about race and

biological hybridity. *A Question of Power's* narrative hopes to pivot away from these antiquated ideas and transition South African culture into new considerations.

A Question of Power's plot alters the definition of hybridity as Elizabeth seeks to find new identity for herself, and in turn a new understanding of what it means to be South African. Similar to how Homi Bhabha describes hybridity as “moving away from singularities of ‘class,’ ‘gender,’ etc. as primary conceptual and organizational categories” (Bhabha 2-3), *A Question of Power* helps to ground this contemporary shift into the post-modern with an internal perspective, following the permeating legacy of colonial laws as they erode to form new meanings. Elizabeth, as the narrator, gives a local representation of the future of South African identity, moving into an autonomous home space free from apartheid’s obsession with race. *A Question of Power* focuses on remedying the status of the native location by using decolonizing politics that can move away from local movement and grow to include the counter-narrative of the immigrant story as seen in the examples of *See Now Then* and *Americanah*.

Jamaica Kincaid’s 2013 novel, *See Now Then*, looks at the modern immigrant narrative, moving from the local post-colonial experience to the landscape of post-war America. This narrative frames the ambiguous immigration process of the Afro-Caribbean subject, Mrs. Sweet. This novel borrows from Western tradition and iconic American culture with imagery ranging from Greek mythology, domestic suburban life, and American fiction writer Shirley Jackson. Kincaid borrows from Jackson’s peculiar style when considering the cultural landscape of American suburbia. *See Now Then* follows Jackson’s interest in taking a closer look into America suburbia as a strangely separate setting. Kincaid’s novel especially latches onto Jackson’s literary trend of showing the suburbs as a place outside of a linear timeline. For theorist Bernice Murphy, Shirley Jackson’s practice of timeless suburbia symbolizes what

Murphy in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* calls, “the genre of the post-war suburbs,” that shows “an anxiety ... about conformity” and “lends itself well to ... supernatural plots” (2). Murphy draws attention to Jackson’s symbolism as a critique of post-war cultural conformity in the United States. Murphy’s observations about Jackson’s texts also outline how this anxious conformity encompasses a variety of societal behaviors including strict class, gender, and political roles. Shirley Jackson’s concerns with the oppressive quality of the American suburbs translate to Jamaica Kincaid’s 2013 novel *See Now Then*.

Kincaid takes direction from Jackson’s literary style and sets *See Now Then* in no specific time period. Similar to a Shirley Jackson novel, *See Now Then* simply functions in post-war American suburbia with an introspection into the habits of American consumerism and assimilation. The storyline moves away from a standard chronology, reflecting a constant cycle of erasure and progress that parallels the post-modern era’s engine of cultural industrialization.

Kincaid uses a sardonic portrayal of the myth-like fantasy of “fitting in” to suburban life throughout *See Now Then*. Mrs. Sweet creates a singular reality comprised of what is valued in American culture, “See now then, the dear Mrs. Sweet who lived with her husband Mr. Sweet and their two children, the beautiful Persephone and the young Hercules in the Shirley Jackson house, which was in a small village in New England” (Kincaid 3). These central images of marriage, motherhood, and financial stability are present as idyllic suburban signifiers. Mrs. Sweet relies on the performance of cultural values provided by her husband, Mr. Sweet, their children, the young Hercules and beautiful Persephone, and the Shirley Jackson house. This performance of Mrs. Sweet’s family and her belongings is what allow the validation of her immigrant identity in an American context.

See Now Then's narrative also explores this consumer/commodity relationship on two different levels, the first being Mrs. Sweet's adherence to the role of American housewife in her domestic storyline and the second larger implication of the first and third-world dynamic between the US and the Caribbean. Mrs. Sweet's narrative functions as a textual representation of third-world commodification in the wake of twentieth-century upsurge of capitalism and modernization. The novel's protagonist Mrs. Sweet experiences generalizations of her Afro-Caribbean identity such as the imposed title of "banana boat woman" that is described as the "seat of her diminishment" (Kincaid 9,11). This statement shows how immigrant identity is marginalized as suspect in the context of American environment. Kincaid shows how immigrant postcolonial identity in this context is pressured to assimilate to American mass culture. *See Now Then* exemplifies this tension with Mrs. Sweet's emulating the American housewife. These two examples show the assimilation process on both cultural and gender identity, both oppressed by the pressures of globalization.

See Now Then focuses on the myth of the modern housewife as a hegemonic ideology that compartmentalizes Mrs. Sweet's identity as female immigrant. This aspect of the narrative parallels with *The Feminine Mystique*'s exploration of the cultural politics of American femininity as a consumer-based performance of gender. Betty Friedan describes the "image of woman" as "young and frivolous ... gaily content in the world of bedroom and kitchen ... and home" (Friedan 30). These observations between the ties of consumerism and performance of gender and culture in America help to articulate the intense process of assimilation that Kincaid mirrors in Mrs. Sweet's identity. Thus, the *See Now Then* acknowledges an important reincarnation of the preliminary influences of the Western/non-Western pairing. Although the progression of decolonization and immigration may lead to the development of national identity

in new geographical locations, the ideology of post-colonialism shifts into the twentieth century, embodied in new agents of supremacy.

The trajectory of these post-colonial novels illustrates the post-modern era's dispersal of previous boundaries of national identity into an onset of global culture. *A Question of Power* spoke of the status of local movement and an evident breakdown in the language of colonial binaries. *See Now Then* studied the erasure of industrializing cultural politics and post-colonial immigration in the twentieth-century landscape. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* embodies each of the post-colonial elements discussed by Head and Kincaid. She presents a modern-day 2013 text that considers the post-colonial condition where the previous delineations of national identity have eroded into an intermingling of cultures.

Americanah uses a multilayered narrative to develop the protagonist Ifemelu's various stages of identity formation with a childhood and adolescence rooted in native location, an adulthood of assimilating migrancy to the US, and finally a return and renewal to the place of ethnic origin. Adichie clarifies moments of post-colonial incongruity as *Americanah* jumps between significant events in Ifemelu's development. The protagonist's voice flourishes into a critical lens that focuses on post-modern instances of culture through a life-style blog called "*Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negros) by a Non-American Black*" (Adichie 4). This format encourages an introspective dialogue of cultural elements to an international audience with evocative titles such as *Understanding America for the Non-American Black* (Adichie 186). Adichie showcases the topics of race and class in these snapshots of cultural interaction. Adichie's motivation for constructing such an unconventional discussion of cultural politics ties into the narrative of national identity in the setting of post-modern global culture.

Americanah's narrative is meant to counterpoint the traditional myth of nation provided by Western culture. Adichie's novel builds an alternative to the first-world mythology of American and British culture. This stance is evident in Adichie's irreverent tone (as a non-American black) of demystifying American standards of race, gender, and class for the third-world subject to "understand America." Adichie's critique of American cultural politics is what empowers Ifemelu's identity as a Nigerian/global citizen. The novel offers a blog post, called "Nigerpolitan Club" as a reflection of Ifemelu's progress as a post-colonial subject, navigating the dissolution of national identity with multicultural identity when Ifemelu blogs, "Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York ... Most of us come back to make money ... start businesses ... others have come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country, but we spend all our time complaining" (Adichie 421). Here, Ifemelu addresses an audience of native Nigerians of her middle-class adult generation and makes the important distinction that "Lagos is not New York" and "never will be." These words contest the Westernizing pressure that moves through Ifemelu's narrative. Adichie establishes that Nigeria, as a third-world country, could never emulate a perfect performance of Western culture. But she also clarifies that their inability to seamlessly assimilate into a monoculture is a positive characteristic.

This statement follows *Americanah*'s important theme of fighting the myth of the West by acknowledging the realities of cultural diaspora in the post-modern era. The Nigerpolitans who "spend all their time complaining" about the difference between Nigeria and the US help to show how to dismantle the myth of the West because many third-world subjects use it as an escape to avoid the problems associated with decolonized nations. Adichie urges these Nigerians who "come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country" to take interest in

their native ethnic culture in order to help alleviate the imbalances caused by colonization and modernization. This quote addressed to the Nigerpolitan Club unpacks the significance of providing a migratory narrative that seeks to resolve contemporary Nigerian identity.

Americanah scrutinizes Nigerian identity in a way unique to twentieth-century cultural politics. The novel models the trajectory of local movement, immigrant story in order to acknowledge the progress of national identity as no longer tied to geographic location. Ifemelu's "Nigerian Club" works as a call to action in the text urging a younger generation of Nigerians to use modernization to aid in the task of building Nigerian identity in the wake of twentieth-century cultural politics. Adichie warns her audience against complacency in the wake of post-modern diaspora. *Americanah* describes the post-colonial subject as crucial to a new kind of national development, one that requires hybridity in order to offset assimilation and a strong foundation in native pride as seen in Ifemelu's development as a migrant and Americanized returnee.

Americanah marks a jumping off point in the trajectory of the post-colonial condition. The stance of this argument has focused on colonialism and post-colonialism, working in a sequence of time and evolution of culture. The themes in *A Question of Power* and *See Now Then* consider the relationship between the subaltern and their native location as irreconcilable, motivating a trend of escape or migration away from decolonized nations in order to avoid the post-colonial condition. *Americanah* contrasts this colonial discourse both with a return to the location of indigenous origin and the acknowledgment of a mobile national identity.

The novel's circularity between local movement, immigration, and migrancy and return introduces a departure from the previous circuit of the marginalized subject, traveling away from colonialism only to find similar agents of dominant power in new spaces. The starting point of

this thesis is rooted in the initial worry of the prevalence of the West vs. non-West binary introduced in *Under Western Eyes* and the imitation of this power relationship across regions and eras. But at the conclusion of this post-colonial investigation of *A Question of Power* and *See Now Then, Americanah* interrupts the sequence of cultural movement. Adichie breaks the traditional grounding of the post-modern phenomena and geographical regions with the concept of national mobility and the possibility of a return. This interconnectivity symbolizes a breakdown of the previous tracks of cultural politics. This development in the progression and resolution of post-colonial condition does not offer a set answer, instead Head, Kincaid, and Adichie's narratives work in conjunction to provide a larger narrative of the event of cultural diaspora.

This idea of diaspora intervenes against practices of the nineteenth-century post-colonial thinking, as theorist Homi Bhabha defines a shift in twentieth-century cultural thinking. Bhabha explains how culture, "moves away from singularities of 'class,' 'gender,' 'race,' etc. as primary conceptual and organizational categories" (2-3). In this passage, Bhabha shows how the categorizing titles of class, gender, and race overlap in the postmodern era. This intermingling creates a space of combined experiences where cultural values are managed from a subjective versus objective point of view. Bhabha's theories regarding cultural hybridity allow for the subversion of the pressures of dominant culture in the form of nationalism and assimilation. These social practices threaten to stunt the development of individual identity.

Post-colonial scholar Stuart Hall also writes on the repressive pressures of nationalism and assimilation in the context of the twentieth century. Hall explains the concept of the "narrative of nation," a cultural and political process that plays an integral part in post-colonial building of national identity (613). The creation of this ideology will join a body of citizens in

their societal identity and include the mediation of a political narrative that carries the weight of subordinating some individuals and elevating others in order to maintain national stability. This implied instability between members of a governing body and its subjects connects to Hall's discussion of the "expression for assimilation into the universal" (615) that ensures an intellectual weight onto the subordinate individuals who follow dominant purveyors of culture.

Thus, after considering the growth and progression of the post-colonial condition, Bhabha and Hall's theories illustrate the necessity of cultural diaspora as a means of fighting against the outcome of cultural homogeneity. *A Question of Power*, *See Now Then*, and *Americanah* mirror the outcome of diaspora in order to show how the path of decolonization idolizes the idea of reclaiming stable national identities. But this re-appropriation is impossible because in the trajectory of the post-colonial subject, growth and progression happens simultaneously between the subject and the location of culture which both fluctuate due to the temporal conditioning of culture on both subject and geographical location.

What the Madwoman/Mulatta Saw: A Question of Power's Investigation of Local Movement

As a text, *A Question of Power* gives an innovative account of South Africa under apartheid law. As a third-world female author, Head sets out to expose the exploitation of apartheid in establishing the national narrative of an independent South Africa. Instead, apartheid's narrative creates an incessant dehumanization of black South African identity based on race. The novel outlines how the remnants of British and Dutch colonial politics in the twentieth century shape South African identity. Head's writing attempts to appropriate an empowered voice by emboldening her audience to reimagine the national narrative. *A Question of Power's* narrative uses a mulatta protagonist, who embodies both white and black identity as a means of disrupting the hegemonic Western narrative represented by South African apartheid.

This chapter will focus on how Head outlines this local movement with the creation of a unique female post-colonial narrative in *A Question of Power*. Head confronts South African prejudice with a biracial protagonist, Elizabeth, who inherits "madness" under South African's governance of race. Elizabeth's "madness" allows for an imaginative reformation of the conventional narrative of nation and individual post-colonial identity. Elizabeth, as a mulatta protagonist, disorders the traditional linear pattern of the Western narrative; she is both an insider and outsider in South African society. *A Question of Power* weirdly "recollects" South Africa's past, present, and future, while tethered to the intimate experiences of Elizabeth's life in her native country. *A Question of Power* contains an incongruity to its plot, with a limited omniscient narrator. This reflective voice guides the reader through Elizabeth's storyline, divided into two chapters: the manifested introspective personas of Sello and Dan. This way, the novel provides a

post-modern cross-examination of the formation of South African national identity from both a local and global perspective.

Elizabeth's "madness" invites the reader to consider uncommon subversions of the apartheid narrative. Early in the story, for example, Elizabeth experiences racially-charged dialogue in the scene with her school principal who issues this warning—"Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy" (Head 16). This passage reflects apartheid's glorifying narrative and cautions Elizabeth as to the stigma she will carry due to her mixed race. Elizabeth's origins, as the illegitimate child of a black father and white mother, make her a product of illegal miscegenation. As a character, Elizabeth's unique identity provides a setting in which to discuss South African expectations on racial identity.

The article *Apartheid and Madness: Bessie Head's A Question of Power*, mentions how Elizabeth specifically represents the violation of South Africa's 1957 Immorality Amendment Act (Pearse 82-83). Thus, the principal's initial foreword to Elizabeth introduces a regulating tone of "being careful" and "not ending up like her mother" (Head 16). In this instance, Elizabeth's mother is singled out as someone who engaged in "social pollution," because any association (sexual, familial, or otherwise) between blacks and whites was considered illegal under apartheid law (Pearse 83). The principal's authoritarian voice manipulates the mother's story of institutionalization, due to madness and immorality, as the only logical answer to black and white association.

The principal employs apartheid rhetoric to cauterize the identities of Elizabeth's parents and Elizabeth's hybridity. South African apartheid ideology projects compacting labels onto Elizabeth's parents: the principal calls her mother a "white, woman" and her father a "stable

boy, native.” Thus, the principal’s phrasing informs Elizabeth of her prescribed status in South African society. Theorist Margaret Tucker describes how apartheid regulates and suppresses Elizabeth’s identity. Tucker highlights how the novel depicts Elizabeth as being “in a state of alienation and silence in ... a society which revolves on a system of power and oppression” (170). Tucker’s analysis shows how South African nationalism broadcasts a “false sense of authority” through its delineations on black and white social behavior. This false authority aims to build national cohesion, depending on a master and slave dichotomy, where white European culture is exalted and black African culture subdued. Elizabeth’s problematic monikers as mulatta and madwoman instill the reader with an intimate awareness of the gravity of racial bigotry in South Africa. The novel positions Elizabeth’s identity of insanity/hybridity in order to gain perspective of South Africa’s discriminatory political narrative.

Head uses a peculiar, nebulous tone when speaking of Elizabeth in the third person, which transmits the experience of “othering” in South African society. The limited omniscient narrator describes how “she was called to one side by the principle and given the most astounding information ... the details of life and oppression in South Africa had hardly taken form in her mind. The information was almost meaningless to her” (Head 16). This narrative summation, through the use of a strangely flat tone, is able to undermine the previous significance of the principal’s repressive statements. The previous warning to “be careful,” (because of her inheritance of madness) once used as apartheid propaganda, transforms into “meaningless information” for Elizabeth who “could not relate it to herself in any way ... She had loved another woman as her mother, who was also part African, part English, like Elizabeth” (16). These details of Elizabeth’s storyline show how, as a mixed-race child, Elizabeth was spared an immediate obligation to apartheid culture and its crippling standards of race.

The text re-appropriates South Africa's narrative on apartheid through the topic of madness and the principal's statements on Elizabeth's background. The novel frames Elizabeth's racial hybridity and subsequent madness as an introduction into an introspective model on South Africa's national story. Head is able to innovatively devalue the authority and veracity of the principal's statements on apartheid through Elizabeth's narrative. The text describes skepticism towards Elizabeth's mother's story when Head writes, "She really belonged emotionally to her foster-mother and the story was an imposition on her life" (16). Scholar Adetokumbo Pearse identifies apartheid's prejudiced authority and weak ideology explaining, "The only characters who allude to her madness are those members of the establishment who wish to use the point to impress upon Elizabeth her own latent insanity" (82). Elizabeth and her mother's insanity becomes a tool that can be used to identify an apparent lack of any real evidence on supposition due to madness; their association with madness is inflicted by societal ideology. Thus, the reader is granted a critical awareness of the injustice of South African culture.

Elizabeth's exile functions as an important trigger in the novel. The text shifts into a clearer introspective tone as Elizabeth reflects on life as an outsider in Botswana. Anissa Talahite specifies how *A Question of Power* uses the protagonist's traumatic experiences in South Africa as well as in exile as the basis to reflect on the psychological effects of exclusion. Head attempts to redefine "'illness' and 'madness' ... as constructions of the 'other'" (2). Talahite's statements show how madness equates to ideological discrimination in *A Question of Power*. The novel unpacks Elizabeth's exile as she diverges from the close contact with the apparatus of South African nationalism but still continues to feel mental anguish for her racial status. The text plots the events leading to Elizabeth's exile as follows: "for a few years she lived quietly on the edge of South Africa's life ... briefly arrested for having a letter about a banned [political] party ...

married a gangsta just out of jail ... and ... She was forced to take out an exit permit, which, like her marriage, held the 'never to return clause'" (Head 18). The text reviews Elizabeth's exile as an inevitable result similar to the instance when Elizabeth and her mother were given the labels madwoman and mulatta due to racial discrimination. Elizabeth and her mother are labeled insane and given no agency in defining themselves before or after their branding. South African society forces Elizabeth into the sublimation of a never-to-return exit permit and exile. Margaret Tucker describes Elizabeth's passivity as an "unmediated, unexamined, non-story" that "defines Elizabeth in terms of what she lacks. She plays a detached, isolated role both as narrator and as actor in her own past" (173). Tucker's definition of Elizabeth's passivity shows how the novel implies that Elizabeth inherently lacks the ability to express South African nationalism. South Africa completely denies Elizabeth any form of valid identity making her the equivalent of a non-native. South Africa's tense atmosphere of racial discrimination peaks Elizabeth is exiled and experiences a significant mental break.

South Africa's deficient system of government characterizes Elizabeth's unsuccessful patriotism. Head uses Elizabeth's exile to model the absurdity of apartheid's national governance. The narrative describes how Elizabeth interacts with the government when she "joined a political party ... and in a state of emergency which was declared she was searched along with thousands of other people ... and involved in a court case which bewildered the judge ... it might have been the court case which eventually made her a stateless person in Botswana" (Head 18). Head shows apartheid society's farcical reactions to Elizabeth's attempted participation in South African society and connotes Adetokumbo Pearse's argument that although "Elizabeth is not party to the oppressive machinery of the South African power structure, she shares in its burden of guilt ... the threatening fantasy figure is usually an

internalised agent of guilt and fear” (86). Pearse’s analysis shows how South Africa’s narrative assigns guilt and fear to Elizabeth as seen in her arrest and trial. She is in-memorably exiled and dismissed from South African culture. South Africa’s assignation of shame onto Elizabeth culminates in her mental breakdown. She identifies South Africa’s narrative as the source of her persecution, and the outcome of her exposure to it causes her madness.

A Question of Power’s narrative pivots in perception after the start of Elizabeth’s exile. The text shifts with Elizabeth’s experience of exile from South Africa; her mental state deteriorates as a result of being ostracized. The narrative portrays Elizabeth’s mad condition as a result of South African racial discrimination and the ideas that suffocate her identity. Ojo-Ade relates these themes in “Madness in the African Novel,” that *A Question of Power’s* Elizabeth as half-breed, South African exile, and stranger in Botswana deals with non-identity, statelessness, and “life on the verge of terrestrial hell ... all make her a logical guest in a mad-house” (Tucker 170). These parallels illustrate how the novel aims to expose the failure of South Africa’s national narrative by demonstrating Elizabeth’s victimization under apartheid. Elizabeth’s expression of insanity results from enduring these various indignities. But the novel treats Elizabeth’s madness as a means of evaluating the history of South African politics through her imagining the personas of Sello and Dan.

Elizabeth’s insanity provides a critical lens that investigates South Africa’s botched governance of power. Jacqueline Rose outlines this practice of disruptive narrative by describing Head’s authorial use of Elizabeth’s madness as “violating and breaking colonial stereotypes and rules” (404-405). Thus, Elizabeth’s exiting reflections about South Africa speaks toward the state of the country’s politics. Head pinpoints South Africa’s damaging lack of diverse community when the storyline speaks of the national politics that create a poisonous atmosphere dense with

racial hatred. Elizabeth recounts, “It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people had to go out of their way to hate you ... there wasn’t any kind of social evolution ... just this vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks” (19). This section summarizes apartheid’s clogging effects on the progress of South African nationalism. This textual example shows how Elizabeth witnesses and protests the fixating separation of race ingrained in black and white South Africans. She questions “Why?” white people go out of their way to hate non-whites and also identifies the lack of social evolution in a country weighed down by discriminatory national politics.

The novel shifts to hold South Africa’s national politics accountable for deeply rooted problems that prevent any kind of social evolution because of the animosity between race and identity. Elizabeth’s passive exile and life in Botswana gives a perspective into how African culture rejects any kind of variation on national ideas regarding race and gender different than their own. *A Question of Power* shifts to mirror the psychological duress in Elizabeth’s narrative due to the psychological trauma as social outcast. Elizabeth begins to imagine the Sello and Dan personas and has trouble distinguishing reality as an outcast in Botswana. Head uses Elizabeth’s internal thoughts as the terrain that the reader traverses in order to discover the history of colonial ideology and how it is hurtfully embedded into South African culture.

The novel shows how Elizabeth’s madness can be seen as an agency that empowers her to analyze the progression of South African national identity through introspection. Jacqueline Rose explains how as a term madness is not a label, but also a powerful act. In order for an individual to “go mad” a certain level of personhood and agency is needed in order to have the capability of “going mad.” Africans and Non-Westerners were considered unable to have the intellectual complexity to achieve madness (Rose 404-405). In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth is

granted this agency due to having a white European mother. Elizabeth is able to provide the reader with an accessing introspective that begins with Elizabeth's introduction of the Sello persona. This change is marked by Head's use of lyrical moments when Elizabeth imagines Sello in, "The form of a man totally filled the large horizon in front of her ... He had an almighty air of calm and assurance about him. He wore soft, white, flowing robes of a monk, but in a peculiar fashion, with his shoulders hunched forward as though it were a prison garment" (Head 22). Head's symbolic introduction of the Sello in the white robes marks a formal introduction into South Africa's pre-twentieth century context. This excerpt describes Elizabeth and Sello in the white robes' relationship with a heavily gendered tone. Sello is, "large and almighty in front of Elizabeth," their imagined relationship in Botswana is paired into roles of dominance and submission based on gender and morality. Head uses this imagery to access Africa's historical traditions in which gender roles and spirituality were crucial to establishing national identity. The novel's narrative highlights Sello in the white robes as Elizabeth first major stop in her journey through African history.

A Question of Power's narrative plants Sello's persona as historical representative to African patriarchy and his practices represent the ideas behind this ideology. The narrative shows Elizabeth imagining Sello's characteristics as methods for building national culture. Sello depends on misogyny and moral superiority to maintain his performance of power. Sello's behaviors include controlling women and dictating ethical beliefs as a figurehead of nationalism. The novel describes Sello's misogynistic actions, "he said strange things about women" and "he killed them" (Head 27). Head provides language that implies sexual dominance. Elizabeth refers to how Sello's treats women with "his killing business ... as though it were simply part of a job he was on ... Dominating and directing the whole drama was Sello" (Head 28-29). These

examples of the “dominating-and-directing-show” indicate Sello’s performance of masculinity. His persona relies on the maltreatment of women to guarantee his authority to command culture.

The novel highlights a similar trend of performance in Sello’s expression of moral expertise that hinges on his relationship with Elizabeth. Head shows how Elizabeth’s imagined narrative aggrandizes Sello. Through Elizabeth’s perception Sello appears with various influential titles, as “the white robed monk,” “Teacher,” “the prophet of mankind,” “Wonder There,” “The Father,” and “King of the Underworld” (Head 25, 30). These titles illustrate the numerous manifestations of Sello’s performance as spiritual leader. The novel again shows how Sello depends on Elizabeth for his high position. Head writes this of Sello and Elizabeth’s relationship, “She seemed to have only been a side attachment to Sello. The nearest example she could give to it was that of a Teacher and his favorite disciple (25). This passage shows their relationship in the narrative as significantly lopsided with Sello in a position of power and Elizabeth constantly reaffirming Sello’s high status through her low status. Margaret Tucker supports the idea that Sello’s relationship with Elizabeth helps her learn “history’s cycles of domination ... as lesser half of a dichotomy ... the pattern of history in which the images of tyrant and revolutionary follow each other endlessly” (175). Tucker observes how Head positions Elizabeth and Sello’s imagined relationship to illustrate the nation’s power struggles and reflect South Africa’s past formations of imbalanced power. Head uses their patriarchal relationship as a means of investigating the previous permutations of power in South Africa.

While in Botswana, Elizabeth imagines herself as observer to Sello’s African customs that embody righteous patriarchy. As an observer and passive participant in cultural history Elizabeth reflects on what Margaret Tucker refers to as “Sello wielding absolute power and historically relying on victimization of an Other” (175). Elizabeth’s narrative characterizes the

prejudices of traditional patriarchal South African nationalism. Elizabeth fills the passive role woman play are expected to play in accordance with African male identity. Theorist Sue J. Kim explains the problematic issues in Elizabeth's relationship with Sello, "She is all too willing to relinquish agency, consciousness, critical analysis, and responsibility ... the novel undermines his authority even as it depicts it ... Sello's teachings are cast as performances, with the double valence of enactment and charade" (43-44). Kim identifies Sello as Head's literary technique to criticize South African traditions in the novel. Head's methods create a window into the discriminatory ideologies of nationalism shown when Elizabeth manifests Sello as a persecuting force that belittles her based on her gender as a woman.

Elizabeth's internal dialogue investigates Sello's transformation into his modern embodiment, Sello in a brown suit. Sello's transformation signifies South Africa's modernization into Westernized ideas of national identity. This transformation comes about due to Sello's corruption through exposure to absolute power. Here, the novel means to parallel Elizabeth's Sello narrative to South African society's corruption under mishandled mechanisms of power. Sello explains, "Then he said, in a small, frightened voice ... There are so many terrible lessons you have to learn ... that the title God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder, the all-seeing eye is the greatest temptation. It turns man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and willful persecutor of his fellow men" (Head 36-37). The novel examines how political power is dangerous in the hands of one individual similar to Sello in the white robes' position as patriarchal figurehead. Elizabeth imagines Sello's predicament that "the God title, in its absolute all-powerful form is a disaster," this portrayal implies that absolute political power given to one person can transform them into a tyrant. Head gives the reasoning that power "turns man in a wild debaucher, a maddened and willful persecutor of his fellow men." Therefore, the

reader sees how Sello is corrupted in Elizabeth's narrative by the temptation of power. Sello's corruption expresses South Africa's own ideological process and the politics that corroded their national history. Such as the patriarchal practices that were once set up to aid in the building of national history but soured into dehumanizing and marginalizing ideas that hurt those they sought to govern. Margaret Tucker points out in her observations that, "In this linear time, tyrant and slave become images that reproduce and follow each other. He is unable to stop 'pushing forward all the nightmares of the past into the present' (44). As the past gets pushed ahead to form the future, we are left with the repetitions of power and oppression that Head's book seeks to defeat" (175-176). As Tucker indicates the corruption from the past moves into the future development of South African politics. Thus, Elizabeth imagines a new Sello dressed in a brown suit as symbolic of political modernization.

Elizabeth's narrative upgrades Sello's persona, by presenting Sello in the brown suit as a next step in political thought. The novel parallels Sello's transformation into the brown suited figure as South Africa's twentieth-century transition into Western national politics. The novel states, "There was no further communication with his image of holiness. Then from out of himself he projected a man, his replica, except that the man was clothed in a brown suit" (Head 37). This transition in the novel deals what Sue Kim calls "the most pressing issues of Head's time" nationalisms and decolonization (45). According to Kim, Head's introduction of Sello in the brown suit shows modern South Africa's backlash against colonialism. These statements readily apply to Elizabeth's introspection into twentieth-century South Africa's modern era when cultural characteristics such as African nativism face rejection as slowing post-colonial progress. Sello abandons his previous "image of holiness" modeling rhetoric of modern South Africa. Sello two characterizations both share oppressive ideas on race and gender

Elizabeth's narrative demonstrates how one cultural model of control can be replaced by another equally destructive model. Sello again manifests dependence on sexist behavior as Elizabeth imagines a Medusa conjured from Sello's new identity. Head writes, "He drew towards him a woman ... she was frighteningly unapproachable ... she started shouting ... 'We don't want you here. This is my land' ... the wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society ... it was shut in and exclusive" (37-38). In this passage, Head reaffirms the cyclical nature of racist power ideology in South Africa's (and Botswana's) narrative of nation. The Medusa figure expresses "the surface reality of African society." This surface reality includes Elizabeth facing the same vicious rejections in Botswana nearly identical to South African apartheid rhetoric. Elizabeth's nationality/non-nationality places her in a liminal space. She is an outsider in Botswana and a stateless person in South Africa, all due to her biracial status. Although in Botswana Elizabeth imagines Sello in the brown suit, and political claims of liberation from stunting colonial ideology, she still faces racial discrimination and the absence of a successful national identity.

The Medusa represents the repression South African women face in the context of industrialized politics. She acts as a singular extension of Sello's national ideology. She is hostile when addressing Elizabeth, "'Get out of the way' ... She swung around near the man in the brown suit who looked like Sello, and looked at Elizabeth like a wild-eyed Medusa. 'We don't want you here. This is my land. These are my people. We keep things to ourselves'" (Head 38). This passage shows how modernized South Africa still bases nationalism on a racial standard. Elizabeth as a mulatta is still rejected due to her hybridity. The Medusa's rejection of Elizabeth shows how the beliefs of Sello in the brown suit are part of prejudiced system of thought. Sello and Medusa's still express the same strict racial standards as apartheid that communicates a rigid

understanding of identity, in terms of being authentically African, and female. Sue Kim indicates how “the Medusa is a character that represents the female role within the new “African Realism”, she is a hysterical woman, she is a black African, and she is a highly sexualized subject (45-46). Elizabeth’s narrative ventures into the high point of South African culture in the twentieth-century and represents this chaotic development in the Dan Molomo persona.

Dan appears as the novel’s second chapter in the imagined timeline of Elizabeth’s narrative. Elizabeth imagines him as a figure that represents an amalgamation of the corruption of power structures found in modern in twentieth South Africa. Dan is Elizabeth’s expression of trying to make sense of the disorganized politics of a modernized South Africa.. Sue Kim explains, “The second half of the novel, titled ‘Dan,’ deals with phenomenon and ideas resonant with postmodernity. Characterized by confusion, contradictory interpellations, and incoherence, Dan appears after Elizabeth’s disillusionment with Sello of the brown suit” (Kim 49). As Kim points out, neither incarnation of Sello was able to accept and include Elizabeth in their narrative, thus Elizabeth’s journey enters into the post-modern because of her disillusionment. Dan embodies the chaos in the mind of Elizabeth as she realizes the depth and complexity of the postcolonial condition, “One half of him seem to come shooting in like a meteor from the furthest end of the universe, the other rose slowly from the depths of the earth in the shape of an atomic bomb of red fire; the fire was not a cohesive flame, but broken up into particles of fine red dust. All put together it took the shape of a man, Dan” (Head 194). Elizabeth uses this powerful imagery to introduce Dan as a destructive force that mirrors Elizabeth’s inability to establish a cohesive narrative in the context of South African’s local setting. The novel’s narrative shows how the nation’s history has still not created a space for someone like a mulatto.

The Dan persona expresses Elizabeth's fragmentation; she manifests Dan as a representative for the destructive corruption and oppression that persecute her in the twentieth-century.

Dan is an example of the unsuccessful ideology of the assimilated Africa continent; he uses all failed systems of power, in order to dominate Elizabeth. She describes him as, "One of the very few cattle millionaires of the country ... He was a friend of Sello ... admired for being an African nationalist in a country where people were only concerned about tribal affairs" (Head 104). Elizabeth outlines how Dan's practices are based on Africa's assimilation of colonial ideas of race, wealth, and power. He also follows African Nationalism's obsession with reclaiming ethnic identity and bourgeois humanism's attempt to modernize by way of Westernization. Dan uses these ideas as a means of justifying his lust for power and express control over Elizabeth.

Their interactions center on all the outlandish ways in which Dan attempts to subjugate Elizabeth. He is dependent on her, and these abuses are used to keep Elizabeth locked in a binary with him as the authoritarian. The novel constructs Dan as part romantic colonizer coming; "in a swirl of clouds" with "a romantic glow" and that he "was in it for the money" (Head 103). He is also part African Nationalist labeling Elizabeth "half-breed", who is not a "genuine African" (Head 103). This imagery of Dan reflects the contradictory images from South Africa's history that are imposed onto Elizabeth's identity. Elizabeth and Sello's relationship was based on the progression of African ideology, morality, and intellectual identity. But Dan contrasts Sello, as a vulgar and sexualized figure he is irreverent and sporadic. Dan's expression of ideology is not glamourized as morally superior, which was Sello's claim. Instead he confronts and manipulates her based on gender and race.

Dan exploits Elizabeth's identity in a more erratic post-modern style. Kim expands on Dan's categorizing of Elizabeth as inferior due to her biracialism. He denies her sexuality, when

comparing her to “African women” who embody his ideal sexual partners as the “nice-time girls” (Kim 57). The progression of Dan and Elizabeth’s relationship shows the pressure Elizabeth feels to adhere an ideal. Dan’s statements reflect Elizabeth’s anxiety, “I like girls like this with that kind of hair. Your hair is not properly African ... “You are supposed to feel jealous. You are inferior as a Coloured. You haven’t got what that girl has got. (Head 127). Dan tries to condition Elizabeth to feel inferior; these statements express the culturally infused anxiety that Elizabeth has absorbed due to her hybrid status. Yet Dan and Elizabeth’s interactions show that his limited ideas about identity construct a failed supposition, he is fearful of women. The internal pressure represented by Dan, makes Elizabeth have a mental breakdown that results her institutionalization.

Elizabeth experiences a crisis in her dealings with Dan’s because of his contradictory remarks about African culture. Sue Kim explains Dan’s incongruity, “he does not want to touch her; *his* desire for racial/bodily purity makes him not want her, so she must not be black. At the same time, Dan's obsession with sexual and moral purity leads him to treat Elizabeth, in opposition to his "nice-time girls," (Kim 57). He expresses the nonsensical standards placed on identity; this instability mirrors Elizabeth merging the oppressive ideas of cultural institutions and mental stress. The destructive weight of Dan’s conditioning leaves Elizabeth unable to function, “it was the power of his projection...it made all things African vile and obscene” (Head 137). The corruption that Elizabeth observes disillusion her to the point of disassociating with African culture. Her hybridity results in a disassociation with national culture. The cultural politics of African ideologies, and their failed systems of power motivate Elizabeth to seek resolution away from the influence of nationalism and colonial history. The reader sees how the task of trying to interpret South Africa’s complex political history can cause a psychological

duress due to failed national identity. But *A Question of Power* considers reconciliation between identity and nationalism by allowing Elizabeth's narrative a resolution through hybridity.

The novel acknowledged that Elizabeth's madness was ability that enabled her to investigate South Africa culture history. Elizabeth attempted to build her own narrative in the space of the South Africa's nation story. She was unsuccessful because of South Africa's dependence on colonial systems of thought and a political obsession with race. But subsequently Elizabeth is able to voice her narrative outside of the pressures of nationalism in Botswana. The text shows how Elizabeth is able to overcome the mental deterioration of imagining Sello and Dan. Her recovery leads to her successful participation in a transnational vegetable garden project built on an alliance between Western and African culture. This joint-project between traditional oppositional cultures proves that multicultural diversity can exist within a geographical location. Elizabeth finds acceptance and friendship with Kenosi a black Africa, and Tom a white American friend, Tom (Head122). The vegetable garden is an example of successful hybridity that combines cultures effectively, without focusing on the cultural politics of power. It is finally in the gardening project in which Elizabeth interacts with both black and white aspects of her identity, without the pressure of cultural interpellation. Foreign aid workers and Botswana townsfolk respect her as an equal. Thus *A Question of Power* shows how hybridity can be considered a means of dealing with the post-colonial condition as a means of dealing with the post-colonial condition.

The Banana Boat Woman looking out from the Shirley Jackson House: American Suburbia and The Immigrant Story in Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then*

In *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head's investigated the difficulties of decolonization by following the construction of an independent national narrative in South Africa. Elizabeth's cultural introspection highlighted the complications involved in untangling nineteenth-century ideas of race, gender, and power. In the twentieth-century, the post-colonial condition challenges decolonized cultures in their quest to form authentic non-Western narratives. But where Head focused on local movement Jamaica Kincaid broadens her narrative to include immigration away from the post-colonial location. Kincaid's *See Now Then* takes place in the American imperial setting. With the global onset of post-war industrialization, Kincaid explores the intermixing of first-world/third-world cultures.

See Now Then acknowledges how post-colonial identity grows into a more fluid phenomenon that allows for a culture to move beyond regional location and traditional colonial ideas of ethnicity and nationalism. The post-colonial narrative inherits mobility and transforms into the immigrant story as *See Now Then* considers the far-reaching implications of colonial ideology. The concerns of decolonization translate into new settings such as American suburbia. *See Now Then* explores how the immigrant narrative faces discriminatory imperialist ideology under the influence of American consumerism and assimilation in post-war America. Jamaica Kincaid offers an example of unfulfilled transnational identity with an immigrant protagonist living in the first-world US setting. This chapter follows *See Now Then's* non-linear storyline and observes how the performance of national/immigrant identity becomes an oppressive structure under the imperialist standards of American consumerism. The novel observes Mrs. Sweet's

problematic assimilation into American suburbia as she cannot emulate the first-world ideal, or reconcile her third-world past.

In *See Now Then*, Kincaid relies on the American suburban setting as the only marker establishing the story's time and place. Paula Cohen comments, "Kincaid has made the audacious choice of writing her story in the manner of a Homeric epic" (228). The reader begins the novel with a fairy-tale like introduction, heavy with references to typical American cultural tropes. Kincaid introduces the narrative with "See now then, the dear Mrs. Sweet who lived with her husband Mr. Sweet and their two children, the beautiful Persephone and the young Hercules in the Shirley Jackson house, which was in a small village of New England" (Kincaid 3). This passage highlights what Cohen terms "allegorical allusions" and "repetitive epithets" that are repeated throughout the novel such as the protagonist's reoccurring "see now then" phrase and Mrs. Sweet's relationship with the Shirley Jackson house. Kincaid creates what Cohen terms a "mock epic" tone that stylizes the novel to provide a surreal critique of America suburban culture.

See Now Then deals with the influence of American suburban culture divided into the categories of gender, class, and nationality. Mrs. Sweet deals with the repressive ideas of "the suburban myth" in order to reconcile her immigrant identity. Kincaid writes Mrs. Sweet as constantly "looking out the window from the Shirley Jackson house" (4); the novel chooses to navigate the American setting by with the literary and cultural significance of the American author Shirley Jackson. Jackson's work carries a strong association with what Angela Hague calls "the stereotype of the 1950s housewife," Jackson's writings accesses this popular culture image of the American housewife who suffers from "isolation, loneliness, and fragmenting identities," she created suburban female characters in order to explore "their simultaneous

inability to relate to the world outside themselves or to function autonomously” (Hague 1). *See Not Then's* Mrs. Sweet character resembles the Jackson's characters as the protagonist struggles to find a fulfilling narrative in the face of American consumerism. This tension is seen in Mrs. Sweet's obedience to her domestic duties, as an immigrant, she works to meet these expectations through her adherence to her roles as American housewife and mother.

See Now Then's narrative revolves on Mrs. Sweet's concern with performing an accurate American identity as both a housewife and consumer. Mrs. Sweet's concerns with displaying first-world femininity connect with Betty Friedan's ideas in *The Feminine Mystique*. Mrs. Sweet's activities range from “attending civic gatherings”, “asking her handyman to paint her house”, and “making three course French food for her small children” (Kincaid 3,4,7). Each of these actions applies to some aspect of American performance but they are grounded in displaying Mrs. Sweet's identity as a woman. Friedan outlines the culture of postwar American Consumerism with special attention to gender standards. *The Feminine Mystique* engages the socially constructed ideas of women portrayed in American popular culture. *The Feminine Mystique* explains the phenomenon, “The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous ... feminine and passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (Friedan 36). Friedan analyzes popular culture's creation of the image of an American woman, described as young, frivolous, feminine, and passive. *See Now Then's* narrative deals with these qualities as “Mrs. Sweet” attempts to mimic what Friedan has called the feminine mystique. Mrs. Sweet desires a fulfilling American identity and through French cooking, gardening, and domestic passivity (Kincaid 3-7) hopes to attain validation through her American femininity. But as a foreign immigrant, Mrs. Sweet begins to realize the

impossibility of perfectly emulating this ideal identity through mimicry. Mrs. Sweet as an immigrant can never be entirely assimilated in American popular culture.

The novel shows how Mrs. Sweet is objectified by her identity as immigrant woman by her husband, Mr. Sweet. Kincaid writes, “to Mr. Sweet ... a kitchen counter should be white or marble or plain wood but Mrs. Sweet would go out of her way to find ... yellow Formica, to cover the counter and then she would paint the walls ... those Caribbean colors: mango, pineapples, not peaches and nectarine (15). Mr. Sweet belittles Mrs. Sweet by constant comparison to the American housewife and criticized for Caribbean characteristics. This comparison mirrors Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* implication of imperial undertones in the exhibition of suburban American housewife as global ideal as she is “freed by science and labor saving appliances ... the dangers of childbirth, and the illnesses of her grandmother ... healthy, beautiful, educated ... She was free to choose ... clothes, appliances, supermarkets, she had everything that women ever dreamed of” (Friedan 18). Friedan cites a direct comparison between first and third-world standards. *See Now Then* also deals with tense comparing between first and third-world standards. Suburban culture exudes the discriminatory idea that American women stand superior to any periphery cultures. This first-world, imperial standard resembles the racism seen in the post-colonial location. The feminine mystique draws her authority through comparison to the non-American other, embodied in *See Now Then*’s protagonist. Friedan’s statements apply to *See Now Then*’s depiction of Mrs. Sweet and her being trapped by the American standard of gender.

See Now Then sets Mrs. Sweet as an outsider observer who can critique the regulating norms on gender and class because of her non-native status. The novel situates Mrs. Sweet as having the advantage to realize the suburban woman as myth. Kincaid gives the example of how

outlandish American femininity can be by including drag performance in her novel. Mrs. Sweet notices how the performance of suburbanite woman is an extreme caricature of femininity when her male neighbor cross-dresses for Halloween, “Mr. Arctic transformed himself into a very attractive woman ... wore pantyhose, a dramatically sleeveless dress and very high heels” (Kincaid 67). The text shows how the image of the feminine mystique is identified as something acquired through consumption and performance just as Mrs. Sweet’s neighbor is able to transform into a woman by buying pantyhose, fake pearls, wigs, and dresses. Mrs. Sweet understands American femininity as a social construct that can be mimicked or mocked. This critique offered by the novel corresponds to Friedan’s words— “The feminine mystique says ... the highest value and ... only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity ... using concrete and finite words.” (Friedan 43). Thus, *See Now Then* is able to show how Mrs. Sweet deconstructs the concepts placed on her identity and uses her immigrant perspective as a means of navigating the complex terrain of the American domestic sphere.

See Now Then shows how Mrs. Sweet deconstructs imperial ideology as a counter-hegemonic force, using her transnational identity to criticize cultural politics. This perspective is applied to the domestic space of the suburbs; Mrs. Sweet reveals secondary meanings to the Shirley Jackson house. When speaking about the American ideal of suburban housewife Mrs. Sweet makes this an important comparison between Mr. Arctic when he is imitating a woman and how this feminine identity corresponds with the Shirley Jackson house. Mrs. Sweet asks what others would think to see Mr. Arctic as a beautiful woman—“confined and defined by the presence of the Shirley Jackson house, looking more like a beautiful woman than most beautiful women can manage, and asking of us all to find nothing in it except delight (Kincaid 67). In this

section defines the Shirley Jackson house as an extension of American femininity. The house functions a symbol that “confines and defines” female identity.

Kincaid adds to the surreal quality of the novel when *See Now Then's* when the Mrs. Sweet's narrative switches to Mrs. Sweet imagining the perspective of her white husband Mr. Sweet. Kincaid subtly dismisses his whiteness, “his own eyes were blue and Mrs. Sweet was indifferent to that particular feature of his” (19), and chooses to make his voice an extension of Mrs. Sweet's narrative and his interjections representative of underlying imperialist thought found in first-world America culture. Their relationship opens a dialogue about the first and third-world dichotomy Mrs. Sweet faces in her immigrant narrative. Mr. Sweet titles his wife according to her inferior third-world status, “Mr. Sweet...hated the coat his benighted wife had given him and could she know what a fine garment it was, she who had just not long ago gotten off the banana boat, or some other benighted form of transport, everything about her being so benighted, even the vessel on which she arrived” (Kincaid 9). This moment in the novel reveals the modernized oppressive ideology found in the American setting that compacts Mrs. Sweet as a Caribbean-America subject. Mr. Sweet's statements judge and categorize Mrs. Sweet's identity.

Mr. Sweet accuses his wife as an inauthentic American and consumer because of her national origins as Caribbean immigrant. This is seen in the language used in the passage shows how Mr. Sweet believes his wife to be suspect and incapable of distinguishing high quality commodities such as “fine garments.” She becomes the “benighted banana boat woman” because she traveled from the Caribbean to the US. His words resonate with the turbulent, imperial relationship between the United States and the Caribbean. Faith Smith describes this transnational relationship in *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* as “involving the

questionable ethics of consuming commodities from the Caribbean ... implications that stretch from ... Africa ... and the shores of the Americas” (21). Kincaid draws attention to the difficult colonial history between the first and third-world nations through the Sweet’s dysfunctional marriage. This historical tension of imperial abuses by way of economic manipulation manifests in American Consumer culture. Mrs. Sweet cannot assimilate into American suburbia because of her race; instead she is commodified as the banana boat woman.

Mrs. Sweet’s narrative identifies how she is restricted by her third-world ethnicity under the gaze of America culture. Examples of this assimilating gaze are voiced by Mr. Sweet’s objectification of his wife’s native characteristics. He focuses on her flat nostrils, wide cheeks and lips, “a symbol of chaos ... that she was her physical entity, as if imagining her as something assembled in a vase decorating a table for people who wrote articles for magazines” (Kincaid 11). Mr. Sweet’s summation of Mrs. Sweet reduces her as an aesthetic object based on her gender and race. His act assigns Mrs. Sweet a fetishized role like that of a decorative vase or valuable commodity.

This conflict in Mr. and Mrs. Sweet’s their marriage reveals an unequal partnership and also implies the skewed connections between twentieth-century first and third-world countries. Kathryn Morris’s “Jamaica Kincaid’s Voracious Bodies: Engendering a Carri(bean) Woman” mentions the work Anne McCintock writes in the discussion of colonial fetishizing of the Afro-Caribbean other. McCintock states, “that the idea of the fetish, sprang up from the abrupt encounter of two radically heterogeneous worlds during the era of mercantile capitalism and slavery ... fetishism emerged ... coming historically into being alongside the commodity form” (Morris 959). This explanation of transnational commodification due to capitalism and industrialization brings clarity to Mrs. Sweet’s title as banana boat woman. Her identity as an

Afro-Caribbean immigrant is categorized by the American homogenizing standard with the same imperial prejudice as an exploited natural resource such as a banana. *See Now Then* structures Mrs. Sweet immigrant identity as dealing with the implications of failed assimilation into American suburbia. But Mrs. Sweet's narrative as both insider and outsider empowers readers to unearth the impossibility of the American housewife and the possibility of a conscientious consumer.

See Now Then gives a comparison between the consumer behavior of Mr. and Mrs. Sweet. The Sweets as citizens of a first-world community are given participation as consumers in the tenuous economic relationship between the US and its third-world suppliers. The novel shows the traditional stance of American Consumerism voiced by Mr. Sweet who worries about matters that deal with the maintenance of luxuries in the Sweet home, luxuries he takes for granted, such as utility companies, light switches, hot water for coffee, and communication by telephone (Kincaid 64). Mrs. Sweet's perspective contrasts her husband's myopic first world perspective as she asks the ethical question— "Who should pay for living itself?" "The cost of the garment could've paid for a months worth of phone calls to relatives ... a days worth of drugs that could keep alive a person ... dying of AIDS ... so easily that garment transformed into a noose" (Kincaid 64). Mr. and Mrs. Sweet's financial obligations convey the implication that they too, as citizens of the United States, play a part in exploiting the third-world. Thus, Mrs. Sweet expresses her awareness for the failed systems of corruption of American culture. She identifies it in the global scale in the habits of consumerism and acknowledges the corruption that is ignored by the average consumer. As theorist Mimi Sheller explains, "Highlighting consuming practices as implied material relations ... enables a position of individual and collective ethical responsibility to be framed as an intervention and the flows of capitalism ... Consumers are

responsible for a kind of agency, which should not be displaced ... as if individual choices and actions did not matter” (Sheller 19). By comparing Mr. and Mrs. Sweet’s financial behaviors the reader can see the implications of first world action that they too, as citizens of the United States, play a part in exploiting the third world. But Mrs. Sweet’s narrative shows awareness due to her transnational identity.

Kincaid also uses the Shirley Jackson house reference in the novel to unpack the stagnancy of suburban culture. *See Not Then* borrows from Jackson’s literary trend of novel with questionable timelines. *See Now Then* cyclically arranges the sentiments of Mrs. Sweet’s trapped state. The novel states, “By then, oh yes the, the beautiful brown hands of the beautiful and dear Mrs. Sweet had turned an unhappy white, all bony and dry ... they blended well with the worn socks that had to be constantly mended. So Mrs. Sweet went on from then to now back again” (47-48). The imagery in this passage connects with Shirley Jackson’s themes in her writing of questions the influence of American mass culture on gender and individuality. Therefore, Kincaid implementing of the Shirley Jackson house fits into the novel’s constant use of the “see then now” phrase and the suburban setting. Richard Pascal’s article “New world miniatures: Shirley Jackson’s *The Sundial* and postwar American society” touches on Shirley Jackson’s literary trend of time stopping because of oppressive ideology. Pascal cites Jackson’s novel *The Sundial*—“‘We are in a pocket of time,’ claims a character in Shirley Jackson’s 1958 novel ... ‘a tiny segment of time suddenly pinpointed by a celestial eye’” (45). This passage parallels to Mrs. Sweet’s limited environment as suburbanite and immigrant. Mrs. Sweet is stuck in the same stasis described by Shirley Jackson because of repressive post-war categorizations.

But the Shirley Jackson house turns into a platform for Mrs. Sweet’s narrative because of the opportunity for autonomous activity. The Shirley Jackson house also serves as an access

point for the empowering act of being an author and creating an individual narrative. Mrs. Sweet is able to deconstruct her imperial encounters and become a counter-hegemonic force through the act of writing, “her hands now holding a pencil, Mrs. Sweet began to write on the pages before her: I had an idea that I should become myself ... My right to live in the way that would please me ... Not my mother” (Kincaid 28-29). Mrs. Sweet attempts to validate and empower her experience through the act of writing and “become herself.” Mrs. Sweet explains that she does not want to be like her mother, she is creating a product as opposed to consuming or being one. *See Now Then* again intersects with the work of Shirley Jackson who in her personal life dealt with the negative backlash against the free-thinking American female identity. Jessamyn Neuhaus’s article on Shirley Jackson and female authorship, Neuhaus writes about Jackson dealing with “how the demands of her domestic role directly conflicted her work as an author” (128). Kincaid’s Mrs. Sweet shares in Jackson’s desire to be a writer and is also hindered by the pressures of domestic duties and gender. But Mrs. Sweet’s writing always serves as a desire to move past the influence of colonialism and rebel against imperialism. Her activity mirrors Shirley Jackson’s objection to the original influence of hegemonic culture and the need to circumvent the influence of the feminine mystique.

Kincaid does not provide a resolution to Mrs. Sweet’s story; she chooses to situate Mrs. Sweet in the same position as the beginning of her narrative. The novel cyclically returns to the introductory scene of the Sweet family living in the Shirley Jackson house. Mrs. Sweet lives as a modern example of the mobile post-colonial subject having traversed into twentieth century modern America. But as a character, Mrs. Sweet’s narrative isn’t any closer to resolving the problematic tensions of post-colonialism now transformed through the influence of diaspora. The novel once again accesses Mrs. Sweet’s domestic role in suburbia stating, “Mrs. Sweet looked

out the window, through the panes of glass separated and shielded her from all that lay outside Shirley Jackson house, the house in which she lives with her children and her husband and she could see a landscape so different from the one in which she was formed: that paradise of persistent sunshine and pleasant weather, a paradise so complete it immediately rendered itself As hell;” (Kincaid 182). This scene shows an important difference than the beginning of the novel, this description of the Shirley Jackson house and Mrs. Sweet mentions “the landscape in which she was formed.” This contrasting statement indicates that Mrs. Sweet narrative has been a journey on coming to terms with immigration. The novel shows how Mrs. Sweet’s reflections on her journey from her native country to an adopted one have been traumatic. Mrs. Sweet’s narrative does provide some agency in Mrs. Sweet’s role as Caribbean-America homeowner of the Shirley Jackson house. But Mrs. Sweet is ultimately unable to properly express a narrative of fulfilled identity. She is able to look out the window and move freely within her domestic sphere. But Mrs. Sweet is unable to find agency in the homogeneity of the suburbs where the pressures of consumerism act the influence of colonialism. The Shirley Jackson house shows that in the setting of American suburbia Mrs. Sweet is isolated by a lack of diversity and mourns the process of cultural diaspora. Mrs. Sweet task of creating her own narrative, writing her story as an immigrant, never comes to fruition. Her identity is eroded in the clash between transnational identities that are unable to coincide in the American setting. This sentiment is strengthened in the description of the land she is from as a paradise, which rendered itself a hell.

Jamaica Kincaid expresses in *See Now Then* the difficulty in dealing with the post-colonial location. The progression of time and modernization of landscape complicates the post-colonial identity. Mrs. Sweet as an immigrant was able to gain agency and leave the post-colonial location through the newfound mobility in the twentieth century. But in her transitioning

she experienced the presence of imperialism and witnessed how hegemonic culture finds new forms as time progresses. Although the novel does not offer a direct resolution to the postcolonial condition the text draws importance to transnational identity and how the stages of post-colonial identity change across geographic locations and time periods.

Becoming *Americanah*: An American-African's Migrant and Return Story

Chimamanda's Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* provides the voice of post-colonial Nigeria as a post-modern author. Her novel intersects into *A Question of Power* and *See Now Then's* concerns with post-colonial progression. *Americanah* embodies the previous novels' aspects of local movement and the immigrant story and places their conversations in the twenty-first-century and global setting. *Americanah*, in comparison with Head and Kincaid's works, shows how the influence of decolonization can again change shape with the passage of time, industrialization, and sophistication of culture. Adichie's twenty-first-century work builds a narrative with a more detailed trajectory of post-colonial setting and immigrant mobility. *Americanah* reassesses how the definition of national identity expands in order to express more clearly independent national identity.

As a twenty-first-century Nigerian writer, Adichie demonstrates the influences of the post-colonial condition in her native Nigeria. *Americanah's* protagonist Ifemelu tries to establish national identity in an era eroded by the cultural history of colonialism, capitalism, and post-modernism. The novel illustrates the ways in which emigration and growing globalization changed the politics of native Nigeria. The lines and distinctions between nationality, based on geographic location and ethnicity, blur with the growing presence of international industrialization and subsequent cultural diaspora. The post-colonial subject becomes the post-modern immigrant, who is no longer tied to a single physical location to navigate national identity. The twenty-first-century post-colonial condition now includes multicultural identities that embrace the hybridity that stems from the intersection of culture. This chapter will focus on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and her narrative on post-colonial identity moving into the global setting. Adichie's text shows how previous ideas of independent national identity

change with the growing presence of industrialization and globalization. *Americanah* gives the example of how the post-colonial subject moves away from the decolonized setting to form a national identity. Adichie's novel shows how the post-colonial narrative expands into the diasporic narrative where stories of migrancy and return give new perspective to post-colonial identity.

Adichie uses the immigrant narrative as a means of opening a discourse on colonialism and the dispersion of culture. *Americanah* falls into the trends of other contemporary Nigerian authors, whose narratives incorporate certain literary trends in order to represent their political beliefs and reflections about post-colonial Nigeria. Theorist Adéléké Adéékó writes about the use of narrative style in Nigerian novels, "In the ... novels discussed ... emigrating to America helps forge a closure for each story of unbearable life under Nigerian military dictatorships ... The flight to America in the ... novels replaces the recuperative escape to the unspoiled village, the narrative strategy commonly used in earlier stories of nation" (Adéékó 17). Adéékó observes that the literary traditions in Nigerian novel writing apply to the message presented in *Americanah*. The reader must acknowledge Adichie's role in the tradition of Nigerian writers. This context clarifies Adichie's intent when organizing the path of the novel. *Americanah* divides into segments of identity formation that reflect on the process of the post-colonial migrant identity. Ifemelu's stages of identity include her time as a native Nigerian, her experience as an immigrant in America, her Americanization, and her return to Nigeria.

Ifemelu's first stage of character development signifies a reflection on the Nigerian experience of national identity. Ifemelu's narrative of Nigeria as an ethnic culture ties to geographic location, voicing an existing deficiency that hinders the native's desire to find wholeness in national identity. The introspective narrative of *Americanah* explores the topic of

failed national identity that surfaces in the post-colonial location. Nigeria's colonial aftermath includes a push to decolonize and automatize national identity. This results in the driving charge of modernization, including the proliferation of capitalism and hyper growth of a middle class. Scholar Obi Nwakanama describes how the context of national history and urbanity influence literary narratives in Nigeria when he writes, "The Igbo had also become the most urbanized group of Nigerians, with the vastest network of the new urban middle class of mostly clerks in the government services and commercial agencies ... the impact of urbanity in its motions of the traveling, hybrid, and displaced identities, had great implications for the transformations in Igbo cultural consciousness" (5). Nwakanama's acknowledgements give weight to the aspirations of the Nigerian middle-class that are directly effected in their quest for national identity.

Americanah rightly interjects into this conversation with Ifemelu's description of her father as an "overzealous colonial subject ... looking at him he was, a man full of blanched longings, a middle brow civil servant who wanted a life different from what he had, who longed for more education than he was able to get" (Adichie 47). This section of the narrative speaks to the dilemma of middle-class Nigerians embodied in the character of Ifemelu's father. A figure characterized by the words, "middle brow civil servant" with "blanched longings." These descriptors point to the unfulfilled desires of the middle class in Nigeria, who seek an identity free from the rampant limitations of classism that originate from a national identity unable to free itself from imperial ideology. Adichie's biting criticism surfaces in the comments made by Ifemelu's aunt who describes the Nigerian economy as an ass-licking economy: "The biggest problem in this country is not corruption. The problem is that there are many qualified people who are not where they are supposed to be because they won't lick anybody's ass" (77). This comment echoes the tone Adichie applies to the political state of Nigeria. The narrative states

that “the biggest problem is not corruption;” Adichie implies the biggest problem in Nigerian society is an infrastructure based on nepotism. This sentiment alludes to Homi Bhabha’s words on the impetus of globalization when he says, “It has certainly made useful interventions into stagnant, state-controlled economies ... and ... kicked-started many societies which were mired in bureaucratic corruption, inefficiency and nepotism” (xiv). Therefore, following Adichie’s criticism of Nigeria’s stagnancy, the inevitable course of *Americanah*’s narrative leads to the necessity of Ifemelu’s immigration. In America, she can gain adequate education so as to overcome post-colonial barriers of inadequate national identity.

Ifemelu’s next stage of identity formation appears as *Americanah* centers on the immigration process. The act of immigration in the Nigerian narrative is acknowledged as a literary device that extends into the cultural politics between the West and the non-Western subject, “The flight to America in ... novels replaces the recuperative escape ... the narrative strategy commonly used ... to protect characters against the ravaging propensities of the metropolitan seats of power play” (Adéékó 14, 17). *Americanah*’s plot follows this trend as seen when Ifemelu first moves to America, a place she perceives as being a glamorized modern location that provides an escape from the shortcomings of her country which leads her to various misconceptions about American culture (Adichie 104). The idea that the American landscape provides a resolution to post-colonial identity is dissolved when learning the reality of cultural politics in the US. Ifemelu learns about the politics of national identities by comparing Nigeria and the United States. She begins to understand that immigration can also lead to instances of failed identity as seen in Jamaica Kincaid’s *See Now Then*.

Americanah’s narrative continues detailing Ifemelu’s progress in identity formation as she delves further into American perceptions of race. Adichie investigates the problematic reality

of moving from a post-colonial system of cultural politics and expanding one's identity to include a global perspective. The narrative deals with code switching from a third-world country to first-world standards on race and class. Ifemelu learns about the signifiers that codify cultural and racial identity in the United States where identity functions as a generalized conglomeration of ethnic/cultural characteristics that combine to project a performance of identity. *Americanah* clarifies this concept with a scene in which Ifemelu is discriminated against because of her cultural background. This scene includes Ifemelu being spurned because of her non-American accent which portrays her as having an inadequate identity that cannot fit neatly into the homogeneous trends of American culture: "Ifemelu half smiled in sympathy, because Cristina Tomas had to have some sort of illness that made her speak so slowly, lips scrunching ... she realized Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of *her*, her foreign accent ... 'I speak English' she said. 'I bet you do,' Cristina Tomas said. 'I just don't know how *well*' (Adichie 134). Adichie sets up this experience as part of Ifemelu's identity formation as an immigrant; she must understand how she is viewed in America. For example, because Ifemelu's foreign accent does not adhere to US cultural standards, it informs her of the expectations of American assimilation as noted in the exchange when she speaks English but is questioned because of her accent. She must learn to perform recognized American traits that grant acceptance into American society.

Ifemelu and Cristina's interaction on race and failed identity shows how ideology is used to set America apart from foreign cultures. Theorist Amar Acheraiou discusses the use of "racist codifications of ethnicity and cultural difference" as ideology motivated by socio-economic factors (125, 127). In the context of *Americanah*, Cristina Tomas and Ifemelu's hostility is indicative of the novel's larger comparison between Nigeria and America. As a non-Western

national, Ifemelu must conform her native and fluent English to a “superior” model of American English, on the basis of an accent. And Cristina Tomas, as a representative of Imperialist politics seeks to intimidate Ifemelu into submission. As noted in her sarcastic comments, “I bet you do” and “but I don’t know how *well*.” This dialogue indicates the dangers of hegemonic culture in the US. In order to be accepted in American society, Ifemelu must allow the erasure of her native culture for the sake of performance. Ifemelu observes how American homogeneity ignores colonial history by whitewashing multi-national culture.

Americanah further explores the American view of race as Ifemelu encounters the controversial word, “nigger.” The novel’s cautioning about the dangers of whitewashing reach a high point when Ifemelu encounters ideology of race in action when her class reflects on the history of slavery, “Professor Moore...showed some scenes from *Roots*, the images bright on the board of the darkened classroom. When she turned off the projector, a ghostly white patch hovered on the wall before disappearing ‘Let’s talk about historical representation in film,’ Professor Moore said. A firm female voice...with a non-American accent, asked ‘Why was ‘nigger’ bleeped out?’ ... a collective sigh, like a small wind, swept through the class” (Adichie 139). The language of this narrative section creates strong imagery when reflecting on America’s history regarding slavery. Adichie sets up this discussion on cultural mentions an important popular culture film *Roots* moment of examining the harmful repercussions of ignoring the ramifications of post-colonial history. Adichie’s voice can be heard in one classmate’s comment about history, “it’s like being in denial” and “hiding it doesn’t make it go away” (139).

Americanah wishes to acknowledge the cultural ties that unite countries in cultural experiences no matter how uncomfortable. As Gunnar Myrdal comments in *An American Dilemma*, he mentions that the anxiety about conversations dealing with the “Negro problem” must not give

way to ignorance and stereotypes. So as not to allow antiquated ideology “to block accurate observation in everyday living” with “detached thinking” (Myrdal 34). Ifemelu’s process of understanding race in the United States allows her to see their social model with its failures to achieve a cohesive globalized national identity because of its application of hegemonic standards.

Americanah’s narrative shifts to American suburbia, where Ifemelu works for a white, wealthy middle-class family. This setting introduces the perception of class as the next aspect of American culture that Ifemelu must consider when adjusting to life in the US. She learns class codifications in America when experiencing social situations sensitive to race and class. One of these learning experiences happens when Ifemelu is being mistaken for a wealthy, black person. (blogpost) “Sometimes in America, Race is class” ... “it didn’t matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of the stately house because of the way I looked. In America’s public discourse, ‘Blacks’ as a whole are often lumped with ‘Poor Whites’” (Adichie 168). Adichie uses this incident as a moment when Ifemelu shows a comprehensive understanding of how race and class work in the United States. Ifemelu recognizes that race and class are linked in an American hierarchy of culture. She also recognizes that she is seen as black and this racial marker can connect her to low socio-economic status. The novel shows how Ifemelu must learn the American definitions of race and class. As Ifemelu becomes familiarized, *Americanah*’s narrative shifts to give a close look at assimilation and American identity.

The novel considers cultural politics from a white, American perspective as represented in this new stage of Ifemelu’s identity by having an American boyfriend, Curt. As a white, wealthy middle-class American, Curt grants Ifemelu another outlook on the American cultural

model of hierarchy, “With Curt, she became, in her mind a woman free of knots and cares ... she was Curt’s Girlfriend ... His optimism blinded her ... She imagined him as a child surrounded with too many brightly colored toys” (Adichie 198). In the course of Ifemelu’s story of identity formation, Curt presents the allure of Americanization. The privilege and wealth granted the white upper class tempts Ifemelu, as she becomes “a woman free of knots and cares.” But as indicated in the novel’s word choice of “blinding optimism,” Curt’s success is contingent on the access granted by his class and the color of his skin. Ifemelu, as his girlfriend, espouses his perspective and learns more about the pressures of whitewashing identity.

Americanah continues assessing the complexities of assimilation with Ifemelu as an American African woman entering the professional workspace. Ifemelu is offered an employment opportunity with Curt’s help. Ifemelu’s relationship with her American boyfriend signifies Ifemelu’s growing integration into US culture. She is comfortable enough to accept Curt’s aid, and the implications of her taking advantage of his privilege, who could “with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to” (Adichie 205), when her peers could not do the same. But Adichie is careful to mention the price of integration. Ifemelu’s college advisor informs her, “My only advice? Lose the braids and straighten your hair. Nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters. We want you to get that job” (Adichie 205). This passage creates a similar tension to the harmful standard of racial performance. Here, Adichie elaborates her critique where Ifemelu as a woman of color is given the professional advice to “lose the braids and straighten her hair.” The hair-straightening process that her advisor is referring to is both destructive and oppressive. But in this case socially justified with the words “We want you to get that job.”

Americanah concerns the reader in the destructive qualities of assimilation. The topic of

assimilation is included in Kwame Appiah's *Ethics of Identity* when he states, "Assimilation is figured as annihilation" connected to the onslaught of modernity that "may bring a flattening, homogenizing effect of mass culture" (147, 159). When speaking of identity and culture in the American location *Americanah* parallels with Appiah's standpoint. Ifemelu in her role as American immigrant feels the oppressive weight for straightening her hair to achieve an American ideal. "Just a little burn," the hairdresser said. "But look how pretty it is ... you've got the white-girl swing ... Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up ... The verve was gone ... she did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully"(205). The novel's attention to Ifemelu's emotional sense of loss replicates Appiah's statements on mass culture stamping out the richness of diversity. The cost of achieving American identity demands the sacrifice of ethnic and cultural diversity. Assimilation usurps the original identity of the individual subject. The novel's language of "losing her verve" and "not recognizing herself" emphatically expresses the precarious situation of the immigrant subject. There is an implicit failure in trying to achieve the "white girl swing" as stated in the novel because even if an immigrant subject or a marginalized group of society attempts to emulate American identity this performance does not transform the subject into a wealthy white American.

The novel effectively dismantles the original ideas of America being a solution to the post-colonial condition. As seen in the process of Ifemelu's identity formation, she learns that race and class are still discriminatory institutions used to categorize and control marginalized groups. Yet Ifemelu's identity has been expanded due to her experience of being an American African. This realization culminates in the novel's presentation of her online blog where she describes her observations about what she has learned about the United States: "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: American Tribalism ... In America, tribalism is alive and

well. There are four kinds—class, ideology, region, and race. First class ... Rich folk and poor folk. Second, ideology. Liberals and conservatives”(186). Ifemelu presents a model of culture that equivocates the national politics of America and Nigeria. The novel bolsters this equalizing trend with the term “American Tribalism” which unmistakably resembles the cultural dilemmas seen in Nigeria. Ifemelu’s evaluation simplifies cultural points in order to make them more understandable and for a global audience, “Third region. The North and the South. The two sides fought a civil war and the tough stains ... remain. Finally, race. There's a racial ladder ... White always on top ... American Black always on the bottom” (186). The blog highlights the dividing standards of American culture when considering the national history of other countries. Ifemelu’s language is straightforward not looking to inflate or exaggerate culturally superiority in any way. This excerpt signifies Ifemelu reaching a self-awareness of her identity that extends to the global conversation of national identity. Ifemelu’s words act as a metanarrative pointing to the *Americanah*’s intent of building a global community of with diverse voices.

Thus *Americanah* considers the role of the post-colonial subject and the changes brought on by the post-modern American landscape. Ifemelu as post-colonial subject moves into the post-modern as she acknowledges the similarities between culture and nation. Appiah’s *Ethics of Identity* supports an idea of culture in the 20th century as “self-fashioning.” Culture can be treated more as a language with codes for practice and free for interpretation (120, 311). *Americanah* seeks to show how autonomy is needed so as to make mobile nationality able to navigate the dispersion of culture.

This motive of mobile identity is encapsulated in a scene where Ifemelu encounters a middle class African-American man, whom she is attracted to and seeks a relationship with, "My name is Blaine’ ... he looked tall. A man with skin the color of gingerbread ... She knew right

away he was African-American, not Caribbean, not African, not a child of immigrants from either place” (178). The novel expands the conversation of identity to include the intricacies of how African culture migrated over many years to create nuanced national cultures. *Americanah* seeks to celebrate the permutations that stemmed from the post-colonial location. The text shows that African diaspora has created diversity that is felt on a global scale. Ifemelu admires this intricacy of identity as she considers the signifiers of a specific culture experience in Blaine, “The longer she spent time in America, the better she had become at distinguishing, sometimes from looks and gait, but mostly from bearing and demeanor, that fine-grained mark that culture stamps on people. She felt confident about Blaine: he was a descendant of the black men and women who had been in America for hundreds of years” (Adichie 178). This passage shows how machinations of post-colonial and imperial cultural politics created the phenomenon of African American. Blaine and Ifemelu can exist in a space where they can both be considered privileged in their move away from the ideology that so powerfully oppressed their forefathers.

Adichie’s example of Ifemelu and Blaine shows how two individuals with complex ethnic histories can share and relate commonalities in identity. Stuart Hall’s *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* explains that when speaking of the differences among the African subject they may share a common history of—“transportation, slavery, colonisation— that has been profoundly formative. But for all these societies, difference is unifying across cultures” (28-29). In the context of *Americanah*, Ifemelu learns to admire diversity in a post-modern setting. She refers to this as, the “fine-grained mark that culture stamps on people.” Blaine and Ifemelu can relate to each other as subjects who acknowledge the cultural history they share as African descendants. But what unifies their relationship is their shared experience of marginalization. Nevertheless, the ties joining dispersed culture in post-modern identity are not unilateral. Difference also

entails moments of miscommunication or estrangement.

Adichie's example of cultural globalization is not without complication in Ifemelu and Blaine's relationship. The novel shows how ruptures can appear in the conversation on cultural identity. Blaine and Ifemelu's conversation on race carries problematic consequences. The novel offers the scenario of racial discrimination that triggers different reactions for the couple; their mutual acquaintance "Mr. White's friend, a black man, came by yesterday ... Mr. White gave his friend his car keys, because the friend wanted to borrow his car, and gave Mr. White some money, which Mr. White had lent him earlier" (343-344). At first, the scenario gives the reader doubt as to the ethnicity of Mr. White. This dialogue presents the innocuously titled Mr. White with a friend who is described as a black man. The conclusion of Blaine's story shows how race colors the perception of the outside observer, "A white ... employee, watching them, assumed the two black men were dealing drugs and called a supervisor ... who called the police" (343-344). *Americanah* uses this story of discrimination as a way for the reader to observe differences in the arena of racial ethics.

This discourse opens a discussion between Ifemelu as an American African and Blaine as an African American and how they deal with the ethics of identity from their own contexts. Ifemelu agrees with the error of discrimination but is not as equally compelled as her American counterpart. Their fight stems from a distinction that they share African heritage but they do not share national identities. *Americanah* supports this distinction in the way Blaine views Ifemelu's actions, "his subtle accusation ... her lack of zeal ... but also her Africanness: she was not sufficiently furious because she was African not African American" (346). This tension between Ifemelu and Blaine shows how cultural globalization is not a utopian solution for the post-colonial or post-modern identity. *Americanah's* narrative broaches a number of issues when

considering the progress of postcolonial identity in America. But ultimately the trajectory of Ifemelu's development leads her to return to Nigeria. This return to the postcolonial nation harkens back to the idea that in order for the postcolonial subject and national identity must work together to accomplish fulfilled identity.

The novel shows how Ifemelu has enriched her identity through the immigrant experience. Ifemelu has adopted the globalizing qualities with her understanding how she is perceived on a grander scale. Yet as established in the beginning of her narrative the American location was never meant to be a tidy answer to the shortcomings of Nigerian national identity. As a postmodern immigrant Ifemelu still feels a sense of longing for her native country, "It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that ... melded into a piercing homesickness (Adichie 6). The language of this scene communicates the need for the sense of community provided by national culture. The descriptions of amorphous longings and piercing homesickness show Ifemelu as a Nigerian subject seeking wholeness in cultural identity.

Americanah's narrative takes a circular pattern as Ifemelu resolutely wishes return to Nigeria. Ifemelu's homesickness culminates in this description, "Nigeria became ... the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil"(6). Adichie's decision to return the immigrant narrative back to the postcolonial nation speaks to Obi Nwakanma's previous statements. In *Metonymic Eruptions*, Nwakanma mentioned Nigerian literature's aspirations to create a modern national identity. This was usually expressed by giving the example of a character or leader who modeled the behavior of leaving and returning to Nigeria like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (5). As a character, Ifemelu's transitioning

throughout the novel has functioned as a means of evaluating and dissecting different areas of cultural politics. But these experiences peak in their consolidation of her identity. These experiences will be the roots that she “sinks into Nigerian soil.” Ifemelu’s immigration home with knowledge and “clothed in American degrees” is a move that will help Nigeria move into a contemporary space. The post-colonial setting receives the postmodern influx of various cultures coming together to change the traditional transmission of culture that has lost meaning for its native inhabitants. The term speaks to the phenomenon of Nigeria’s transitioning.

In a final stage of Ifemelu’s identity formation, she is marked with a new title as an immigrant Nigerian. Ifemelu inherits the title of *Americanah*, “*Americanah!*” Ranyinudo teased her often. “You are looking at things with American eyes” (Adichie 385). This term appears on other occasions throughout the novel. It is derogatory slang word when first introduced in the beginning of Ifemelu’s narrative, a term used to describe immigrant Nigerians who returned home with “odd affectations” and no longer in touch with Nigerian culture (65). This word symbolizes the societal stigma of an Americanized Nigerian. As Adéléké Adéékó mentions about the Igbo culture view of immigration, “The United States and England resembled what an Igbo proverb will represent as ‘white body’ a leprous entity whose hands one shakes but whose body one does not embrace” (Adéékó 18). Adéékó acknowledges the existence of a generalized stigma of intercultural exchange between post-colonial Nigeria and the West. Yet *Americanah*’s narrative continues to fight stereotypes and argues the benefits of being a Nigerian with “American eyes.”

Americanah recognizes the difficult undertaking of the reform of Nigerian national identity. The novel’s narrative tracks the frustrations Ifemelu faces as she reacclimatizes to Nigerian life. However, Ifemelu uses her Internet blog as a means of balancing the ignorance and

hostility she finds when trying to express American ideas of culture. “Nigerpotilan Club...Lagos has never been, will never be, and has never aspired to be like New York...Most of us come back to make money ... start businesses ... others have come with dreams in their pockets and a hunger to change the country, but we spend all our time complaining” (Adichie 421). The titling words “Nigerpotilan Club,” invite a characterization of the discussion on nation. The two polarized sides being “arrogant” immigrant Nigerians returned from America and native Nigerians. Ifemelu’s use of this globalizing medium shows how the novel wishes to comment on the importance of communal discussion on culture.

Americanah focuses on the idea that national identity is compromised of the beliefs and behaviors of the people. Ifemelu’s blog is an outlet for national voices being heard in thoughtful conversation. This principal notion of national identity being an ideology driven by the members of the community finds a definition in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* applies—“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community”(6). *Americanah* as a Nigerian novel works to include the connections between national identity, immigration, and overcoming the post-colonial. But Adichie most importantly understands the manner in which her narrative is in conversation with other works. *Americanah* as a text has the power to imbue the Nigerian story into the global community.

Adichie’s *Americanah* provides a composite view of the journey of the post-colonial identity. The novel shows how post-colonialism has eroded out of the binaries and concepts once used in the past. 20th century cultural politics observe how colonial ideology, once held in rigid binaries and strict definitions of race, has melted into evolving global culture. Hence, the migrant narrative’s trajectory is essential for unearthing the board scope of how cultural ideology has

changed in the post-modern era. *Americanah* shows the importance of understanding this journey so as to understand a contemporary incarnation of nation and cultural identity.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to examine the post-colonial condition in the novels *A Question of Power*, *See Now Then*, and *Americanah*. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* served as a introduction into the complex discussion of post-colonial progress. The essay outlined the cultural and historical complications when trying to isolate the exact trajectory of colonialism and its end. Mohanty's essay instead distills for her readers the most destructive quality of colonial history that is the discriminatory practice of creating ideology that marginalizes one group of people in order to grant power to another. The essay gives an outline of the traditional binary between of Western vs. non-Western culture. But her essay also warns readers about that the greatest tool for colonization cultural production of political ideas that othered identities not traditional to a white European model.

Under Western Eyes greatest example of how colonial thinking can still invade contemporary times is the language used in post-colonial discourse. Mohanty includes an footnote in her essay that sparks awareness to the presence of post-colonial thinking in everyday life. She intervenes to remind the reader of the precarious role that language plays in the discourse on post-colonialism and culture. Mohanty absolves herself of the ambiguous usage the terms "first world" and "third-world." She acknowledges a gaping lack in the language used to discuss post-colonialism, gender, and race. Her footnote reads, "terms such as *third* and *first world* are very problematic both in suggesting oversimplified similarities between and among countries labeled thus, and reinforcing existing economic, cultural, and ideological hierarchies which are conjured up in using such terminology. I use the term...because this is the only terminology available to us at the moment" (Mohanty 74-75). Mohanty's statement acknowledges an important gap in the discourse on post-colonial identity. The discourse is

limited to problematic terms left over from the Western historical narrative. Words such as first and third-world warrant the same caution as the categorization of West vs. Non-West. This tension in the language used to describe leftover ideology is most importantly problematic because of a change in post-colonial progression. The historical moment of colonialism has passed but the ideology that marginalizes people and nations modernizes with the spread of culture.

Mohanty mentions how oversimplification is a danger in the narrative between Western and non-Western cultures. This thesis shows that through exposure to diverse narratives an answer can be found to the question of Western and non-Western cultures understanding each other. The examples used in this thesis survey the narratives grown from African diaspora in the works of Bessie Head, Jamaica Kincaid, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche. But the common thread between the novels is that these third-world authors have provided distinct interpretations of the imposition of post-colonial hegemony. Each author has given an example of how cultural discrimination seeks to marginalize diversity according to a modern idea of supremacy.

A Question of Power explores the aftermath of post-colonialism and the difficulties newly independent nations. The novel trudges through the messy details of colonial oppression and racial discrimination. But Head reforms the narrative to specifically show a genuine, un-simplified expression of the process of national identity. Head's text argues for an awareness of past and present cultural movement in order to build successful nationhood. *See Now Then's* narrative challenges the reader with the erosion and loss of native identity through immigration and assimilation. Kincaid shows how mass culture's promoting of ignorance of cultural diversity leads to a stagnant national identity. And finally *Americanah* considers the dangers of mass

globalization that can invite a complete departure from the post-colonial nation but unsuccessfully translates individual multicultural identity.

This conversation between Head, Kincaid, and Adichie's work shows how the post-colonial event continues to expand and reinvent itself whether it is expressed through gender, ethnicity, and class. Thus, the paranoia expressed in *Under Western Eyes* over a rigid cultural binary becomes obsolete. In today's contemporary time ideological oppression has the same mobility as cultural identities that intermix and overlap within the post-modern setting. This trend of blurring the boundaries between culture shows that the post-colonial discourse must embrace cultural diaspora. The dissolving of national boundaries as seen in *A Question of Power*, *See Now Then*, and *Americanah*, challenges traditional ideas of national standards dependent on geographic location, ethnicity, and performance of identity. Readers are encouraged to include new more complex identities that have direct ties to political culture. For example, South Africa eventually abolished apartheid and abandoned the ideology of strict racial categorization, and the United States and Nigeria must still adapt to the flow caused by immigration. Thus, a growing mobility and diversity must be added to definition of national culture. Part of the reason the protagonists of these novels faced outcomes such as madness, exile, immigration, and migrancy was due to geographic location's inability to successfully adapt to the flow of culture. The writings of Head, Kincaid, and Adichie imply a need for progression in the twentieth century context of cultural movement. But just as the post-colonial condition has no clear delineation of beginning and end so too cultural diaspora proves difficult.

Mohanty's comments on post-colonial language highlight the problem of association between cultural terms and ideological narratives. Samantha Pinto's *Difficult Diasporas* offers a solution obstacle of colonial history. Samantha Pinto's *Difficult Diasporas* engages with the

disparity between Western and non-Western narratives. Western narratives dominate culture because of a lack in alternative stories. Pinto suggests that diaspora narratives can offset the colonial story. Diaspora narratives express the reality of the post-colonialism condition still felt today.

Therefore, the diaspora narrative presents itself as a method of inventing new stories and new language to the ideological narratives. Pinto explains how diaspora texts can begin to map the territory of “difficult diasporas” (3). As a literary form diaspora writing can access the problematic cultural issues and create a counter-hegemonic aesthetic through non-traditional narration. Pinto clarifies that “diaspora becomes not only a set of physical movements, but also a set of aesthetic and interpretive strategies ... embracing the failure of ‘trying to include everything’” (Pinto 3-4). *Difficult Diaspora*’s possibilities for defining diaspora expand into different branches of thought. This theory can move into a variety of topic ranging from gender, politics, and more. Diaspora’s greatest advantage is its independence from a physical geographic location. Nationality can be expanded to focus more on individual identity instead of hegemonic politics that desperately tries to maintain cohesion through categorizing ideology.

The novels analyzed in this thesis can also fall into the work of diaspora narratives as the next logical step in the post-colonial progression. These third-world female authors write with the intention to create a narrative voice for those subjects silenced because of a tradition narrative. This motivation connects to a modern day event when Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attended a 2009 TED talk. She spoke as to the “danger of the singular story” and the harm caused by cultural stereotypes. Cultural ideology shapes the global perspectives of nations and individuals with both positive and negative effect. One country’s national ideas on personal identity could affect global culture on a widespread level. Today’s global community is

continually shrinking because of the continuing evolution of technology and transport. Adichie drives home the important point that each individual identity is representative of the quality of that person's national culture. Adichie's conversation extends to the need for diaspora narratives. Western culture has all too commonly censored cultural history into one meta-story rooted in Western grandeur. But the diasporic lens discussed in *Difficult Diasporas* could expand this analysis of the flow of culture in these texts and present an even more sophisticated understanding of cultural movement.

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