
Ambivalence and Mimicry: A Post-colonial Study of Hayford's "Mista Courifer"

Ahmed Hassan

BS (English), University of Gujrat, Pakistan. Email: ahmedhassan47192@gmail.com

Muhammad Owais Ifzal

Lecturer in English, Government College University Faisalabad Sub- Campus Hafizabad Pakistan
owaisifzal@gmail.com

Shehryar Ali

BS (English), University of Gujrat, Pakistan. Email: syedshehrvarali79@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the concepts of ambivalence and mimicry in Adelaide Casely Hayford's short story *Mista Courifer*. The story, set in colonial Sierra Leone, examines the impact of British colonialism on the lives of its characters. The protagonist, Mista Courifer, mimics European culture in his clothing, house design, and lifestyle, believing this will elevate his status. However, his son, Tomas, rejects these imposed values, leading to conflict between them. The research uses post-colonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's ideas on mimicry and ambivalence, to analyze the story. Mimicry is shown as a survival tactic for Courifer, while his ambivalence reveals internal conflicts about adopting English ways. Tomas also experiences ambivalence as he resists his father's influence and rejects colonial norms, yet paradoxically adopts certain European ideas. Through this lens, the study highlights how colonialism creates psychological tension and cultural confusion in individuals, shaping their identities and relationships. The analysis reveals that mimicry in the story is not mere imitation but a deliberate tactic used by the characters to secure a place within colonial society and to create a sense of protection for themselves. Ambivalence, on the other hand, emerges as an inevitable outcome of colonial rule: in *Courifer*, it stems from his conflicted adoption of English culture, while in Tomas it arises through his resistance to his father's expectations. Together, their experiences illustrate how colonialism produces deep psychological and cultural fractures that shape both personal identity and familial relationships.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Mimicry, Ambivalence, Sierra Leone, Identity, Psychological Conflict

Introduction

Over the last 500 years, the world has witnessed significant changes, one of which was the colonization of various regions by European powers. Colonial empires such as England, Spain, and France began colonizing different countries as early as the 16th century. By the

19th century, colonization had reached its peak, with England emerging as the most powerful empire. Colonized nations were subjected to exploitation through the destruction of their resources, cultures, and people. Prominent colonial writers like Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad portrayed colonized people as barbaric and uncivilized, attempting to justify the exploitation inherent in colonialism.

In the 20th century, a movement known as post-colonialism emerged, accompanied by the development of post-colonial theory. Post-colonialism is a literary theory that examines the cultural, racial, and psychological issues caused by colonial rule. It challenges the Eurocentric worldview, which positions whites as civilized and superior while viewing blacks as inferior and uncivilized. Post-colonial theory discusses various concepts such as racism, mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence, and double consciousness. Scholars have used these concepts to analyze a range of literary texts. Mimicry and ambivalence are two key concepts that are evident in the short story *Mista Courifer* by Adelaide Smith Casely Hayford. Adelaide Casely Hayford, a prominent Victorian feminist, was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1868 to a Creole elite family. Her family moved to England when she was four years old. At the age of 17, she traveled to Germany to study music. In 1892, she returned to Freetown to begin her teaching career and dedicated her life to the education of girls. She founded the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and raised funds for the Girls' Vocational School in Freetown. Through her travels, she became acutely aware of the racial discrimination faced by black people. During the later years of her life, she began writing about racial issues caused by colonial rule, and it was during this time that she wrote the short story *Mista Courifer*.

Mista Courifer explores the impact of colonial rule on the lives of black Africans. The story's protagonist, Mista Courifer, is heavily influenced by white Europeans. He mimics their clothing style and insists that his son, Tomas, do the same. However, Courifer holds contradictory views regarding women, as he forbids his daughter from wearing English clothing. Although Tomas is born black, his father insists that he must become an Englishman. As Tomas grows up, he begins to despise the English way of life. Courifer's obsession with English culture and Tomas's rejection of it create a conflict between father and son. This conflict reaches its climax when Tomas decides to marry a girl and build "a nice mud hut." By the end of the story, Tomas and his wife appear in traditional attire while Courifer preaches in church. Following this incident, Courifer stops preaching altogether.

This study aims to analyze the story through the lens of post-colonialism. When *Mista Courifer* was written, Sierra Leone was a British colony, and the story reflects the effects of British rule in the region. The analysis will focus on the themes of mimicry and ambivalence, asking in what ways the characters engage in mimicry and how this reflects their colonial experience, as well as how they exhibit ambivalence and what factors contribute to its development within the narrative.

Literature Review

Several critics have shared their views on Mista Courifer. Okonkwo (1983) discusses Adelaide Casely Hayford as a cultural nationalist and feminist, offering insights into her short story. The researcher describes the protagonist, Courifer, of the short story Mista Courifer as “indeed a caricature of the black Englishman” (Okonkwo, 1983). Tomas, the son, is portrayed as suffering from discriminatory treatment. Furthermore, the complex relationship between father and son is analyzed, with the ending of the story summarized as portraying Mista Courifer as “the slavish imitator of the Europeans” (Okonkwo, 1960). This reading highlights the absurdity of Courifer’s excessive imitation, aligning with Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as “almost the same, but not quite.” Okonkwo’s emphasis on Courifer as a slavish imitator underscores the central theme of mimicry, yet his analysis does not fully address the psychological tension – ambivalence - that emerges from this imitation.

Donna Rosenberg, a renowned scholar and director in In-House Counsel, comments on Adelaide Casely Hayford and her story Mista Courifer in her book World Literature. Rosenberg praises Casely Hayford’s talent for observing people and depicting them in her short stories. She notes that Casely-Hayford was “interested in the different ways in which her people reacted to the fact that their country, with a heritage of its own, was a British colony.” Rosenberg highlights that Mista Courifer is set in this context, exploring how the protagonist and his son react to colonial rule. However, Rosenberg views Casely Hayford in broadly humanistic terms, whereas the current study foregrounds the postcolonial critique of mimicry and ambivalence. (Rosenberg, 1992)

In recent years, researchers have applied the concepts of ambivalence and mimicry to analyze various literary works, including novels, short stories, and dramas. For instance, Babaei and Purjafari (2022) explore identity in Nadine Gordimer’s selected short stories using Homi Bhabha’s post-colonial theory, particularly his ideas on ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity. They examine the interactions between the colonizer and the colonized, concluding that some characters experience hybrid identities, others remain in ambivalence, and some mimic the colonizer’s behavior to adapt to new circumstances. Similarly, Lazuardi and Laksono (2021) investigate aspects of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity in Homi Bhabha’s framework. Their study examines the struggles of Lazlo Strange, a character intertwined with post-colonial issues, who is compelled to engage in mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity. Despite the opposition faced, Lazlo ultimately develops a new identity by the end of the novel. Another study by Wardani and Widyabening (2020) focuses on the ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity of female characters in Indonesian novels. Their findings reveal that both female characters exhibit similar mimicry behaviors. However, in terms of ambivalence, they are not treated as equals to the native population, despite fully adopting the Dutch lifestyle and education. These studies affirm that mimicry and ambivalence recur across colonial contexts.

Although these frameworks are widely applied, Casely Hayford’s *Mista Courifer* has rarely been studied in this light. Existing criticism emphasizes the story’s satire and cultural nationalism, but little has been written on how Courifer’s mimicry produces ambivalence, or how Tomas negotiates his own conflicted identity. This analysis will examine the themes of mimicry and ambivalence, exploring how the characters engage in mimicry as a reflection of

their colonial experience, and how their ambivalence emerges and develops within the narrative.

Theoretical Framework

Critics agree that providing a definitive definition of post-colonialism is challenging. However, broadly speaking, post-colonialism is a critical approach concerned with literature produced by both colonizers and colonized people. Post-colonialism also addresses writings in which authors portray the distorted realities and identities of subjugated, marginalized, and oppressed colonized people. It encompasses concepts such as otherness, resistance, mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity. From all these concepts of post-colonialism, mimicry and ambivalence are central to this research. Simply, mimicry refers to the act of imitating another person or entity. However, within the framework of post-colonialism, mimicry describes how colonized people imitate the colonizer's culture, customs, attitudes, and beliefs. Bhabha (1984) defines mimicry as "the way in which colonized people sometimes address their oppressors, adopting their language, clothes, religion, etc (Bhabha, 1984)". Feeling inferior, the colonized often mimic the colonizer to gain acceptance or integrate into colonial society. Bhabha shows that mimicry is not a simple act of copying but an **ironic, ambivalent** strategy. When colonized subjects imitate the colonizer, they produce a representation that is "*almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 1984). This incomplete resemblance functions as a kind of camouflage or "metonymy of presence": the colonized become partial reflections of the colonizer, but always marked by difference. Bhabha argues that this creates a "double vision" of colonial power: the mimicry both *fulfills* the colonizer's demand for a recognizable Other and *undermines* the colonizer's authority. In other words, by producing a nearly-accurate copy, the colonized mock and expose the artificiality of imperial dominance. The colonizer's superiority is destabilized because the mimicked identity is a **distorted**, unstable image of authenticity.

For Frantz Fanon (1963), mimicry is a strategy used by individuals to feel a sense of belonging to high society and secure a better position within the colonial system (Fanon, 1963). Frantz Fanon's work on colonial psychology reinforces these ideas by emphasizing mimicry as both a survival tactic and a form of internalized aspiration. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1986) argues that the colonized internalize the colonizer's values in a desperate bid for acceptance. He describes the "Black man" who tries to "*don the white mask*" - learning the language, education, and manners of the white oppressor - in the hope of attaining status (Fanon, 1986). Many colonized people come to see "whiteness as virtue and beauty" and even believe they can "save their race by making themselves whiter". However, Fanon shows this mimicry leads to a permanent inferiority complex: no matter how far one assimilates, the colonizer will always regard the colonized as "not quite" worthy. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he explicitly condemns such imitation as a "nauseating mimicry" - a futile strategy that only perpetuates the colonized person's psychological captivity. (Fanon, 1963)

This dynamic of mimicry generates deep ambivalence in the colonized subject. Broadly

speaking, ambivalence refers to the simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion towards something or someone. In the context of colonialism, ambivalence describes the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Homi K. Bhabha incorporated the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence into his concept of colonialism. According to Bhabha, ambivalence involves contradictory emotions, attitudes, or behaviors resulting from the dynamics of power, authority, and dominance. Bhabha uses “ambivalence” to describe the split feelings – attraction and repulsion – that result from colonial power. The colonial subject who mimics the dominant culture experiences contradictory emotions: a desire to belong and simultaneously a sense of loss or unease.

These theoretical insights provide the foundation for analyzing Adelaide Casely Hayford's *Mista Courifer*. By applying Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and ambivalence alongside Fanon's critique of colonial psychology, the study can trace how Courifer's obsessive imitation of English culture and Tomas's conflicted resistance reveal the psychological instability produced by colonial rule. The following analysis demonstrates how these abstract theories take shape in the lived experiences of the story's characters.

Data Analysis

A) Mimicry

Mista Courifer's entire lifestyle revolves around imitating various aspects of European culture, including clothing, architecture, and professions. At the start of the story, the third-person narrator reveals that Courifer not only considers the European lifestyle superior but views it as “the only thing for Africans...” (Rosenberg, 1992). He consistently wears a black suit because he once read in a newspaper that Europeans often wear somber attire. His mimicry extends to building his house in the English style, despite the impracticality of small rooms causing suffocation and excessive heat for his family. Nevertheless, Courifer believes it is the right thing to do.

This mimicry is not confined to his personal choices; Courifer also imposes it on his son, Tomas. He purchases English clothes for Tomas, insisting that he become an Englishman despite his black skin. The father-son conflict in the story arises from this forced mimicry. When Tomas expresses his desire to build a traditional mud hut instead of a European-style house, Courifer becomes furious and loses his composure.

One of the research questions seeks to understand why characters engage in mimicry. According to Frantz Fanon, mimicry is a strategy employed by colonized individuals to navigate power dynamics and define their roles within the colonial system. The story is set in Sierra Leone, a British colony, and Courifer mimics the English because he aspires to attain the high social status of the colonizers. He may also believe that imitating the English will make him more “civilized.” Yet, as Fanon (1963) warns, this “nauseating mimicry” traps the colonized in a perpetual state of inferiority, since no matter how faithfully Courifer copies European customs, he will never be fully accepted as equal. Thus, his attempt at survival becomes the very source of his humiliation and insecurity (Fanon, 1963).

A significant clue to Courifer's mimicry is found in his own words:

"No matter if we get inside a whale or get inside an ark, as long as we get inside some place of safety—as long as we can find some refuge, some hiding-place from de wiles ob de debil." (Hayford, 1992)

A closer reading suggests that "wiles ob de debil" metaphorically refers to the colonizer. Just as Jonah found refuge inside the whale, Courifer finds refuge within the colonial system by mimicking it. For him, mimicry is a means of survival and maintaining a safe position under colonial rule. However, the irony of his statement lies in the fact that the supposed "refuge" is itself a site of suffocation and entrapment, much like the English-style house he forces upon his family. His refuge, therefore, becomes a prison, illustrating how mimicry produces dependence rather than liberation.

B) Ambivalence

One major psychological effect of colonialism is ambivalence - simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the colonizer. While Courifer imitates nearly every aspect of English culture, he also exhibits an ambivalent attitude towards the English. He considers the European way of life the only suitable path for Africans but behaves contradictorily in certain contexts. Courifer insists that his son Tomas wear English clothes, yet he refuses to buy European clothes for his daughter, Keren-Happuch. This inconsistency underscores his ambivalence. The conflict between father and son becomes more apparent when they argue over how a wife should be treated. While Tomas adopts the European perspective on treating wives, Courifer—despite being a caricature of European traditions—maintains an indigenous view of women's roles.

Courifer's ambivalence is particularly evident in his statement to Tomas:

"But I want to make you look like an Englishman. I don't say you must copy all their different ways!" (Hayford, 1992)

This ironic statement highlights Courifer's internal conflict. After forcing Tomas to imitate the English in every possible way, he suddenly advises him against copying them entirely. This contradiction reveals that Courifer himself is uncertain about whether they should mimic the English and to what extent.

Another research question examines how characters develop feelings of ambivalence. For Courifer, this ambivalence is a direct result of the colonial system. Even after adopting every English mannerism, he still believes that wives should adhere to indigenous customs. This contradiction reflects the psychological tension caused by the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Tomas's ambivalence stems from a deeper realization. Although he reluctantly follows the English way of life, he begins to question it when he notices that his father forces only him— not his sister—to imitate the English. This unequal

treatment fosters a sense of resentment in Tomas. After this realization, Tomas begins to reject the English lifestyle entirely. He quits his job and asks his father to stop purchasing English clothes for him, declaring:

“I may as well tell you at once, you need not order any more Liverpool suits for me.”
(Hayford, 1992)

Despite rejecting the English lifestyle, Tomas paradoxically wishes to treat his wife in the manner Europeans treat theirs. This duality demonstrates that ambivalence, as a by product of the colonial system, is deeply ingrained in his character. This pattern of ambivalence in both Courifer and Tomas illustrates what Bhabha calls the instability of colonial identity: the colonized subject is always suspended between imitation and resistance, never fully at ease in either position. Courifer's contradictions reveal his dependence on colonial validation even as he clings to traditional authority, while Tomas's rejection of European customs is complicated by his selective adoption of certain colonial values. Their divided identities expose how colonialism produces not a stable assimilation but a fractured self, caught between attraction to the colonizer's culture and the simultaneous urge to reject it. In this way, *Mista Courifer* demonstrates that ambivalence is not an occasional inconsistency but a permanent psychological condition under colonial rule.

Conclusion

This research has examined the notions of ambivalence and mimicry in *Mista Courifer* to illustrate how the characters are influenced by their colonizers and the impact this influence has on their lives. Adelaide Casely-Hayford effectively portrays the struggle of Sierra Leonean natives to maintain their place within the colonial system and navigate power dynamics. By analyzing the reasons behind mimicry, the study concludes that the characters employ mimicry as a tactic to secure a position within colonial society and to establish a sense of safety. Mimicry thus functions as a strategy for attaining social status or, at the very least, cultivating a sense of self-worth. In conclusion, ambivalence arises as a direct consequence of colonialism in the character of Courifer, while for Tomas, it emerges from his relationship with his father. Both characters demonstrate how the colonial experience generates psychological and cultural tensions that shape their identities and actions.

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