



EUFONI Vol. 6 (2) (2022)

**Journal of Linguistics, Literary and  
Cultural Studies**

<http://openjournal.unpam.ac.id/index.php/EFN/index>



---

**Hybridity as Reflected in Fabiola in Ibi Zobo's American Street Novel**

**Rendi Prayoga<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Pamulang, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> Email: [rendi@gmail.com](mailto:rendi@gmail.com)

---

**Abstract**

---

*This study examines the depiction of hybridity and mimicry in Ibi Zobo's novel "American Street," focusing on their effects on the protagonist, Fabiola. Titled "Hybridity as Reflected in Fabiola in Ibi Zobo's American Street," the research explores how Fabiola's move to America initiates her hybrid identity and her adoption of American culture. Using a qualitative method, the study employs Homi K. Bhabha's (1990) theories of hybridity and mimicry to analyze the novel. The findings reveal that Fabiola embodies both hybridity and mimicry through her adaptation to American language, behavior, and attire. The study also highlights the impacts of hybridity and mimicry on Fabiola, such as culture shock, identity crisis or ambivalence, and camouflage.*

---

**Keywords:** cultural identity, hybridity, mimicry.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, cultural identity is a phenomenon commonly observed in society, especially in Western contexts. Since the colonization era, cultural identity has been shaped by the inability of one group to determine itself while being dominated by another. Colonized individuals often lose their true identity as they imitate the culture of the colonizers, a process known as mimicry. This leads the colonized to view the colonizers as powerful models to emulate. Identity is a crucial aspect of human behavior, enabling individuals to connect with their community. However, for immigrants, determining their identity can be challenging as they navigate between their origin culture and the struggle for acceptance in a new society.

The phenomena of hybridity and mimicry are evident in the experiences of mixed-race individuals and immigrants. For instance, Rihanna, born in St. Michael Parish, Barbados, to a Barbadian father and a Guyanese mother, moved to America at 16. Living in Connecticut and working on her recording demo, Rihanna experienced the overwhelming challenge of adapting to a new country. She developed a hybrid identity, blending her Barbadian roots with American culture to fit in. Her successful career is a testament to her ability to adapt and adopt American culture, thus gaining acceptance in American society.

In the post-colonial context, the cultural identity of Black people in America has been significantly marked by their appearance and language, which have roots in the Caribbean islands. Cultural identity is profoundly influenced by colonization's impact on cultures and societies. African immigrants in America, initially brought as slaves, have struggled with their identities, enduring the effects of colonialism. Post-World War II, African immigrants in America often adopted and adapted to the local culture to survive and gain acceptance, a clear example of mimicry.

Stuart Hall (1996) describes cultural identity as a collective "true self" shared among people with common history and ancestry, despite the superficial differences imposed by external factors. This intrinsic identity differentiates individuals who share a common background from those who do not. Hybridity arises not from mere relocation but from the interaction between different cultures, leading to the formation of new identities and cultures (Day & Foulcher, 2008). Hybridity can be pursued through mimicry.

Homi K. Bhabha (1990) defines mimicry as the imperfect reproduction of colonial subjectivity within an 'impure' colonial environment, characterized by ambivalence and the colonial discourse's inherent contradictions. This ambivalence undermines the colonial authority's attempts at control.

In this study, the focus is on analyzing the novel "American Street" by Ibi Zoboi, which explores themes of cultural identity, hybridity, and mimicry. The novel depicts characters experiencing identity crises as they adapt to and adopt American culture. The protagonist, Fabiola, grapples with her family's move from Brooklyn, New York, to Detroit for her father's job, her enrollment in a new school, and the struggle to maintain her identity amidst American cultural pressures. "American Street" was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for Young People's Literature. This study employs a qualitative method to examine cultural identity, particularly hybridity and mimicry in literature, and serves as a reference for future studies on similar issues. The enduring relevance of cultural identity and hybridity makes it a valuable subject for ongoing analysis.

## **METHODS**

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed. Data were gathered through reading, understanding, and analyzing the novel "American Street," along with relevant documents and journal articles. According to Bogdan (1998), qualitative research is descriptive and collects data in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. Quotes from documents, field notes, interviews, or excerpts from videotapes, audiotapes, or electronic communications are used to present the findings.

Qualitative research focuses on in-depth analysis rather than numerical or statistical analysis, using textual or visual data that includes quotations from experts. This method delves deeply into the problems of the study, providing a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena and behavior, thereby aiding in solving the research problems.

The primary data source for this study is the novel "American Street" by Ibi Zoboi, first published in February 2017. Ibi Zoboi is an award-winning author and the novel has been recognized as a New York Times Notable Book in the category of Young People's Literature.

The steps for collecting qualitative data included:

1. Thoroughly reading the novel.
2. Identifying and marking issues in the novel by underlining relevant words.

For data analysis, a list of relevant data was compiled based on the identified issues and related theories. The study applied Homi K. Bhabha's (1990) theory to describe and analyze the data, connecting the theoretical framework to the research problem.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### THE EFFECT OF BEING HYBRID REFLECTED ON CHARACTER FABIOLA

Hybridity explains identity must be crossed culture and there is no pure identity. It can be the relation between colonizer (Western) and colonized (Eastern). It is not oppositional or and creating binary oppositional but instead changing the oppositional into an alternative that fit them in political or society. Between the colonizer and colonized there is a space beyond both. The effect of being hybrid and living in the crossroad is typically developed culture shock, then the effect of mimicry is camouflage which leads to the ambivalence or identity crisis. The ambivalence itself is constructed along with mimicry. Ambivalence phenomenon markedly because of the mimicry, in order to fit in into the new culture and can be accepted in society. The immigrants people develop ambivalence or identity crisis from the process of mimicry which is an ambiguous attitude between their original culture and the new culture.

#### 4.2.1 Cultural Identity Crisis

The process of culture shock is normally happened to people who are living in the crossroad. When they leave their country and go to the foreign country where the customs, foods, and language are different. Culture shock is usually experienced on those people. In this case, Fabiola develops culture shock when moving to America, new sight, smells sounds, people, and customs intimidated her. As seen as in the following quotation.

In Haiti, we used to travel to the top of the mountain ranges near Au Cap for their cool winds. But here, I will turn into a block of ice. America is more colorful than I imagined. The people are a mix of white and not-white. If only Detroit had a bunch of *blan*, it would be easier for me to pick out a single black woman and three teenage girls, but many of the women look like my aunt with their brown faces; black, shiny straightened hair; and their big, dark coats that hide their shapely figures. (Zoboi, 2017, p.5)

From the quotation, it can be seen that Fabiola experiences culture shock by looking the people there are mix of white and non-white. It is because America is country with many of races living at there. In Haiti, she usually travels to the mountain with the cool winds but in America she could be a block of ice. It makes she thinks that America become more colorful than she ever imagined. From the dialogue above, it can be seen how a diaspora tries hard to be accepted in their host nation. Detroit is the name of one of the most populous cities in Michigan, United States of America. The word "Detroit" itself is originated from a French word for "straight". This means Detroit's parents do not consider the meaning of the name, yet picked it up for their daughter's name just because it is an American city and it sounds American.

Then, American's style and appearance mostly is similar. They are just look like her aunt with their brown faces, they have a long black hair straightened and with their big coats that hides their shapely figures. It means that Fabiola amazed by the people at

there. They are mostly wearing the same attributes and their appearance are also similar each other.

The interior of building of American is also different with Haitian. She describes the bathroom of American and Haitian is most different as seen as in the quotation below.

I TURN ON the bathroom-sink faucet and let the cold water wash over my hand. In Port-au-Prince, we had a well in the front yard. By this time, I would've had to wash and rinse out the bucket from the bathroom to bring it outside and pull clean water up from the well. (Zoboi, 2017, p. 21)

The quotation above shows that Fabiola does not comfortable with the American's house. The design interior is very different with Haitian. She describes the bathroom-sink faucet and let the cold water wash over her hand, but in Haiti she has a well in the front yard. She has to handle the new circumstance and also adaptation with the house. The design interior forces her to bring the bucket from the bathroom to bring it outside and pulls clean water up from the well. Instead, in Haiti she had a well in front of the yard that is much helpful because she did not bring the bucket from the inside into outside.

Then, the situation in American family is more complicated which she never could imagine being in the house with the full of family as depicted in the quotation below.

Never could I have imagined being in a house full of family and still feeling lonely. Loud music plays upstairs and the TV blares downstairs. No one is cooking in the kitchen even with the nice stove and refrigerator filled with food. I'm sitting at the table eating my dinner out of paper bags—a hamburger, French fries, and soda. (Zoboi, 2017, p. 33)

The quotation above portrays that Fabiola shocks living in the house with the big family in it. Even she said that she never could have imagined being in a house with the full of family. It is indicated that in Haiti she just lives with her mother but in America, her aunt's families are lived in the same house. Instead, Fabiola is living in the big house and the big family but she still feeling lonely. It reveals that she is not living in her own home. Then, she is also amazed with the music plays loud upstairs and TV on downstairs. This situation seems very new for her. There is no one cooking in the kitchen means that there is no home dish even though the refrigerator filled with the food. Thus, she is eating hamburger, French fries, and soda which means that she buys it.

In addition, she makes a slight comparison again between people in Haiti and America. Yet, she shocks how American people can make her threatened as seen as in the quotation below.

How is this the good life, when even the air in this place threatens to wrap its fingers around my throat? In Haiti, with all its problems, there was always a friend or a neighbor to share in the misery. And then, after our troubles were tallied up like those points at the basketball game, we would celebrate being alive. (Zoboi, 2017, p.159)

From the quotation above, it reveals that Fabiola has thought living in America was like a dream come true but the reality teased her this is not the good life she ever imagined. The first line depicts that Fabiola afraid to the local people as she portrayed them just like the air threatens its finger to her throat. It means that Americans are not humble and they rather than not care each other. Which different with people in Haiti, they are will always there if she has a problem. There will be a friend or neighbor to share in a misery. Then, after fixing everybody problems they will cheer up together and celebrate for being alive. This indicates that Haitian is more harmful and friendly than American. Thus, it makes Fabiola gets culture shock by the American. Moreover, Fabiola feels more strange in America because it is too different with Haiti. As seen as in the quotation.

I realize how strange this place is with all these little houses, and on most days, I barely see any people. If there was a place like this back in Haiti, everyone would come out and gather on the sidewalk to exchange meals and gossip. No one would be left alone in a tiny house with only their regrets and sorrows to keep them company. (Zoboi, 2017, p.70)

The quotation above emphasizes that Fabiola experiences culture shock. As it is seen by having a feeling of strange with the place and all of these little houses and also the people. She even gives more comparison between the Haitian and American which in Haiti, everyone would come out and gather on the sidewalk just to exchange meals and gossip but American rather than individualism. They do not share their problem and also their meals to eat together in the sidewalk. American mostly have party or dinner party to celebrate of achieving something. Then, she also added that Haitian would not let anyone be left alone in the small house, they will company their family because the basic of relationship of Haitian is that they are family. Thus, after moving to the America Fabiola obviously shock with everything especially the people.

The effect of mimicry is camouflage. In order to fit in the society, a hybrid literally camouflage themselves to avoid the problem. The process of camouflage can be seen as they are wearing the American's accent, attributes including clothes and appearance. In this case, Fabiola is also doing camouflage as seen as in the sentence "**BECAUSE OF MY** new hair and clothes, no one knows that I've come from Haiti. Only a few months ago. I fit in like a well-placed brick. (Zoboi, 2017, p.154). it reveals that she camouflages by making new hair do for her hair to become more American and then wearing clothes that is defined American. Thus, no one knows her has come from Haiti. Then, the words *I fit in* it definitely she successfully camouflages among the American citizens only a few months after she come in America.

Then she also tries hard to be more American by using the American accent as seen as in the quotation "I say, trying to make my English sound like my cousins'. "I know things. Me and my mother, we did well in Haiti, with or without your money." (Zoboi, 2017, p.104) it reveals that Fabiola do exercise to speak English to make it her fluent like a native speaker. She also goes to the course to make more excellent in her speaking. From the first line reveals that her cousins are fluent because she made them as the rule model to live in America. Of course her cousins were born and rose in America that is why

they speak like a native speaker even though their parents are immigrant. Then, in the second line means that she knows things about her mother being detained in New Jersey and she wants to set her free as soon as possible because she believes that they can still alive without money in Haiti but not in America.

She really wants to be American even though she knew that her accent sound stupid as they call it swag but she really wanted to admire that she is American as seen as in the sentence “My swag, as they call it, is off. But in my head, I sound just like them. I sound American. (Zoboi, 2017, p.88) it shows that Fabiola tried really hard to sound like a native speaker. The reason she camouflages because she does not want to be judge and being underestimate by the American. The phrase *but in my head* means that American people still judging her language. Even though she thought that she sounds like them, but they do not think the same. It proves that language and accents really defined people.

The effect of mimicry is camouflage which lead to the ambivalence. The ambivalence itself is constructed along with mimicry. Ambivalence phenomenon markedly because of the mimicry, in order to fit in into the new culture and can be accepted in society. The immigrants people develop ambivalence from the process of mimicry which is an ambiguous attitude between their original culture and the new culture. This is happened to Fabiola after she tried hard to mimic and camouflage American cultural identity. she is developed identity crisis as seen as in the quotation below

I feel so alone in this house. I am surrounded by family, but none of them really knows me or understands what happened to me today. My heart begins to ache for my mother. How could my aunt just leave me here in the kitchen—is this how you treat family in America? There is no celebration for my arrival, no meal is cooked, no neighbors are invited to welcome me, not even a glass of cool water is on the table for me to drink after such a long trip. (Zoboi, 2017, p.13)

The quotation above proves that she is experienced cultural identity crisis or ambivalence between her origin culture and the new culture. She feels alone implied that she feels alone in her own home. It is also can be meant that she is alone at the crossroad which she is not at home in her own home. She surrounded by her family but she cannot be herself. She even cannot speak Creole in this home. She feels that none of them really knows her or understand what happened to her and what exactly her feeling. The sentence *How could my aunt just leave me here in the kitchen—is this how you treat family in America?* Means that she is not feel homely at this house.

Then, there is no celebration about her arrival means that she comes in America is nothing special. The ways her aunt treat her put her in terrible feeling because there is no food and not even a glass of water after a long trip. They are even not say welcome to her. That makes her feel uncomfortable because she thought that she would have feel home because she will stay with her family in America. Yet, her family in America seems they have changed. They are not Haitian anymore, they rather be more American. It proves by refusing Fabiola speaking Creole.

Additionally, this place and everything have been put her into ambivalence. Fabiola feels that she lost herself. She is forced to be act like this but she is actually wanted to act like that. It proves that she is confuse about herself as it is depicted in the quotation below.

spent the rest of my life working on my aim and trying to prove to Q that I'm a real G. I never said a word to nobody, not even Haitian Phil's daughter. I couldn't hate Q. I couldn't hate my fucked-up aim. But I could hate that girl for having a dead father whose ghost fucked with me in my sleep, in broad daylight, and even when I was so high, I could hear every fucking cell in my body move. (Zoboi, 2017, p.207)

The quotation above shows that ever since she has come in America, she has worked hard trying to be fit into society. she was trying to be accepted but it turns into other things inside of herself. They want her act like this just like she did not allow to speak Creole or French and they want her act like that. Then, it hard to resist because Fabiola is alone at the crossroad and her family in America have changed their identity into American culture. It leads her to spent the rest of her life living in America hardly working too hard to prove that she can be American but actually she belongs to Haitian.

This makes Fabiola lost her identity because she extremely tried hard to be fit in the society by adopting and adapting American culture, from the language, behavior, dress, and the meal. The meals were hardly hit her into the ground. She really tried overly to eat American food even though she did not like them. The sentence *I couldn't hate Q. I couldn't hate my fucked-up aim* means that she could not hate American culture because she has to act like them. Then, she could not even hate her aim she come to the America. Thus, now she ends up with the identity crisis run into her body.

The process of imitating the other culture leads her for losing her identity as it is seen in the quotation below.

The whole house seems to want to squeeze me in, force a deep wail from out of my body because it's only been one day and I am losing myself to this new place. This is the opposite of the earthquake, where things were falling apart and the ground was shifting beneath my small feet. Here, the walls, the air, the buildings, the people all seem to have already fallen. And there is nothing else left to do but to shrink and squeeze until everything has turned to dust and disappeared. (Zoboi, 2017, p.33)

From the quotation above, it depicts that Fabiola is loss her identity to this place. It is because the huge different between Haiti and America. She depicts it like the opposite earthquake, where the things were falling apart and the ground was shifting beneath her feet. It is implied that she world she is living now inversely proportional with her world before. Everything about America from the building, the air, and people did not suit her. This proves that inside of her body was burden and she lost her identity. She does not even recognize herself as she said *I am losing myself this place*, which means that her origin culture slowly disappears and gone as she said "there is nothing else left to do but



to shrink and squeeze until everything has turned to dust and disappeared” it reveals that living in the crossroad give her a big effect and impact that she lost herself especially her cultural identity.

Living with her family in America, Fabiola is herded to grow to be American by her family as depicted in the following quotation.

You raised me to be like another part of you—another arm or leg. Even as you kept telling me that I’m becoming a woman, you never let me go out into the world to be free. You raised me like this, so I cannot go on with my own life without you. You can’t go back to Haiti. You have to come to this side because this new family of mine is both familiar and strange—just like how I am American by birth and Haitian by blood, bones, and tears. Familiar and strange. (Zoboi, 2017, p.153)

The quotation above shows that since Fabiola had come in America, her family constructed her identity to be more American. The word ‘*you*’ refers to her family in America including her aunt, uncle, and her cousins. They raise her to be like another part of her which means that they shape her to more American rather than staying in her origin culture. It is caused she experienced ambivalence because she was forced to be another part of her in order to be acceptance in society. Despite all of it, ironically they do not let her to be free even to speak Creole. Yet, they dressing up her appearance and she cannot go on with her own life without it. Her family has taught her and rose her like that. It just like she was born in America but her blood that run in her body is Haitian. It means that she is not at home in her own home.

Moreover, this quotation emphasizes Fabiola experience cultural identity crisis as depicted in the quotation below.

At that point, death was more real than anything because I remember not owning my own body, my own breath, my own thoughts. In death, you own it. You take back your shit—your body, your thoughts, your past—and you own it. (Zoboi, 2017, p.207)

The quotation above reveals that Fabiola deathly loss her identity. As she is remembering at the point she is dead more real than anything because she was not owning her body, breath, and her thought. The new culture was shaped her to be another part of her. This proves that the process camouflage put her developed cultural identity crisis. As it is seen when she slowly feels that she is lost her origin culture even she is not owning her own body because the place forced her to act American. Ironically, she said that *in death, you own it. You take back your shit—your body, your thoughts, your past—and you own it*. It can be meant that until death she cannot take back her body and her thought because people have already recognized her as American citizen. People have already seen her appearance has changed into American. It is also implied even though she is still alive right now, but she can take it back her own body unless she can go back to Haiti. As long as she lives in America, she would be trapped in her own body.

## CONCLUSION

From the data analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. The novel "American Street" by Ibi Zoboi depicts hybridity and mimicry through the experiences of the main character, Fabiola, after she migrates to America. The analysis reveals that Fabiola embodies hybridity and mimicry by adopting American language, behavior, and fashion.

The analysis also highlights the effects of being hybrid and engaging in mimicry. First, Fabiola experiences culture shock due to the significant differences between Haitian and American environments and people. Second, she undergoes ambivalence or an identity crisis as she begins adopting and adapting to American culture. Finally, Fabiola resorts to camouflage, altering her behavior and appearance to fit into American society.

This study examines the depiction of hybridity in Ibi Zoboi's "American Street." The first suggestion is for students interested in analyzing hybridity and mimicry, as well as their effects. Future researchers are encouraged to explore these concepts using different theories and objects to uncover more insights about hybridity and mimicry. To facilitate analysis, carefully reading the novel to understand the characters' behaviors is recommended. For readers, "American Street" is an excellent novel that offers a profound understanding of cultural identity through the lens of hybridity and mimicry.

## REFERENCES

- Amrullah, B. S. (2014). Cultural Identities on Hybridity and Mimicry in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. *Universitas Islam Negeri Malang*, 1-53.
- Anwar, A. R. (2020). At The Crossroad of Identity in Mohsin Hamid's Novel *Exit West*. *E-Journal of English Language & Literature*, 1-11.
- Bhaba, K. H. (1990). *The World of the Home*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative Research for Educatuon: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*. Pearson A & B.
- Foulcher, T. D. (2008). *Bahasan Kolonial dalam Sastra Indonesia Modern*. Yayasan Obor Indonesia.
- Hall, S. (1990). *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

- Hussain, A. Q., Liu, L., & Akhter, S. (2020). Deconstructing Issues of Identity and Cultural Clashes in an 'American Brat' by Shidwa. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 1-8.
- Keith Foulcher, T. D. (2008). Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol.6 No.1126-128.
- Liu, L., Akhter, S., & Qureshi, A. H. (2020). Deconstructing Issues of Identity and Cultural Clashes in 'An American Brat' by Sidhva. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 1-8.
- Mayer, M. (2011). *Literature to Go*. Bostfort st Martin's.
- Robert, E. V., & Jacobs, H. E. (1987). *Fiction: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Setyowati, Y. (2017). Homi Bhabha's Mimicry as Reflected in Tanizaki's Naomi. *Jurnal Sastra dan Budaya Dinamika*, vol.5 No.2 603-612.
- Stanton, R. (1965). *An Introduction to Fiction*. Holt, Rinehart and winston.
- Zoboi, I. (2017). *American Street*. HapperCollins Publisher.