
The Impact Of Society On Personal Identity In One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest And Americanah

One's identity is what makes them stand out from society; without identity the world's population would be able to fit into one common mold. At the same time, individuality is one of the numerous challenges faced by youth today. While the idea of acceptance is spreading continuously, everyone faces a period in life in which they are told by society or peers that it is inappropriate to be different. The novels, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie challenge this issue and discuss the effect society has on a person's identity and individualism. Ken Kesey uses two of the main characters, Nurse Ratched and Randle Patrick McMurphy, to represent the battle for one's unique personality as one portrays the power society has in manipulating an individual into believing that one should alter themselves into societal views of the conventional whereas the other represents the counterbalance to society's views. McMurphy is strong, aggressive, and with his undoubtedly unique personality he reaches out to the patients to undo the damage inflicted upon them by society. Likewise, in *Americanah*, several characters undergo transitions, shedding their old made up personalities and eventually accepting their true identity. Thus, Ken Kesey and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explore the ideas of conformity and identity in their books *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Americanah* by discussing the way people change certain elements of their identity to meet the approval of a dominant force, culture, race, or social class, but with time, this adjustment feels unnatural, and eventually they grow and establish a relationship with their true identity.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Americanah*, the society is depicted as one to strip of each person's individuality by establishing rules for living life, enforcing conformity upon all individuals and by creating challenging situations for ones who have distinctive race, social class or even opinions. The Theory of the mental institute in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* implies that the goal of the ward is to shape the inmates to better blend into society. The entire system for creating individuals that fit better into the societal puzzle begins with the 'Theory of the Therapeutic Community' which is a speech given by Dr. Spivey to each new admission; it is summarized for the reader by the narrator, Bromden, who has heard it repeated numerous times. Bromden explains the theory to 'help the guy by showing him where he's out of place; how society decides who's sane and who isn't' (Kesey, 48). According to this theory, the group can help one by pointing out how they are different and to reduce those differences so everyone can be the same, without any identities. It is believed that in this way they can all "fit" into society. The theory also states that it is, "...working towards making worthwhile citizens to turn back Outside onto the street" (Kesey, 38). It is implied that society is the one to decide what a worthwhile citizen is composed of, which does not include any individuality. In *Americanah*, as teenagers Ifemelu is already smart and outspoken, and Obinze is calm and thoughtful. But as they grow up, these qualities are then affected by outside cultural forces and racism. Ifemelu experiences racism when she moves to America to chase her dreams and deals with it by neglecting her identity. She begins adopting an "American accent ... and straightening her hair" and even creates a fake identity to find work (Adichie, 56). Ifemelu's struggle to find a job even at fast food establishments causes severe harm to her self worth. Her inability to find a job forces her to sell her body in order to pay rent, pushing her into a bout of depression that destroys her relationship with Obinze. Ifemelu's racialized experience in the U.S. further goes

on to influence other aspects of her identity like when Christina Tomas talks in a “slow and patronizing voice” to her, under the assumption that she can’t understand English (Adichie, 43). Ifemelu’s transformation is reflected in that of Auntie Uju and Dike as well. Auntie Uju, beaten down by the struggles she faces upon coming to America, becomes merely a shade of who she used to be, passionless, dispirited, and willing to marry a man that treats her terribly. Dike grows up in America yet still experiences racism through microaggressions, where “a camp counselor tells him he doesn’t need sunscreen” and his “classmates jokingly asking him for weed” (Adichie, 77). That contributes to a sense of confusion and alienation that ultimately causes him to attempt suicide. Coming into a country where the majority race tells them their race is inferior, Ifemelu, Auntie Uju, and Dike, along with other African immigrants, actually begin to believe that they are worthless. Likewise, even “Obinze has a difficult experience adapting to a new cultural identity” in England (Adichie, 87). His visa expires so he is forced to take on other people’s identities to find work, and to partake in fake marriage to obtain his green card. In the developed nations, there is a fear of immigrants which makes him feel invisible and worthless. Therefore, the society is displayed as one to dismantle of all traces of individuality by establishing rules for living one’s life, enforcing conformity, and constructing disputes making one feel uninvited at a new place.

Furthermore, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Americanah* demonstrate the many forces like cultural, racial, economics, and determined nature all engaging to create one’s identity. Nurse Ratched and McMurphy engaged in an extensive battle to control the patients’ views of themselves. While the nurse worked to deceive them into an idea of isolation and unconventionality, McMurphy reached out to them and taught them that being different is not always a negative characteristic. The narrator of the story, Bromden, exemplifies this battle between society and McMurphy’s balance of acceptance. Bromden’s contrived “mental illness” was merely an effect of society (Kesey, 184). It can be argued that he did not possess any physical or mental flaw, but it was merely his imagination instilled by the institution. Throughout the novel, he described his ability to see occurrences that the other patients did not notice. McMurphy tries to show the patients that the only way to fight the system is to beat the routine and win back their identity. Similarly, in *Americanah* Ifemelu embraces her Nigerianness by giving up on her American accent and growing her natural hair, and at the same time is dating a rich white man and later winning a fellowship to Princeton. This blend of cultural identities seems healthy and natural for Ifemelu because of her love for both cultures, but that means she is in an in-between place, where she is not accepted as a full American or a full Nigerian. Ifemelu, having her own identity crisis where she feels out of place in Nigeria and America, then reconnects with Obinze and the two begin to work toward reconciling the differing identities they have constructed in their separation. Likewise, when Obinze is caught for his fake marriage, he returns to Nigeria and results in building a new identity for himself. In Nigeria, he becomes a huge success by his peers, and finally enhances his happiness which he thought would be coming from moving to UK. Apart from these two, many secondary characters also relate to this theme, like Emenike, who completely changes his true personality to become a cultured and wealthy British citizen. Overall the situations and characterizations of both novels show the many forces working upon the creation of someone’s identity: cultural, racial, and economic ones, and even strong-willed nature of some like McMurphy.

Chimamanda Adichie and Ken Kesey clearly portray the immense power that perceptions have in determining and manipulating identity but eventually one grows and realizes the significance of their individuality. A stereotype or a norm, when held by a party with significant power, can have massive, sometimes destructive, impact on individual identities. Identities are in large part

constructed by how others view people and in many cases, people conform to what others expect and want of them. The characters involved in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Americanah* showed significant growth as they began to enjoy their identity and individuality signifying that the essence of happiness comes from disregarding conformity and celebrating individuality.

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