

# Cultural Imposition and Identity Formation: A Cross-Cultural Study of Inaam Kachachi's *The American Grand-Daughter*

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## Abstract

In spite of all attempts to refine the real image of colonialism as the angel of mercy which has staff of Moses to flip up the scales, yet such attempts are doomed to fail. Hence, this article shows the impact of cultural imposition on identity formation by applying Frantz Fanon's concept of "cultural imposition" to Inaam Kachachi's *The American Grand-Daughter* within the context of postcolonial theory. A question has been raised about the nature and the role of cultural blending. The article argues that imposition as a process has a negative impact when applied to culture since it generates a feeling of double consciousness. This article also extends our knowledge of the effect of living within two cultures which generates characters with duality of thinking but not hybrid characters and also to make scholars aware of the impact of such a blending. The most striking result to emerge from this study is that Kachachi's characters undergo a mental conflict since another culture is imposed alongside with their own culture, leading to double consciousness that dominates their thinking.

**Keywords:** colonialism, cultural imposition, double consciousness, hybridization, post-colonialism.

**الفرض الثقافي وتشكيل الهوية: دراسة عبر الثقافات لرواية إنعام كجيه جي "الحفيدة الأمريكية"**

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## المستخلص

باعت كل المحاولات الرامية إلى صقل الصورة الحقيقية للاستعمار كملك رحمة لديه عصا موسى لقلب الموازين، لأن مثل هذه المحاولات محكوم عليها بالفشل. وعليه، فإن هذه المقالة تبين تأثير الفرض الثقافي على تشكيل الهوية من خلال تطبيق مفهوم "الفرض الثقافي" لفانون على رواية إنعام كجيه جي "الحفيدة الأمريكية" ضمن إطار نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار. والسؤال المهم هو ماهي طبيعة ودور ازدواج الثقافات لما بعد الاستعمار. ولذلك فإن المقالة تجادل بأن الفرض كعملية لها تأثير سلبي عندما يتم تطبيقها على الثقافة لأنها تولد شعوراً بالوعي المزدوج. تُزِيد هذه المقالة من معرفتنا بتأثير العيش بين ثقافتين والذي يولد شخصيات ذات ازدواجية في التفكير وليست شخصيات مهجنة وكذلك تجعل الدارسين على دراية بتأثير مثل هذا المزج. وأظهرت نتائج البحث أن شخصيات كجيه جي تمر بصراع عقلي بسبب فرض ثقافة أخرى لثقافته الأصلية. ونتيجة لمثل هذه العملية سيطر شعور الوعي المزدوج على تفكيرهم نتيجة لذلك.

**الكلمات الدالة:** لاستعمار، الفرض الثقافي، الوعي المزدوج، التهجين، ما بعد الاستعمار.

## 1-Introduction

No one can deny the catastrophic consequences of colonialism due to its retrogressive practices which have been done by the colonizer in the colonized countries. Such adverse consequences have a direct impact on the identity and its formation since people who live in those colonized countries are torn between two loyalties. The struggle between cultures has overshadowed on the identity and results in forming dual identities which lie in the midst of nowhere. Cultural hybridity, the quest for identity, the concept of otherness and double consciousness are some of the prominent legacies of colonial period and they become the main concern of a great number of postcolonial theorists, scholars and writers.

To make things clear, "Cultural Imposition" can be a tendency of a person or group to impose their values and patterns of behavior onto other persons or culture(s) [1: 57], which may lead to a negative impact on identity since such an imposition generates a feeling of "Double Consciousness". In this respect, Frantz Fanon [2] in his book *Black Skin, White Mask* holds that those people who have the opportunity to be within two cultures experience a state of alienation since they swing between their rooted culture and the new culture. Their will-to-forget the past may face a direct clash with some of the facts of their present in that such a clash is certainly the real core of their mental conflict. Moreover, Fanon [2] also points out that those people cannot hide or even neglect their own origins due to the fact that every person has a past whether it is ugly or fruitful one and his/ her future cannot be established without that past. That is to say, the combination of those past memories with future realities can make some balance to shape the identity. For Fanon the desire to make any change or even a slight progress in the trajectory of moving from one culture to another may encounter the barricades of language and complexion believing that the transition cannot totally eradicate such differences of shape and the mastery of language which may effect the psyche of the one who undergoes such an experience.

In her novel *The American Grand-Daughter* (2010), Inaam Kachachi sets forth the way in which identity is formed within two different spaces with two cultures. She craftily portrays the dark side of facing a new culture and the futuristic side effects which may occur since there will be unavoidable fusion between cultures. Kachachi in her novel casts light on the negative effect of that clash and articulates the reasons behind the suffering of some of her characters. Throughout the course of the novel, the novelist outlines the relationship between culture and identity formation and shows how the identity of her characters has been oscillating between two spaces due to cultural differences. *The American Grand-Daughter* is a novel that highlights the issue of immigrant families all over the world and their miseries because of the sudden change of culture and traditions. It also shows that most of the characters are stuck to their roots which can be considered as the main reason for their persistent suffering.

In the broadest sense, the process of "Cultural Imposition" has a double effect, positive as well as negative. Kachachi's novel has been selected to show the dark side of that imposition and how it has a negative impact on identity formation. At the same time, it is necessary to connote to the positive side of this process which lies in the desire of all

characters to reunite once again with their roots since it is the source of their mental conflict as well.

## 2-Theory

It is significant, at the outset, to be aware of the negative consequences that colonialism has generated and compelled the colonized to be in a non-stop search for the self in the midst of cultures. Postcolonialism, therefore, is the period which witnesses all those consequences including cultural hybridization, stereotyping and identity crisis. Many theorists, critics and writers have tackled the issue of colonialism's aftermaths to clarify the consequences that followed such a period, its effect on the following period and also to articulate how colonized societies suffered under occupation. The researcher traces Fanon's concept of "Cultural Imposition" and the way that such a phenomenon endangers a feeling of "Double Consciousness", a term which has been coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903, for whoever experienced or was exposed to different cultures.

First and foremost, it is worth pointing out that Fanon in his theory has elucidated the impact of "Cultural Imposition" on those he calls "non-West" who are indulged in Western societies and become vulnerable to a feeling of "Double Consciousness". Moreover, Fanon metaphorically uses the terms white / black as two expressions which denote West and non-West.

According to Fanon, "the slave of this cultural imposition"[2:148] may become "a toy in the white man's hands" [2: 107] since they culturally lost. In other words, Fanon argues that colonized people do not choose their destinies by their own because the entanglement between their cultures and the European culture is the cause of their mental conflict. That is to say, the colonized mind feels that he is neither Western nor non-Western because "[h]e represents the flip side of the Enlightenment: he is constructed not as a real person with real history but an image" [2: xiv]. Yet Fanon believes that non-westerns are in a non-stop endeavor to "prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" [2:3].

The colonized man's strenuous effort to carve a niche in white space by the "mastery of the cultural tool that language is"[2:25], "wearing of European clothes" [2: 14] or "go to bed with a white woman"[2:6] are the major reasons for his feeling of "Double Consciousness". In other words, the colonized man imagines that if he "speaks with a European language. He becomes proportionately whiter"[2:xv] believing that "he will come closer to being a real human being"[2:8].

From this perspective Fanon argues that the colonized man becomes a captive of duality of thinking, behavior and culture since he "wants to be like the white man" [2: 178]. This burning desire to be a replica of the white man forces most of the non-west to "[have] two dimensions. One with [their] fellows, the other with the white man [2:1]. To be more specific, the colonized man realizes that he "has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics... his customs... were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization ...that imposed itself on him"[2:83].

This duality of culture, thinking and behavior has casted a shadow on the identity of the non-West by making them victims of two different spaces. The state of alienation

has forced them to be non-West, but "in relation to the white man" [2:xii], and such a relationship creates a lopsided identity since they realize "that there is a difference"[2:172].

Fanon, therefore, outlines that the whole process of "Double Consciousness" can be seen as if making those who are already exposed to different cultures, victims since they are divided into two loyalties. He believes that "Double Consciousness" floats on the surface as a result of what he calls "Cultural Imposition" which puts the colonized man in "a challenge to his humanity...But it is too late" [2:172] because such a challenge makes him adopts "two dimensions". That is to say, there are two souls which are in a continuous struggle in a single body because that body is neither Western nor non-Western, but it is in between.

In a related context, Fanon wonders whether the non-West can accustom with Western world when he writes "can the non-West develop its own self-definition by using the tools and instruments of western civilization?" [2:xv]. Fanon, therefore, asserts that the non-West may suffer because "they have their own drama. They have emerged from a particular cultural milieu and reflect the concerns and prejudices of that culture and worldview"[2:xv]. In a similar vein, Fanon points out that colonized societies have no hand in determining their future since "western history... writes off ...both History of the West and History as perceived by the West"[2:xv]. His real intention is to do justice to colonized people who suffered the scourge of colonialism, whether in their native lands or as immigrants.

### 3-Discussion

#### 3-1 Rediscovering the self

It is noteworthy to mention that postcolonial literature is concerned with the conflict between two discourses, Western and Eastern, since such a conflict overshadows the identity and the basis of its formation. Identity crisis, therefore, has been at the forefront of the issues that have received wide attention by theorists, critics and writers because of its grave importance in drawing the features of any civilization. The fusion of different cultures may create unstable identity in that the characters hover between two spaces in search for a safe shelter.

Kachachi in her novel *The American Grand-Daughter* runs so smoothly in her narration and in the way that she portrays the way in which her protagonist Zeina suffers in living between two spaces to show the clash between the past memories of childhood and the present life in America. In this respect, Fanon argues that past and future events are the core of the formation of identity and they both form the true life for any [2:106], i.e. the struggle between past memories and present events unveils the real suffering of the ones who live between two different worlds. Zeina, our protagonist, and her family members are a case in point. To be more precise, the novelist sheds light on the cultural fusion of the Iraqi and American culture and how such a fusion has an impact on the creation of Zeina's identity. In this respect, Peter Adler points out that:

most individuals are relatively unaware of their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. Transitional experiences, in which the individual moves from one environment or

experience to another, tend to bring cultural predispositions into perception and conflict[4:14].

Rahma, Zina's grandmother, on the other hand, represents the historical heritage and the national identity of Iraq. Rahma, therefore, resembles the other side of the coin for Zeina since the latter spends most of her life in America and her early childhood in Baghdad. Rahma is the core of Zeina's mental conflict since she makes Zeina aware of her past. In other words, the clash between Zeina and her grandmother, an encounter of past and present, engenders a feeling of "Double Consciousness".

Between Baghdad and Detroit, Zeina has haunted with two different cultures that make her a captive of that feeling of duality of identity. In this context, Fanon holds that the colonized man "has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics... his customs... were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization ...that imposed itself on him"[2:83]. The attempts of colonized man to fit himself into two different of cultures endanger a sense of "Double Consciousness" since he wishes to cling to both cultures. Kachachi has been keen on showing the fragile relationship between the new generation, Zeina's generation, and the old generation, Rahma's generation to show that the new generations are the generation which is lost between the struggles of cultures. To be more specific, Fanon argues that colonized people are "victims of a cultural imposition"[2:151] and this generates a duality of identity and the state of alienation. The old generation is characterized by a kind of stability since that generation grew up with a single culture and identity. Whereas, Zeina's generation, which has undergone the process of "Cultural Imposition" in Western land, becomes captive of dual cultures. Kachachi in an interview has outlined her double belongingness to two spaces which has a serious impact on her writings; she writes, "[i]n my head I'm still Iraqi. I would always say "chez moi", meaning Iraq" and she further explains that "France gave me a big chance to live an enriching life as a woman and as a modern person" [5]. In other words, the effect of both cultures on the novelist has been shown clearly in her own writing.

In a similar vein, this type of "Cultural Imposition" has made Zeina's brother, Jason, living a life full of contradictions which forces him to swing between two spaces. In other words, Jason's real suffering lies in the premise that he may make his deep-rooted culture alive, but it should be, as Fanon holds, "in relation to the white man" [2: xii]. This relationship between the two cultures is a fragile one because Jason fails to gather both cultures in one soul and lives the burdens of "Double Consciousness". "Americanize their names"[3:63] is the result of living in a new culture and shows this attempt to hide their real feelings of inferiority. Thus, Zeina's brother, Yazan, is fully convinced that in changing his name into Jason, he can eliminate differences between the West and the East. Fanon in this regard affirms that the colonized man is "not [he] who make a meaning for [himself], but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for [him]"[2:102]. In other words, cultural differences inside and outside the house, where he lives, has driven him to be a drug addict as a way to keep himself in a world of unconsciousness. To put it simply, "Cultural Imposition" has a side effect on the identity of Yazan since it hits the depth of his personality and has driven him to the brink.



Fanon, moreover, asserts the fact that any clash between any different cultures creates some changes to those who have undergone such an experience and those people "will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world"[2:111]. The total change of people, language, culture and even the house they live in have a nightmarish impact on the family behavior as if all these circumstances seem as putting the final nail in the coffin.

Yet, Zeina has got an additional dose to resist such slow death in her meeting with Rahma. In other words, Rahma restores the pulse to Zeina and enables her to rediscover the self. Being conscious of her Iraqi half has created a feeling of "Double Consciousness" since she tries to reunite both halves. On the other hand, Jason fails to construct a sense of identity due to the unbalanced fusion of Iraqi and American cultures which has compelled Jason to live with a self-fission identity. Jason realizes that witnessing his original culture fading away in front of his eyes on the one hand and on a personal level he has been rejected by the new culture, on the other hand, makes him aware of the futuristic destruction of his identity. This sense of inferiority or feeling of being as an "Other" has been generated due to instability of identity. In this context, Fanon posits that those who are in a direct encounter with a new culture will face "inferiority complex" since they witness "the death and burial" of their native culture. But later, they will face a serious conflict between their native culture and the mother culture since they come to know that their rooted culture is still alive inside their souls. As a result of such a clash between two cultures, a birth of a dual identity may be inevitable. Zeina's desire to forget and neglect all things that connect her to Iraq in order to start a new life in America has been abolished at the first encounter with her own people as an interpreter with the US army.

### 3-2 "A dog with two homes"

Upon her arrival to Iraq in an intention to rediscover her own native land and to gain some money being an interpreter, Zeina witnesses the beginning of paradoxes of her daily life in Baghdad. Muhaymen, her foster brother, is the turning point in Zeina's life since she starts to feel some passions towards him. She is an inferno of an Iraqi memory walking in an American military uniform. She is a heterogeneous mixture of two different spheres who inherits her father's thoroughness in Arabic language, her mother's fond of memorizing folklore Iraqi songs and her Rahma's Hymns in Arabic as well as in Syriac language on the one hand. Her dictionary, on the other hand, is full of filthy American vocabularies.

Our protagonist is divided into two different halves; the Iraqi half which hopes that "old men will become boys again when they sup from the milk of democracy and taste the life I lead here"[3:10]. The other half which is the American one thinks about "the one hundred and eighty-six thousand dollars, the price of [her] precious language, the price of [her] blood"[3:10]. Zeina is living a lie because she does not realize that coming to Iraq is in itself a kind of help to the colonizer side to achieve its goals in imposing its influence in Iraq. In other words, she believes that she serves both parties at the same time by assisting Iraq in salvation from the tyrant as well as helping the Americans in their mission to eliminate this dictatorship. In this respect, Fanon argues that colonized mind "knows nothing of the cost of freedom, for he has not fought for it. From time to time he

has fought for Liberty and Justice, but these were always white liberty and white justice"[2:172]. That is to say, Zeina became a victim of false principles that she has absorbed from Western values which later on come in a direct confrontation with her Eastern standards. Zeina's psychological trauma is increased to its highest levels upon her arrival to Iraq due to the direct contact with Iraqi people. She, by all means, endures the pain to lump two cultures and traditions of two different worlds together hoping to reward them equally.

Zeina's "heading towards the honour... in the country of [her] birth" [3:20] repletes with a desire to liberate Iraq from the tyrant and at the same time she wishes to "serve the great United States of America"[3:22] since it is the country that embraced her family in hard times. In a similar vein, in his book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race* (1995) Robert J. Young asserts the idea of "rootedness" and how people establish strong ties with their roots in spite of mixing with new cultures. That is to say, the bright side of "Cultural Imposition" is that the emigrants have no tendency to abandon their native culture and at the same time they wish to cling to the new culture[6]. As a result of their strong desire to keep up their native culture alive alongside with the foreign culture, a sort of mental conflict will appear on the surface as well as a double identity will be shaped. Thus, the core of the struggle that our protagonist suffers is her desire to support America and simultaneously unveils her wish to save her own native people from torture. This encounter between Zeina and the new Western culture makes Zeina living with a spilt self. She has, therefore, been lost in the midst of nowhere. She experiences unbelievable agony after her decision to join the forces that are supposed to free Iraq from Saddam:

Despite my enthusiasm for the war, I experienced a strange kind of pain that was hard to define. Was I a hypocrite a two-faced American? A dormant Iraqi like those sleeping cells of spies planted in an enemy land and lying in wait for years?[3:37]

This feeling of doubleness has been experienced by Kachachi herself being an Iraqi woman lives in France. Kachachi believes that being far from her original land could be both positive and negative. It is positive, in that it allows the writer watch the "hot" scene from a quiet place and it is negative, because writing demands living experiences and interactions.

Zeina like her parents, is a woman carries two souls in a single body who always tries to create a sort of balance between Western ideologies and Eastern strategies. She once brings together the Green Zone, the American forces settlement in Baghdad, with Iraqi ancient memories when she puts herself in danger to meet her dying grandmother. In a similar vein, Fanon holds that the dream of most emigrants of belongingness to the host culture alongside with their native culture is nonsense since "[t]he seeds of inferiority of the non-West are already laid in the first chapter of history"[2:xv]. That is to say, white people look at migrants in a way that denote to inferiority whatever those emigrants do to be at the same level with natives. In this respect, Paul Gilroy in his book *Back Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*, points out that both European and black require some specific forms of double consciousness"[7:1]. That is to say, double consciousness can be considered as a two edged weapon in that one who strives to be accustomed with

two different cultures can be, at the same time, a prey for doubleness which may endanger a mental conflict.

Understandably, imposition as a process may generate two negative things; loss of identity and the sense of being an "Other". Throughout the course of the novel, Muhaymen clarifies this fact to Zeina because he thinks that "emigration was like captivity: both left you suspended between two lives, with no comfort in moving on or turning back"[3:130]. But Zeina, on the other hand, starts an argument with her milk brother trying to convince him that "migration was a form of settling" and she makes the whole issue looks easy by considering "the whole world...as your homeland" [3:130]. Zeina always hides her unbridled desire that drives her unconsciously towards Baghdad, especially her grandmother's house which represents the point of conflict for Kachachie's protagonist. She insists that "disaster" has kept her away from Baghdad and the "disaster" has also got her back to Baghdad again, but it is not her "milk" that makes her return back to Iraq. In the tumult of contradictions that grapple inside Zeina, she, therefore, remains captive to two identities living in a constant and continuous race. Tawoos's, the woman who breastfed Zeina, description of Zeina as "[a] dog with two homes but unable to feel at home in either"[3:147] shows Zeina's divided loyalties because she is "tainted with dual nationality"[3:117]. Concerning both Iraq and America, it can be said that Zeina is both a colonizer and a colonized.

### 3-3 "[L]et my right hand forget me if I forget thee O Baghdad"

A Polemical reading of Kachachi's novel reveals the fact that Zeina as a single character represents a crisis of a human being and a homeland. Yet, the other characters around her are not just arteries that push the blood in the veins, but are real characters and not ghosts. Rahma resembles the umbilical cord that connects the American granddaughter with her Iraqi soul. She represents the second nest for Zeina since the latter cannot live totally with a single soul. Zeina's family can be seen as an exiled family who live a shaky life because they are divided into two different cultures. They speak Arabic at home, yet "English remained the language of the street, work and the news" [3: 13]. In this regard, Fanon articulates that the colonized mind believes that he "becomes proportionately whiter in a direct ratio to his mastery of...any western language, nowadays most particularly English"[2:xv].

Zeina's description of the place where they live in America in "rooting wooden houses of Seven Miles"[3:133] reveals her indignation as well as her partial affiliation to such a place. Her desperate defense, on the other hand, on the ritual of Ashoura when some American soldiers start mocking up such rituals proves that her connection to Iraqi Muslims and Christians is much stronger than the bonds which link her with American society. This sense of "dual existence" as Richard Wright has called in his book *White Man, Listen!*[8], reveals a hidden wish which pushes Zeina to gather both cultures. There is a burning desire leads Zeina to "plug a memory stick into [her] grandmother's head...and click copy and paste. Within seconds her wisdom and experience would be transferred to my brain"[3:197]. Zeina's lovesick to Iraq pushes her to make a commitment and "say, like [her] father, let my right hand forget me if I forget thee O Baghdad"[3:180], which shows her nostalgia to past memories even they were simple ones. In spite of her feeling of belongingness towards Iraq, but she simultaneously



"climbs up towards whiteness and light"[3:xix] to establish a bridge between the two cultures successfully.

Metaphorically, her attempts to make the Iraqi body dresses up with a US military uniform do not see the light because of cultural gap which enforces her to live with a dual identity. That is to say, Zeina has undergone identity crisis because of "Cultural Imposition" which makes her a victim of these cultural differences.

#### 4- Conclusion

To gain insight into the impact of "Cultural Imposition" on identity formation, we have to put into our consideration that the major goal of colonialism is to make the native identity of colonized societies shaky in order to impose its on colonial identity and culture. In such a way the colonizer can gain a foothold in the colonized lands in order to spread the colonial ideology and to dominate the whole scene. Thus, "Cultural Imposition" has a negative effect on whosoever exposed to such a process because the results may generate a non-stop suffering, an inner conflict and a spilt identity. In other words, "Cultural Imposition" leads to "Double Consciousness" since there are two cultures fight to win the dominance.

Zeina the protagonist of Kachachi's novel is a case in point. She is divided between two loyalties, Iraq and America, in an attempt to satisfy both sides of different cultures. Swinging between those cultures, Zeina becomes a victim of identity crisis. Her lovesick to Iraq alongside with her desire to pay the debt back to America being the country that embraced her in hard times, makes her captive of both spheres. Yazan or Jason, Zeina's brother, does not tolerate such type of imposition and he chooses to be a drug addict in order to forget his suffering temporarily. To put it another way, "Cultural Imposition" is just like a cancer which cuts the guts of whoever exposed to it since it generates a continuous mental conflict. Kachachi craftily portrays such psychological conflict which occupies the whole characters of the novel because Kachachi herself is an immigrant who has undergone a similar experience.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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