Post-Migration and Embracing Identity Multiplicity

Kaira Carter

ABSTRACT

Migration is a phenomenon that requires individuals to shift their identity to incorporate new cultures, creating a split between the individual's ethnic identity and national identity. Acculturation to a new environment requires migrants to solidify a new identity, often adopting a combination of their past lives and their new lives. In the context of Social Identity theory by Henri Tajfel, each migrant has the ability to choose how they categorize themselves and create groups. The book American Street by Ibi Zoboi contextualizes the migrant experience to America as a struggle to find their place and acceptance in a community. Using Social Identity Theory, this paper aims to prove that the protagonist, Fabiola Toussaint, is able to find peace as a Haitian American citizen, incorporating both of her homes into her identity. By embracing her multiple identities, Fabiola unites her family from both worlds and learns to accept herself.

In each culture, there are unique traits and traditions that set it apart from other cultures across the world. Within these social constructs, each individual develops an identity to reflect the culture they live in. This representation allows individuals to feel a sense of belonging and harmony, creating meaning and community worth cherishing (Deaux 280). However, for those who permanently migrate to new countries, their ethnic identities no longer reflect social expectations, driving them to adopt a new national persona. This new national identity often differs from their ethnic identity, requiring migrants to rapidly adapt to their new situation. Between ethnic identity and national identity, each migrant has to decide how to incorporate their old selves into their new selves and find acceptance as a mixture of both. Without the ability to adhere to each part of their identities, they will feel incomplete or inauthentic as an individual. Migrants finding belonging in their new home depends on their ability to blend their social identities and categorize themselves as bicultural individuals who derive support from their cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and family bonds.

In 2017, Haitian-born author Ibi Zoboi wrote her debut novel *American Street* about immigrants in the United States having to grapple with several social identities while adapting to new surroundings. As one of the finalists for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, this novel follows the US-born Haitian protagonist, Fabiola Toussaint, raised in Haiti with her Haitian-born mother. Wanting to leave Haiti to live with their American family, Fabiola tries to enter America with her undocumented mother, who is arrested at the airport and put into a detainment center. Fabiola is forced to immigrate alone. Struggling to leave behind her mother and country to assimilate into Detroit's isolated, fast-paced society, Fabiola turns to her American-born cousins to help her acculturate while also remembering to preserve her Haitian heritage to find a sense of happiness. While immigrants to the United States can identify as Americans, they can't escape their past cultural identities. Throughout the novel, Fabiola connects her

spiritual beliefs to the people in her life, finding guidance and comfort from her origins. Her cousins and Aunt Jo take care of her and teach her how to survive in downtown Detroit, even introducing her to their family businesses: Loan sharking and drug dealing. Because of their Haitian backgrounds and because they have a single mother who cannot work an official job due to medical issues, the Toussaint family has to support each other by any means necessary. Fabiola finds strength and offers support by praying for her family, cooking nutritious Haitian cuisine, and inviting her family into her religious practices. Even though Fabiola must adopt new behaviors as an American citizen, such as attending a public school and prioritizing money, she does not abandon her ethnic identity as a Haitian. Instead, she recontextualizes her ethnic identity in a way that sustains her national identity. By engaging with both of her identities, Fabiola finds peace and acceptance with her choices throughout the novel and feels connected with her Haitian mother, the person she dedicates herself to rescuing from confinement. The novel culminates in an impossible choice between two families: Her American family or her Haitian mother. Accepting both worlds as a crucial part of herself, Fabiola finds a solution that allows her to unite both, even at the expense of financial security.

The author of *American Street*, Ibi Zoboi, is a Haitian immigrant to the United States who writes about migrant experiences, striving to bring awareness to her audiences about violence and oppression in America. *American Street* is her break-out novel and National Book Award finalist, and it was the first step toward accomplishing her goal. In an interview with PBS Books, Zoboi explained she was born in Port-Au-Prince, like Fabiola, and immigrated to America with her mother at the age of four to Bushwick, New York. The area she grew up in was prone to violence and drug use, causing her mother to restrict her from going outside. As a result, Zoboi grew up in front of the television, consuming as much media as she could (PBS Books). She explains her reason for placing the setting of *American Street* in West Side Detroit was because it reflected the Bushwick

she had to grow up with. The event that motivated her to publish *American Street* was "the murder of a black boy and the media haranguing of his Haitian-Dominican-American friend" (Jean-Charles 45). As someone who grew up in the crosshairs of violence, Zoboi decided to represent migrants and marginalized groups who face persecution because of racial judgment and their inability to escape their ethnic identities. After *American Street's* success, she published several more books such as Nigeria Jones, Pride, (S)kin,Punching the Air, and many more. *American Street* helps provide a migrant perspective about the difficulties of categorizing oneself in a new environment and finding an accepting community to rely on.

Zoboi's novel received extensive review and praise for making migration studies and an assimilation text accessible for young adult readers, who often struggle to relate to migrants. In Laurel Niedospial's review on Popsugar, they state, "While a different writer might have fallen into the trap of making America be the ideal, Zoboi manages to describe the difficulty of living in the US while still making authentic and dynamic characters who have grown up there." As a Haitian immigrant to the United States herself, Zoboi understands first-hand the hardships involved in leaving one's country behind for one that is supposedly better. Zoboi depicts the American Dream as an unrealistic standard and presents the struggles migrants face as they adapt to a new culture. Another review from Tiffany Rhoades on Girl Museum also takes notice of Fabiola's multiple identities and her dedication to integrating into Detroit's harsh environment. They emphasize that the book creates an emotional attachment between Fabiola and the reader, creating a personal experience. Rhoades states, "I was proud as she learned how to write a proper research paper and received her first 'A' in an American school … I also became enamored with her traditional practices as she prayed to the ilwas, made a Haitian-influenced Thanksgiving dinner, and told her cousins about life in Haiti." These reviews show that even if the American Dream is not accessible

to everyone, immigrants in the United States can find success. Fabiola's journey is not just one of hardship; she learns to be courageous and take steps toward the life she wants most. Her dedication to her family and her bicultural identity gives her a sense of purpose in her new life that the American Dream never offered her.

Before determining whether multiculturalism is an approachable method for integration, it is imperative to understand how human beings define themselves and what creates effective social groups. Social Identity Theory, originally established by Henri Tajfel and his colleague John Turner in the early 1970s, is a method used to define and categorize an individual. This theory utilizes social categorization and social identity to explain why and how social groups are created (Tajfel 254). Social categorization is when like-minded individuals with similar qualities or goals come together. These qualities and goals help the group identify and compare themselves to other groups. Tajfel explains that "Social identity will be understood as that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups)" (254-255). Social identity is how someone defines themselves in relation to others, thus creating communities of people.

As established in the definition, individuals can be parts of several groups and determine for themselves what represents them. This can incorporate multiple cultures and beliefs should the individual choose to accept culturally diverse practices into their everyday lives. What determines whether a social group is successful is equally important to identify. In a later article published in 1985, Tajfel teamed up with John Turner to research the factors determining if a group fulfills its purpose and gets along with other groups. A social group naturally determines its success by comparing itself to alternate groups, also known as out-groups. If conditions are better in their group, members will have higher self-esteem and a sense of belonging. When conditions are worse in their group, members will have worse self-esteem and will likely leave the group or start

conflicts with an opposing group (Tajfel, Turner 16). The difference in social status between groups is what creates issues with out-groups, leading to disputes over social identity and how to properly categorize oneself.

Social identity theory applies to all ethnic groups because ethnicity is a categorization used for identification and relatability. Because identity is malleable and can be changed to conform to a new social standard, assimilationist and multiculturalist texts are often about how to shift from one identity to another, or how to bridge the gaps between the two cultures (Carpio 16–17). However, conflict often plagues migrant groups, preventing them from finding self-esteem and acceptance in their host country. Large immigrant groups with common traits and beliefs tend to be viewed as threats to a host country's culture, preventing the two ethnic groups from forming peaceful relations (Schwartz 344). In many cases, immigrants who try to integrate into a host society have to accept new ethnic labels that place them into a stigmatized social group, such as when an Afro-Caribbean native is labeled as "Black" in American society (Deaux 276). Zoboi focuses on conflicts between different nationalities and ethnicities in her book, emphasizing the Haitian struggle to immigrate to America and assimilate into their society. In trying to compete with a powerful, opposing culture, the Haitian American community is plagued with low self-esteem and feels as though they have to fight to belong. Fabiola's oldercousins and Aunt Jo represent this struggle, and they feel alienated as a result, unable to find support from locals or financial opportunities. Because they could not find a stable source of income, the family resorts to becoming loan sharks and drug dealers to survive. While a part of their social group and struggle, Fabiola also represents the combination of American and Haitian culture. Instead of feeling resentful toward anyone in particular, she attempts to create bridges to cross the gaps between their ethnic and national cultures. Creating these bridges and finding similarities in her social groups are what allow her to integrate into society as a bicultural

individual and allow her family to follow in her footsteps.

One of the first ways Fabiola bridges the gap between her ethnic and national identities is through spiritual association: Drawing connections between the people in her life and the spiritual lwas that guide her. These lwas play a significant role in the Haitian religion known as Vodou. Laënnec Hurbon, a Haitian professor who studies Haitian religion and culture, explains Vodou as a social hierarchy of spirits (lwas) with God serving as the leader of all spirits. He states, "They represent a transformation of ethnic groups into families of divinities and constitute a genuine pantheon. God is recognized as the 'great master' who leaves to the lwa, the secondary divinities, the task of dealing with earthly matters" (6). To interact with the guardian spirits, there are manbo, or priestesses, and Vodou practitioners who conduct ceremonies to communicate with the lwas (7). Each family usually inherits one or two lwas who guide and represent them. In *American Street*, Papa Legba, also known as the leader of the lwas and the "master of crossroads," is Fabiola's lwa who helps show her what choices she has in front of her. (6–7). Once Fabiola realizes that Papa Legba is guiding her, she realizes that her life is surrounded by spiritual guardians who take the form of the people in her life, offering their advice.

In Chapter 21, after interacting with several outside characters and spiritual guides, she finally puts everything together, connecting her two worlds through spiritualism. For instance, the book states:

> "If the old man at the corner called Bad Leg is Papa Legba in the flesh, if Dray with his eye patch and gold cross is Baron Samedi, if Donna with her makeup and pretty things is Ezili and, with her scars, Ezili-Danto, then Chantal and Pri can be my spirit guides, too, as Ogu, the warrior, and one-half of Les Marassa Jumeaux, the divine twins who stand for truth, balance, and justice. Maybe even Kasim represents a lwa if I look hard enough. They are all here to help" (Zoboi 214).

By identifying recurring archetypes in her life, she feels better prepared to confront challenges and take action to appease the lwas. These associations also help fill in what is no longer present for Fabiola: Her mother. On the page before, Fabiola wonders to herself what her mother wouldsay to her if she were there. After discovering her cousins are the drug dealers responsible for killing a minor at a block party, Fabiola hides away in her mother's nightgown, breathing in the scent of home. The confusion caused by the discovery brings her to a crossroads and a monumental decision. Should she turn in her cousins in exchange for her mother's freedom or ally with criminals and become the manifestation of a falsified American Dream? When tasked with an impossible scenario, recontextualizing her life to that point through spiritual guidance is what allows her to preserve both. Her morally gray decision becomes black and white: sacrifice Dray, Donna's abusive boyfriend, to the police. As the manifestation of death itself and having a hand in local drug dealing, Dray becomes the key Fabiola needs to liberate her home, her cousin Donna, and her mother from entrapment. Though the results of her decision would later become a devastating trade-off, Fabiola's spiritual upbringing allows her to find resolution in her new circumstances and determine where her loyalties lie: With her family.

The second instance where she blends her ethnic and national identities to find solace in her new home is in Chapter 23 when she helps her family prepare a Haitian American-style Thanksgiving dinner. In this section, Fabiola sees her aunt "holding her head as if about to pass out" (229). Having suffered from a stroke in the past, Fabiola's aunt is unable to maintain the level of power and control she had in the past, making her feel incapable of holding together the family, even for holiday events like Thanksgiving. Fabiola, recognizing this pain, takes it upon herself to bring the family together, despite her unfamiliarity with the holiday and the foods commonly prepared. Rather than letting the task daunt her, her passion spurs her forward. The kitchen connects Fabiola with

her mother and the ingredients bring her comfort. She says, "I'm at peace here in this kitchen—seasoning, chopping, and stirring pots. I pour every prayer and blessing into the dishes" (230). By comparing cuisine to religion, she is also incorporating her protective Vodou practices, meant to fend off misfortune and create harmony in the household. The tension caused by the drug deals and Dray in the past chapters fade into the background as Fabiola blesses her household in a moment that is "like a hug from God." Once the meal is prepared and the family is together, they each take turns commenting on how Fabiola's presence helped heal the sense of helpless separation their family created. The unified moment is thanks to the warmth she feels for her family, and the Thanksgiving meal helps her to express her dedication. In her "thunderstorm" of emotions, Fabiola finds strength in the familiar and the new as her cousins and aunt embrace her (231). The scene concludes with the cousins realizing that Fabiola stewed the turkey, a common tradition in Haitian cuisine, rather than cooking it whole. They accept the shift in tradition and Fabiola as a new, experimental individual who brings warm memories. Her American family comes together to comfort her and support her for who she is, accepting her traditions even when they deviate from what they are used to. Her country's food brings them all together and helps contextualize Fabiola's unique talents and blessings.

Haitian food, like what was served during the Thanksgiving dinner, has a vibrant history of cultural identities forging together into a melting pot of internal and external cultural influences. For instance, according to an article about the history of Haitian cuisine, the indigenous tribe known as the Taino set the spicy foundation for Haiti's food culture, inventing barbecue and open-air cooking practices. Once the European settlers colonized Haiti and introduced African slave workers, they introduced their unique cuisine, introducing ingredients like coffee, sugar, cacao, okra, and gumbo (Louis-Jean 1). With Spanish and Arab migration to Haiti, more cooking styles permeated in the Haitian culinary world. Fabiola's history and bloodlines, derived from countless global sources,

prove that she has experienced identity multiplicity and integration since she was born, having incorporating European, African, American, and indigenous influences.

The final chapter of the book brings Fabiola's family together one final time to mourn the loss of their collective American Dream. Fabiola, taking up her mother's role as a mambo, a priestess, conducts restorative ceremonies to help her family move on from their losses and misfortune:

> "We are all in white. Even Pri has shed her dark clothes and now wears a white turtleneck and pants. I had wrapped my cousins and aunt in white sheets after making a healing bath of herbs and Florida water for each one, and let them curl into themselves and cry and cry. This is what Manman had done for our neighbors who survived the big earthquake. The bath is like a baptism, and if black is the color of mourning, then white is the color of rebirth and new beginnings. Our brown skins glow against our sweaters, pants, and head scarves. We are made new again" (Zoboi 321).

The ritual helps Fabiola and her family remember that not all is lost and that they still have their lives before them. Even after losing their home to crime and violence and watching their companions perish because of impossible choices, they still have each other and are allowed to heal each other. Pri's decision to cast away her masculine persona demonstrates her desire to be present, ready to be vulnerable with her family as a way to offer support. However, she still wears pants rather than a skirt or dress, recognizing who she is and staying true to herself. Fabiola's recollection of her mother after the 2015 earthquake that devastated her previous home in Port-au-Prince shows that she has witnessed first-hand what it is like to see an entire existence crumble before her into something that can never be restored. Rather than giving into despair, she leans into her upbringing and her mother's comforting role to bring hope. In this baptism scene, the whole family recognizes that what they desire in their lives is not a new

nationality or the American Dream; rather, they seek solace in each other and peace from the world that offers them nothing but hardship. Despite the chaos surrounding them, Fabiola knows how to pave the way for a new future: Open-minded understanding and a strong community. Because of her continuing connection to her past life, Fabiola can find resolution not only for herself but her entire family as they each choose to move forward to the future.

Vodou, as a healing and connecting religion for Haitian individuals, offers comfort and connections to Haitian migrants in their new homes. By cultivating a community and practicing their religious beliefs, they embrace their ethnic identities alongside their national identities, similar to how Fabiola embraces Vodou and invites her family to participate in her rituals to purify them. This can be seen in a 2009 scientific study of Haitian communities coming together to practice Vodou in Montreal and inviting locals to join them. In Hadrien Munier's article about this study, they state, "As the migrant defines himself or herself within this socio-cultural construction of belonging, two dimensions are important to this process. The first establishes Haiti as a reference point for identity that is constructed and shared in the diasporic community. Secondly, adherents develop a 'dividual' self through the practice of Vodou" (27). What they mean is that Haitian migrants use Vodou as a way to comfortably and successfully integrate into their host culture, allowing themselves to become part of a like-minded social group and retaining their ethnic background in a safe environment. Their practice educates the local inhabitants, encouraging cultural exchange and open-mindedness. For instance, one participant named Carline grew up in Montreal and was experiencing financial troubles. Her family encouraged her to consult a Vodou practitioner. After taking their advice, she overcame her troubles and found a community of caring individuals, leading her to become a convert (Munier 30-34). Vodou is a therapeutic practice for adherents, offering stability in an unfamiliar situation and leading to the reinvention of the self. The

baptism scene in *American Street* is an example of this reinvention, and it solidifies the family's collective desire for a better life—not an American or Haitian one, but something in between. In becoming individuals, a unified family with shared ethnic backgrounds and shared goals, Fabiola finds the community she needs to feel accepted as a Haitian American.

American Street's significance comes from its ability to confront racial conflicts migrant groups face in America and how material gain never trumps family and culture. The ending reflects this idea and leaves only one thing certain for the readers: Fabiola has her family, and they are going to continue the fight to belong. In a critical essay about *American Street* by Betsy Nies, she states, "The family drives down Joy Road, symbolizing a decision to abandon the American dream … Zoboi leaves unanswered how the family will survive …, she does indicate the importance of moving away from material gain as a value and toward spiritual and familial connections" (153). The American Dream—the concept that everyone has the freedom to pursue wealth and achieve their wildest dreams—proves to only be a dream for Fabiola and her family. Instead of ending with a struggle for wealth or turning against American ideals after Dray and Kasim's deaths, Zoboi chooses to leave the ending open to interpretation. Ultimately, the audience needs to decide if their struggles throughout the novel were worth the outcome. What matters most in the end is Fabiola's conviction to stand up for herself and her culture, showing the world what it means to be a proud Haitian American. Fabiola, "fortified by Vodou, love, and visions of community …, helps readers think of worlds in which her trials and tribulations … cease to exist" (Jean-Charles 47). Fabiola alone cannot improve American society and create acceptance; the people around her are the ones who decide if she has a place. Zoboi's voice for girls like Fabiola is meant to push her audience to consider a world where migrant groups are not seen as invaders or threats—they are people.

Ibi Zoboi and their first breakout novel *American Street* show that no one has to give up their history or their home to acculturate to a new place; their past lives and experiences are what give them strength. Fabiola's journey to the United States teaches her that the skills she adopted from her mother in Haiti make her powerful and resourceful. She creates an entire Thanksgiving feast, asks the lwas for guidance to save her sisters from deadly drug dealers, and uses her knowledge of sacred rituals to guide them in mourning and restoration. By relying on her Haitian background as she developed as an American citizen, Fabiola found friends and a family to look out for, even rescuing her mother from detainment in prison. Home is not something that needs to be abandoned; rather, it should be incorporated into every new home, offering strength, esteem, and familiarity to those who face a vast new world.

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