

Gender, Identity, and Migration: A Study of Select Stories from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Veronica Yumnam (Research Scholar) and Dr. Sangeeta Laishram (Associate Professor)

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology, Manipur

Abstract: Since time immemorial, literature around the world has been gender-biased and male-centric. Women and their works have been excluded from the mainstream society. Women have been neglected and subjugated in every field of work. Most of the literary works have discussed the view of women by either the opposite gender or by the society in general. But with the beginning of Feminism, things had started to change as women began voicing their stories as narratives through their writings. Therefore, the contemporary world has seen a large number of studies and literary works that showcase the status of women in different parts of the world. Works that concentrate on postcolonial women have become quite popular over the centuries. There has been a lot of interest in bringing light on the situation of the African women writers than what has been done in the past. Africa, being one of the most patriarchal societies had made their women submissive to male dominance for centuries. Adichie, who claimed herself as a feminist, firmly believes in the equality of the sexes, which is reflected in her writings. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a notable Nigerian women writer whose works have been critically acclaimed all over the world. Most of her works are focused on African women who struggle in the patriarchal world where all of them manage to overcome their weaknesses and thrive to success. The paper is set on the backdrop of this subject as Adichie presents the lives of African women as they grapple to survive wherever they go. The paper will explore the diverse issues and themes Adichie raises in the select stories from her short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The text is a collection of twelve short stories with settings in Nigeria and the U.S. The stories in the collection focus on a multitude of themes including race, gender, identity, alienation, migration, and many more. The paper will therefore analyse the stories in light of the female characters' experiences in the stereotypical world where people of colored races fell into multiple hardships and misfortunes. The paper will further focus on the black women in both Nigeria and America, showing their difficulties while trying to survive in between two different cultures. Adichie also shows how these women empower themselves through various means and regain their lost identities in their journeys.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Migration, Race.

Paper: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a notable Nigerian women writer who has been gaining a lot of recognition for her literary works today. Adichie's novels have won many prestigious awards and she has become a role model for many of the youths of this generation. She is also best known for her 2009 TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, which became one of the most-viewed TED Talks of all time. Adichie was born on 15 September 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. She studied medicine and pharmacy at the University of Nigeria and then moved to the U.S. to study Communications and Political Science at Eastern Connecticut State University. She gained an M.A. in Creative Writing from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. By the time she was 21 years old, Adichie had already published a collection of

poems entitled *Decisions* (1997) and a play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998) in which she shows the brutal experiences of an Igbo woman, her ethnic group, during the civil war of the 1960s. She also explores ethnicity in Nigeria and what it means to different people. Her works have been translated into over thirty languages and have appeared in various publications, including *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, the *Financial Times*, and *Zoetrope*. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize and was shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction. Her second novel *Americanah* (2013) also won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was named one of *The New York Times*' Top Ten Books of 2013. Adichie is also the author of the short story

collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Adichie's works focus on multiple issues including family, religion, politics, gender, class, race, history, identity, and so on. Like, Chinua Achebe, Adichie feels and believes that African writer has a moral responsibility towards the people; to teach and guide the people about the African history and culture that they had lost during colonization. In short, the present paper is an attempt in this direction as Adichie tries to validate the African culture through her works. The paper will explore the many issues Adichie raises in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a short story collection comprising twelve short stories. The stories deal with different issues prevailing in society. Adichie's views on female identity, gender problems, social norms, the effect of migration on black women, etc. will be discussed in the paper. The paper will also focus on the lives of black women in America as they struggle to survive in between two different cultures. Adichie also presents the strength of these women and how they try to gain an identity for themselves while also fighting for their freedom. With this regard, the text can also be considered as a postcolonial feminist text. Weedon C., in an article titled "Key Issues in Postcolonial Feminism: A Western Perspective" writes: "postcolonial feminism, often referred to as Third World feminism, is a form of feminist philosophy which centers around the idea that racism, colonialism, and the long lasting effects (economic, political and cultural) of colonialism in the postcolonial setting, are inextricably bound up with the unique gendered realities of non-white, and non-Western women." (7)

The select three stories are, namely, "Imitation", "The Arrangers of Marriage" and "The Thing Around Your Neck".

"Imitation", is a story about a Nigerian woman, Nkem, who followed her husband to America after their marriage. She found out through her friend that her husband was keeping a mistress in their home in Nigeria. She no longer wants to continue living in America after knowing about the affair and also realizes how she had been living her life in America all those years, even losing her identity. At the end of the story, Nkem decides to move back to Nigeria.

The main reason behind the dominance of women by men is due to financial problems. Nkem in "Imitation" is described to be a very submissive woman who is dominated by her husband in every aspect. Even the decision to move to America is decided by her husband without discussing it with her. Nkem, being brought up in a very poor family considers herself lucky to have been married to Obiora:

At first, when she had come to America to have the baby, she had been proudly excited because she had married in to the coveted league, the Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies league. Then the house they rented was put up for sale. A good price, Obiora said, before telling her they would buy it. She liked it when he said 'we', as though she really had a say in it. And she liked that she had become part of yet another league, the Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned House in America league. (2009, 26)

Chinaza from "The Arrangers of Marriage" also comes from a poor family background. She had also followed her husband to America after marriage. When reaching America, Chinaza was shocked by many things including her husband's American name and the things he had to do in order to get the American green card. She got married only to become financially dependent on her husband. She didn't even know who she was going to get married to before the marriage. Since her uncle and aunt took care of her after her parent's death, she could not easily reject their arrangement of her marriage. The reality of this marriage turns out to be far more terrifying as it is revealed how her husband has thought of her all this time:

"I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin." He smiled. He looked even more tired when he smiled. "I probably should tell her how wrong she was... "I was happy when I saw your picture...You were light-skinned. I had to think about my children's looks. Light-skinned blacks fare better in America." (2009, 84)

We can see how women are subjected to mere objects in the world of marriage in both two stories. This shows the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society where wives are considered to be just accessories for their husbands. The way both Nkem and Chinaza's husbands have treated their wives

shows how it was considered to be a very normal issue that happens all the time in their society. Even parents who bore female children considered it best for the family to just sell their daughter for money and the best way was to get them married.

Women are also exploited sexually and this can be seen in "The Thing Around Your Neck" where Akunna was nearly raped by the uncle who took care of her in America by giving her a space to stay. "The Thing Around Your Neck" is a story about a young woman who won the American Visa that will enable her to immigrate. Even though her family predicted an easy and successful future, the reality was quite the opposite. As soon as she moved to America, she started to search for jobs that were quite unfair as they paid below minimum wages. And on the worst-case scenario, she was also sexually assaulted by the so-called uncle who stayed with her. So, she felt like something would wrap itself around her neck and would even choke her before she fell asleep every night. When she refused his advances, she was thrown out of the place. He was taking advantage of her current situation and if Akunna were to agree to his intentions then he would have provided her with all her needs. But she decided not to do that:

He wasn't really your uncle; he was actually a brother of your father's sister's husband, not related by blood. After you pushed him away, he sat on your bed – it was his house, after all – and smiled and said you were no longer a child at twenty-two. If you let him, he would do many things for you. Smart women did it all the time. How did you think those women back home in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City? (2009, 116-117)

Chinaza is also being used sexually by her husband. He always initiates having sexual intercourse just to relieve himself without bothering about what his wife feels. Chinaza describes this moment:

My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine...He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist. "Wait—" I said, so that I could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty. But he had crushed his mouth down on mine. Another thing the arrangers of marriage failed to mention...his breathing rasped as he moved, as if his nostrils were too narrow for the air that had to be let out. When he finally stopped

thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs. (2009, 168-169)

People in Nigeria often migrate to America in search of better opportunities and they face difficulty assimilating in that society as they are often oppressed and segregated. The struggles faced by black women were two-fold of what their male counterparts have encountered. This is what Crenshaw had to say about such a situation: "because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized with both" (Crenshaw1244). They have been doubly marginalized based on their gender and their identity of being a black. Therefore, 'racism' becomes a common issue in all three stories. Ashcroft et al defines racism as: "a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, casual way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, which on this basis distinguishes between 'superior' and 'inferior' racial groups. (2007, 181)

Akunna in the story "The Thing Around Your Neck" couldn't find a single decent job with normal wages wherever she went in America. And when she dated a white man, she could see people's reaction as if it was something unbelievable:

You knew by people's reactions that you two were abnormal – the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice. The old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem, your self-loathing. Or the black women who smiled swift solidarity smiles; the black men who tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too-obvious hi to him; the white men and women who said "What a good-looking pair" too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open-mindedness to themselves. (2009, 125)

This shows how Akunna's relationship with her white boyfriend was considered to be inappropriate only because she was a black woman.

Identity becomes the main issue concerning migrant Africans. Akunna's identity as a migrant is one of the main reasons behind her suffering in America. The 'thing' that Akunna describes as the source of her haunting every night might be the

weight of her loneliness and alienation. She is also homesick and worried about her family's condition back home. As she wasn't able to find proper jobs it was difficult for her to send money to her family. Also, her identity as a black, makes it more devastating to survive. For a while, she was getting better and the thing also got quite loose when she started dating her white boyfriend. But later when she heard about her father's death she decided to return home. When her boyfriend asks her whether she will return to America, she doesn't give a reply till the end.

From the above situation, we can come up with two possibilities: one is that Akunna might never return to America, and the other one is that she might return after things are completed at home as she still has her Green Card. In his book *Narrating the Nigerian Diaspora: 21st Century Nigerian Literature in Context* (2019), Maximilian Feldner talks about the new African diaspora where there is a possibility of return. He says:

In contrast to other diasporic formations, where the old homeland is usually an unfamiliar but mythologized place impossible to return to, the new African diaspora is well connected with their homeland. Modern forms of communication and fast and affordable means of transport enable stable connections, visits, and even permanent returns. Members of the new African diaspora, especially those with long-term visas or even citizenships of their host countries, are able to move freely between the continents, which allows them to remain in touch with, and invest in, their African homelands. (2019, 16-17)

Therefore, Akunna can be regarded as someone who belongs to this group of new diasporas because she can go back and forth between the two places. Like Akunna, Nkem also felt loneliness while staying in America as her husband started visiting her only in the summers. She decided to bear with it by considering her children's education and future. She became extremely traumatized when she learned about her husband's affair. Her husband had decorated their American home by bringing in African artifacts and by keeping a Nigerian girl as a maid to assist his wife. This was to make Nkem feel more comfortable to stay there. Nkem was grateful for his effort. She later realizes how everything seemed so fake. It was not the real Africa but a

house full of fake items. The 'Benin mask' which she used to stare at at the beginning of the story recalled the moment when everybody admired saying how impossible it was to even find the original. The mask becomes symbolic of her marriage. Her marriage was like an imitation of a real marriage just like how the mask was also an imitation and not the original. The only thing that consoled her at this point was the memory of her homeland. She recollects her teenage years when she used to date married men for money. The man paid for her father's hospital bills and also new furniture for her house. This again shows how Nigerians were also materialistic like America. Nkem had to survive in every possible way as she was the first daughter of her parents and so she had a big responsibility. Despite all her hometown memories, Nkem finds that "America has grown on her, snaked its roots under her skin" (2009, 37). She was quite relieved that her life was so much better than the ones who had to financially struggle in Nigeria. But this did not mean she had fully assimilated into the new space. She was still in an identity crisis with her memories intact. In the end, we can see how Nkem didn't confront her husband about her knowing his affair, she pretended not to know anything. She silently cuts her hair, stops waxing her body, and tells her husband firmly that she wants to return to Nigeria. She defeated her identity crisis by valuing her Nigerian culture and by going back there.

Likewise, Chinaza also suffered an identity crisis while staying in America. She has seen many cultural shocks, one being her husband having an American name as he was ashamed of revealing his real Nigerian name, Ofodile. He had also given Chinaza an American name for her which shocks Chinaza even more. He taught her how to act like the Americans, which starts with correcting her language problems. Some of the words were to use 'busy' for 'engaged', 'Hi' for 'You're welcome', 'cookies' for 'biscuits', or 'elevator' for 'lift'. Ofodile constantly reminded her how this place was different from Nigeria, he explained: "If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside" (2009, 172). Here, Ofodile can be described as a mimic man as he constantly tries to imitate everything the Americans do but was not able to

fully become one. In the words of Homi Bhabha, mimicry means the imitation of the coloniser by the colonised, where the colonised aspire to the more powerful and superior culture of the West:

“...the colonial system required that the colonized aspire to remake themselves in the image of the European, to become at once secondary to the colonizer, and also (necessarily) other to what they were before. Yet, as they were not in fact European, or indeed white, there was always a slippage or hybridization, however subtle, in the meanings that they thus worked to reiterate.” (Waugh 648)

Ofofodile had even gone to the extreme by marrying an American woman just to get a Green Card. This made Chinaza overwhelmed. Unlike Ofofodile, Chinaza finds it hard to assimilate and is constantly reminded about her past in her homeland. She feels relief in her kitchen space when she cooks Nigerian food and speaks to herself in Igbo during cooking. She later becomes furious about Ofofodile's marriage to the American woman which led her to move out of the house. She decided not to tell her uncle and aunt back home and managed to stay at a place in America on her own. She was not ready to move back home to Nigeria but instead wanted to start her life afresh by finding a job.

In the three stories, Adichie portrays the lives of three African women who migrate to America. They struggle to find a place in the new cultural space in their own distinct ways. Chinaza and Nkem had migrated because of marriage, while Akunna came to seek a job and study in order to support her family. All three were shocked by the reality of America, which was considered to be a dream place for everyone in their homeland. It turned out to be extremely wrong and just an illusion.

Adichie's female characters all suffer the issue of identity crisis. They realized that they can't simply ignore and forget about their origins nor can they fully reject the new cultural space of America. Therefore, a new third space is developed where there is a chance of flexibility. This third space in the words of Homi Bhabha means a hybrid cultural identity. Bhabha says:

Hybridity is therefore the moment in which the discourse of colonial authority loses its coherent grip on meaning and opens itself outward to the trace of the language of the other...Domination within the colonial situation is, in short, subverted

through the hybridity of colonial discourse. This is because hybridity undermines the single voice of cultural authority and foregrounds a double-voicing process that includes the trace of the other. (Edwards 141)

Therefore, through the three stories, we can see how Adichie showcases the day-to-day struggles women had to face and also the oppression towards them. She shows how women are marginalized in terms of gender wherever she goes whether it is America or Nigeria. America had made these women realize their inner strengths; to do things they thought were impossible, gave them a lot of freedom than they got in Nigeria. Thus, this brings to light what Carole Boyce Davies had commented, “Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it reasserts” (1994, 37). Adichie's stories showcase the idea of America as a unified destination for migration through the women characters' perspectives on migrant life. In “The Danger of a Single Story”, Adichie comments: “The single-story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They made one story become the only story” (2009). We can see how Adichie puts great effort into giving black African women a suitable place with dignity, denied by patriarchy and other forms of suppression. She engraves stories of black African women living between two worlds, contesting with identity and intruding on boundaries. These women's positions as daughters, wives, mothers, or mistresses allow them to use the domestic space and the approved female identity to contest male power. Her female characters are therefore not submissive to oppression but can subvert and transform their situations concerning their own welfare.

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