

*Deconstructing the single story of Nigeria:
Diasporic identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
The Thing Around Your Neck*

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Abstract: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most representative members of the third generation of Nigerian writers. In her article “*Authenticity*” and the *Biafran Experience*’ she argues the necessity of representing the many faces of Africa as a way of combatting Western stereotypes (‘the single story’). The Nigerian third generation, in opposition to earlier writers who celebrated a coherent idea of the nation, shows a tendency to deconstruct this ideal and represent uncertainties about monolithic nationhood. In her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie’s diverse diasporic characters set in the United States, from where she is published, ache for self-definition within fragmented identities and discourses. They become fictional representations of a necessary mental reconstruction of the nation, which cannot anymore be built on dichotomy and territorialized belonging, and often find themselves oppressed by the opposition of Nigeria as homeland and the frustration of the American dream.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian literature, Nigerian diaspora

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria, into a middle-class family with both parents working for the university in Nsukka. Even though she had been thinking of herself as a writer from a really young age, she studied medicine for a few years. Then she left to the United States, where her sister was living, to study communications and political science. In the US, she found the necessary support to pursue a writing career, receiving scholarships and funding to do so. Since then, she’s been teaching creative writing in both the US and Nigeria.

Adichie is considered one of the most prominent members of the third generation of Nigerian writers. This label groups literary works “on the basis of their putative affiliation to a nation-state and their location in a historical narrative beginning with foundational figures and proceeding through stages” (Dalley, 2013, p. 16). However, contemporary

postcolonial writing problematizes the idea of “nation” as written by previous generations of authors. As described by Dalley, the models of time and space are not valid anymore, since transnational migration and displacement are fundamental aspects that define the Nigerian nation, which can be seen as “an entity made through movement”(Dalley, 2013, p. 18). The works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explore this new concept of “nation”, through her characters’ struggle to find their place in a complex and changing environment with a heavy political aura.

It should be noted that the personal and the political are always interpenetrated in her writing. Adichie’s first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), is built from the writer’s own experience growing up in the oppressive atmosphere of Abacha’s dictatorship during the 1990s. She explores the tension between the traditional Igbo culture and the colonial western values, directly linked to Catholicism, that were being imposed upon the Igbo people. *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming-of-age story that follows Kambili’s evolution from her father’s abusive and fanatically religious hands to a wider, more mature, comprehension of the world around her. It’s the first of many allegories built by Adichie linking the Nigerian nation to her female characters. In her novel, Kambili’s maturing and understanding of the complexities of her family is a reflection of Nigeria’s own effort to grow away from colonialism and find a way to write its own history.

This ongoing quest for self-definition is a common theme through Adichie’s writing, as can be seen in her second and greatly acclaimed novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This story is set in the 1960s, during the Biafran war that raged across the southeast of Nigeria. The narrative interweaves the lives of a few, diverse individuals to show how they are affected in different ways by the war. It is mainly centered on Olanna and her husband, both professors at Nsukka University living a well-off life until it is shattered by the traumatizing effects of the civil war. Adichie clearly shows certain sympathy for the idea of Biafra, and there is a shadow of political engagement always present on the novel. The story is centred on the human side of war through its characters, but along with their stories, Adichie writes the chaos that breaks and fragments Nigeria. *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* exhibit opposed views of the possibility of a merging of values and cultures: the former presents the blending of cultures as the only viable option in a post-colonized era, while in the latter it seems to be unfeasible due to historical circumstances. Therefore, Adichie—and the third generation of Nigerian writers as a whole—tend to question the meaning of nation as a single coherent story, as opposed to previous generations of writers, who “found in the use of the literary tool a means to celebrate and establish the nation” (Nwakanma, 2008, p. 13). This evolution is the result of the population dispersion and migration that undoubtedly demands a redefinition of the idea of belonging. It is reflected on Adichie’s latter works, like *Americanah* (2013), and the collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), both centred on the diaspora experience.

Adichie herself admitted that she only started consciously identifying as African once she moved to the US. This phenomenon is explained by Radhakrishnan as an act of rebirth: the immigrant’s “naturalization into American citizenship simultaneously minoritizes her identity. She is now reborn as an ethnic minority American citizen” (Radhakrishnan, 2003, p. 121). In the US, Adichie realized that the Western world holds a single story of what Africa is, based on racist stereotypes. “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person”, said the author on

her well known TED Talk, “The danger of a single story” (2009). This reductive portrayal of the African continent prevents outsiders from seeing an African “as equally human” (Adichie, 2008, p. 45). Consequently, Adichie writes to combat these stereotypes and the “single story”. In most of her writing we find characters that are educated, have comfortable lives, do not starve and have cellphones and cars. These traits made them, as seen by some critics, as “not authentically African” (Adichie, 2008, p. 48). Again, this breaks the tradition of previous generations of Nigerian writers, such as Chinua Achebe (1930-2013). Adichie insists on portraying the diverse faces of Africa, not just the one that the West is comfortable with: “Achebe’s characters were nothing like me and lived without the things that I saw as the norm in my life: cars, electricity and telephones” (Adichie, 2008, p.42).

As analyzed by Stuart Hall, the western regimes of representation based on power differences not only construct people of colour’s experiences as *other* but they also have the power to make them experience themselves as such (Hall, 2003). Writing about her own migration to the US, Adichie recognized that she felt the disappointment in the north American people when they realized she was not the exotic creature they were expecting (Adichie, 2008, p. 43). In the same manner, the life of those who migrate to western countries is not always as utopic as expected. Without question, Adichie’s own experience comes again as a key element to understand the purpose behind her diasporic stories. The author herself started writing under the westernized name Amanda N. Adichie, which is an example of ethnicity suppression in the name of assimilation and opportunism, as exposed by Radhakrishnan on his exploration of the narrative of ethnicity in the United States (Radhakrishnan, 2003 p. 191 - 131). Adichie later changed her publishing name to her Igbo one, and through her works she explores the implications of this suppression of ethnicity. Her diasporic characters often re-name themselves as a strategy to assimilate into the North American culture. We find one example in her short story *The Arrangers of Marriage*, published in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. This story is narrated by a young Nigerian woman, Chinaza Okafor, who is sent to the US after marrying Ofodile Udenwa (a Nigerian man settled in America) through an arrangement. What was supposed to be a fantastic opportunity for Chinaza turns out to be a great disappointment: not only the man is not a successful doctor as he presented himself to be, but he is also authoritarian and abhorrent. Ofodile calls himself Dave, and even changed his last name to Bell because “Americans have a hard time with Udenwa”. Therefore, he urges his new wife to adapt as much as she can to her new life in the US, and even forces her to change her name to Agatha Bell (p.172):

“You don’t understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here.” (*The Arrangers of Marriage*, p. 172).

Adichie is critical towards the hypocrisy that lies behind renaming. Dave keeps insisting on how important it is to be assimilated, and he praises the wonders of America even if the price to pay is the complete abolition of his African origin. He would not let Chinaza speak Igbo or even cook Nigerian food: “This is not like Nigeria [...], he said, sneering, as though he was the one who had invented the superior American system” (*AM*, p. 173).

The dichotomy between the so-called American system and the Igbo tradition is present in most of Adichie's stories, and it is dealt with in different ways. Most of her diasporic characters show little balance in their attitudes towards cultural integration or assimilation. This trait often marks the character's role in the narrative. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the story that gives name to the collection, Adichie confronts the stereotypes that Americans have of Africans, but also vice versa. In this story, told in second-person, Adichie narrates the challenges that Akunna faces once she wins the visa lottery. While Akunna tries to embrace her Igbo origin and traditions, her uncle forces her to adopt the westernized ways of life as her only option. But once again, the American Dream becomes a hurtful disappointment when she discovers that America is very different from her naïve view:

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans (*TAYN*, p. 115).

She expected a lot from America, but as soon as she arrives the people in her community college class ask her ignorant questions, such as where she had learnt to speak English, or if she had a real house in Africa. According to her uncle, who registered her for the lottery, she is supposed to expect it, "a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, he called it" (*TAYN*, p. 116). Far from being supporting, he later tries to rape her insisting that it is what smart women do all the time in America: "The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot, but you gained a lot, too." (*TAYN*, p. 116). Refusing the offer, Akunna leaves his house and moves to Connecticut, where she takes a waitress's job for two dollars less than the other employees. The American dream gets shattered piece by piece: she can't afford to go to school, lives in a tiny room with a stained carpet and keeps sending money back home every month. She *won* the visa lottery, so she's ashamed of showing her failure: "At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that nearly choked you before you fell asleep" (*TAYN*, p. 119).

The American Dream gradually dissipates and Akunna starts feeling something hanging around her neck, the weight of disappointment and cultural oppression that even stops her from speaking. A similar experience is lived by Kamara, the protagonist of *On Monday of Last Week*, another short story included in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Once Kamara moves to Philadelphia to join her husband and reach for the American Dream, she quickly gets disheartened. She abandons her Master's degree for a babysitting job that allows her to be with Tobechei, his husband. Tobechei himself moved to America with high hopes and found a harsh reality instead:

America was about hard work, they both knew, and one would make it if one was prepared to work hard. Tobechei would get to America and find a job and work for two years and get a green card and send for her. But two years passed, then four, and [...] Tobechei could not send as much money as he wanted to because most of it was going into what he called "sorting his papers". Her aunties' whisperings became louder and louder: What is that boy waiting for? (*On Monday of Last Week*, p. 84)

Just like Akunna in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, failure becomes a taboo for Tobechi. His family finding out that he's not as successful as someone in America is supposed to be a source of great anxiety for both him and his wife.

Another interesting take on the migration experience is found in *The American Embassy*. The protagonist of this story narrates the humiliating experience of applying for a US asylum visa in Nigeria. The theme is once more the disappointment that comes with the cracking of high expectations:

Was she imagining it, or was the sympathy draining from the visa interviewer's face? She saw the swift way the woman pushed her reddish-gold hair back even though it did not disturb her, it stayed quiet on her neck, framing a pale face. Her future rested on that face. The face of a person who did not understand her, who probably did not cook with palm oil. [...] She turned slowly and headed for the exit" (*The American Embassy*, p. 141).

In any case, Adichie's characters reflect the complexities of the diasporic experience and the evolving relation between individuals and nationhood. Her writing, as many others' from the mentioned third generation, works towards the reformulation of the idea of nation and national belonging. Adichie problematizes the idealization of the American Dream, contrasting it with migrant's experiences. At the same time, her characters show ambiguous reminiscences of home. Nigeria appears as a reconstructed memory, often seen as a distant reality, or even a heavy burden to carry (as it is for the exemplified characters above). However, the migrants in Adichie's stories seem to be unable to fully disconnect their lives from their Nigerian origins and always feel somehow displaced both from Nigeria and the US. In Braga and Gonçalves' words,

they have ambiguous recollections of Nigeria: on the one hand, Nigeria lacks jobs, university opportunities and equality between sexes; on the other hand, it is the familiar territory in which they know how to face adversities. In a state of permanent hesitation, they wish to stay in the United States and return to Africa at the same time (Braga & Gonçalves, 2014, p. 2).

In conclusion, Adichie's diasporic characters become fictional representations of the aching for self-definition within fragmented identities and discourses. The author forces the remodeling of the idea of nation-belonging to fit these dislocated individuals, who cannot any longer be seen as a "compound of separate, constructed national identities" (Braga & Gonçalves, 2014). Contrasting with the monolithic nationhood written by first and second generations of Nigerian writers, Adichie questions the "single story" of Nigeria to fit the contemporary diversities. Even if what she creates are, as put by Nwakanma, "imaginary homelands" (Nwakanma, 2008, p. 10), the newly built idea of the Nigerian nation needs to be constituted within and outside the territorial margins. In other words, it needs to take into account the experience of its diaspora, and the challenges its members face while trying to shape their relation to both the homeland and the hostland.

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