

## Women Navigating Minority Status in Selected Stories in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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### Abstract

*This paper provides an intertextual reading of three stories purposely selected from Chimamanda Adichie's **The Thing Around Your Neck** against the theoretical backdrop of her feminist treatise 'A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions'. The 'Manifesto' is her theoretical attempt to condense the practical application of African feminism into the modern context within which her stories are set. In this paper, I distil the practical implications of Adichie's postulations on a feminist manifesto through a reading of selected stories in **The Thing Around Your Neck**. I rely on a close reading of the text, in which key concerns and aesthetic approaches of African feminism are identified and critically assessed. Through the three short stories from the collection, namely 'Imitation', 'The Arrangers of Marriage' and 'The Headstrong Historian' Adichie demonstrates her feminist philosophy: In 'Imitation' and 'The Arrangers of Marriage', for example, she tells the stories of two women who are both physically and psychologically uprooted from their cultures and forced to struggle for their identities and place in society by circumventing the patriarchal order. They embrace sisterhood as one of the strategies to overcome their segregation. These women also refuse to be defined by society and instead choose to assert their identities and value. They are more than just mothers or wives of rich Nigerian men. In 'The Headstrong Historian', Adichie dramatizes the story of a woman who, despite living in a traditional and highly patriarchal society where women have no voice, is able to rise and confound men (both native and foreign). Therefore, the most engaging feature in Adichie's writing is how she uses marriage as a dramatic stage to test out her theories on feminism and gender issues and to demonstrate how women navigate their minority status.*

**Key Words:** Feminist Manifesto, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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## **Introduction**

*The Thing Around Your Neck* is a collection of twelve related stories authored by Adichie. It was first published in 2009 in the UK and reprinted in the US the same year. The book is dedicated to Ivara, possibly a woman who holds some significant place in the author's life. Since Ivara is not identified, we can best assume that she represented all the unknown women out somewhere in the world.

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, it is worth noting that most of the stories have women as the main character or narrator. The stories take the perspective of women, even where the main character is male. Moreover, each story presents or dramatizes a balanced discourse on gender and other social issues. Just to cite one example, the first story, titled 'Cell One', follows the lives of the privileged sons of Nsukka University campus professors who live in the campus vicinity. The narrator is a dark-skinned girl whose brother (a brown-skinned boy named Nnamabia) has just stolen their mother's jewellery. She notices that the 'thieving boys', as she refers to the spoilt sons of the university dons, can get away with anything. Their parents are quick to vouch for them by blaming children (riff raff) from the less privileged neighbourhoods. However, things take a turn for the worse when Nnamabia is arrested on suspicion of involvement in a cultist revolt in the University. At first, Nnamabia seems to take his prison experience with calm and courage. However, soon, he realizes that prison life is more difficult, what with the prison warders who treat prisoners like livestock. Following his attempt to defend the bullying of an old cellmate, Nnamabia is beaten to a pulp, thrown into Cell One, which symbolises the highest heights of the inhumanity in the entire prison, and later transferred to another station. The family comes to his rescue after securing his release. Initially, everyone is tense at the first station when they discover that Nnamabia is missing owing to his transfer. Fortunately, when they find him, he has sustained some injuries and, suddenly, everyone is eager to return home.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This paper takes the position that most writings by women will, other than address the general social, economic and political concerns of the day, also attempt to define the ideal place of womanhood or the female gender in society. It presumes that the philosophical, theoretical or methodological movement that has sought to define the place of women in the context of knowledge is feminism. Milns and Whitty (1999) aver that feminism is marked by a focus on gender as a key organising principle of social life; an emphasis on the concept of power and the way it affects social relations; an unwavering commitment to progressive change. To these authors, feminist

approaches generally reject universalistic claims or accounts of the abstracted self.

African feminism is rooted in the cultures, traditions and historical realities of gender relations in Africa (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2005). In the words of Karibi-Whyte (2016):

African feminism is a movement of ideas and practical demonstration of gendered consciousness to concepts and situations that impacts the lives of African women. African feminism stands on the pivot of African philosophy of life with its emphasis on marriage as a social institution. It engages with patriarchy that dehumanises women and portrays her as a second-class citizen. African [feminism] is also rooted in African cultural and historical experiences which advances the complementarity between men and women (p. 6).

From the above postulations, this paper explores how Adichie in her work demonstrates the gendered consciousness in respect to issues of marriage, economic relations, power dynamics and cultural expectations. The paper examines three of the twelve short stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck*, namely 'Imitation' (no. 2), 'The Arrangers of Marriage' (no. 10), and 'The Headstrong Historian' (no. 12).

In most of her writings, Chimamanda portrays women who strive to rise above their categorization as the minority. The minority status of women manifests in many ways and is a product of diverse socio-economic forces. Hughes (2013) discusses how women are a minority in professional contexts in the United States. He specifically cites how the legal and legislative professions have a minority of women, and how the few in the profession are underpaid compared to their male counterparts. Within religious contexts, the minority status of Muslim women has also been examined in the work of O'Niell *et al.* (2018) in their discussion of religious freedom, women's agency and the legislative ban on the *hijab* and head covering in places like France. In the context of family, studies have also examined how women occupy minority status in economic and other critical decision-making (Ramadani *et al.*, 2017), navigating domestic or gender-based violence (Johnson, 2017) among others.

In Africa, girls are disproportionately segregated as minorities across the various levels of different societies. For instance, Stark (2018) examines the interplay of poverty, sexual exploitation and early marriage among girls and young women in urban Tanzania. Similarly, Van Bavel (2020) avers that, in Kenya, girls and young women are at different levels of risk of female

circumcision depending on their place of residence, nature of gender relations in their societies and their ethnic group.

Keton (2015) argues that literature provides an avenue for granting agency to women minorities. He specially cites how H.R. Ole Kulet, in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, grants voice to women by making them heroines in their own stories. Duce (2021) also discusses how Chimamanda Adichie demonstrates the power of social media in granting agency to women in *Americanah*. Similarly, Stanley (2021) argues that Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates how womanism helps women to overcome oppression from patriarchy. Therefore, this paper explores how women navigate their minority status in selected stories from Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

The overarching theoretical foundation of this paper is African Feminism. The specific strand of African feminism adopted in this paper is 'Stiwanism' by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994). Stiwanism examines how socio-economic structures are designed to oppress women. It therefore advocates for the transformation of social, economic and political systems as a means of women's liberation and sustainable development. African feminism acknowledges that men have a role to play in the re-construction of society in which the rights of all people (irrespective of gender) are respected (Nkealah, 2016). Therefore, African feminists prefer to collaborate with men rather than dismiss the male gender as oppressive. This paper examines how Adichie, in *A Feminist Manifesto*, distils some of the tenets of African feminism and applies them in her writing in *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

The study undertakes a close inter-textual reading of a selection of Adichie's stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* using *Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* as a theoretical backdrop. The *Feminist Manifesto* text is a 2017 treatise on what it takes to raise a feminist child. The treatise is written in an epistolary style as a response to Adichie's friend who asked the author to give some tips on how to raise her daughter as a feminist.

### **Ironic Twists and Twisted Lives in 'Imitation'**

In 'Imitation', Adichie explores the intricacies of marital infidelity and the double-standards at play. Nkem is a twenty-one-year-old wife of Obiora. Obiora is cheating on Nkem with his girlfriend on their matrimonial house in Nigeria while Nkem is in New Jersey. Nkem learns about the infidelity from Ijemamaka, her friend, who sees Obiora and the girlfriend while on her (Ijemamaka's) trip back to Nigeria. Ijemamaka immediately calls Nkem to inform her about the alleged affair. In this story, Adichie demonstrates how women occupy minority status in family decision-making. The bond between

Nkem and Ijemamaka alludes to the African feminist womanism bond that helps women to navigate and overcome patriarchy.

The story is told from a third person omniscient narrator. The story of how Nkem ends up in America is recounted through an exploration of her thoughts as she stands in her living room contemplating over the Benin mask. As such, Adichie gives Nkem the ability to voice her own story with authentic details. By granting agency to Nkem, a woman, Adichie lives up to her recommendation in *A Feminist Manifesto* that girls should be raised with a sense of individual identity and to question cultural categorizations.

Sisterhood is a key feature of second wave feminism, providing a collective sense of unity and purpose but also demonstrating the solidarity of the feminist movement (Morgan, 1970). The fact that Nkem learns about her husband Obiora's infidelity from Ijemamaka underscores the idea that women tend to look out for one another. This aspect of womanism is espoused in Adichie's *A Feminist Manifesto*, which is a letter written by a woman to a fellow woman discussing how to raise up a girl to become a feminist. Ironically, it is evident that Ijemamaka derives some degree of pleasure in seeing Nkem suffer. From the manner in which she laments about Obiora's infidelity, Ijemamaka almost seems to condemn Nkem choosing to marry a rich man. In her view, it seems, all rich men are cheats. We gather that her position is informed by jealousy and Nkem remains unsure whether or not Obiora is actually cheating.

There is a sense in which identifying herself as a mother also turns Nkem to look like a child. Moving to America and having to stay with her toddlers seemed to have infantilised Nkem. This is another strategy used by the Nigerian rich men in America to ensure their women do not fit in fast. Hungry for adult company, Nkem resorts to befriending her maid, Amaechi. Amaechi has even become her drinking buddy. This is also another feature of sisterhood in the story. Nkem has noticed that she and Amaechi, her maid, are very much similar. They are both less educated women who are raised in underprivileged homes. Amaechi is also resigned to her place; she never likes to go against authority. She even advises Nkem to forgive Obiora for bringing another woman into their matrimonial home in Lagos, saying "Men are like that" (p. 28). In *A Feminist Manifesto*, Adichie encourages Ijemamaka to teach her daughter to realize that motherhood is a glorious gift, "but do not define yourself solely by motherhood. Be a full person" (2017).

Interestingly, Nkem used to date married men when she was single. Is it, therefore, karma that has come back to haunt her for taking other women's husbands in the past? Adichie seems to attribute this character to the poor

conditions in which she was raised. Her parents were poor and she ended up going to a secretarial school instead of the university. However, she used those men to advance her needs. For instance, Ikenna had paid her father's hospital bills; Tunji had fixed the roof of her parents' house and brought them the real sofas they had ever owned. All these married men also enjoyed the fact that she was beautiful "with a baby skin" (p. 26), but none of them would propose marriage. One man even refused to propose to her because she was not educated enough. They were only interested in her beauty not her brains. For this reason, when she meets Obiora, she is filled with insecurities. She keeps waiting for Obiora to leave her for her supposed flaws. Much to her surprise, he stays on, educates her siblings and places her in a good rented house. When he proposes, Nkem recalls that she feels an obligation to marry him: "She thought how unnecessary it was, his asking, since she would have been happy simply to be told" (p. 26). Poverty and exploitation are a key concern for Stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Accordingly, the fight for gender parity is one means of eradicating poverty and exploitation in Africa.

Adichie uses the story of Nkem and Obiora as a prop to make other critical comments about the African people and cultures, colonialism and racism. For instance, the Benin mask that Nkem is holding and observing in her living room becomes an entry point to reflect on so many aspects of the black people's history and culture. Nkem recalls the stories Obiora told her many times. Most of the original masks had been confiscated by the British in the name of stripping Africans of ancestor worship tools. Adichie also notes that Africans do not value what they have, citing the example of a Nigerian head of state who had gone "to the National Museum in Lagos and forced the curator to give him a four-hundred-year-old bust, which he then gave to the British queen as a present" (p. 21). Adichie also criticizes those who condemn others for seeking to advance themselves in life. Through Nkem, she points out how America is teeming with an abundance of unreasonable hope.

Adichie also ridicules the big man syndrome of the Nigerian rich men. This is relayed in a conversation that Nkem recalls having had with another Nigerian woman she had met in Delaware. The woman went on and on about how Nigerian men were afraid to stay in America because no one would recognize their Big Men status. These men instead prefer to leave their wives and children in America then go back to Nigeria where they can receive validation for their social statuses from the constant praises of their subordinates.

Interestingly, when Nkem probed if she would prefer to go back to Nigeria, the woman quickly felt uncomfortable. While she enjoys the pleasures of living in America, she hates the fact that their husbands are free to go back

and forth as they please. This is Adichie's way of saying that wealth is not necessarily bad or evil; the problem is how it affects people's relationships.

The rich Nigerian men are a scheming lot. They bring the women to America but do not provide them with sufficient education to be self-sufficient. They also make sure these women are saddled with many responsibilities to take their attention away from seeking self-improvement. They first ensure the women have children fast. Then they ensure the women find schools where they will have to take these children to and fro every day. From the outset, all these privileges look good. However, they also serve to ensure these women are trapped in the little pleasures as they get stuck and wait for their husbands who travel around the world for 'businesses'.

Obiora imitates white sophistication people: Kissing the children and wife; owning homes in different places; attachment to art for superficial reasons as souvenirs (not for the value those so-called souvenirs had for the original makers and owners); duplicating African crafts for decoration... He likes for his American wife to wear long hair, yet in Nigeria he is dating a woman with short curled hair.

Adichie describes Nkem as the woman who had married rich and came to America "to have a baby". Nkem at first seems to be a mere decoration to the image of Obiora as stereotypical Nigerian rich diaspora man. These men come back to Nigeria (Africa) to pick women who would sire children for them. It seems that such men have no other regard for these 'exported' wives except for their fecundity. Nkem is very observant as she notes that Obiora uses the term "we" when buying the house, as if she had had a say in it.

At first, Nkem is depicted as a woman who has no initiative of her own. She does everything because Obiora wants it done. She goes to school to study computer packages because Obiora said it was good for her to do so. She is at first satisfied with the incredibly privileged life that Obiora has secured for her: Living in America, owning her own house, her children going to the best schools located just a short drive from their house. She even makes her hair the way Obiora likes. She never questions Obiora's fidelity and always seeks the best explanations for any signs of his unfaithfulness.

Nevertheless, when Obiora comes back to America, she marshals the courage to inform him that she had decided that they should relocate to Lagos. Obiora is surprised by Nkem's brave declaration. He realizes that he had been attracted to her by her submissive quality. The new Nkem is a threat to his Big Man status. To Nkem's surprise, Obiora accepts that they can move back to Lagos.

**Convenient Conservatism in ‘The Arrangers of Marriage’**

‘The Arrangers of Marriage’ is a story about a newly-wed couple, Ofodile and Chinaza, who have just moved from Lagos to New York. The couple have just moved into the house in which the groom, Ofodile, used to live when he was single. The house does not have much; it is a two-bedroom flat. The wife feels that it is much less than she expected. Perhaps this is the first sign to her that marriages are not always what they are advertised to be. It is not all glamour or gloom.

The narrator of the story is a woman who has just married. Her voice is unique and very present, even though Adichie deliberately omits her name while that of her husband is mentioned. She only mentions her name as Chinaza Agatha Okafor when she is narrating how Ofodile seemed to despise his African names in America. The omission of her name makes the story one of all women living and trapped in patriarchy. She also repetitively refers to her husband as “my new husband”. This captures her sarcastic and disgruntled tone. The tone implies that, in the eyes of the arrangers of marriage, Ofodile is her shiny (new) trophy. By assigning voice to women, Adichie affirms Ogundipe-Leslie’s (1994) view that women are as important as men in the transformation of society.

In the story, arranged marriages are a sign of women and girls’ minority status. They have no decision on the matter. It is the majority men who decide for these women. Chinaza’s is a marriage arranged by her family led by Uncle Ike and Aunt Ada. The narrator notes that the smile that Uncle Ike wears on his face the day they informed her that they had found the perfect husband is the same smile he had worn the day the national soccer team, Super Eagles, had won gold medal in the Atlanta Olympics. This implies that the arrangers of marriage consider their work of marriage arrangement as a simple sport from which they derive simple pleasures. They have no high regard for the opinion or self-worth of the woman for whom they are arranging marriage.

The process of marriage arrangement began with her picture being sent to Ofodile. A picture presents the physical looks of a person and nothing more. In the first place, this implies that in the eyes of her aunts and uncles, a woman’s value only resides in her physical appearance. Second, it also implies that a wife is just an aesthetic object to her husband. She exists to be seen and not to be heard. Ofodile says he had liked the picture because Chinaza was light-skinned. He hoped that Chinaza would sire him light-skinned children who would fit in well in America. This is either a stereotype or evidence of the shallow nature of discrimination by the colour of one’s skin. Evidently, Chinaza is unhappy about the whole situation. She sarcastically points out how the marriage arrangers informed her that they



would have “plenty” of time to know each other with Ofodile before the wedding. It turns out that the so-called “plenty of time” was but a mere two weeks.

The narrator registers her disillusionment with the marriage she has just entered into. She is first dejected by the small house that Ofodile has put her in. She calls it the “furniture-challenged flat”. She then humorously laments that the arrangers of marriage never warn the wife of the snoring habits of her new husband. She is also uncomfortable with her husband’s weight, which she cannot bear. Obviously the new environment in which she finds herself catches her off-guard. She has to contend with both marital shock and culture shock. Amidst all this confusion, her husband does not even bother to establish if she is in the mood for sex the morning after they moved into their house. He simply climbs on top of her while she is still asleep. Even while she tries to get comfortable by getting rid of her night dress, he is already planting kisses on her lips. The wife dislikes the kiss because the man had not brushed his teeth, but he does not seem bothered by it. The whole experience of sex, which ought to represent pleasure, turns out to be what she calls “the stickiness between my legs” that “itched”.

The marriage arrangement is not meant to benefit the woman but the man who is getting married. Ofodile’s mother is afraid that her son might marry an American woman. Marriage in the patriarchal society is seen as an important accomplishment for a man, and the role of the woman is to make that accomplishment a reality. A man who has gone to school and gotten a good job is expected to marry and sire children.

Chinaza only learns about Ofodile’s previous marriage to a white woman in one evening conversation. Ofodile informs her that it had been a marriage of convenience, “marriage on paper.” The casual manner with which Ofodile mentions his pending divorce depicts the level of disrespect he has for Chinaza. He does not see why Chinaza should be bothered by such news. He sees no need to inform her of his pending divorce since, in his view, Chinaza’s marriage to him had already been sealed by the decision of her guardians. Indeed, Ofodile considers himself Chinaza’s saviour. Her marriage to him supposedly helps her to escape the traps of poverty and joblessness in Nigeria. Although Ofodile is educated and exposed to other cultures in America, he is quick to exploit the advantages that men derive from patriarchy. While ideal marriages are based on mutual love and respect, he views marriage as a mark of male accomplishment. He marries Chinaza for two reasons: because she comes highly recommended by his mother and because he needs a Nigerian wife.

Ideally, parents are obligated to provide for the children they have sired. Parenting is not a favour; it is an obligation. It is not meant to make the children that they owe their parents anything in return. However, in *The Arrangers of Marriage*, the aunts and uncles feel entitled to choose a marriage partner for Chinaza. They use their parental authority to patronize her into accepting their choice. The question "What have we not done for you?" is meant to make her feel guilty if she chooses to reject the husband chosen for her. The question also underlines how these 'parents' feel proud of and perfect in their own traditions. Adichie criticizes parents who use their parenting responsibilities to make their children feel indebted to them. True to their word, the narrator says she had thanked her aunt and uncle for doing all those things for her. She says she did not want to be called "ungrateful." The peritonising attitudes of the parents disregard the priorities of their children. The narrator says she wanted to pursue her studies up to the university, but the uncle and aunt would hear none of it. She had also proven herself to be a good salesperson at Aunt Ada's bakery. However, her passions and talents go to waste as the priorities of adults – namely making her into a wife of a wealthy man – come first. Adichie challenges parenting styles as one of the social structures that women (with the help of men, in the spirit of Stiwanism) must navigate to overcome their minority status.

Infantilization of women is one means by which patriarchy reinforces their minority status. In some African traditions, women are considered part of the children of the husband. Therefore, when two men meet and one asks the other "How are your children?" the questioner is implying "How are your children and wife?" It is to be expected that the narrator knows little about her new world in America. For instance, she does not know how to make a phone call to Nigeria. Ofodile takes advantage of Chinaza's ignorance to treat her like a child. When the phone call does not go through, Ofodile tells her "Americans say busy, not engaged" meaning he thinks that the language she uses need to reflect her geographical context, not the person she is – an African woman. He also informs her that "Americans don't drink their tea with sugar and milk" as if he is now American. When their neighbour comes in to bring Ofodile his mail, he tells his wife "You should say 'Hi' to people here, not 'You are welcome.' Moreover, he informs her that in America he is not known by his African name of Ofodile but he is simply 'Dave'.

However, in Chinaza's case, ignorance is not the same as lack of intelligence. It is evident that Chinaza is an intelligent woman. She is also educated enough to read and describe what she sees while on a bus in America. She also recalls all the intelligent talk Ofodile gave her about medical training and the earnings that interns and attending physicians earned in a year. Yet, in

the eyes of Ofodile, she cannot depend on herself, not even to fill a social security number application form. On the one hand, Ofodile tries to justify why Africans adopt English names by pointing to discrimination that one could suffer as a result of their name. He claims that it is difficult for immigrants to move forward without adapting to America. However, inside the bus, Chinaza observes that he is so proud of the American systems.

Adichie also demonstrates how gender discrimination is reinforced by alien cultures in Africa. Ofodile discards and seems ashamed of his African names because, in his view, they make Americans struggle when pronouncing them. He would rather adopt other non-existent names (fake identities) than make his white friends uncomfortable pronouncing African names (true identity). So, in America, instead of Ofodile Emeka Udenwa, he is simply known as Dave Bell. Later, Chinaza reveals that not knowing Ofodile's name was also synonymous with not knowing him at all. Ofodile had hidden his true identity as a married man. Without her interjection, when Ofodile filled out her social security number application form, he indicated Chinaza's name as Agatha Bell. Nevertheless, she is observant enough to learn things on her own without Ofodile's condescending lessons. She for instance observes carefully how Ofodile ignites the oven.

Despite his privileges, however, Ofodile is not contented. In fact, it appears that he is ashamed of his social and economic status. For this reason, Chinaza observes that he is always seeking the approval of Americans. He changes his ways of walking, speaking and he smiles a lot. He is always thinking of a future when they would move out of their neighbourhood, buy from better supermarkets, afford more stuff and buy a new car. He is also very conscious of spending.

Chinaza feels misplaced in the many places that Ofodile takes her in America. Everything looks strange. She also notices that Ofodile has changed. For instance, while he eats a hamburger, she notices that his face looks unfamiliar. She begins to miss her Nigerian foods. Even when she makes a meal out of her Nigerian recipe, Ofodile seems disapproving. The next day, he buys for her an American cookbook. Ironically, Shirley, their old white neighbour loves the smell of Chinaza's cooking. This reinforces the feminist idea of women's bonding as a means of navigating patriarchy for the likes of Chinaza.

Chinaza idealizes Nia, an African-American woman, who resides in their neighbourhood. Indeed, Nia is the complete opposite of Ofodile. She fills Chinaza with hope and expectation. Nia is a free spirit. She drinks and smokes. She dresses casually. She also swears often. She retained her African

name, which she adopted from her stay in Tanzania. She is also depicted as an independent woman. She owns and runs her own hair salon and she lives alone. While she does not earn as much as Ofodile, she lives in a decent house. Chinaza finds Nia's Afro puff hair beautiful. She also complements Nia's deep skin, eyes and curves. Unlike Shirley who preferred to respect other people's privacy (American culture), Nia immediately shows empathy for Chinaza who has to stay home all day while Ofodile is at work. She (Nia) thus invites Chinaza to her house for a drink. She even offers to recommend Chinaza for a job at Macy's Mall. Chinaza is filled with hope and excitement at the thought of earning her own money. In her excitement, she admits that she wanted to hug Nia. Ofodile is reserved about Nia, considering her a potential "bad influence." Nia is also eager to learn Igbo words and Chinaza teaches her. When Chinaza decides to leave Ofodile, she moves into Nia's house who welcomes her heartily and tells her she can stay as long as she likes. Chinaza does not take offense of the fact that Nia had slept with Ofodile before their marriage.

#### **African Feminist Womanhood in 'The Headstrong Historian'**

'The Headstrong Historian' is the last story in the collection of *The Thing Around Your Neck*. It is the story of Nwamgba, widow to the late Obierika. Obierika had been a hardworking man and a strong wrestler. He and Nwamgba had fallen in love when they first met. Nwamgba is a more assertive woman compared to Chinaza and Nkem of the previous stories. Even though she lives in a traditional African set-up, she is determined to marry the man she loves. Her father finds her "exhausting" and considers her a headstrong daughter. At one point, we are told that she had wrestled her brother to the ground. Her father was ashamed of the incident and warned people against spreading rumours about it. Nwamgba's parents did not like Obierika because he had been an only child. Nwamgba's mother had theories about why Obierika had been an only child, why his father had also been an only child and why most of the women from their lineage tended to be survived by only one child. Nwamgba sees these theories as mere fears founded on silly superstition. Nwamgba's father finally gives in to her petitions to marry Obierika.

Patriarchal societies abhor women's progress. According to Ogunjipe-Leslie (1994) the segregation of women is among the many factors that have stunted the social, economic and political development of Africa. In such societies, a woman who exercises her freedom is considered an outcast and is branded with such labels as a bad influence and prostitute (as we see in the case of Nia in *The Arrangers of Marriage*). Adichie uses Nwamgba to contest the negative images labelled against headstrong women. She demonstrates that such

women are not against men per se, but they simply try to assert their identities and humanity as they seek to be respected and treated with dignity like every other person in society. She shows that Nwamgba's strength comes from her own character. She does not look down on the males around her, like her brother and father. She believes in marriage as well, but, to her, marriage should be based on love. She also respects strength and hard work in a man, as Obierika embodies the qualities she likes. Even Fr. Shanahan, the in-charge at the Anglican school, notices that Nwamgba is a very assertive woman. However, he concludes that her assertiveness is tampered with wildness that needs to be tamed first.

Ayaju is also used to contest patriarchy. She is equally assertive and headstrong. She has travelled beyond Onicha undertaking trading activities. Because of her exposure, she is respected and often consulted in the Women's Council. However, unlike Nwamgba, her strength stems from her family history in slavery. Moreover, unlike Nwamgba, she does not marry well. She does not love or respect her husband, Okenwa.

Ayaju is also the story teller in the village. Her exposure to other cultures as she travels has become a form of reading experience that equips her with so many interesting stories. She travels on her trading activities and always comes back to the village with stories about other communities. She especially regales the likes of Nwamgba with stories about the white men she had encountered in her trading routes. She captures the dramatic encounter with Christians. She also narrates about the setting up of courts by the white men in Onicha. Through Ayaju, Adichie demonstrates how the white colonizer uses the gun as a symbol of power to rule over others. In their community, power is attained through personal hard work and participation in community affairs. Obierika is the symbol of such power. The interesting story was that of two men who took their land dispute case to the white man's court. Language barrier leads to poor judgement leading the rightful owner of the land to lose the case to the one who can speak English. Perhaps the British rule in favour of the man who, in speaking their language, is considered to be on the side of the colonizer.

According to Nwamgba, women were not to be sold into slavery because they were protected by the Oyi goddess. Slavery is abhorred in the community so much so that anyone from the slave descent is not respected. It is for this reason that Ayaju cannot find a suitable man to marry her and she has to settle for the lazy Okenwa. Their son, Azuka, is a lazy but wealthy brat. However, despite being wealthy, he is still barred from taking titles in the community because he is a descendant of slaves. Nwamgba cannot differentiate between the colonizers and the white missionaries. In her

ignorance, curiosity and bravado, she asks one of the missionaries in Onincha to show her the white man's guns. The people from Nwamgba's side cannot understand the Christian god and they find it funny that he has a son but no wife.

In Nwamgba's traditional society, childlessness is frowned upon. It is also surrounded by many superstitious beliefs. Nwamgba's mother detests Obierika because his family has had a history of childlessness. When Nwamgba miscarries for the third time, Obierika's cousins and friends, Okafo and Okoye, ask Obierika to marry another woman. Obierika prefers to wait, much to the surprise of Nwamgba. Ironically, it is Nwamgba herself who decides to find a second wife for Obierika. She seeks the advice of Ayaju, a fellow woman, concerning the matter. Nevertheless, even after Nwamgba had chosen the right woman for him, Obierika takes his time to try having a child with Nwamgba first. The patience pays off when their firstborn son Anikwenwa was born. Okafo and Okoye are jubilant to see Nwamgba and Obierika have a child at last. However, Nwamgba can see through the insincerity in their celebrations. She is so distrustful of them that when Obierika dies suddenly, she immediately suspects that one of her neighbours has poisoned him. The trauma from childlessness in that community is hard on women. Nwamgba recalls a woman who hanged herself after her tenth miscarriage.

The cycle of miscarriage continues on to Anikwenwa's wife, Mgbeke or Agnes. However, unlike Nwamgba, Agnes, with the help of her husband, Anikwenwa (baptised Michael), is adamant to consult the oracles. Nonetheless, a reprieve for Nwamgba comes when Agnes becomes pregnant again and gives birth to a boy, Nnamdi christened Peter. After another three miscarriages, Agnes gives birth to a second child; a girl named Afamefuma, and christened Grace. Nwamgba adores Afamefuma and senses that in her the spirit of Obierika lives.

Okafo and Okoye believe that inheritance of family property follows the lineage of sons and not daughters. This is typical in many traditional African societies. As such, when Obierika dies, they are quick to confiscate his ivory tusk. Nwamgba does not protest this until the duo come for Obierika's barn of yams and goats. Okafo and Okoye ignore Nwamgba's protests. However, being the headstrong woman that she is, she decided to announce their misdeeds across the village in a song in the dead quiet of the night. The elders, the Women's Council and the members of Obierika's age-set come to her rescue.

Nwamgba embodies the trials and tribulations of a widowed woman in a society ruled by patriarchy. Okafo and Okoye are supposed to protect Nwamgba after the death of Obierika. Ironically, they are the ones who come in to Obierika's compound to deprive the widow of her rightful belongings. Even after the intervention of the elders, the women's council and the other men, Nwamgba still feels unsafe from the two. She is afraid that Okafo and Okoye would grab the land that Obierika left for their son Anikwenwa. Ultimately, they take the land under the pretext of cultivating it for her. She is also afraid to let Anikwenwa go out to play without her supervision. Nwamgba fears that Obierika's cousins could choose to get rid of Anikwenwa by selling him off to slavery as it happened in Iroegbunam's story. The story of Iroegbunam and the unfair land dispute case persuade Nwamgba to realize that her son needs to learn to speak the English language well. Her motivation is so that Anikwenwa can take Okafo and Okoye to the white man's court and claim back what is rightfully his. Nwamgba refuses to remarry after Obierika's death, despite many suitors coming to seek her hand.

The mentality of looking down on African cultures and people also translates into the rejection of African arts, history and knowledge systems. For instance, one of Grace's teachers, Sr. Maureen, tells her that the call-and-response songs of her people does not qualify to be called poetry. With time, the stories that people recount concerning past events in Onicha sound like myths to the new generation represented by Grace. She is not sure if she should trust such authorities of knowledge. The knowledge she has is steeped in a Christian-Eurocentric Western Education which has a disconnect with the indigenous knowledge systems of the Igbo. However, Grace does not run away from what she does not understand. She instead decides to change her degree from Chemistry to history. Her decision to study history represents the deliberate resolve by an African (woman) to document the stories of her own people. In so doing, she is able to set the record straight and provide continuity in knowledge from the past to posterity.

Grace is an educated woman. She embodies the value of true education, which is characterised by a healthy scepticism that is driven to pursue truth. Grace questions everything, especially language ("obvious things painted on a book..."). Having been born into a generation disconnected from its history, she is curious to learn everything about her culture. Her headstrongness is evident in her resolve to find out the truth about her community so that she can (1) write back at false history and (2) rewrite history and set the record straight. She spends much of her time with her grandmother, which symbolizes her being at home or identifying with one's roots.

Grace is the persona of Adichie and other African writers concerned with revisiting and revising the historical narrative of Africa and its people. In their reflections on 'The Headstrong Historian', Mikailu and Wattenberg (2015) have this to say concerning Grace's publishing of a book entitled *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*:

Readers familiar with *Things Fall Apart* will instantly grasp Adichie's resonant allusion to the final sentence of Chinua Achebe's iconic novel, in which a District Commissioner, collecting material for his report on pacifying the Lower Niger, reflects on the suicide of Okonkwo, whose story merits a chapter, or at least "a reasonable paragraph."

### Conclusion

This paper has examined the most engaging features in three of the twelve short stories from Chimamanda Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The method adopted has been inter-textual reading of the selected short stories with Adichie's suggestions in her *A Feminist Manifesto*. The study has also been anchored on Stiwanism as a strand of African feminism. From the analysis, the study has revealed that Adichie demonstrates her feminist philosophy through the short stories. In 'Imitation' and 'The Arrangers of Marriage', for example, she tells the stories of two women who are both physically and psychologically uprooted from their cultures. In 'The Headstrong Historian', Adichie dramatizes the story of a woman who, despite living in a traditional and highly patriarchal society, is able to rise and confound men (both native and foreign). Therefore, the most engaging feature in Adichie's writing is how she uses marriage as a dramatic stage to test out her theories on feminism and gender issues. Adichie also demonstrates how women recognize that the men in their lives are vital to their success in subverting patriarchy and minority statuses.

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