

# EXAMINING THE DIASPORA EXPERIENCE IN SELECTED STORIES IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*

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## Abstract

This paper examines diaspora and the impact on various characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The specific short stories for interface are: "Imitation", "On Monday Last Week", "The Thing Around Your Neck" and "Arrangers of Marriage". These stories show the life of Nigerians living in the diaspora, bringing out the trouble and difficulties at home that drive these citizens to hope and believe that salvation and relief from the trouble in the home country lies in a foreign and strange land. This paper will examine these stories through the lens of the postcolonial literary theory to bring out the issues of homelessness that diaspora citizens face in the new country, hybridity, mimicry, and the ambivalence that comes with the interaction of a new culture in position of power. In examining these stories, this research finds that Adichie criticises mimicry, while showing hybridity as inevitable

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Hybridity, Mimicry and Homelessness

## Introduction

Diaspora refers to the movement of people from their homeland to a foreign land. This is a central issue in postcolonial studies as colonialism itself was a sustained mass diaspora movement that saw the colonialist move into different regions of the world and carrying their culture; food, language, dressing and many other traits to those regions and forever altering them. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, diaspora is gotten "From the Greek meaning 'to disperse'" (61). They go on to say,

Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical act of colonization. Colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions Europeans over the entire world. The widespread effects of these migrations (such as that which has been termed ecological imperialism) continue on a global scale. (61)

Kirti Jha brings another angle to the field of diaspora. She sees diaspora beyond the mere scattering or movement of people from one place to another, she sees the scattering and movement of language and culture, she states that:

Diaspora is derived from the Greek term *diasperein* which means to disperse or sow or scatter. The term *diaspora* could be defined as “scattering of language, culture, people: a dispersion of a people, language, or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place” or it could be simply used to refer to people of some country settled in a foreign land (112).

Colonial contact brought about the need for education and the need for jobs that were available in the European countries, this brought about a reverse diaspora movement; of people from the former colonies going back to Europe and America and other countries in Africa and Asia in search of school and work. Ashcroft et al say,

the most recent and most socially significant diasporic movements have been those of colonised peoples back to the metropolitan centres. In countries such as Britain and France, the population now has substantial minorities of diasporic ex-colonial peoples. In recent times, the notion of a ‘diasporic identity’ has been adopted by many writers as a positive affirmation of their hybridity (62).

Their contact with the culture of the host country produces a reaction with their own culture and produce hybrid cultures. Cultures that are produced in the contact zone, no longer fully identifiable with that of the home country but not also fully like that of the host country therefore producing a hybrid culture. Ashcroft et al defines postcolonial hybridity as

One of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc (108).

With the contact of language, food, politics and several other elements, a new life and culture rises that is a mix, a cross-pollination to form a third space, a third specie separate but bearing the identity of both worlds. This is seen in diaspora writing when a character with a naïve, basic culture and identity from their country is made to adapt due to contact with a new culture, a new language or at least a new way of speaking it. While people that are still living in their countries still contact the residues of colonialism, the diaspora candidate's contact is most often more radical.

The hybrid character in diasporan writings is formed as contact is made and the character picks up traits from the new home and culture. This contact and change is never a straight forward path. The person is pulled to the new culture yet is also repelled by the new culture creating a love-hate relationship which is called ambivalence in postcolonial literature. According to Ashcroft et al ambivalence is:

A term first developed in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It also refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action. Adapted into colonial discourse theory by Homi Bhabha, it describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are ‘complicit’ and some ‘resistant’, ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject. (10)

### Postcolonial Theory

The postcolonial theory is a theory that largely deals with colonialism and its effects on the colonised. While the name postcolonial seems to on the surface indicate that it deals with after colonialism, this is not the case as it deals with colonialism, the process of decolonisation and the period after colonialism. Postcolonial theory is difficult to explain and situate it historically; that is, where postcolonial studies start and stop, what countries are included. Yedda Palemeq say “postcolonial, by definition, is one field that does not do in ‘firm’ conclusions. Its (Postcolonialism?) very purpose seems even to avoid reaching them. This may have its roots in the colonial experience itself, which was quintessentially hegemonic, dominating, dividing, and firm in its determination to get its message across” (7). Postcolonial theory is not concerned about limiting itself and setting up standards as what makes a good postcolonial text. C. L. Innes attempts to show the scope of postcolonial literary theory, he says:

But within the area of ‘Postcolonial Studies’, which tends to embrace literary and cultural – and sometimes anthropological – studies, the term is more often used to refer

to the consequences of colonialism from the time the area was first colonized. Such studies are generally concerned with the subsequent interaction between the culture of the colonial power, including its language, and the culture and traditions of the colonized peoples. And almost always, the analysis of those interactions acknowledges the importance of power relations in that cultural exchange – the degree to which the colonizer imposes a language, a culture and a set of attitudes, and the degree to which the colonized peoples are able to resist, adapt to or subvert that imposition (11-12).

As Innes points out, postcolonial literary theory seeks to examine the effects of colonialism on the language and the culture. Postcolonial theory also seeks to study how the transfer of language and culture takes place, what is it that makes it important for the colonised to adopt the language and culture of the colonisers; what Innes calls “...the importance of power relations in that cultural exchange - the degree to which the colonizer imposes a language, a culture ...” (12). the process where the exchange of language and culture takes place is examined in postcolonial theory. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin writing on what makes a text a postcolonial work in *The Empire Writes Back* says:

What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial (2).

To Ashcroft et al, what makes a work a postcolonial text is the area it is produced from, from a country that experienced colonialism and the text explores the tensions arising from the colonial experience. Furthermore Ashcroft et al(2004) also say “[w]e use the term ‘post-

colonial', however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression (2). This means that postcolonial literatures are not only restricted to the literatures produced after colonialism, but it involves all the text produced that cover the period of colonialism to the present day.

The postcolonial theory in examining the effects of colonialism on the language and culture of the colonised examines several aspects of life ranging from culture and identity, language, ambivalence, hybridity among several others. In this paper, diaspora, hybridity, ambivalence, and identity.

### **Poverty as Motivation for Emigration in *The Thing Around Your Neck***

In *The Thing Around Your Neck* there are a total of twelve stories and five are set outside Nigeria. This paper will look at "Imitation", "On Monday Last Week", "The Thing Around Your Neck" and "The Arrangers of Marriage". The need to leave one's home country and move to a foreign land is often precipitated by a push; it can be the need to go to a good school, the search for better economic or career opportunities or war and violence at home usually in expectation of a better life in the new home.

Andre Kabore says, "migration theorists such as Dustmann and Weiss say that throughout human history, "economic motives for migration, and motives related to natural disaster or persecution (...) are the two main reasons why individuals migrate." (3). Kabore goes on to say "In fact, for ages, people have been migrating because of poverty, natural disaster or social unrest" (3). There is always something sending the migrants away from home or something they aim to get that is difficult or impossible to get in the home country. Jha opines that "... Adichie achieves the high pinnacle of immigration tales with

*Americanah* and "The Thing Around Your Neck" as these narratives are replete with rootlessness, depression, exile, low self-esteem, fake marriages and divorces, and the dilemma of making it big in a land of dreams called America and the bursting of that dream bubble" (146).

In Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* the main characters in the diaspora short stories are females looking for better opportunities away from poverty in Nigeria, Kabore also notes that "for instance, some of the stories in her collection of short stories, *The Thing around Your Neck*, especially "Imitation" and "The Arrangers of Marriage," show girls migrating to America with their husbands, expecting to rise from grass to grace, i.e., from poverty to riches" (3). The characters move for love and marriage and the hope of becoming wealthy in America.

The author shows the level of poverty that these female characters we encounter in these short stories passed through before they moved to America. In "Imitation" the protagonist, Nkem describes the poverty in her life before she got married to Obiora. In Nigeria she dated married men to take care of her bills:

Ikenna, a businessman, had paid her father's hospital bills after hernia surgery. Tunji, a retired army general, had fixed the roof of her parents' home and bought them the first real sofa they had ever owned. She would have considered being his fourth wife-he was a Muslim and could have proposed - so that he would help her with her younger sibling's education. She was *ada*, after all, and it shamed her, even more than it frustrated her, that she could not do any of the things expected of the First Daughter, that her parents still struggled on the parched farm, that her siblings still hawked loaves of bread at the motor park (31).

Nkem comes from a very poor family that she will obviously do anything to escape her poverty. Marriage for her was a means of economic

survival does not love; and when she met and married Obiora and even moved to America, it was all about economic survival. When Amarachi, Nkem's maid in America said that her mother used to rub yam peel on her hand if she took too much of the yam with the peel and that it itched for days, Nkem reflects that "she has never told Amarachi how similar their childhoods were. Her mother may not have rubbed yam peel on her skin, but then there were hardly any yams. Instead, there was improvised food. She remembers how her mother plucked plan leaves that nobody else ate and made soup with them, insisting they were edible" (32-33). So both Nkem and Amarachi come from poor background so that one can even conclude that Nkem the lady of the house comes from a poorer background than Amarachi the help. In "The Thing Around Your Neck" the protagonist also come from a poor background where her aunts hawked dried fish (117), uncles that lived with their whole families in a single room, and salary that was barely enough to pay the school fees of her brother (118). In the "Arrangers of Marriage" the whole purpose of the mirage was for the economic advantage of marrying a doctor in America, which the uncle and aunt compared to winning the lottery (170).

### **Ambivalence**

Ambivalence in postcolonial studies is the feeling of wanting something and then wanting its opposite; a love and hate relationship. In the selected stories under study, the characters are in a new land and encounter a new language, a new weather and culture. The characters are supposedly settled in America but all they think about is Nigeria. In "Imitation" the protagonist says "she did not mind that her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless to them. She liked them and their lives. Lives Obiora often called "plastic". Yet she knew he too, wanted the children to be like their neighbours', the kind of children who sniffed at food that had fallen on the dirt, saying it was "spoiled" (24). There is that dislike of the people and their culture that Obiora has for

the neighbours, calling their lives “plastic” yet his wife is aware that he wants the children to be like the neighbours; exhibiting a love and hate relationship with the culture. He hates the American life yet will love for his children to behave like them.

### **Hybridity and Mimicry**

In the effort of the characters to blend in with their host country they also try to speak and observe the cultural norms of the host country; yet they are not able to blend in by mimicking the culture, rather they are able to create a new culture, a third space. Hybridity and mimicry take different forms, for the diaspora character to look as act as an American in this case, it is important for such a one to be able to mimic as much as possible regardless of how one feels. Adichie calls this change, from a Nigerian to an American Americanah as Oboiro is happy that his children have transformed and are not just Nigerians, so he calls them Americanah (38).

In “On Monday Last Week” the author observes that “American expressions like ‘all set’ still felt chunky in her mouth, but she used them for Joshua” (75). Mimicking and therefore becoming, but not quite like the original but a copy. There is also another attempt to mimic the language of the Americans that produces a hybrid in language “she stared at him as he spoke, his Igbo interspersed with English that had an ungainly American accent: ‘Amah go’ for I will go’(84). “Tobechi... had begun to talk in that false accent that made her want to slap his face” (85). Tobechi having lived longer in American has begun to mimic the way the American’s speak in his effort to assimilate but his wife who is a recent arrival call it fake so Tobechi who wants to speak like the Americans is neither there nor is he speaking like a Nigeria. He had created a third space for himself.

In the “Arrangers of Marriage” the protagonist is married off to a Nigerian working in America. He immediately starts the job of changing her from a Nigerian girl to an American by teaching her to

mimic the language and culture of the Americans. When she calls home after her arrival, and she tells the husband that the line is ‘engaged’ he replies that “busy. Americans say busy, not engaged” (170). He teaches her to mimic the culture of Americans “Americans don’t drink their tea with milk and sugar” (171) concluding that he got used to it and “you will too, baby” (171). He even changed his name “I’m not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave...The last name I use here is different, too. Americans have a hard time with Udenwa, so I changed it” (172). He had changed his name to become American, becoming Dave Bell (172). This is mimicry, Udenwa tries to blend in so he mimics the dominant culture of having two English names thereby creating a hybrid culture and a third space of engagement. He defends his need to mimic by saying “You don’t understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you must be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside” (172). Unenwa Moves to America to improve his financial status, he will do anything to guarantee that. He even gives his new bride an English name; Agatha Bells and tells her “You’ll get used to it, baby” (173). The mimicking of language and culture does not make anyone of them American.

### **Home, Homelessness, and Identity**

Citizens of the diaspora struggle with the issues of identity, what and where is home and the rootlessness that comes with the movement to a foreign land. In the diaspora stories in *The Thing Around your Neck* Adichie paints a vivid picture of homelessness in the diaspora citizens in all the selected short stories understudy. In postcolonial studies, homelessness refers to the effect of colonialism on the nation or individual who has encountered a new culture and is not comfortable with their native culture and is also not comfortable with the new culture. Mehmet Recep Tas attempts to explain the concept of homelessness, he says,

An unhomed person does not have the feeling of belonging since s/he is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and cultural displacement. Here, being “unhomed” does not mean being homeless. To be unhomed, as Lois Tyson states in *Critical Theory Today*, “is to feel not at home even in one’s own home because you are not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (116).

Homelessness in postcolonial studies does not necessary refer to the lack of a home but the feeling of not being at home even if you are at home and in your country because of the clash of two cultures. Creative writers have different ways of portraying this in their works. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the author shows how the characters are unsettled and constantly try to re-define themselves by creating new identities.

The sense of home, the place of home is questioned in *The Thing Around Your Neck* as the author question what home is, Thomas Bonnici states that:

Colonization disrupts the colonized subject’s sense of place. On the one hand, for the colonial, enslaved and diaspora subject, it is impossible to leave “home” while it is almost impossible to remain untouched by the new “home”. Further, in most cases, identity and an actual place have been totally severed and all attempts to identify oneself with the original location have generally resulted in frustration and more displacement (2).

In diaspora fiction, the home has changed yet the characters in diaspora struggle to settle in the new home. Things like the weather, language, food, and the loss of identity all these contribute to make the character to feel unsettled. The country left behind is always seen as the home, where they were comfortable, and the new diaspora country is there to always remind them that they are not at home but only alien residents

with a strong desire to return home to the familiar environment and culture. Comfort Wernigo Siver in support of this opinion say that “Migrants tend to suffer from solitude, torture due to racism, self-destruction, loss of identity or develop an unstable sense of the self, disappointment, despair and psychological trauma, which pushes them to regret and long to return to that from which they moved away” (119).

The original home country in these stories is not good enough due largely to poverty and lack of opportunities for progress. Moving to a new home the characters are not able to sever ties with the old home country thereby making it difficult to settle in the new home country. There is a nostalgic feeling about Nigeria that these characters have left behind. In “Imitation”, the house is not a home, with Nigeria constantly referred to as home, confessing that “she does miss home” (37). She identifies home with language, that her friends speak Igbo, Yoruba, and Pidgin English (37). This is immediately contrasted with what makes her not feel at home in America, the weather “and when the snow covers the yellow fire hydrant on the street, she misses the Lagos sun that glares down even when it rains” (37). Mohammad Hussein Oroskhan and Esmail Zohdi say “for the diasporic people, it is an anguished experience to be dispersed from their homelands, whether voluntarily or unwillingly. The doubleness of diasporic identity is, on the one hand, the lack of any stability, and on the other hand it could be the domination of power” (302). The diasporic citizen still retain their original home identity and what gave them the feeling of stability and home but in a new land that stability is gone, and a new identity has to be developed.

“On Monday Last Week” there are also similar cases of the diaspora citizen aware that where they are residing is not home. The story is also littered with references back to Nigeria; every little thing is compared back with Nigeria. From cooking (80), parenting (81), and then the narration of how Kamara and Tobechei loved themselves back in Nigeria, a love that is missing in America. How they were

comfortable sitting on one *okada*, taking bucket baths together in a bathroom with slimy walls and several other things that should have made them feel restless and not at home but the reflection in America sees all of these with nostalgia as the best moments in their relationship (83).

In “The Thing Around Your Neck” the layout is not very different; the talk about Lagos starts from the very first page and the author traces how the protagonist finds herself in America by winning the American lottery and moving to America and thinking “you laughed with your uncle and you felt at home in his house; his wife called you *mwanne*, sister, and his two school-age children called you Aunty. They spoke Igbo and ate garri for lunch and it was like home” (116). The protagonist is able to feel at home without feeling uprooted because the food, the culture and language largely stays the same avoiding the feeling of homeless until the uncle tries to rape her and she discovers that they are not even related by blood (116). She leaves the house and immediately starts feeling the shock of her uprooting from Nigeria and experiencing the nostalgia and reflections about her home in the cramped and lonely apartment.

In “The Arrangers of Marriage” the protagonist’ -who moves to America in an arranged marriage- husband shows her the house with its scanty furniture making it a house but not a home. She experiences the culture and language shock as her husband tries to make sure that she becomes an Americanah and heightening her feeling of homelessness. When they went for shopping with the protagonist, she notes that “I felt as though I were in a different physical world, on another planet” (176), she feels homeless and uprooted enough to compare it to the feeling of leaving the planet. Jha says “There is a deep-seated longing in the hearts of Diaspora characters of Adichie and at various instances they draw comparisons between home and foreign only to yearn to return back to their motherland” (138). Jha also

observes that “The very phrase of “moving back” to the native land echoes a sense of displacement and longing and while people migrate to places in search of greener pastures, but their psyche is always haunted by appalling situations thus creating a lacuna in their minds for homeland” (119). In *The Thing Around Your Neck* the characters hold an almost idealist love for Nigeria, simply believing that their troubles will disappear when the move back or simply regretting the move to America.

### Conclusion

Adichie in *The Thing Around Your Neck* weaves story after story that gives voice to different women and in the diaspora stories, she give voice to several women living particularly in America. These stories highlight the expectation that most Nigerians have about America as a land of wealth where they are going to make their own money but both the male and female characters no matter the level of education are struggling to make ends meet. Even Obiora and Nkem who live in a big house in America get the wealth from Nigeria and not America.

These diaspora stories try to show that America is not a land where you go and all your problems disappear, rather you have more problems dealing with the culture and other elements of psychological that have been discussed above. The jobs are still hard to come by and the pay not so good. This can be seen first as a critique on the government to make Nigeria a home where the citizens don't have to see another country as the solution to their problems. Secondly, it can be seen as an advice and a deterrent to those who think that all they need to do is to get to America by whatever means, and all their problems will disappear.

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