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Literary Cosmopolitanism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*: The Hyphenated-American or the Critic of Pervasive Authorization

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Abstract:

The first and foremost condition of a postcolonial writer is to present an objective view of any colonial experience without indulging in pseudo-nationalism or what Edward Said calls a “rhetoric of blame.” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s careful representation of characters and events both in Nigeria and America is not only unbiased and objective but also depicts the exiled state of their existence. As a writer striving to achieve cosmopolitanism in her works, she reflects upon issues related to race, ethnicity, gender and migrant identity. Her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, is a collusion and collision of cultural and ethnic marginality with the pre-established norms of the cultural “West” for those trying to establish what Rushdie claims to be an “imaginary homeland”. Her characters that embrace nationalism in the newly developing Nigeria are equally dichotomized between their support of the ‘government’ and ‘development’ of the nation as well as its economy and their fear of the pervasive authorization. The unheard voices are inside their heads, that rebel against the established order sustaining both worlds. The paper aims to detail the ‘adaptation’ process of the migrant Nigerian while trying to assimilate the traditional values along with other issues.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, pseudo-nationalism, dichotomy, ethnicity, migrant identity, rhetoric of blame, adaptation, assimilation.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a celebrated Nigerian writer renowned for her compelling works in fiction, non-fiction, and essays. She is considered one of the most prominent literary voices of the 21st century, and her writing often explores themes of identity, gender, migration, and the complexities of modern African life. Adichie is celebrated not only for her literary talent but also for her ability to provoke thought and foster important conversations about identity, culture, and societal norms.

Her notable works include three novels- *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), her debut novel which tells the story of a young Nigerian girl navigating the dynamics of a dysfunctional family against the backdrop of political unrest. It won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), a critically acclaimed novel set during the Nigerian Civil War (Biafran War) which delves into its human and emotional cost. It won the Orange Prize for Fiction and *Americanah* (2013), a powerful exploration of race, identity, and migration. This novel focuses on the experiences of a Nigerian woman in the United States. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Short Stories collection- *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) is a collection of short stories that vividly portrays the lives of Nigerians and Nigerian-Americans grappling with cultural expectations and personal desires. Non-fiction books- *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), adapted from her widely viewed TEDx talk, this essay became a landmark text in contemporary feminist discourse, and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), a practical guide for raising feminist children.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a collection of short stories, traverses borders, cultures, and identities, offering a nuanced exploration of what it means to belong in a globalised world. Aminatta Forna, in her review of the book, writes,

'The Thing Around Your Neck' is a collection of 12 short stories, focusing mainly on the lives and experiences of Nigerian women - women caught up in political or religious violence, coping with displacement, loneliness and disappointment in their new lives or their new marriages, surviving tragedy. The women are generally middle class, intelligent but unconfident, and tend to be routed by more selfish and amoral characters.' (Forna)

Thematically rich, the work reflects literary cosmopolitanism, foregrounding characters who straddle cultures and challenge the pervasive authorization of singular narratives about identity,

race, and migration. Adichie's stories grapple with the complexities of being a "hyphenated American" while critiquing the broader systems that shape such identities.

The Thing Around Your Neck is an impactful title, and this impact is what draws the reader to the central themes within the story. However, there are many implications when reading the title. Thoughts of racial discrimination, suicide, and being entrapped could cross someone's mind when reading the title. These are all valid assumptions if the title is read in a vacuum. However, as the reader moves forward, they find that the ropes of depression, loneliness, and disillusion due to events in the story are what are tied around the narrator's neck. These are just parts of the overall phenomenal themes found within the story. (Wyatt)

Adichie's portrayal of the hyphenated American experience often centres on Nigerian immigrants negotiating their diasporic identities. In stories like "The Thing Around Your Neck," she delves into the internal conflict of her protagonists as they navigate cultural dualities. Akunna, the protagonist, finds herself alienated in America, where her Nigerian identity is either exoticized or dismissed. The "thing around her neck" symbolizes the choking weight of expectations and the persistent need to conform to a monolithic idea of Americanness. Adichie illuminates how the hyphenated American identity is fraught with tensions between the homeland's traditions and the host land's pressures, questioning the authenticity of belonging.

'Adichie begins her short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" with an allusion to a few stereotypes of America generally held by the Nigerians for several generations, such as that "everybody in America had a car and a gun". It is surmised that these stereotypes are inspired mainly by Hollywood movies full of car races and gun fights.' (Fonseka)

This sense of displacement and cultural estrangement also resonates in "Imitation," where Nkem lives in America while her husband maintains a separate life in Nigeria. Her material comfort in America contrasts sharply with her emotional detachment and longing for home. Here, Adichie critiques the pervasive authorization of a Western-centric ideal that equates success with assimilation and material wealth, highlighting how it marginalizes the nuanced experiences of immigrants.

Adichie's work, however, does not stop at portraying the struggles of hyphenated identities. Her stories actively critique systems of power that perpetuate these struggles. By challenging the narratives that authorize Western hegemony, Adichie asserts the agency of her characters and, by extension, her literary voice. For instance, in "Jumping Monkey Hill," the protagonist Ujunwa attends a writing workshop that is steeped in neo-colonial attitudes. The British convenor, Edward, attempts to dictate what constitutes an "authentic" African story, dismissing narratives that challenge his preconceptions. This story serves as a meta-commentary on the literary world's complicity in authorising reductive representations of African identities, pushing back against the commodification of diversity. Similarly, Akunna, a young Nigerian woman who has reached America after winning a visa lottery, enters into a relationship with a white American man. While he seems caring and curious about her background, his approach is often tinged with privilege and exoticism, highlighting the cultural gap and her unease in fully sharing herself with him.

Adichie presents her observations of American behaviours, values, practices, and outlooks in terms of what Akunna desires to write about in her letters to her family. Akunna wants to write letters not only to her parents but also to her friends, cousins, aunts and uncles. The anecdotal accounts Akunna thus develops to relate "the surprising openness of people in America" cover people who openly talk about issues such as "their mother fighting cancer" and "their sister-in-law's preemie", which in Nigeria are privy only to their families and close well-wishers. She means here that Americans take everything lightly. She relates the extravagant lifestyle of Americans based on some of her clients who leave "so much food on their plates" and crumple "a few dollar bills down" as an "expiation for the wasted food". (Fonseka)

Adichie's exploration of cosmopolitanism challenges simplistic binaries between the local and the global, the traditional and the modern. Her stories depict protagonists negotiating cultural, linguistic, and emotional dualities, revealing how global migration transforms individual and collective identities. In particular, she examines the "hyphenated American" experience, where Nigerian immigrants grapple with their diasporic identities and confront the tensions of belonging to multiple worlds.

While exploring the theme of the hyphenated American, Adichie also puts forth ideas that cosmopolitanism is not the uncritical celebration of borderless global interaction but rather a

reflective engagement with the power dynamics inherent in cross-cultural exchanges. Her stories expose how the pervasive authorization of dominant cultural and racial ideologies shapes the immigrant experience, from microaggressions to systemic exclusion. Through her characters' resilience and refusal to conform to simplistic categorizations, Adichie asserts a cosmopolitan ethic that embraces multiplicity and challenges authoritarian structures.

She encapsulates the tension and harmony between local and global identities, often through the lens of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism, the idea of being a citizen of the world while appreciating individual cultural identities, is central to Adichie's narrative universe. Her stories vividly explore how characters navigate the interplay between their Nigerian roots and broader, often Western, influences.

In "The Thing Around Your Neck," Adichie portrays Akunna's journey as a metaphor for the challenges of cosmopolitan existence. Akunna migrates to the United States, seeking better opportunities, but instead encounters alienation and racism. Her initial experiences dismantle the romanticized notion of the American dream, highlighting how cosmopolitanism is not always harmonious. Akunna struggles to reconcile her Nigerian identity with the expectations of her new environment. Her relationship with her white boyfriend is emblematic of this tension. While their bond offers moments of connection, it also reveals cultural misunderstandings and power imbalances, emphasizing that cosmopolitan ideals are complicated by real-world inequities.

Similarly, in "Imitation," Adichie delves into the dislocation and ambivalence of a Nigerian woman, Nkem, living in America. Nkem enjoys material comfort, yet her sense of identity is fractured. Her husband remains in Lagos, maintaining a dual life that reflects the broader tensions of cosmopolitanism—balancing roots and global aspirations. The story critiques the superficial allure of cosmopolitan lifestyles, revealing the emotional costs of displacement. Nkem's eventual decision to return to Nigeria signifies a reclamation of agency and cultural identity, suggesting that cosmopolitanism is sustainable only when grounded in authentic self-awareness.

Adichie also addresses cosmopolitanism through the theme of language and communication. Her characters often find themselves caught between English, as a global lingua franca, and their native tongues, which carry cultural and emotional significance. This linguistic duality highlights the internal conflict of belonging to multiple worlds. For instance, in "Jumping Monkey Hill," Ujunwa's struggle to assert her narrative against the patronizing gaze of a Western workshop

facilitator symbolizes the broader struggle of postcolonial subjects in cosmopolitan spaces. Ujunwa's assertion of her voice critiques cosmopolitan spaces that claim inclusivity but often perpetuate colonial hierarchies.

Adichie's nuanced portrayal of cosmopolitanism extends to her depiction of food, dress, and cultural practices. In stories like "The Arrangers of Marriage," the protagonist's resistance to her husband's insistence on assimilation underscores the loss of cultural specificity that often accompanies globalization. Adichie uses these cultural markers to question whether genuine cosmopolitanism necessitates erasure or if it can exist as a celebration of multiplicity.

Ultimately, Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* challenges the simplistic binary of local versus global. Through her characters' struggles and triumphs, she illustrates that cosmopolitanism is a fraught but enriching process. It is not merely about geographic mobility or cultural blending but about negotiating identity in ways that honour both the self and the world. Adichie invites readers to rethink cosmopolitanism as an evolving, often uneasy, conversation between the familiar and the foreign, where belonging is both a challenge and a choice.

This is yet another powerful theme found in the story, as learning about what you thought to be perfect is not at all what was expected. Tying into the theme of alienation, another instance is when Akunna is shown the unfortunate reality of America when her employer hires her under the table for a dollar less than what is offered and only hears "all immigrants worked hard" (Adichie). Hearing that the only thing she is to her employer is a hard-working immigrant when she hasn't worked a day for the company adds to the overall disillusion Akunna has toward America. She feels so ideologically challenged and broken that she even won't write to her family back home. (Wyatt)

Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* traverses borders, cultures, and identities, offering a nuanced exploration of what it means to belong in a globalized world. Thematically rich, the collection reflects literary cosmopolitanism, foregrounding characters who straddle cultures and challenge the pervasive authorization of singular narratives about identity, race, and migration. Adichie's stories grapple with the complexities of being a "hyphenated American" while critiquing broader systems that shape such identities.

In the titular story, “The Thing Around Your Neck”, Adichie centres on Akunna. The narrative begins with her migration to the United States, driven by hopes of achieving the American dream—a vision shaped by idealized notions of prosperity and freedom. However, Akunna’s initial excitement turns to disillusionment as she confronts racism, cultural alienation, and economic exploitation. The “thing around her neck,” a metaphor for the weight of expectations and cultural estrangement, underscores the internal conflicts of diasporic identity. Adichie critiques how the promise of cosmopolitanism often fails to account for the systemic barriers immigrants face, such as racism and class discrimination.

Akunna's relationship with her white American boyfriend further highlights the complexities of cross-cultural interactions. While their connection offers moments of intimacy and understanding, it also reveals cultural misunderstandings and power imbalances. For instance, the boyfriend's fascination with Akunna’s Nigerian heritage often veers into exotification, reducing her identity to a set of stereotypes rather than acknowledging her as an individual. Through Akunna’s experiences, Adichie exposes the tension between the ideal of cosmopolitan inclusivity and the reality of systemic inequities that constrain it.

Similarly, in the story “Imitation”, Adichie portrays Nkem, a Nigerian woman living in America while her husband remains in Lagos. Nkem enjoys the material comforts of life in the United States, but her sense of identity is fractured by loneliness and disconnection. Her husband’s dual life—marked by infidelity and a stronger cultural attachment to Nigeria—exemplifies the difficulties of balancing roots and aspirations in a cosmopolitan world. The story critiques the Western-centric ideal that equates success with assimilation and material wealth, revealing how such frameworks marginalize the emotional and cultural dimensions of immigrant experiences. Nkem’s decision to return to Nigeria at the end of the story signifies her reclamation of agency and cultural identity, challenging the notion that cosmopolitanism requires the erasure of one’s heritage.

Adichie also uses her stories to critique broader systems of power that perpetuate these struggles. In “Jumping Monkey Hill”, Ujunwa attends a writing workshop in South Africa, only to find it steeped in neo-colonial attitudes. The workshop’s British convenor, Edward, embodies the patronizing gaze of Western institutions that seek to define and control African narratives. Edward’s dismissal of Ujunwa’s story as “not authentically African” reflects the broader

commodification of diversity in global literary spaces. Through Ujunwa's defiance, Adichie critiques the pervasive authorization of reductive representations of African identities, asserting the agency of her characters and, by extension, her literary voice.

Language and communication are central to Adichie's exploration of cosmopolitanism. Her characters often inhabit linguistic dualities, caught between English as a global lingua franca and their native tongues, which carry cultural and emotional significance. In "The Thing Around Your Neck", Akunna's silence becomes a form of resistance to the cultural dissonance she experiences in America. By refusing to write letters home or conform to expectations of assimilation, Akunna asserts her identity on her own terms. Similarly, in "The Arrangers of Marriage", the protagonist's resistance to her husband's insistence on abandoning her Igbo language and customs highlights the loss of cultural specificity that globalization often demands. Adichie uses these linguistic tensions to question whether true cosmopolitanism necessitates erasure or can exist as a celebration of multiplicity.

Adichie's nuanced portrayal of cosmopolitanism extends beyond language to include cultural markers such as food, dress, and social practices. These elements serve as both symbols of identity and sites of negotiation. In "The Thing Around Your Neck", Akunna observes the extravagance of American lifestyles, contrasting it with her frugal upbringing in Nigeria. Her reflections on wastefulness and consumerism critique the cultural disconnect she feels in a country that equates abundance with success. Similarly, in "The Arrangers of Marriage", the protagonist's struggle to adapt to American culinary habits reflects the more profound challenge of maintaining her cultural identity in a foreign land. Adichie uses these quotidian details to illustrate how cosmopolitanism operates at the level of the everyday, shaping how individuals navigate their sense of self.

Adichie's stories also explore the emotional dimensions of cosmopolitanism, particularly the longing for connection and belonging. In "Imitation", Nkem's isolation in America is mirrored by her longing for the vibrant communal life she left behind in Nigeria. Her material wealth contrasts sharply with her emotional detachment, highlighting the hollow promise of success defined by Western standards. In "The Thing Around Your Neck", Akunna's alienation is compounded by her inability to share her experiences with her family back home, as her letters remain unwritten. Adichie portrays these emotional struggles as intrinsic to the cosmopolitan condition, where pursuing global mobility often comes at the cost of personal fulfilment.

However, Adichie's cosmopolitanism is not merely a critique of global power dynamics; it is also an affirmation of resilience and agency. Her characters refuse to conform to simplistic categorizations, asserting their identities in ways that challenge hegemonic structures. In "Jumping Monkey Hill", Ujunwa's defiance of Edward's authority symbolizes the broader struggle of postcolonial subjects to reclaim their narratives. By foregrounding such acts of resistance, Adichie celebrates the multiplicity of identities that cosmopolitanism can encompass.

This sense of "sterility" is reinforced by a sense of loss — of traditional customs, culture and lifestyles. That life lacks passion, vibrancy and intensity is often highlighted in comparisons between America and Nigeria. America as a sterile place: loss In *The Shivering*, Adichie also draws parallels between the passion, the fervour and the vibrancy of catholic sermons in Nigeria as compared with those in America. Father Patrick sprinkles water from a big saltshaker (166). The narrator reflects upon how much more "subdued Catholic masses were in America" (166). In Nigeria, the priest would have been "splashing and swirling holy water" and the "people would have been drenched". (Bull)

Adichie's engagement with cosmopolitanism is also evident in her meta-commentary on storytelling itself. Her stories challenge the literary world's complicity in authorizing reductive narratives about Africa and its diaspora. In "Jumping Monkey Hill", Ujunwa's experience at the workshop exposes the power dynamics that shape what is deemed "authentic" or "marketable" in global literary spaces. Adichie critiques the commodification of diversity, arguing for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to representing marginalized voices.

Ultimately, *The Thing Around Your Neck* encapsulates the tension and harmony between local and global identities, offering a reflective engagement with the complexities of cosmopolitanism. Adichie's characters navigate the interplay between their Nigerian roots and broader, often Western, influences, revealing how identity is shaped by the forces of migration, globalization, and cultural exchange. Her stories invite readers to rethink cosmopolitanism as an evolving, often uneasy, conversation between the familiar and the foreign, where belonging is both a challenge and a choice.

The protagonists in Adichie's stories are not necessarily all that similar. Yes, they are almost all black women from Nigeria, but that obviously no more binds them together than Katherine Mansfield's (later) short stories mostly being about white women in England,

for example. What does feel repetitive, though, is how they are almost all – all? – women to whom things happen. They are noble, passive people, victims to the prejudices and misunderstandings of others. They experience disillusionment and disappointment, except in those instances where they don't have any illusions in the first place. (Stuckinabook)

Through her nuanced portrayal of diasporic identities, Adichie critiques the pervasive authorization of dominant cultural and racial ideologies that shape the immigrant experience. Her characters' struggles with alienation, cultural estrangement, and systemic exclusion are tempered by their resilience and refusal to conform to simplistic narratives. In doing so, Adichie asserts a cosmopolitan ethic that embraces multiplicity and challenges authoritarian structures, making *The Thing Around Your Neck* a powerful exploration of identity in a globalized world.

Adichie's work stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling in bridging personal and political divides. By weaving together themes of migration, identity, and resistance, she offers a compelling vision of cosmopolitanism that celebrates diversity while acknowledging its inherent challenges. In a world increasingly defined by globalization, Adichie's stories remind us that belonging is not merely a matter of geography but a dynamic process of negotiation and self-discovery.

In conclusion, *The Thing Around Your Neck* is both a representation of hyphenated American experiences and a critique of the pervasive authorization that underpins global and local power dynamics. Adichie's literary cosmopolitanism resists binaries and celebrates the fluidity of identities, inviting readers to question the narratives that define belonging in a globalized world. By bridging the personal and the political, her work stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling in challenging the status quo.

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