



FRAGMENTED POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY IN THE WRAP OF STEREOTYPES IN ADICHIE'S 'THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK'

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to analyze Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story, 'Things Around your Neck' from the postcolonial perspective; how Africa/Africans are trapped in the single fold story of being barbaric and savage and how the contemporary writers like Adichie and Sefi Atta are using their writings to dismantle this stereotyped image. The story revolves around Akunna, a Nigerian girl who shares with her people glamorous dreams of being in America but soon her fantasy shatters down like castle of cards. Through Akunna, Adichie shares the predicament of the diaspora community who are stranded on the hyphens in the New World. She uses the technique of story-telling to repair the fragmented identities of Africans whose history is distorted, disfigured and eventually destroyed by the colonial forces. The present discussion tries to deconstruct the Western stereotypes, simultaneously, reconstructing the past heritage from an Afrocentric point of view. Adichie has attempted to provide a 'black perspective' to the issues unheeded hitherto or taken for granted.

Key words: New World, Colonial Forces, Afrocentric

INTRODUCTION

As a genre of contemporary history, Postcolonialism stands for the distinct moment of political independence of Middle East, Asian and African countries from British Empire. It refers to a 'moment of significant dismantling of the political and economic architecture of colonialism: of decolonization'. (Mullaney, 5) Postcolonialism, particularly in literary and

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cultural studies drawn from the postmodern school of thoughts, addresses the consequences of colonialism in the form of distorted linguistic and cultural legacy of a particular country. Postcolonial study is a bundle of theories and practices which carries the inheritance of anti-colonial movements. It reflects on the histories, political campaigning, cultural identifications and struggle for emancipation at the cost of human life. Postcolonialism describes a range of theoretical and critical practices voiced by writers including Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minha, Aijaz Ahmad, Helen Tiffin and Partha Chatterjee and so on. Often termed as 'New Literatures', it is more about the national, cultural, and ethnic histories of Commonwealth countries. It was the phase when writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Raja Rao, Kamau Braithwaite, Wilson Harris started asserting the indigenous or hybridized models in their writings to contest the imposed and imported cultural forms. Primarily these writers had a two-fold task; first, to represent their past and culture before the world and second, to restore the lost confidence of native in their nation and cultural values. In the colonial period, the colonized were 're-presented' by the colonial forces and in the postcolonial period they are trying to 'represent' the self. In simple words, it can be said that Postcolonialism is the fire test of identification. It is a story which is being retold by the colonized; one is speaking what has already been spoken about them but in an attempt to deny the colonizer's definitions about colonized. To completely overpower the colonies, the colonizers aimed at the 'cultural estrangement' (Fanon, 253) of the colonized. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence to colonize the mind of the native:

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or. the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized. (Ngugi , 16)

The 'cultural bomb' (Ngugi, 3) thus dropped 'destroyed, disfigured, distorted' (Fanon, 154) the whole existence of the colonized. Therefore, Postcolonialism is nothing but coming out of the state of voicelessness. It is the process of re-locating the 'Self' and identity; it is the phase of bridging the gap between the past and present; connecting back to roots; fulfilling the relational fragmentation with the history of their own land. It was the period of production of the cultural identity or the phase of rediscovering the lost identity, 'not an identity grounded in archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past (Hall, 224)

Just after the collapse of colonialism the first generation writers recreated the lost national identity by dismantling the colonial cultural power structure. However, Postcolonialism

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continued by transforming and reviving its power structure in the form of hegemony and neo-colonialism to hover on the economy of decolonized people. There was never a complete gap between colonizers and colonized even after political independence. Diasporas kept a link between the 'home' and the 'host land' but the natives could not wipe their colonial past abroad and it caused racism, identity crisis and class consciousness against immigrants from Africa and Asia. Consequently, a global postcolonial community of the migrated people of color from Africa, people from Middle East came together to share their collective experience as an immigrant abroad. This constituted the second generation writers who are diasporas in different countries including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta of Nigerian origin, M G Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni of India, Khaled Hussein from Afghanistan, Aime Cesaire, (considers himself as Nigerian descendant) and Franz Fanon, Martinique born Afro-Caribbean writer. These writers re-told their own history, asserted their culture, by negating the stereotypes created by colonizers. They believed in their legacy of past and present and carried it in their writing to contest the biased images of their own country. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the writers from Africa who bandaged the fractured cultural identity of Africa abroad as identity formation has been a thematic concern of postcolonial literature.

The present paper tries to reveal the Western construction of the stereotypes about Africa being a dark continent. The basis of identification of African continent as 'Other' emphasizes on the presence of 'Colonial Otherness' in postcolonial portraits. The black man started seeing his 'self' in 'Otherness'; 'the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body'. (Bhabha, 45) Cultural identities have their roots in history, time and place. The African cultural identity got transformed during colonial period and became crippled and deformed. Colonizers had the politics of knowledge to construct, to create and to distribute the nation in relation to social and political power; 'They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'' (Hall, 225) The paper also tries to establish a specific identity of being African in the USA, regardless of their colonial past and free from biases of race and gender. It carries a two-fold story about African people being ill-treated across the world because of the stereotypes created by the Whites for their own personal benefits. But there is another story of the African continent which could not reach to the world or was not allowed to be told – the story of Africa itself. So, this paper attempts to negate the distorted single story of Africa which has been constructed by colonizers. Stories can create a negative image of a particular place if they are not told with genuine intentions. As the Nigerian writer Adichie says in her well known TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009) that "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" and this paper too makes an effort to repair the fragmented identity of Africa as a dark continent without history. It covers the aspects of

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Postcolonialism in context of biased and fractured identity of African people outside the continent. The identity of being a colonized continent controls the political policies for African immigrants abroad, it also controls the ideas of race, history, cultural heterogeneity and identity as an African and as an individual as well.

The present discussion tries to deconstruct the Western stereotypes, simultaneously, reconstructing the past heritage from an Afrocentric point of view. Afrocentricity is a paradigm which is based on the idea of assertion of the reoriented African identity or in other words, it is a way of looking things from a black perspective. The philosophy of Afrocentricity is developed by Molefi Kete Asante and Amma Mazama who are the central figures of Temple School. They have defined the term as, 'a way of answering all cultural, economic, political, and social questions related to African people from a centered position' (Asante, 56) Hence, this study makes an effort to ponder on the issues like race, historicity of African continent and the experiences of being 'African' in the USA. The text taken for analysis is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story 'The Thing around Your Neck'. It is the title story of the short story collection, *The Thing Around your Neck*, and discusses the aspirations of Africans about America when they are at 'home', the glamorous dreams they cherish of America and also talks about their struggle to survive and to maintain their identity of being 'African' in the New World.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prominent Nigerian writer who divides her time between Nigeria and the United States. She is the recipient of MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and Commonwealth Writer's prize for the best first book *Purple Hibiscus*. Her other works are *Half a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* and a short story collection *The Thing around Your Neck*. In her works she celebrates the Nigerian intellectual vigour and cultural wealth and also explores the challenges often faced by Africans abroad. The prominent theme in her works is Nigerian immigrants in the United States and their struggle to get acculturated in the new world. She speaks more through her female protagonists on the issues like gender, race and African ethnicity and tries to relocate the identity of being African in the White world. Adichie portrays a real situation of what it is to be at the position of 'Other'. Power discriminates between the 'other' and 'Center'. She asserts in her Ted talk: 'The Danger of a Single Story' (2009) that "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it definitive story of that person." She questions the fragmented stereotypical images of Africa as 'the Other World'. (Achebe, 251) She sees the lack of humanity in the construction of identity of Africans by Whites. Adichie asserts 'African Authenticity' and challenges the stereotype about Africa of having no past in her article "African Authenticity and Biafran Experiences". The literature she has written depicts African characters who are well off back home and having enough things to spend a comfortable life, quite contrary to what the world has thought them to be (incomprehensible and poor people).

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After my first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published, a professor at Johns Hopkins informed me that it was not authentically African. My characters were educated and middle class. They drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore, they were not authentically African. It made me wonder why I had never heard anybody speak of “authentically American” characters. (Adichie, 48)

In *The Thing Around Your Neck* Adichie sets all the characters in the United States. They all have an ache for self-definition within fragmented identities of being Immigrant. The story deals with various issues like immigration, cultural clash, ethnic violence, gender biasness, colonization and multiple layers of first-hand experience of being at home as well as abroad. Akkuna, a Nigerian girl, wins the lottery for an American visa and flies to the new world with her uncle. The family and the local people are very excited that she would live in the ‘golden land’ where ‘In a month, you will have a big car soon, a big house. But do not buy a gun like those Americans’ (115) but, things turn out exactly opposite to what she had thought before landing in the land of plenty. Akkuna was told by her uncle that America has plenty of everything but in turn she will have to pay a lot too, ‘The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too.’(116) Here Akkuna was cautioned by her uncle about her native identity which she can lose in the process of mimicking in order to get assimilated into their aspired culture.

The protagonist leaves the town Maine without any future hopes and settles in Connecticut at her own after being sexually assaulted by her uncle. Her shoulders are too tender to bear the communal and individual responsibilities. She soon walks into a restaurant to secure her livelihood thinking nothing lasts forever but even there she is paid lower wages than the others. Here, her skin colour, gender, and ethnicity decided her status of being “Other” or different. She is all alone with no money, no home, alienated and isolated yet very strong to face the unexpected upheavals of life. Back home, her family and relatives were expecting her to write to them, to tell them the glorious stories of America but she cannot tell them the reality that America is not picture perfect. The acute isolation was almost choking her and she felt uncomfortable; the feeling of loneliness remained inexpressible within her as she does not know anybody and nobody knows her. She was almost living the ghostly life there where one’s presence is not noticed, ‘Nobody knew where you were, because you told no one. Sometimes you felt invisible’. (119) It is a psychological fact that one needs emotional support when one feels lonely and alienated but to Akunna there was no one to whom she can vent out her pain. And this pain of acute isolation and the burden of expectations of her family which she cannot fulfill made her feel suffocated, ‘At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep.’(119)



The story is told in second person narrative 'You' and none of the character is named in the story except the protagonist. Author deliberately has made a generalization to display the identity crisis of African immigrants abroad. Adichie has shown the prejudiced image of African continent to elaborate on stereotypical image of the continent:

Many people at the restaurant asked when you had come from Jamaica, because they thought that every black person with a foreign accent was a Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African told you that they loved elephants and wanted to go on a safari. (119)

The narrator of the story is an outsider who is telling the experience of an African migrant who has no identity of her own. The protagonist is not able to locate herself in the new land and not even back home. In the words of Derek Walcott, she possesses double consciousness: one of leftover of native and another one is of First World. (Nayar, 179) She was standing at the border of two cultures, looking critically at both but neither assimilating nor combining the both. This threshold space is the cultural space which an African creates to adjust, as Bhabha calls it Liminal space or Liminality in his book *The Location of Culture*. Though this threshold space does not help to belittle the racial oppression and prejudices, Akunna creates this third space by giving up on her homeland experiences but the trigger behind this third space of liminality is the experience which she came across as an African diaspora in America. She had lost the grip on past and her future has no possibility to lead her to the destination. An individual adopts the transformative nature from one culture to another but contradictions and instabilities within the individual do not allow to get completely transformed.

This leads her to the state of alienation and dislocation. Akunna wants to go back home as America does not allure her anymore but she cannot leave America for two reasons: she cannot afford the return ticket and she also cannot reveal the truth about America to her family. Her imagination about America shattered into pieces. She could not afford to go to school and living in a tiny room, Akunna learns to accept the truth about America and Africa as well. "So, when he asked you, in the dimness of restaurant after you recited the daily specials, what African country you were from, you said Nigeria and expected him to say that he had donated money to fight AIDS in Botswana." (119) Diaspora theorists Avtar Brah and Robin Cohen state that the idea of 'home' for immigrants is a mythical one. It is a place of desire and longing which cannot go hand in hand with one's present. Brah writes, "Home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "Origin" (Nayar, 178) Hence, out of compulsion, the African immigrants chose the border space to maintain the psychological balance. Akunna's disappointment about American dream and cultural oppression even stops her from speaking. She stops writing home. 'There was

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nothing to write about' (Adichie, 118) However, like other diasporas she tries to come to border space and get befriended with a white man who wants to visit Africa.

Hence one is not living with one's own ethnic or cultural aspects nor can one completely gulp down the new culture. The compulsion is that one actually cannot survive with one's own ethnic values while one is living outside nor can he/she leave it due to inherent contradictions. The condition becomes as Mathew Arnold says, "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born". The identity natives had back home is lost in the process of assimilation and the identity of being African immigrant is not the part of social structure of the host country so it cannot produce them the desired position. Therefore, they try to create the third space which holds them in-between. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* terms this boundary space as "the realm of beyond". This process of entering in the realm of the beyond crosses the boundary of present or time and space to create the complex figure of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. Bhabha's idea of 'liminality' and 'beyond' is full of ambiguity. One cannot be sure of one's identity as an African nor as an American citizen but this is the condition where people reject the structures and hegemonies and occupy the heterogenous space where they come across to their own existence in post-colonial conditions. The third space or the realm of beyond is full of confusion and paradoxes but Africans have to adopt it to survive in a different culture along with their native identity. This doubling (of identity) resists the traditional casual link that explains contemporary metropolitan racism as a result of historic prejudices of imperialist nations. (Bhabha, 55)

One more aspect of identity crisis with every African diaspora is because of its geographical reality that constitutes the continent of Africa as a unitary entity in spite of having 55 different countries. It does not matter whether one belongs to Uganda, Kenya or Egypt, for the outsiders they are just Africans. The word 'African' itself has racial, ethnic and biological meanings. It is the racial identity of people from African continent which includes their skin color, hair texture, facial features etc. The very step they put out of the threshold of their home, they become 'black' and inferior creatures. One's biological or physical identity is not their social identity but in the case of Africans, outsiders have created their biological identity (their complexion and appearance) as their social identity. Their color, hairs and facial features represent them as savage, barbaric and uncivilized as if they never had been modern in any sense. In the story the protagonist is asked about her hair, and also, the American people are not able to believe that she knows English as well:

They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you had seen a car before you came to America. They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the

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braids? They wanted to know all of it stands up? How? Do you use a comb?
(116)

The fact of being from Africa creates the identity of natives as different or 'Other'. And, this 'otherness' carries their colonial history which is so dominant that instead of having the richest ethnicity of the world, nobody talks of it. Being "different" marks the 'difference of culture and history. And the *difference matters*' (Hall, 227) because, difference challenges the fixed binaries, black/White, West/Africa, Self/Other. The term 'Africa' has a cultural unity yet at the same time it has the shifting nature of African identity in Derridian term. As a 'Sign', Africa leads to further discourse of 'Otherness' which signifies Blackness as another marker of African identity. Signified Africa refers to the idea of Africa (its shape on map or the largely Black race) that is situated on the intersections of different races. (Kalua, 26) In the story 'The Thing around Your Neck' protagonist Akkuna is taken as Jamaican because she is black. Here, her identity of being an African is signified by her blackness. Though, she is a Nigerian but after all she is an African. Hence her identity in the USA was defined throughout the story by her 'blackness', her hair texture and the African country she belongs to. Signified 'Africa' in the story is taken as a poor land where people of color have never seen big houses or cars or anything luxurious. Postcolonial identity of Africa is all about positioning and repositioning her in past and present. Africa is being known by the metaphors, signifiers of race and colonial history:

The ideology of racism was derived from ancient and medieval ideas, biblical references, linguistic connections to the idea of blackness, all of which said, in the end: Black is not as good as white. And it therefore became morally acceptable to engage in unfair trade with Black Africans, to take their agricultural resources, to take their land, to "civilize" them. These dangerous stereotypes that originated from the need to justify the economic enterprises of slavery and colonialism meant that the inhabitants of Black Africa were no longer looked at with the mere curiosity that one may have for somebody who is different; instead, they were regarded with contempt. And these stereotypes found their way into the popular imagination and literature. (Adichie, 43)

Adiche herself has admitted this in her TED talk 'The Danger of Single Story' (2009) that African people are being treated according to the single story of catastrophe and poverty. This single story of catastrophe has been told by the Whites to show themselves superior and moreover to legalize their colonialism by calling them savage and barbarous. Adichie recalls a real incident of her visit to America at the age of 19. Her roommate felt pity for her even before she saw her as she had prejudices about Africa. She emphasizes that people have a single story of Africa i.e. "the story of catastrophe where there is no possibility of being



similar to high in anyway, no possibility of feeling complex than pity, no possibility of connection as human equals.”

In her TED talk (“The Danger of a Single Story”) Adichie gives an account about John Lock, a London merchant who was the first person to flaunt the single story of Africa in the amazing account of his voyage. He sailed to West Africa in 1561 and had referred to Africans as ‘beasts who have no houses.’ He writes, ‘They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts.’ The tradition of telling one fold stories about Africa starts from here. It has been considered that sub-Saharan Africa is the place of negatives, and of darkness, where there is no hope for future. In the words of Rudyard Kipling people of Africa are “half devil half child” who needs a white man to save them. (The White Man’s Burden)

Literature that comes from Africa, Middle East, and the Indian sub-continent is mostly full of characters that suffer or struggle for or with their identities as British had a colonial presence in their continent. Even after decolonization, having stereotypes about Africa makes it difficult to get recognition as equal humanity rather it emphasizes how Africans are different. They get their identity as an African when they come to US otherwise they are neither Black nor African in their own homelands. They become Black minorities with the very step in US and they start struggling for their identity with the process of naturalization. Now they are ethnic minority with American citizenship.

Adichie has tried to create a fresh image of African continent through her work. She has drawn attention towards the disorientation and decenteredness of ‘black’ people from Africa. Chimamanda has ensured the central role of the African subject in her works in the context of African history by removing the Whites from the center of African reality. She presents the stereotypes and single story about Africa but simultaneously she also has supplied the possibilities of having an Afrocentric approach to look at the history and culture of Africa. She calls upon to have black ideals and values to ensure the centrality of African perspective to define their Africanness. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’O also asks for the ‘decolonization of the mind’ to define themselves as African, “Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.” (Ngugi, 16) Chimamanda argues the necessity of representing the many faces of Africa against the Western stereotypes.

There is no doubt that we are all equally human, but the course of history has made it possible for some people to question the humanity of others, which has grave consequences for all of us. And so, we need to combat and challenge and complicate stereotypes. We need to conceive of a world in which the idea of difference is just that: *difference*, rather than



something necessarily better or worse. I am obviously biased, but I think that literature is one of the best ways to come closer to the idea of a common humanity. (Adichie, 46)

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