

RECONFIGURING THE IMAGE OF AFRICA IN TRANSNATIONAL SPACE : A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*

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Abstract

This article explores how Adichie's TED talk *The Danger of a Single Story* breaks and challenges the stereotypes about African people by the West and how her short story *The Thing Around Your Neck* creates a discourse of immigrant experience in a transnational space. It also brings in the immigrant experiences of African Women in America and how the Africans were perceived by the White Americans. Through the migrant experiences of women Adichie articulates a new narration of Africa which encapsulates the unconventional discourse of Africa as encounter by the immigrants. The focal point of the study is to reconfigure the generalised postulations about the African immigrants particularly women in transnational spaces by analysing their lives and experiences. It also analyses how the metropolitan marginalizes the immigrants as alien and exotic through the imperialist ideologies and practices. Adichie attempts a contrapuntal reading of the discourse of West through her TED talks and condemns everyone who creates a single story of Africa.

Key words: Culture, Contrapuntal Reading , Identity, Immigrant, Transnationalism, Stereotypes.

Power is the ability to not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person-Adichie

Introduction:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED talk emphasizes how the creation of a single story about countries and people affect the narration and interpretation of the same. The single story creates stereotypes which are indeed incomplete narratives. In her talk she also adds that how she has been informed a single story of 'poverty' about a boy named Fide who has worked in her home. When Adichie visits Fide's home she learns that poverty of Fide is just a single story which veils

the other stories about his family. Adichie tries to make people believe that there are many stories and narratives about people and place and it should not be confined within a single story which actually changes the perception of others. When she was a little girl, she was exposed to only British and American Children's literature. She was unaware of her own landscapes, customs and traditional practices embedded in African literature. She was not able to identify with the blue eyed characters that played in the snow and ate apples. She had never imagined that characters with black skin could exist in literature. Only after reading the works of writers like Chinua Achebe, Adichie unlearned the single story and she was surprised to see the chocolate skinned and kinky haired characters with whom she could easily identify herself.

Image of Africa:

In his poem *The White man's Burden*, Rudyard Kipling misrepresents the Filipinos as 'Half devil and half child' and he calls British Colonialism as the moral obligation of white men to civilize the non white people and Kipling celebrates imperialism and British Colonialism as ways of civilizing the barbarians, the non whites and he portrays the White men as messengers of God who civilize the whole empire 'earth'. Only through colonialism the whole earth can be civilized and moralized. Once Adichie has been asked whether all African men are physical abusers as Eugene in her maiden novel *Purple Hibiscus* and she counter attacks whether all American men are serial killers. To the world Africa is a continent full of savages and uncivilized humans and this has been created by the West. Adichie breaks the image of Africa as portrayed in the grand narratives by her counter narratives. John Lok a London merchant in his voyage to Africa in 1561 says "There are also people without heads having their mouths and eyes in their breasts". Adichie condemns the portrayal of African stories as filled with only darkness by the West. Since the dawn of colonialism Africa was dark because it was considered as barbaric and primitive on the other hand the West was portrayed a land of light knowledge and civilization. The latter was considered as a force and power whose mission on earth is to bring enlightenment and civilization to the colonized Africa. Africa was often treated as land lack of knowledge. Edward Said, a renowned Postcolonial critic introduces contrapuntal reading, an attempt to read the Orientalist texts against the grain. The intention of contrapuntal reading is to question the Europe centric values of the colonizer's texts and to point out and critique the myths and prejudices that underline them.

Albert Abu Boahen, Ghanaian academician and political leader in his book *African Perspectives on Colonialism* asserts that Africans had a very long and rich cultural tradition and they were also thriving economically and socially till before the European colonizers brought the light of civilization. Chinua Achebe in his essay "Image of Africa" criticizes Conrad's novel and his fundamental idea that Africans were lesser human beings than Europeans. Conrad in his novel *Heart of Darkness* describes Africans as prehistoric men. He does not even depict Africans as complete human beings but as physical fragments, black limbs, stamping feet, rolling eyes and so on. The characters Marlow had seen were not portrayed as complete men and women as if complete human identity was impossible in an African. Conrad has presented only the deformed image of Africa in contrast Achebe places the image of a civilized Africa. Achebe emphasized that the European art world was revolutionized by the dawn of Cubist movement and cubism which was indeed deeply inspired by African art, the art of Fang people and masks. Africa is civilized enough to deeply influence the culture of the modern western world. He adds that this image of civilized Africa is found missing in all the discourses about Africa that have originated

in the West. Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* breaks the stereotypical image of barbaric Africa and presents the image of a civilized Africa in contrast with the image of uncivilized Africa.

The Thing Around Your Neck:

In the story *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie expounds how the immigrant African women in America are treated with a single story which robs their dignity. The story is told in first person narration and it revolves around Akunna a young Nigerian woman who has just won the American Visa lottery. Her uncle helps her to find a job in America, the land of dreams: "He showed you how to apply for a cashier job in the gas station on Main Street and he enrolled you in a community college" (116). In America the protagonist lives in her uncle's home where she is expected to fulfill her uncle's sexual desires in order to live in his home: "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). This episode leads her to Connecticut to seek a job that pays less than two dollars in a restaurant. The manager of the restaurant Juan admits that he has never had a Nigerian employee but "all immigrants worked hard" (117). The protagonist often reminisces about her hometown and dwells in the memories of homeland. Akunna is often asked "where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you'd seen a car before you came to America (116). When Akunna has won the Visa lottery she became the captive of American Dream, owning a car and a big house. But this American Dream becomes a mirage for Akunna and she could not afford to go to school. So Akunna has to go to public library and refer the course syllabi on school websites and read some of the books.

When Akunna's boyfriend tells her that her name echoes like 'hakuna matata' (a phrase occurs in one of the theme songs in the movie *The Lion King*, meaning no problems), Adichie's use of the phrase and reference to *The Lion King* reinforces the image of Africa as a safari destination for tourists where animals roam freely like in a prehistoric place. In spite of its significant moral narrative, the movie was criticized for being racist in its portrayal of minority racial groups. This remains as a critique of America's race relations. She gradually forms a relationship with a young white man who frequents his visit to the restaurant just meet the protagonist. Both of them become comfortable in the relationship. But the public view of their relationship varies according to their colour: "You knew by people's reactions that you two were abnormal...the old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem, your self-loathing" (125). He confesses that he desires to visit Nigeria and he is ready to pay the ticket for both of them. "You wanted to feel disdain, to show it as you brought his order, because white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same – condescending" (120). Nevertheless she hesitates. She narrates an episode in which her father pleads with a rich man when he accidentally hits the car. She dislikes the actions of her father. Akunna wants to write letters to her home but she finds it difficult to write: "Sometimes you sat on the lumpy mattress of your twin bed and thought about home" (117). Nobody in Nigeria knew where Akunna was. She feels invisible and at night she feels lonely "something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep." (119). The thing that wraps around her neck could be the effect of American Dream with which she travelled from Nigeria to America. Everything seems to be shattered in this transnational space for Akunna. But when after the meeting with her boy friend "The thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go" (125). When Akunna is about to return to Nigeria her boy friend asked her whether she would

return to America and she reminded him that she had a green card: “ You turned away and said nothing , and when he drove you to the airport, you hugged him tight for a long, long moment and then you let go” (127). Akunna dislikes her life in America but her boyfriend eases her loneliness. Despite of his race, Akunna feels secure in their relationship.

Conclusion:

One fine day Akunna writes a letter to her family and the reply letter bears the news of her father’s death. Finally she visits Nigeria when her mother informed that her father has died. The story ends with Akunna’s return to her homeland but her visit remains ambiguous. Akunna is left with the empty promises of American Dream when she has left from Nigeria. American Dream is possible only for people who work hard “ rich people who wore shabby clothes and tattered sneakers, who looked like the night watchmen in front of the large compounds in Lagos and rich Americans were thin and poor Americans were fat and that many did not have a big house and a car” (118-119). The people Akunna met are ignorant of her home country Nigeria and everyone has the single story of Nigeria as a land torn by the civil war and poverty. Thus Adichie reconfigures the image of Africa lost in British colonialism and deconstructs the single story of Africans as barbaric and primitives and voices out the rich tradition of Africa particularly Nigeria.

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