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Representation of Nigerian History and Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Short Stories

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Abstract:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the most representative contemporary Nigerian Writer belonging to the third generation women writers of Africa. Gender, globalization, cultural consciousness and diaspora are some of the recurring issues in her writing. She has written three novels and one short story collection. *Thing around Your Neck* is her short story collection wherein she not only dwells on the process of immigration but also introspects into African diaspora in America. Both her settings as well as character become live in these stories that depict Nigerians in United States. The present paper explores Adichie's central hypothesis behind writing the short stories.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Diaspora, History, Nigeria.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a major voice from contemporary Nigeria. She is the leading third generation writer. She was born on 15th September 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. James Copnall calls her "the most prominent" of a "procession of critically acclaimed young Anglophone authors [that] is succeeding in attracting a new generation of readers to African literature". She is a gifted Nigerian writer whose work has been translated into thirty languages and has appeared in various publications including *The New Yorker*, *Zoetrope* and *Granta*.

Adichie's Works:

Purple Hibiscus, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* are the major novels to her credit. Adichie's third book, *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009), is a collection of short stories. In 2010 she was listed among the authors of *The New Yorker's* "20 under 40" Fiction Issue. Her story, "Ceiling", was included in the 2011 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Nigerian Literature:

Adichie divides her time in Nigeria and America. She writes about the Nigerians in Nigeria and outside as well. Race, culture, gender, diaspora and history are some of the most recurring themes in her writings. While writing about the people and nation she presents them in such a manner it becomes the national identity. Her portrayal of Nigeria and its people

through her novels and stories is very realistic. It leads one to illustrate the connection between history and literature.

History in Adichie's Writings:

Biafran war in Nigeria is the predominant historical theme in Adichie's works. She has adopted it as a traumatic experience from her parents. Biafran war is the central theme of her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Her stories depict the traumatic after-effects of the period of colonization that are affecting Nigerian society today, and the character's individual traumatic experiences of the war. Narration and testimony are central to overcoming the stifling effect of trauma.

The Thing around Your Neck:

The stories are set where one finds middle-class Nigerian in the South, and the North of the country and in the West. In America during the colonial rule Africa people went through bitterness, ignorance, loss of identity, with this in mind, Adichie depicts the hope of Africa in the post-independence Africa society's survival. According to Douglas Killiam and Alicia L Kerfoot, "Chimamnda Ngozi Adichie's short stories are mostly about the Nigerian immigrant experience in America".

The American Embassy:

Adichie's story "The American Embassy" describes an incident where police invade the home of an investigative journalist in a violent way. The unnamed journalist and male head of the household brings tragedy upon his family when Abacha's military junta whose shady deals he keeps exposing, comes after him. The story mainly represents the invasion of the domestic space by political violence during which their four-year old son is killed by one of the hit men and how it affects the mother. From the woman's perspective, her husband's stature in public as a brave and courageous man, as a "voice for the voiceless" deserving of a Human Rights Award, is compromised by the senseless and brutal death he brings upon his son. To her, what her husband has done is "simply an exaggerated selfishness" (TAYN 136).

The Headstrong Historian:

Adichie's story "The Headstrong Historian" features a similar though more serious and academic attempt to re-write history, but by a female character, Grace, an academic at University College in Ibadan who publishes a book on the history of Southern Nigeria. Notably, Grace's book is aimed at reclaiming the history of tribes of Southern Nigeria otherwise (mis)represented in colonial history books. Grace's first step towards the reclamation of her people's stories is to "change her degree from chemistry to history" (TAYN 216).

Jumping Monkey Hill:

In "Jumping Monkey Hill" Adichie seem to draw on her experiences as writer during writing workshops. The story is about writers' retreats: at the Jumping Monkey Hill resort in Cape Town. The story reflects on travel, displacement, and the idea of literary production as autobiographical. In it Ujunwa, a young Nigerian writer, is invited to a British Council-

sponsored African Writers' Workshop in Cape Town where she meets other participants from Senegal, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa. It also features a story within a story as in a piece of writing presented at the workshop, Ujunwa fictionalises her own experience as a jobless graduate struggling to get employment in Lagos. In her story, Chioma, a university graduate, struggles to get a job until her estranged father helps her secure some marketing job in a bank. To make her appointment permanent, Chioma is required to bring 10 million Naira worth of new accounts. On her first assignment, Chioma realises that to get new accounts, especially from rich business people, requires that she prostitute herself which makes her quit on her first day at work.

A Private Experience

In "A Private Experience", Adichie introduces us to the chaos and religious riot that a Hausa Muslim onion seller and an Igbo Christian medical student Chika finds herself hiding with an uneducated Muslim woman from rioting Muslim who are taking machetes to the Christians. The shared refuge brings about a shared intimacy that would never occur in normal times. This shows the experiences that Nigerians pass through in times of riot, the ugly experiences of the realities of living in Nigeria.

Ghost:

The only one story that features a male character is "Ghost". It relates an encounter of a retired professor inwardly recall the many changes that have taken place in the intervening years, the betrayals by colleagues and by government, the loss of dreams and identity, ideology of Africa and also of the professor's own life as a result of being treated with counterfeit drugs the same wife who still pays mighty visit to her husband's room. Also showed here is the issue of corruption as experienced by the professor whose pension was not paid and owed.

Diaspora:

The term 'diaspora' refers to 'scattering' or 'dispersion'. When it refers to human beings it implies a scattered population with a common origin in a smaller geographic area. It also refers to the movement of the population from its original homeland.

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines diaspora as, "a group of people who live outside the area in which they had lived for a long time or in which their ancestors lived – a: the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland (the black diaspora to northern cities), b: people settled far from their ancestral homelands (African diaspora), c: the place where these people live.

According to Wikipedia it has come to refer particularly to historical mass dispersions of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from Europe, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the southern Chinese during the coolie slave trade, or the century-long exile of the Messenian under Spartan rule.

African Diaspora:

African Diaspora is one of the largest diaspora of modern times it dates back several centuries. Its origin is in the Atlantic Slave Trade. At that time almost 9.4 to 12 million people from North, West, West-Central and South-east Africa survived transportation as the slaves in the Western Hemisphere. These people have influenced the culture of English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish colonies. Even before that millions of Africans had moved and settled, usually as slaves, sometimes as merchants and seamen, in different parts of Asia and Europe. In modern times, some of the Africans are moving to US and UK for education and better prospect. Chimamnda Ngozi Adichie depicts this type of immigrants from African American diaspora through her writings.

Diaspora in Adichie's *The Thing around Your Neck*:

The protagonist of the title story, "The Thing around Your Neck" notices ethical contrast between the two cultures since she moves from Nigeria to New York. She is surprised to know the ethical values of the west. The second person narrator of the story tells her the bitter reality behind the success stories of the working women as the story runs, "If you let him, he would do many things for you. Smart women did it all the time. How did you think those women back home in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City?" (117). She learns is 'America was give-and-take'.

Imitation:

In the story "Imitation" the protagonist is a Nigerian young woman who has got married with a Nigerian settled in America. After reaching US she finds the reason to love about America – i.e. the abundance of unreasonable hope. Adichie writes, "She had never imagined that her children would go to school, sit side by side with white children whose parents owned mansions on lonely hills, never imagined this life. So she said nothing." (27).

Ghosts:

The old Professor in the "Ghosts" whose daughter is settled in the US refers to American life style as "A life littered with what we call 'opportunities'". The protagonist of "On Monday of Last Week" depicts another important aspect of immigration - i. e. racism. He says, "My wife is African-American and I'm white, Jewish." (76). In "The Arrangers of Marriage" readers are introduced to the idea of marriage among the immigrants. When the protagonist asks "Why did you marry me?" her American husband says with a smile, "I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin".

Conclusion:

Adichie documents the Nigeria-Biafra War, but the story revolves around how this particular period in time was experienced by the characters. Adichie aptly uses the different characters to demonstrate that there are as many versions of reality as there are people to interpret it; she uses her stories to show these different dimensions of one and the same period in time. Moreover, by conjoining history and literary writing, Adichie enables herself to engage with the deep personal connection she has to the Nigeria-Biafra War. Adichie

adopts the intersections of history and literature to keep the past in the present, to keep it alive, and also to make the historical and political history felt.

It is concluded that Adichie's Nigerian immigrants in America face through lot many changes and challenges right from language, culture, and racism to ethics and economics. In an interview with Maria Blackburn, Adichie expresses sentiments about belonging, or rather about the lack thereof: "I will always feel like I don't belong [in the United States of America] fully. Even though I also feel I'm an observer in Nigeria".

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