

Article

## *The Thing Around Your Neck: A Study of Marginal Voice*

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates marginal identity through several female characters in the story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, examining the predicaments they faced and the resistance they offered. In Nigeria, female immigration soared after independence due to high aspirations for their future economic stability. For this, sometimes they have to undergo multiple challenges, such as being a victim of physical and emotional abuse. These abuses were not being done by outsiders of the society but by their relatives, like boyfriend, husband, uncle, and grandmama, in the name of gender discrimination. This paper aims to highlight the marginalized voices of female immigrants and indigenous people through their identities and resistance. Resistance "has several shades such as non-conformism, protest, propaganda, commitment, criticism; it works in different ways for different people, adopts a variety of means and mediums" (Jain 1). In this research, feminist views and a neocolonial approach are employed, and to support the arguments, a textual analysis method is utilized.

**Keywords:** female voices; economic issue; identity; resistance

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## Introduction

*The Thing Around Your Neck* is a collection of twelve short stories. The renowned Nigerian author Adichie presents these stories in a straightforward narrative style. She was a fabulous storyteller from her childhood and also a great reader of different books. She suggested that beginners should start their initial reading by focusing first on old books, and later on new books. Being an excellent storyteller, she describes the story through these lines, “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” (Adichie 2009). The present collection portrays women who play significant roles, who must overcome numerous difficulties caused by men or the society in which they live.

## Gender and Identity

The story “Cellone” begins with a Nigerian family in which the father of the central character was very traditional, discriminating between his boy and girl children. Adichie wants to convey in this story that different circumstances bind a girl, but a boy has the freedom to do anything. Here, the narrator, an unnamed character, shows her pathetic view of her brother Nnambia when he robbed his own house and stole his mother’s jewellery. He had a group of rogue boys and was soon imprisoned. Observing his behavior and releasing him from prison, a policeman stated these lines, “You can not raise your children well, all of you people who feel important because you work in the university. When your children misbehave, you think they should not be punished. You are lucky, madam, very lucky that they released him” (Adichie 20). Here it is evident that despite all the faceless behavior, males are expecting special treatment from society. “The Arrangers of Marriage” tells the inner experience of the lead character and narrator, Chinaza, whose husband, Ofidile, is obsessed with America and American culture, despite being Nigerian. Chinaza’s uncle and aunt arranged her marriage with Ofidile, but she is not happy, disillusioned, and does not enjoy her sex life. Her husband does not care about his new bride’s interest, and just starts having sex to relieve himself, “my husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine...he raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist. ‘Wait,’ I said, so that I could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty. However, he had crushed his mouth down on mine...when he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs” (Adichie 168-169). Rejecting his Nigerian culture, Ofidile does not like her cooking style, language, and the way she talks. One day, she cooks ‘coconut rice’, and the neighbor Nia praises it so much. After meeting twice or thrice, Chinaza comes to know that Nia and Ofidile were in a relationship two years ago, but they broke up after just one week. Ofidile instructs Chinaza about living style through these lines, “‘speak English. There are people behind you,’ he whispered, pulling me away, towards a glass counter full of twinkling jewelry. ‘It is an elevator, not a lift. Americans say elevator’” (Adichie 177). Despite all the issues, she is bound to accept her fate and willing to, “start afresh” (Adichie 186) because, “this is the U.S. of fucking A., for God’s sake... I went back across the hall the next evening. I rang the doorbell and he opened the door, stood aside, and let me pass” (Adichie 186). In “Tomorrow Is Too Far”, Adichie

explores the relationship and discrimination between a brother and sister or between a male and female. An unnamed female character and narrator, who is so jealous of her brother, Nonso, that she pranked him with a snake when he climbed to the top of the tree, and he fell to the ground. After falling on him, she stared at him until he died. After that, she called her traditionalist grandmother and mother. Grandmother gives priority to Nonso, as Nonso will climb the tree, whereas the narrator was not a good climber. He will take the first sip of coconut water and pluck the coconut. The narrator also has a cousin, Dozie, whom she loves and hates more than her brother. Dozie was older than Nonso. Despite this, Nonso gets a chance in every action because of his firstborn male to firstborn father. Adichie utterly describes the male oriented society where hierarchy is primary and pertinent, it is clearly visible through the perception of traditionalist grandmother where she “taught Nonso how to pluck the coconuts...because she said girls never plucked coconuts...Nonso sipped first even though Dozie was thirteen, a year older than Nonso,...Nonso was her son’s only son” (Adichie 187-188).

### Immigration and Identity

“Imitation” voices the story of an immigrant female, Nkem. She lives in America, while her husband, Obiora, lives in Nigeria with his parents and his girlfriend. The name of the story justifies its name through the central character, Nkem, who imitates an American woman to please her husband. Nkem struggles with mental trauma as well as physical pain; she decorates herself by cutting her hair and maintaining her physical beauty to attract him, but all these things do not matter to him. With two children, Nkem did everything quietly that he wanted to do with them. Here, the issue of Identity and the impact of immigration is clearly visible. This pain and agony may also be felt through these lines, “Nkem sighs, runs her hand through her hair. It feels too thick, too old. She has planned to get a relaxer touch-up tomorrow, have her hair set in a flip that would rest around her neck the way Obiora likes” (Adichie 27). “On Monday of the Last Week” is about an immigrant Nigerian woman, Kamra, who works as a babysitter in an upper-class family. Adichie explores the psychological and emotional condition of Kamara, who is desperate to do any kind of job at any cost due to immigration. Although waiting for a green card and to secure a proper job in America, Kamara notices how an upper-class family is separated in their day-to-day lives. Last Monday, she joined the duty, and the result is the present situation, “she had a master’s degree, that she had recently arrived in America to join her husband, and wanted to earn a little money babysitting while waiting for her green card application to be processed so that she could get a proper work permit” (Adichie 76). The eponymous story, “The Thing around your Neck,” tells about an immigrant young Nigerian woman, Akunna from Lagos, who wins the visa lottery to go to America. She arrived in America to live with her pledged uncle, a married man with children. There, she wanted to study and earn money in order to send half to her parents. Her uncle gave her a cashier job in America, where he tried to sexually assault her because America is a country of “give-and-take” (Adichie 125). She was much disillusioned about the effects that she had gone through. Later, she was silent like an invisible person that nobody saw. Her state of quiet is surrounded by dejection, disappointment, and a

gap between a sense of home and a landscape that is culturally aligned, “the thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go” (Adichie 125). In “Shivering”, the central character Ukamaka, a Nigerian graduate student in the US, faces a psychological situation like other female characters Nkem and Kamara. She was attracted to a male character, Chinedu, a person who accidentally knocked on her door. After entering, he prays to put her hand in his, but she shivers due to spiritual awakening, and she does not tell Chinedu. He respects whatever she does. Due to this respect, she compares him with her ex-boyfriend, Udenna. The experiences, such as shivering, that she shares with Chinedu later, validate her religious practice. This led her to value her own thoughts and feelings because her journey in her relationship with her ex-boyfriend was very frustrating and unfaithful. Even though he never says any affectionate word to her and accidentally broke up with her to say a word like, “Staid” (Adichie 148), Udenna never said ‘I Love You’ to me because he thought it was a cliché. Once I told him I was sorry, he felt bad about something, and he started shouting and said I should not use an expression like ‘I am sorry you feel that way’ because it was unoriginal” (Adichie 153).

### Resistance and Identity

“Jumping Monkey Hill” describes the experience of the central character, Ujunwa, a writer, who was invited to a literary workshop in South Africa. A male character, Edward Campbell, a British workshop organizer, misunderstands the people and tries to bribe Ujunwa sexually. However, Ujunwa rejects his bribery and reflects on her own experience in her writing, “she turns to the door and opens it and walks out into the bright sunlight. She walks and walks where she gets a taxi and goes to the office to clear out her almost empty desk” (Adichie 111). Here it is evident that Edward’s limited perspective leads to defining colonialism and racism. This kind of notion illustrates the power versus identity and resistance versus the oppressor. “Revolutionary violence brings needed physical release to natives whose muscular energy has been blocked...by colonial confinement. A colonised person, then, resembles a patient suffering from neurosis or hysteria manifesting itself through physical symptoms” (Wyrick 109). “The American Embassy” is about an unnamed woman, who stands in line at the American Embassy to apply for an asylum visa, suffering from mental trauma because she is recently widowed and constantly thinking about the death of her four-year-old son, Ugonna. Due to the publication of a political article, her husband was also bound to escape and was killed. However, she is being assaulted in her own home by drunken Nigerian soldiers in search of her husband. Finally, she was very frustrated and exited the Embassy. It shows the resistance against the American system: “She walked out of the American embassy, past the beggars who still made their rounds with enamel bowls held outstretched, and got into her car” (Adichie 141). Resistance, then, is the freedom of the other to reject one’s dominance. Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols* opposes “the measure of freedom, in individuals and in peoples? The measure is the resistance that must be overcome, the trouble it costs to stay on top” (75). The final story of this collection is “The Headstrong Historian”. The story revolves around the headstrong female character, Nwamgba, who shapes her own destiny. She marries her lover while she is aware that his family has fertility problems,

due to this, she faces many miscarriages. Fed up with taunting people, she tries to find another wife for her husband, Obierika, who lives with his two cousins as if they were his own brothers. Soon, they give poison to Obierika due to jealousy, but she fights at the end. Another concern of this story is colonialism, imperialism, and slavery. Adichie explores how the British Empire slowly imperializes on Africans' minds. They were also preparing slaves for Christian missionaries. Nigerians were changing their Igbo names into English names and becoming Christians for survival through baptism. Nwamgba did not like this system, but due to her son Anikwenwa's adaptation of Christianity, she agreed. At the end of the story, her son's daughter, Grace, is being called 'Afamefuna' by Nwamgba, which means "My Name Will Not Be Lost" (Adichie 214). She worked hard to read many books, and she was truly connected to her roots and celebrated her Igbo culture against the system of Christianity and superstitions:

It was Grace who would read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself until her teacher, Sister Maureen, told her she could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry. (Adichie 216)

## Conclusion

*The Thing Around Your Neck* offers a deeper insight into understanding Nigerian culture and lifestyle through its characters. Adichie focuses on female characters from a feminist point of view. As a writer, she strives to rescue black women and liberate them from their oppression. After reading the stories, the reader navigates through the different strata of life to connect with their own emotions through the diverse psychology of the characters. She focuses not only on the marginalized female characters but also on the resisting female characters who strive to discover their selfhood. In the "Imitation", Nkem chooses to relocate to Nigeria with her cuckold husband and fight for their marriage after battling a deep inner turmoil of evil thoughts toward her circumstances, "we are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back." She speaks slowly, to convince him, to convince herself as well" (Adichie 41). Here, it is true to say that Resistance and power are synonymous. In their existence, these two concepts are implicated in one another. In this connection, Foucault's statement is justified, "where there is power, there is resistance" (95).

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