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A Literary Analysis of short stories in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Immigrating to a new country is often linked with the notion of excitement and prospective futures. However, the difficulties that immigrants endure during their assimilation to the new environment, both procedural and emotional, are often glossed over; one of the most prominent being loneliness. In the book “The Thing Around Your Neck,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses perspectives to portray stereotypes, and the language of both the narrator and the characters, to reveal and detail the solitary experiences of Nigerian women immigrating to America.

The stereotype of America viewed from the perspective of developing nations, is what motivate many to move to the states—often the “American Dream.” This concept, that in America working hard would yield a life of happiness and comfort, is exposed in both of the short stories “On Monday of Last Week,” and “The Thing Around Your Neck.” In the former story, Kamara’s flashback about her life in Nigeria reveals her belief that “America was about hard work, [...] and one would make it if one was prepared to work hard,” (83) and conveys an excitement towards America during her fast-paced recollection of her wait for a green card (83). In the latter story, Akunna narrates: “In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house,” as well as those of her relatives: “In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the thing [relatives] wanted were minor—handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes.” (115) We see that America was, to Kamara and Akunna, synonymous with prosperity and material abundance.

Both of their dreams, however, turned out to be illusions as time reveals the gritty details of daily lives in the country. In both stories, there is a sense of conflict and discomfort with their new lifestyle, may it be their job, or relationships; Kamara indirectly narrates her constant disapproval of the American lifestyles of her employer, Neil, as a babysitter of his son Josh; She is irritated when Neil praises her fluency in English: “it annoyed her, his surprise, his assumption that English was somehow his personal property;” (76) She is dissatisfied with her “common job of wiping the buttocks of a stranger’s child;” (78) and she is disappointed by her husband, Tobechei’s use of American accents. (85) These direct expressions of disapproval of American culture directly contrasts her initial image of the wealth and hopefulness of America seen from the outside, providing a sense of solitude and distance from her hopes.

The plain but slight connotations while she narrates the story also imply the sense of annoyance towards America; the gray Venetian blinds [that] cast strips of shadow over the counter,” (74) leaves a depressing and cold impression towards a typical American household scene; the description of Neil as a “collection of anxieties” (77) or that American parentings was a “juggling of anxieties” shows a disapproval of common American parenting; and even her first impression of the country in the “staleness of the air when she arrived at the Philadelphia airport;” shows how much she dislikes her stay.

Read together, however, her hate for America is mainly based on the stereotypes of American culture. Her ideas about the lives of America when she says that “these rich white people on the Main Line did not know what to do with their money,” (79) and that “A sated belly gave Americans the luxury of praising themselves for being a good parent,” (82) reveals the premature generalizations that she confidently states despite her short time in the country. She, therefore, feels disconnected from the culture in which she lives with, delivered mainly through the stereotypes as well as its distinctions from what she expected America to be—about wealth and happiness.

The story is somewhat different in the case of Akunna, however, who takes a more passive attitude regarding her new environment, and who often is the *subject* of the stereotypes. Many scenes describe the “mixture of ignorance and arrogance” (116) towards her heritage when her college classmates ask offensive questions about her looks, and when others assume that “Africans ate all kinds of wild animals,” or “guessed that you were African [and] told you that they loved elephants and wanted to go on a safari.” (119) Although she maintains interest and wonder in her new culture, evident in that she “wanted to write [home] because you have stories to tell [...] about the surprising openness of people in America,” (118) she ultimately finds the American people “condescending.” (120) Her loneliness stems not from difference or the mismatch of expectations and reality—but more from the stereotypical and biased misunderstandings she was subject to.

This aspect is most evident in her relationship with the boy, where a clearer expression of bias and stereotypes are apparent from the his perspective. She initially feels attracted to him for his understanding of her culture, expressed when he asks her ethnic group: “But he asked if you were Yoruba or Igbo, because you didn’t have a Fulani face.” (119) As the relationship progresses, however, it is apparent that, although the boy is knowledgeable in many aspects of Nigerian culture, he fails to understand that the culture, especially poverty, in developing nations that he romanticizes, is a reality for others, including Akunna, further intensifying the sense of misunderstanding and isolation.

When the boy expresses his desire to visit Nigeria with her, Akunna comments that “You did not want him to go to Nigeria, to add it to the list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at his life.” (124) She interprets the boy’s interest in her as “an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk,” (126): a sense of superiority. Conclusively, it is her feeling of isolation and letdown, that originates from the condescending and biased attitudes from the views of the American people, condensed in her relationship with the boy, that ultimately forces her back to Nigeria.

Language is another technique that Adichie uses to portray the sense of solitude in the character’s experiences, through both the narration and the conversation. Both of the characters develop distance from American culture, and find a partial relief of their loneliness through conversation—though often superficial or misconstrued.

Although there is a complete lack of conversation in the story “The Thing Around Your Neck,” the direct use of Nigerian words convey the rare solace Akunna finds in America. She finds comfort when her uncle’s wife called you “mwanne,” sister, at his house and “ate *garri* for lunch”, and was attracted by the boy who asked if she was “Yoruba or Igbo.” The use of her country’s language is what reminds Akunna of her home, and she is noticeably delighted by its use by others.

The stereotypes and ignorance of Americans towards her is also implied through short but powerful vocabulary. Her uncle calls the uninformed comments from her college classmates a mixture of “ignorance and arrogance,” which is later compressed into the word “condescending.”

In the case of “On Monday of last week,” it is through the conversations with Neil that Kamara feels discrepancy. The discussion about the meaning of the word “half-caste” (76) represents the disconnect; while she interprets it as a compliment, due to the positive images of American culture from Nigeria, in America the word is treated as an insult. This not only represents the differences in interpretation, but also the perceived cultural inferiority and superiority that the two countries, represented by Kamara and Neil.

Another show of the clash of the two philosophies are displayed in their conversations about Josh. Neil constantly asks how well Josh is doing in his phone call a day before Josh’s competition, while Kamara, evidently frustrated, repeats: “Everything is fine,” “He’s fine,” “He’ll be fine,” and “He’ll be fine.” (81) The sticker on the cradle that reads “Protect Our Angels” (82) directly sums up the parenting method that Neil endorses, and which Kamara finds extremely irritating and shows disapproval of.

Kamara finds distance between her husband after their reunion in America, focally represented by the new accent that Tobechei has acquired. Even in their most intimate moments, she expresses her aggravation of Tobechei’s false American accent “I wanna fuck you. I’m gonna fuck you” that “made her want to slap his face.” (85) This contrasts with the short, but profound conversations that she has with Tracy, an African-American artist, wife of Neil. Opposed to the mundane descriptions of the time spent with Tobechei, Tracy’s words are carefully narrated and illustrated, in which Kamara finds consolation. Tracy praises her looks, “You have the most beautiful teeth,” (87) her academic degree, “Neil says you have a master’s degree. [...] That’s wonderful.” (88) and even the sound of her name, “It’s beautiful, it’s like music. Kamara, Kamara, Kamara.” (89) She is noticeably shaken by Tracy’s compliments and detailed praise about parts of her scarred dignity during her stay in America, which were excluded during conversations with Neil, or even her husband Tobechei. It is one of the few, if not the only, moment in which Kamara feels beautiful. Emotionally and physically distant from her husband and her family, she finds comfort in the superficial compliments from Tracy, which, near the end, she finds are just shallow flattery.

Adichie’s style of writing endears the character’s experiences of living in a foreign country in a way that many, born in the American culture, never could have felt. The use of stereotypes from both perspectives, as well as the delicate use of language, reveals how much of the hope of the American dream is let down by the miserable, and lonely lives of the immigrants. These techniques, combined with the simple but powerful plot, illustrates the solitude and despair of the characters with depth and sympathy.