

Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading

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Abstract: This research paper is focused on Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a collection of the stories from Nigeria, as a strong the postcolonial feminist voice. The writer presents the pains and pathos as well as the rebellion of the females in Nigeria and aboard. Western Colonialism has badly exploited the country and the people. The females have been the main victims of Nigeria at that time and later too. The patriarchy in the country has given much pain and suffering to Nigerian Women. They were victimized, dehumanized, and humiliated through different social institutions. They were also exploited by their close relatives who were patriarchal by nature. The writer says that the awareness among the people and especially on the women themselves has made the situation better. The females are able to resist any kind of inhuman treatment and severe tortures given by patriarchy and colonialism. As a qualitative research, the researcher used the text of Adichie as a primary source of data and analyzed with the theoretical tool of feminism and postcolonialism.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Patriarchy, Rebellion

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a young author of postcolonial Nigeria. His short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* contains twelve short stories and represents several strata of lives of the Nigerian people. Nigeria, an underdeveloped country, where there was extreme colonization of the Western countries like the U.S.A., faces several problems. Patriarchal exploitation, in another word, male domination was the serious problem over Nigerian females. Adichie's fictions are mainly based on the female experience of postcolonial Nigeria. During and aftermath the colonial period Nigerian people were dominated by Western ideology and imposed authority. Nigerian women's condition was far worse than Nigerian male because they were doubly marginalized exploited. They were facing many domestic problems because of male chauvinistic society. After the colonial period, colonial legacy continued in Nigeria and other countries where Nigerian people lived. This research mainly attempts to find out the postcolonial experiences of Nigerian women and their silence, resistance against the situation through minute textual analysis of the book *The Thing Around Your Neck*

with the spectacle of postcolonial feminism.

The underdeveloped Nigeria has many social problems. In the places with the lack of things and where people's demands are not equally fulfilled, there exist several types of conflicts, tortures, exploitation, pains and suffering. So the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie rightly captures the true essence of the society where females have been victimized. The analysis of the female experience in Nigeria and aboard during the postcolonial era is relevant in the present context of postcolonial period too.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's stories consist of the female characters who represent the state of marginalization, victimization, and alienation of the Nigerian women at home and aboard. By analyzing them in the context of postcolonial Nigeria the state of double marginalization of the female will be foregrounded in this research. Her writing explores the tension between Igbo and Western culture mainly through the experience of Nigerian women from different strata and age groups. So that Adichie is highly praised for her unique writing style with female experience.

The collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* which was published in 2009, the writer focuses not only on Nigeria but also on America. The twelve stories

explore the relation between bind men and women, parents and children, Africa and the United States. In the story “A Private Experience”, a student hides from a riot with a poor Muslim woman whose dignity and faith force her to confront the realities and fears she has been pushing away. In the next story “Tomorrow Is too Far”, a woman describes the painful secret about her brother’s death. In the story “Imitation”, a young mother deals her pain when she knows that her husband has moved his mistress into their home in Lagos. “*The Thing Around Your Neck*” presents the painful loneliness of a Nigerian girl who moves to America, faces pains. She suffered with the collision of two cultures, and the deep human struggle to reconcile them.

The Thing Around Your Neck by Adichie presents the victimization of the females in Nigeria and abroad. Exploitation of females is the result of the colonial legacy and the patriarchal social system where the colonizers (and) males are always exploiting females. The collection has got twelve short stories entitled “Cell One”, “Imitation”, “The Private Experience”, “Ghosts”, “On Monday of Last Week”, “Jumping Monkey Hill”, “The Thing Around Your Neck”, “The American Embassy”, “The Shivering”, “The Arranges of Marriage”, “Tomorrow Is Too Far”, and “The Headstrong Historian”.

The book, as a collection of short stories, reflects the different strata of the Nigerian people’s lives in the country and abroad. The stories present the Nigerians’ activities and cultures, their pains and pathos and complexities of lives. Adichie herself is a revolutionary female writer; she foregrounds the female experiences in this story book. Several of the stories have the principal female characters that have gone through a massive burden of the conventional patriarchal exploitation. Most of the females here have been affected due to the poverty, superstition, ignorance, hardships and discrimination that are prevalent in the country.

1.1. Objective of the Study

The objective of this research is to analyze Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck* with postcolonial feministic approach. By digging out the text, the researcher aims to know the author’s conscious resistance against patriarchy. The researcher tries to posit the resistance of female figures against colonial patriarchal domination in Nigeria. The present research, scanning the stories of Adichie’s collection, tries to find out the instances of the typical female experiences, their subordination, victimization, and their rebellion in Nigerian context.

1.2. Limitation of the Study

This research is solely focused on Adichie’s short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The twelve different stories collected in these books are analyzed from Postcolonial feminist notion. As a tool to interpret the stories, the researcher used the notions of different postcolonial feminists.

2. Review of Related Literature

Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck* [1] has received different critical attention since its publication. Adichie, as one of the Nigeria’s talented young writers, she is known for her well created stories and novels that present the picture of Nigerian society. In her works, Adichie addresses the challenge of the immigrant experience, focusing on issues of national identity, language, and female experience. The book, *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a fictional, strong but intelligent rehash of Adichie’s Biafra postcolonial struggle and stories of personal loss, individual realization, critics against colonial power and female experience and protest against male exploitation. *The Thing Around Your Neck* has been analyzed from various perspectives. The majority of critical commentary on Adichie’s novel views the text from various perspectives. In *The Times*, A critic Evaristo [4] writes:

This stunning collection of short stories confirms Adichie’s position on of Africa’s brightest new literary stars. The author of two important novels, her writing is even more poignant when applied to the short story: crisp, succinct, vigorous and loaded. ... Like all fine storytellers, she leaves us wanting more. (4)

Here the commentary is about the whole book that deals with the overall evaluation of the stories which he calls concise, vital and dynamic. He finds them interesting as they truly represent the Nigerian people’s true experiences in an artistic way.

Similarly, another critic McCandless [8] states:

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s first collection of short stories to follow her award-winning novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half a Yellow Sun*, headstrong girls and women make the best narrators—they’re sassy, agitated, and predisposed toward action once their inner injustice detectors calculate the full measure of their circumstances. Whether their subjugation is political, familial, romantic, or cultural, Adichie’s headstrong and heartstrong heroines reach a point where they take action to loosen whatever is choking them. That their actions are often risky or severe, and still seem inevitable, is a testament to Adichie’s empathetic storytelling. (5)

His commentary on its female characters is crucial. Many female characters in the stories are headstrong, who show the female rebellion despite the torturous environment. These are the focus points of the feminist remapping. In *The Financial Times*, Dixon [3] says, “Adichie’s spare, poised prose, the coolness of her phrasing, ensures these scenes are achieved with melodrama. And though she writes very specifically about Nigeria, the stories have a universal application” (9). Then Dixon says, “Adichie has shown herself a powerful writer, moving with disquieting ease from humour to horror, and anger to tenderness”. (11)

Here the critic reviews the book as the best storytelling as it includes the different stories representing the different strata of Nigerian lives. When we read the entire book it sometimes provides humour and sometimes horror. In *The Times*, Shilling [9] points out:

Family and exile are recurrent themes in this collection: by compulsion or choice Adichie's subjects are often far from home; alienated from the comforting familiarity of place and culture by violence, fear or the hope of a better life. Adichie's birthplace of Nigeria is the lone star of the collection: the place from where her characters set off to seek education and wealth in far distant places, the home for which they yearn when they are away. (13)

The critic remarks about the family exile and alienation that are the common issues of Nigeria which have realistically been represented in the book.

Considering the above analysis of different critics over Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the researcher focuses on the suffering of females and the way they resist against patriarchal domination in postcolonial Nigeria. By applying postcolonial feminist theories, this paper is new research over it..

3. Methodological Tool or Theoretical Framework

In this research paper, the researcher has used postcolonial feminism as the methodological tool to analyze the text. Many feminists have contributed to postcolonial feminism and express their ideas and opinions. About post-colonial feminism the feminist theorist Weedon [5], says:

postcolonial feminism, often referred to as Third World feminism, is a form of feminist philosophy which centers around the idea that racism, colonialism, and the long lasting effects (economic, political, and cultural) of colonialism in the postcolonial setting, are inextricably bound up with the unique gendered realities of non-white, and non-Western women. (7)

Here, Postcolonial feminists criticize Western feminists because they have a history of universalizing women's issues, and their discourses are often misunderstood to represent women globally.

Thus, one of the central ideas in postcolonial feminism is that by using the term 'woman' as a universal group, they are then only defined by their gender and not by social classes and ethnic identities. Also, it is believed by postcolonial feminists that mainstream Western feminists ignored the voices of non-white, non-western women for many years, thus creating resentment from feminists in developing nations. So also, in *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women*, another critic Kramarae and Spender [6] posits that:

Postcolonialism can provide an outlet for citizens to discuss various experiences endured during colonialism. [...] Postcolonial feminists see the parallels between recently decolonized nations and the state of women within patriarchy - both take the perspective of a socially marginalized subgroup in their relationship to the dominant culture. (22)

Here, 86 strong ties with black feminists because colonialism usually contains themes of racism. Both groups have struggled for recognition, not only by men in their own culture, but also by Western feminists.

Postcolonial feminism emerged from the gendered history of colonialism: colonial powers often imposed Western norms on colonized regions. In the 1940s and 1950s, after the formation of the United Nations, former colonies were monitored by the West for what was considered "social progress". The status of women in the developing world has been monitored by organizations such as the United Nations and as a result traditional practices and roles taken up by women—sometimes seen as distasteful by Western standards—could be considered a form of rebellion against colonial oppression. Third-world feminism has been described as a group of feminist theories developed by feminists who acquired their views and took part in feminist politics in the so-called third-world countries.

Postcolonial feminism is critical of Western form of feminism, notably radical feminism and liberal feminism and their universalization of women's experiences. Postcolonial feminists argue that cultures impacted by colonialism are often vastly different and should be treated as such. Colonial oppression may result in the glorification of pre-colonial culture, which, in cultures with traditions of power stratification along gender lines, could mean the acceptance of, or refusal to deal with, inherent issues of gender inequality. About postcolonial feminism in "Postcolonial Feminist Theory" another writers) Mills (1998) says, "Postcolonial feminists can be described as feminists who have reacted against both universalizing tendencies in Western feminist thought and a lack of attention to gender issues in mainstream postcolonial thought." (98).

Similarly, in "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism" another postcolonial author Narayan [10] says:

Given the significant dangers that varieties of cultural essentialism pose to feminist agendas, I believe that the development of a feminist perspective that is committed to anti-essentialism both about 'women' and about 'cultures' is an urgent and important task for a postcolonial feminist perspective. Such a perspective must distinguish and extricate feminist projects of attending to differences among women from problematically essentialist colonial and postcolonial understandings of 'cultural difference' between Western culture and its 'Others'. (89)

Here, the difference between the women in the different cultures like the western and the others is depicted. Though the women in Western as well as in Others have long been victimized due to the patriarchy, the women in the "Others" have been doubly victimized by the patriarchy as well as the colonialism.

All in all, Adichie's stories recounts the account of the females of the Nigerian land who have been under the shackles of patriarchy as well as colonial hangover. The females in the colonized countries like Niegaria are not only vicimitized at home but also aboard. The kind of culture and tradition that they originally have are not in the proportion of the colonizers.

Postcolonial feminism is an intervention of both postcolonial and feminist studies. It is the intersections of

colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race and sexualities in the different contests of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality and rights. It is identified with the work of feminist of the Third World origins located in the metropolitan university and the agendas set by them to define a recognizable postcolonial feminism. Interlinking feminism and Postcolonialism, Aschroft [2] et al. write in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* as:

Both feminism and Postcolonialism have often concerned with the ways and extent to which representation and language are crucial to identify formation and to the construction of "subjectivity". For both groups, language has been a vehicle for subverting patriarchy and imperial power [...]. Both discourses share a sense of disarticulation from an inherited language and have thus attempted to recover a linguistic authenticity via a pre-colonial language and a primal feminine tongue. However both feminist and colonized people like other subordinate groups, have also used appropriation to subvert and adapt dominant languages and signifying practices. (102)

The feminist and postcolonial studies get involved into a mutuality investigative and interactive relation with each other. There they are victimized not only by the colonizers but also by the people who have migrated from the third world countries like Nigeria and have linguistic and cultural affinity to them and even their own relatives. Postcolonial feminism is an intervention of both postcolonial and feminist studies. It is the intersection of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race and sexualities in the different contexts of women's lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality and rights. It is identified with the work of feminists of Third World origin located in the metropolitan university and the agendas set by them to define a recognizable postcolonial feminism.

4. Critical Analysis of the Text

Adichie, in the fiction, presents several examples of the females resisting against the Patriarchal and colonial ideology. Resistance or rebellions are the new ways to overcome against patriarchy and colonial domination for the third world females. In *The Thing Around Your Neck* the women characters like Akuna, Nkechi, Tobechei, Chika and others have shown the characters of the postcolonial females and are resisting against patriarchal cum colonial legacy. Using specific examples from Nigerian land this paper shows how women struggle to overcome marginalization in a sexist and patriarchal society. Love, war conflict and the persistent inequality between the men and women are among the dominant themes in the potentialities which the patriarchal structure has repressed. Women's impassioned struggles to free themselves from the shackles of male brutality and dominance are clearly seen in the novel.

Adichie remarkably dramatizes women's determination to survive in the face of violence, sexual assault, extreme starvation, senseless brutality and careless threats to their lives and property. Through her main characters, Adichie

reveals how the physical, psychological, and mental abuse of women can have negative effects on their well-being. The liberation of women from all structures against their peaceful co-existence alongside men deserves the support of all humanity. Every African woman must face up to the realities of her sexiest culture and asserts her rights.

The female characters like Nkem, Akuna, Kmara, Dozie and others represent the true essence of the female victimization in Nigeria. The title story, exemplifies her prevailing theme of homesickness as a physical, as well as a metaphorical, malaise. The 22-year-old narrator girl gains a longed-for American visa and goes to live with her uncle's family in Maine. "They spoke Igbo and ate "garri" for lunch and it was like home," recalls the girl, "until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning... And you remembered what he said, that America was give-and-take" (116).

Akuna, the girl whom the narrator addresses as "you", also is impressed by the description of America and decide to migrate there. She reaches there with a heavenly dream. But her dream is almost shattered there too due to the patriarchal superiority. She is harassed not only by the outsiders but also by her own relative, uncle. Being a bold young lady she leaves the house of her uncle where she has been taking shelter after she has arrived America. She reaches to the town of Connecticut. But there too she is not far from the patriarchal system, and its effects. She meets a young American named Juan, a university student, who too cannot be away from the patriarchal beliefs and attitudes. Whenever he met with Akuna, he began to behave in a manly way. Akuna says:

You said no the following four days to going out with him, because you were uncomfortable with the way he looked at your face, that intense, consuming way he looked at your face that made you say goodbye to him but he also made you reluctant to walk away.(121)

Here, she has been just the victim of her uncle and is in the process of being introduced with others. A love affair with a restaurant customer seems to offer the dream of a happy ending: love, intimacy, and security: "The thing that nearly choked you before you fell asleep started to loosen, to let go" (122). But the power of what she has left behind is strong and in the end it is the girl herself who lets her go.

In the story of *The Thing Around Your Neck* titled as "On Monday of Last Week" the African-American women named Chinwe shows a sort of silence resistance by refusal what her molestating husband Tobechei tells. He keeps relationship with other women and is going to have a baby but ignores his own wife's wishes. The narrator says:

Tobechei had brought her contraception pills because he wanted a year of just the both of them to catch up to enjoy each other, but she flushed one pill down the toilet each day and wondered how he could not see the grayness that clouded her days, the hard thing that had slipped in between them. One Monday of last week, though, he had noticed the change in her. (86)

Here, due to the patriarchal convention Chinwe cannot overtly reject her husband's idea but at the inner level she has got the consciousness that no male should have monopolistic decision on the matter of childbearing which is entirely her concern. Her husband thinks that he is the superior person to have a full control over her and can impose any sort of decision over. The males could have control over the females but they cannot control everything of them especially the matters of childbearing. So, she can easily befooled him and bear the child soon. It is the beginning of the resistance against the patriarchal treachery by going against their wishes and shattering their secret plans.

Another similar kind of rebellion but a more overt one can be seen in the title story when the uncle tries to molest Akuna, she escapes from him. Unlike a conventional submissive and obedient girl she shows a bold resistance against his wishes. He had persuaded her enough by giving the instance that "America is give and take" but she is not so easily melted. Despite the shelter she has got in his house she dares rejecting his attempt. She says

You locked yourself in the bathroom until he went back upstairs, and the next morning, you left, walking the long windy road, smelling the baby fish in the lake. You saw him drive past—he had always dropped you off at Main Street—and he didn't honk you. You remembered what he would tell his wife, why you had left. (117)

Akuna's act of leaving the shelter is a much rebellious act. She was in the new land and perhaps was unknown where to go after leaving the uncle's home. Yet she did not endure the treacherous acts and left the house. She wanted to protect her dignity even if she had to bear troubles. This shows the growing consciousness among the women that they should not be subdued without any reason. They also have the dignified self which they should protect and then only can be a free being. Otherwise, in being dependent on others they may have to give their dignity at every moment.

Colonialism, as it began with the motive of ruling the world, it made the people of the colonized countries suffer a lot physically and mentally. Among the people too, it is the female race that has been severely victimized by it. As they already were the marginalized parts of the society, colonialism has added the fuel to the burning flame of the suppression, victimization and dehumanization. For a long span of time patriarchy has remained a black spot on women's self development and existence. However, in several of the developed countries the typical conventional practices have been removed and the females have leapt a lot. At least they have been free from the superstitions and humiliating submission. But, still, in the countries of the "Third World" or in the underdeveloped countries the female race is still in victimization. The outward development seen in the countries has made them more pendulums. In the countries like Nigeria, there is the direct effect of the colonialism although the Nigerians are politically free. They are badly colonized in terms of culture and economy. They have a dream of going to the western countries or the US, get good education, earn a lot and live a sophisticated life. After

a great struggle they reach to the countries. But there too they are tortured and victimized.

They are either victimized by the colonizers directly or by the males of their own relations whose minds have been severely colonized. For example, they think that the sexual relationship even among the incest is not a taboo, which is the product of the colonization of their minds. The female's body has been mutilated and abused by the patriarchy and colonialism side by side. Colonialism takes a control over the entire nation and patriarchy takes the control over the females. In course of the control, they are curtailed, harassed and deprived of their rights. Hence, the females have been doubly victimized and marginalized by the legacy of colonialism and patriarchy.

The feminist and postcolonial studies get involved into a mutually investigative and interactive relation with each other. But when feminist perspectives are blind to issues related to colonialism and the international division of labour and when postcolonial studies fails to include gender in its analysis, then both theories fail to co-relate with each other to address the lives of women under colonization.

Adichie remarkably dramatizes, in her work, women's determination to survive in the face of violence, sexual assault, extreme starvation, senseless brutality and careless threats to their lives and property. Through her main characters, Adichie reveals how the physical, psychological and mental abuse of women can have negative effects on their well-being. The liberation of women from all structures against their peaceful co-existence alongside men deserves the support of all humanity. This study, therefore, suggests that every African woman must face up to the realities of her sexiest culture and assert her rights. This is undoubtedly a demanding choice fraught with its own dangers but a woman needs to burst the system and set up her won parameters within the society or risk being treated as a doormat for life.

In the first story "Cell One" the narrator, a girl, describes the activities of her brother Nnamabia, a male member of the family. He has learnt to steal the things from house and has fallen in the bad company. Yet the parents cannot take a serious step against him. It seems that whatever misconducts the boys do are pardonable but girls are not. Such discriminating treatment affects the boys themselves. Because of their misconduct the whole society suffers. So, the female discrimination is not only the problem of the women but it is widely pervasive to the whole society.

In the second story "Imitation" Nkem has been tortured by her husband who is reported to have done the second marriage in Nigeria while Nkem is in America. Her husband Obiora's such step of marrying another girl has given no peace in her mind. It is the form of the severe mental torture given to the women by the males. Despite their loyalty and honesty, the males become cruel to them and give them pain. Nkem, being a woman victimized by the husband, is still decorating her so that she could impress Obiora. She combs her hair for him and she decorates her pubic hair so that he would get more pleasure from her. It shows the female subordination and the superiority of the males. It further

shows the internalized patriarchy in the part of the females. Males can even have the extramarital relationship, whereas the female should still be a faithful to them and try to please them by undergoing different kinds of physical decorations.

So also, patriarchal society assumes females as the passive beings who do not have any decisive quality. Even in the matters of their personal life they decide themselves and impose their decision upon the females. For example, in the story "The Arrangers of Marriage" Adichie shows how the females are victimized by imposing others' decision even in the life-long matters. Agatha Okafor, an orphan girl who is reared by her uncle and aunt, is married to a diasporic Nigerian in America. In the matters of her marriage she is never asked and directly after the marriage she has to understand him and follow him being passive and bear whatever he does and says. She mentions a humorous instance while they were in bed after the marriage.

The vast differences between the Western women and the third world women cannot be avoided simply by the apparent activities and by saying the things. For this the economic colonialism should be stopped and the females of the third world also should be given equal kinds of education and opportunities. Then only they can be self reliant and can prove their personal efficiency and can compete with the colonizer women.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* depicts the condition of postcolonial Nigerian women who were exploited by the colonial power as well as the traditional patriarchy. In the fiction, both the patriarchy and colonization exploit women and make them to believe that they were unable to know and do anything the men would do. The dominant power and the discourses never provide freedom to knowledge. Adichie also shows some women, question and resist the domination, discrimination and

marginalization. Some stories consist of the principal female characters who have some sort of resisting role against the domination discrimination and the ill-treatment. In their resistance, they are seen to be in liberation or at least they have freedom of choice and independence from the patriarchy. The stories as a whole are the replica of the women experiences of the Nigerian context. Their culture is the patriarchal one where the colonialism has added a fuel to the discrimination, domination, and alienation in the females. The female characters also raise their voice against the dominating forces.

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