

## Literature as A Mirror of the Society: The Thematic Preoccupation of Chimamanda Adichie's the Things around Your Neck.

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### **Abstract**

*This paper sets out to study critically the thematic preoccupation of Chimamanda Adichie's collection of short stories in the **Thing around Your Neck** with the aim of pointing out the fact that literature is society-centered, that is, it serves as a mirror of the society man finds himself. Literary works are borne out of man's experiences in his immediate environment. Through a meticulous character sketch, the author is able to create prototypes of real human characters which enables the reader to see the good and ugly sides of human beings in the society. Chimamanda Adichie in 'Cell One', 'Imitation', 'A Private Experience', 'Ghost', 'On Monday of Last Week', 'Jumping Monkey Hill', 'The Thing Around Your Neck', 'The American Embassy', 'The Arrangers of Marriage' and 'Tomorrow is Too Far' subtly but explicitly exposes the pertinent issues bothering the existence of human beings on the society with particular reference to both Africans (Nigerians) living in the African society and in diaspora.*

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**Key words:** Literature, society, themes, human beings, short stories.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Literature or literary works (poems, plays and novels) serve as a mirror of the society man finds himself. This is so because literary works are borne out of or emanate from man's experiences in his immediate environment. Through a meticulous character sketch, the author is able to create prototypes of real human characters which enables the reader to see the good and ugly sides of human beings in the society. Wole Soyinka's **The Trials of Brother Jero** is a satire on how churches in Nigeria, his home country, have lost their spirituality and are fast becoming lucrative ventures for dubious religious leaders, Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** talks about the Ibo indigenous culture and the numerous religious conflicts and clashes with the colonialists during the colonization of Eastern Nigeria while Ayi Kwei Armah's **The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born** mirrors the Ghanaian society, the corruption and bad government leadership which eventually prompted the military to overthrow the lawless regime but the author ended the novel on a note of skepticism because he can envisage the same cycle repeating itself again.

Similarly, Chimamanda Adichie's **The Thing Around Your Neck** is a collection of twelve short but interesting stories with different themes woven around the lives of majorly Nigerian people who live in Nigeria, South Africa and the United States of America. Although the stories are not linked, a common thread runs through them and this makes them rich with reference to history, culture, societal norms and tradition.

In the collection of stories that make up this literary text, Adichie uses plain language which enhances the linguistic success of the stories to convey meaning and add the stamp of believability to their renditions of reality. Also, a combination of simple words plainly used, lack of superfluity, colouration or ornamentation and, sometimes, a mere piling of details

constitute simplicity in the narrative composition as we see in the short stories. According to Balogun (1991);

‘they (African writers) had of necessity to do violence to standard English in order to create an authentic image of Africa. Consequently, the English of the African short story is certainly not the same as that in British of the same as that in British or American short stories... The various attempts to make language authentically reflect African reality are evident in the increasing use of translated or untranslated words and phrases from indigenous African languages, urban colloquialism and slang’ (53).

Balogun is of the view that African writers, in telling their stories, use borrowed words and phrases either translated or not from the local language or dialect as well as pidgin and slang. This we see in most of the stories in **The Thing around Your Neck**. These help the writer in plain renditions of the narratives especially to readers who are familiar with the linguistics practices of the environment. Such uses are reflections of the society and reality and are replete in the collection of short stories under study.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework of this study is centered on the theory of New Criticism; the critical theory that examines literature as a presentation of art and the realities of society. New Criticism believes that the literary work should be viewed and examined as a work that reflects socio-political as well as economic experiences of the people in the society. It, therefore, examines literary texts from the standpoint of a merger of art and content as a representation of the society which should be studied as one. Analyzing this relationship, Meussa Bostrom explicitly asserts that;

‘the field of short story criticism is the final vestige on New Criticism in twenty-first century literary studies. Too long have critics ignored the context of the short story; the changes that have taken place in the material production of the form, the changes in the educational culture... implementations from the new critical tool box, in particular, the strategy of close reading expands the realm in which the short story exists, from the pages on which the words are printed to theoretically complex, culturally produced, and culturally limited texts that both reflect and project a world. (8)

In addition, the theory of New Criticism serves our purpose as it combines the art of the writer with the content of the selected stories from the text under study which reflects the experiences in the society.

The Nigerian short story conveys effective meaning by the use of words incorporated from the local languages and dialects, pidgin and aphorisms in its plain presentations as we see in the selected stories in **The Thing Around Your Neck**. All these are geared towards expressing the writer’s experiences in the society which he wants to expose to the reader.

### **THE CONCEPT OF THEME**

The concept of the theme has been variously defined by literary scholars. Abrams defines it thus, “...the term is more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader... Some critics have claimed that all non-trivial works of literature, including lyric poems involve an implicit theme which is embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery

(229). In addition, he opined that most modern critics of prose fiction make an important distinction between the fictional scenes, persons, events, and dialogue that a narrator reports or describes and the narrator's own assertions about the world, about human life, or about the human situation, the central, or controlling, generalizations of the latter sort are said to be the theme or thesis of a work (129). Abrams also explains that this theme could be explicit (clearly stated and deciphered) or merely implied, suggested on inferable from the narrator's choice and control of the fictional characters and plot of the narrative itself. He further states that it is often claimed that such generalization by the narrator within a fictional work, whether expressed or implied, function as assertions that claim to be true about the world, and that they thereby relate the fictional narrative to the factual and moral world of actual experience.

From the above, it can be deduced that the theme of a story is its underlying message, that is, the critical belief about life that the author is trying to convey in the novel, play, short story or poem. This belief or idea usually transcends cultural barriers as it is universal in nature touching on the human experience, regardless of race or language. A literary work usually has more than one theme as we see in most of the short stories selected for this paper.

According to Wikipedia (online dictionary), "the most common contemporary understanding of theme is an idea or point that is central to a story which can often be summed in a single word (for example, love, death, betrayal). A theme may be exemplified by the actions, utterances or thoughts of a character in a novel. It also states that a story may have several themes which often explore historically common or cross-culturally recognizable ideas such as ethical questions and are usually implied rather than stated explicitly. This means that the reader of a literary work has the task of bringing out the theme(s) implied in a novel, short play, play or poem after reading it.

### **THEMES IN *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK***

**CELL ONE:** The predominant themes in 'Cell One' are namely cultism in our campuses and corruption in the Nigerian Police Force. The Nigerian Police Force is representative of all government offices in Nigeria. These themes are prevalent in the Nigerian society. In the story, Nnamabia, the son of a University professor resident on the campus steals his mother's gold jewelry in a faked robbery and his mother pretends not to know the real culprit but supports him all the way. Nnamabia is eventually implicated in rival cult clashes on the campus and is arrested by the police and taken to the police station in Enugu, the state capital. The theme of government corruption is captured when Nnamabia explains that he was able to bribe the head prisoner in his cell, nick named General Abacha with the money he hid in his anus which would have been taken by the police who arrested him if he had not done so. Because of this bribe, he was not beaten by the other prisoners in the same cell with him and was even given some privileges. Also, Nnamabia's parents were able to visit him every day of the first week and also bring food from home to him by bribing the officers in the station with food and money. This is what actually obtains in police stations in Nigeria. This theme of government corruption features prominently during the military leadership of Sani Abacha which is the period this story was written. The narrator of the story informs us that some prisoners simply disappear implying they are killed. This is extent of human rights abuses in the Nigerian society which dominated during the military reign of General Sanni Abacha.

**IMITATION:** This is a story which revolves around Nkem and Obiora who are married with children in the United States of America but living in two different continents of America and Africa (Nigeria). Nkem, the narrator of the story thinks that America is the abundance of unreasonable hope and is happy to have married into the league of "Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies" and "Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America," Here, we see the theme of disillusionment as the affluent lifestyle Obiora

offers his wife and children is not enough to make them completely happy and fulfilled. Nkem longs to be in control of her husband's life after she is informed that her husband is keeping a girlfriend in their Nigerian home in Lagos. Obiora, on his part, lives a material America dream, but, according to the Nigeria woman Nkem met, he (Obiora), like other Nigerian men, wants to be in Nigeria where he is treated like a 'Big Man' which he cannot be seen as or referred to in America. Interestingly, most marriages in Nigeria are like that of Nkem and Obiora where couples who are financially stable strive to travel to America and the United Kingdom to give birth to their children so that they can be citizens of the countries by birth. Most men in Nigeria even struggle to relocate their families' abroad (Canada, America, United Kingdom and so on) while they remain in Nigeria because those countries have better educational, social and health care systems.

**A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE:** The major theme of this short story are racism and ethnocentrism. These have led to religious wars between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and have been on for several years. Muslims, who are predominantly northerners, believe their religion (Islam) is superior to the Christian religion practiced by the people of Eastern and South East Nigeria). In this story, a religious war starts because a Christian man ran over the Koran with his car and a Muslim man beheaded him for doing so. The narrator, Chika and her sister Nnedi get caught up in this fracas. Chika remembers that her sister would always say "religion and ethnicity are... politicized because the ruler is safe" when hungry people are killing one another. Despite the religious tension and killing on the streets, Chika (an Igbo) forms a bond with a Hausa woman who saves her (Chika) from being killed on the street. Later, when Chika sees the charred bodies littered in the streets, she observes she cannot determine whether they are Igbo or Hausa, Christian or Muslim. The scenario painted in **A Private Experience** is still predominant in the Nigerian society. This tension between these groups have led to serious insecurity issues as the Hausa herdsmen and Boko-Haram activists have moved down from the North to the East, South and Western parts of Nigeria where they terrorize, kidnap for ransom and harm innocent people in villages. As a result, farmers in these areas have abandoned farmlands to avoid being kidnapped, raped or even killed by the insurgents who are in their thousands littered in all nooks and crannies of the country.

**GHOSTS:** The theme of government corruption informs this story. A retired professor of Mathematics, James Nwoye, is not paid his pension when due possibly as a result of corruption by the government. It is either the Education Minister or the University's Vice-Chancellor is mismanaging or he has outrightly stolen the funds meant for payment of University retired workers. Vincent, a retired driver, clearly says the delay in pension payment is the actual reason people retire and die. This assertion is not far from the truth because several people who have retired from active service die before their retirement benefits are paid. This is because they are paid between four to five years after retirement. Meanwhile, it is stated in this story that people look the other way at professors lying about their birth dates so that they can work more years. Also, the issue of non-regulation of fake drugs in the market is another menace in the society discussed by the professor who lost his wife, Ebere, to fake drugs and when one of the fake drug dealers was apprehended, he had the nerve to say his drugs does not kill patients but they will not make them get better (cured of their ailments). This is the height of irresponsibility which is prevalent in the Nigerian society. The theme of ghosts is another major issue in the story. Ikenna, a University lecturer has disappeared with the civil war and when James encounters him on his way from Bursary office, he throws sand on him to make sure he is not a ghost. Ebere, his late wife visits him once in a while as a ghost and he fears to disclose this to his daughter, Nkiruka, who will conclude that her father has become senile.

Moreso, the themes of racism and ethnocentrism are the major themes highlighted in the short story titled **On Monday of Last Week**. There are also traces of disillusionment on the part of Kamara who seems disappointed on the realities of life in America contrary to her expectations. Neil, Kamara's white employer talks down on her like the way unskilled servants are spoken to and is surprised that Kamara speaks English fluently and has a master's degree as if good spoken English is the exclusive preserve of the Whites only. We discover later that his mightier-than-thou-attitude is actually a veil to cover his inadequacies and anxieties in his parenting role to his son, Josh and his artist wife who seems to be in control of the marriage.

**JUMPING MONKEY HILL:** This has the same theme of racism which runs through the story from the beginning to the end. African writers from South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and Zimbabwe who converge on a South African resort for a workshop organized by a white man, Edward and his wife, Isabel, are treated as second class citizens by the couple. They are proud of themselves for organizing the workshop and supporting African writers and their attitudes, most of the time, are condescending to the dignity of the writers. Also, the resort is frequented by white people seeking a sanitized, theme park version of Africa, who look down at the black African workshop participants, and even at the white woman, Isabel, for dressing in African clothing. This attitude is not far-fetched from what obtains in the society where whites (even in Africa) feel and show that they are superior to blacks.

**THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK:** This story has the themes of disillusionment with the American dream and racism enshrined and exposed through Akunna who experiences shock and disappointment on her arrival to America. To her chagrin, she is faced with the hard realities of life when she arrives. Previously, she had envisaged that everyone in America had big house, drove a posh car and owned a gun. She had promised her people back home in Nigeria lots of beautiful things. However, her hopes and expectations are dashed when her uncle attempts to sleep with her, she refuses and flees from the house. She refuses to write to her family because she does not want to admit how badly she has failed. The American dream is a sham that has kept a lot of people imprisoned. Many people still have this false illusion that once they travel to America, all their problems would be solved and they would live there happily-ever-after. On the other hand, the theme of racism which does not escape Achchie's stories is present here. Akunna's employer thinks that she will be a good worker because she is an immigrant. Even if this assertion seems positive, such expectations for being an African is a form of racism. In addition, people assume Akunna and her white boyfriend cannot be a couple because of their races. Akunna says 'white people who liked Africa too much [or]... too little were the same – condescending'.

**THE AMERICAN EMBASSY:** The major theme of this story is human rights abuses suffered by the citizens during the military rule of dictatorship of General Sanni Abacha (1993-1997) and the severe oppression journalists suffered. The narrator's husband, a journalist with The New Nigeria newspaper was the first journalist to accuse General Abacha of inventing a coup so he could kill and jail opposition. As a result, he is detained for two weeks and beaten. Armed soldiers are thereafter sent to assassinate him but fortunately he has been smuggled out of the country. His wife and only son, Ugonna, suffer terribly in their hands and he is killed by one of the soldiers but the narrator escapes by jumping off the balcony. Adichie, in this story, also explores the theme of women not having a choice in their destiny. The narrator, who is also a journalist gives up her career when she becomes pregnant and remains bound by her husband's choices. However, in the end, she makes a choice to stay back in Nigeria not minding her fate afterwards which is a surprise to all.

**THE ARRANGERS OF MARRIAGE:** This is a story that also highlights the theme of disillusionment with the American dream. Chinaza, a young Nigerian woman, orphaned and raised by her aunty Ada and Uncle Ike, is traded off in marriage to a Nigerian doctor based in America. She is, however, disappointed that he lives in a shoddy, barely furnished apartment in Brooklyn, New York when she arrives in America. She is appalled that her doctor husband does not earn as fantastically well as she envisaged because he has not yet completed his training. Dave lives a highly pretentious life, forcing his wife to speak and behave like an American woman overnight. Chinaza assumes she is trading her culture, her language, and her name for marriage to a man who lies to her when it is necessary to cover his inadequacy and shame. It is noteworthy that Chinaza's dilemma in America is that faced by many Nigerians in diaspora whose marriages, most of the time, have strings attached to them as either of the partners may have been involved in one form of contract marriage or other to have legal documents to enable them work and stay back in the foreign country.

**TOMORROW IS TOO FAR:** Adichie treats a delicate theme in the African society generally; the belief that a male child is more valuable than the female child because the male child carries on the family's name from one generation to another. Nonso is given preferential treatment and pampered by the narrator's grandmother in the village because he is her only son's son and would carry on the Nnabuisi's name. On the contrary, the narrator (Nonso's sister) and their cousin, Dozie, the son of grandmother's daughter are not treated in a special way and are given less attention and care by Grandmama. She teaches Nonso how to climb trees and makes sure Nonso has the best share of everything good. This eventually makes the narrator to conspire with Dozie, their cousin to kill her own blood brother, Nonso but, she lies about the part she played in Nonso's death and is quick to put up a false tale that grandmama made him die when her mother asks her how Nonso died in America.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The paper examined Literature as a mirror of the society with the study of the thematic preoccupation of Chimamanda Adichie's collection of short stories in **The Things Around Your Neck** with the aim of buttressing the fact that literary works center on issues or themes prevalent in the society.

In 'Cell One' the issue of cultism on our campuses and corruption in the Police Force representing all government offices are exposed in the incidents that occurred in the story. 'Imitation', on the other hand, is a story which captures the disillusionment and unfulfillment usually faced by rich Nigerians who strive to live affluent lifestyles by keeping their families abroad while breadwinner (the man) stays back in their country of origin. We discover from the story that their lives are not as perfect as we think but fraught with uncertainties and anxieties. Tribal and religious wars between the Muslim North and Christian South-East are the major issues raised in 'A Private Experience' and the narrator points out that the dead bodies littered in the streets cannot be easily identified as Christian or Muslim, Hausa or Igbo.

Similarly, 'Ghosts' is a story that has the same theme of government corruption like we see in 'Cell One' but the major emphasis is on the plight of Nigerian pensioners who suffer in penury when they retire from government service because those in power have either diverted the money meant for payment of their pensions or outrightly stolen the entire money. A lot of pensioners die out of frustration and lack of care in Nigeria because their retirement benefits are not paid when due. The story, 'On Monday of Last Week', dwells on the themes of racism and ethnocentrism and we also find traces of disillusionment in the character of Kamara who becomes disappointed because what she envisaged about life in diaspora (America) is opposite of what confronts her as she arrives. This same theme racism exhibited by Neil, Kamara's employer is exhibited by Edward and Isabel who organize a writers' workshop for African

writers in Jumping Monkey Hill. The white organizers feel they are superior and treats the writers in a condescending manner because of their black skin. In ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ and ‘The Arrangers of Marriage’ we are once again confronted with the theme of disillusionment with the American dream. Akunna in the former story and Chinaza in the latter story discover to their chagrin and surprise that America is not the land of milk and honey they had envisaged. We are exposed to the fact that Nigerians in diaspora do not find life as easy as we see in Hollywood movies. However, in the diaspora stories, the women are portrayed by Adichie as strong, courageous and resilient characters who stand firm in the face of the odds against them in a foreign land. Instead of allowing difficult situations to overwhelm and defeat them. They tenaciously rise above adverse situations thus attesting to the resilience of blacks and the human spirit.

Finally, ‘In Tomorrow is Too Far’, we are subtly but sincerely advised not to give preferential treatment to a male child against a female child in order not to strain the relationship between siblings or children from the same parents as envy against a favored male child can sometimes lead to dire consequences.

In conclusion, Chimamanda Adichie has in her collection of short stories exposed the issues prevalent in the Nigerian society leading credence to the fact that literary artists write out of the experiences in their society. By exposing the ills or evils in the society they live in, literary artists hope to reform it and make it a better place for the citizenry and the overall good of man.

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