

## The 'Invisible' Sibling: An Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Cell One" and "Tomorrow is too Far"

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### Abstract

"Cell One" and "Tomorrow is Too Far" are short stories included in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, an anthology by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Both these stories have many elements in common. In "Cell One", the unnamed protagonist narrates the various habits of her brother Nnamabia. She analyses the events as an objective observer, as if she is standing outside the circle of her family and community. "Tomorrow is Too Far" is told from a second person narrative. In it, we find the protagonist citing her experiences which entail that she is discriminated by her grandmother and her mother. Everybody prefers her brother, Nonso, the son of her grandmother's only son. Thus, both the stories taken for study, clearly reflect the discrimination among siblings on the basis of gender.

**Key words:** Discrimination, sibling rivalry, indiscretion, space.

Eat a little more, she would say often. Who do you think I made it for? As though you were not there. Sometimes she would pat your back and say in Igbo, It's good you are learning, *nne*, this is how you will take care of your husband one day.(Tomorrow is Too Far, 195)

### **Introduction**

*The Thing Around Your Neck*, a collection of short stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, explores the lives of Nigerians both at home and in problematic post-colonial settings-stories of women living between worlds, struggling with identity, with mapping, navigating, and trespassing boundaries. Adichie's stories are elegant evocations of family, loss, and sadness, despite being translated into a different milieu. Through the various happenings in the story, Adichie brings before us the inner experiences of a daughter who finds it difficult to survive in the presence of her brother. Both the stories, "Cell One" and "Tomorrow is Too Far" reflect the observations made by the daughter- within the family and the outside community.

### **Analysis**

"Cell One" begins with about six pages of back story and ends with present action. The narrator lives with her brother, Nnamabia, and their parents on the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their family has been experiencing growing pains as they are given an English education. Hence, they are relatively isolated from the rest of Nigeria. Three years ago Nnamabia, faked a break-in and stole his mother's jewellery. His mother especially has been making excuses for his misbehaviour since he was eleven. Namibia, now twenty, is arrested and detained at the Enugu police station. The narrator and her parents make a series of visits with him there.

From the second-person narrative, Nnamabia appears to be the main character. He is both transparent and a mystery to his sister. We learn more about Nnamabia's physical appearance than the protagonist herself. He "looked just like my mother with that honey-fair complexion, large eyes, and a generous mouth that curved perfectly" (6). He has "a carefully tended beard" (5), his eyelashes are "long and thick" (8-9). The narrator describes Nnamabia's face as "even more beautiful with a new pimple-like insect bites on his forehead" (11). He is "the handsome boy from the university" (21). She makes use of various adjectives to describe him - "my handsome brother", "my amenable brother", "my worldly brother", and "my charming brother". The narrator is not uniquely attracted to her brother. His attractiveness is

an objective fact. The negation of the narrator by the community is reflected from the comments made by the people when the mother took them to the market together:

“Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark? What is a boy doing with all this beauty?” And my mother would chuckle, as though she took a mischievous and joyful responsibility for Nnamabia’s good looks. (6)

The mother feels attracted to her brother. The realization that her brother is perfect makes her feel that her presence is invisible. She gives evidences from her daily experiences to make it clear to the reader that she has no space. Her mother has been making excuses for his indiscretions. Even the day her brother committed the theft, he was left unpunished, and was only asked to write a report by her “Professor father”. The fact that her brother is favoured by her parents is illustrated from the lines:

When, at eleven, Nnamabia broke the window of his classroom with a stone, my mother gave him the money to replace it and did not tell my father. When he lost some library books in class two, she told his form-mistress that our houseboy had stolen them. When in class three, he left early every day to attend catechism and it turned out he never once went and so could not receive Holy Communion, she told the other parents he had malaria on the examination day. When he took the key of my father’s car and pressed it into a piece of soap that my father found before Nnamabia could take it to a locksmith, she made vague sounds about how he was just experimenting and didn’t mean a thing. When he stole the exam questions from the study and sold them to my father’s students, she shouted at him but then told my father that Nnamabia was sixteen, after all, and really should be given more pocket money. (6-7)

The readers know nothing about the habits, the likes and dislikes, the ambitions and values of the narrator. Of a boy she had a crush on, she says “He never noticed me” (6). It is possible for the reader to forget her presence as she merely takes the role of a narrator without directly being involved in the events. Her parents take little notice of her. Though she is the speaker, she remains silent throughout. The only scene when we see her speaking out is when she goes against her parents’ decision to visit her brother:

The second week, I told my parents we were not going to visit Nnamabia. We did not know how long we would have to keep doing this and petrol was too expensive to drive three hours every day and it would not hurt Nnamabia to fend for himself for a day. (14)

Further, we see her moving into some action, perhaps the only act of opposition performed by the narrator later on. She “picked up a stone near the ixora bush and hurled it at the windshield of the Volvo. The windshield cracked. I heard the brittle sound and saw the tiny lines spreading like rays on the glass.” (14). As a result of her furious actions “there was silence” and she “did not hear the car start”. Nobody went to see Nnamabia that day. It surprised her, “this little victory”. Hence, we find that throughout the story, she seems to lurk in the background of events as a quiet observer.

In “Tomorrow is Too Far”, an unnamed American woman revisits her childhood in Nigeria, when she was 10, her brother, Nonso, was 12, and cousin Dozie, whom she loves, 13. The woman recalls her traditionalist grandmother presiding "over the sipping ritual to make sure Nonso went first". It is also Nonso, by assuming right as the first-born male to a first-born father, who is taught to pluck the coconut and to climb the avocado tree. Grandmama "didn't show you, because she said girls never plucked coconuts". (188) “Grandmama said Nonso was her son's only son, the one who would carry on the Nnabuisi name, while Dozie was only a *nwadiana*, her daughter's son.” (188)

The narrator then describes her grandmama's reaction after Nonso's death. “Grandmama screamed at him – at his limp body – saying *I laputago m*, that he had betrayed her, asking him who would carry on the Nnabuisi name now, who would protect the family lineage.” The narrator's mother's voice echoed on the phone asking her “Are you all right” as if she “suspected that you were all right, despite Nonso's death” (189).

The narrator closely examines her family and their approach towards her brother. The various events imply that she is totally crushed by discrimination. She longed to be seen by her mother and her grandma. She felt heartbroken that even her mother loved her brother and failed to notice her. She was affectionate only towards her brother as:

When she went into Nonso's room to say good night, she always came out laughing that laugh. Most times, you pressed your palms to your ears to keep

the sound out, and kept your palms pressed to your ears, even when she came into your room to say Good night, darling, sleep well. She never left your room with that laugh. (190)

She hated her grandma as she would always support her brother and find fault with her. She said “you did not know what was good” when she said the unsalted avocado nauseated her. Her inner self becomes so furious that one day she has a self-realization- "you knew that something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive. Even at ten you knew that some people can take up too much space by simply being, that by existing, some people can stifle others". (195) She wanted to “mar the perfection of his lithe body, to make him less lovable, less able to do all that he did”. (195)

The narrator was relieved that her mother did not ask her anything when she cleaned up her brother’s room and packed his things. Her hatred towards her brother is obvious from her sense of relief. She did not want his books with his handwriting “neater than typewritten sentences”. She did not want his photographs of pigeon which “showed so much promise for a child”. She did not want to take possession over any of his belongings. She wanted to be a ‘seen’ daughter and find a space within her family.

Even after his death, Nonso won. In the eyes of her mother too, he was the coveted one, not she. Three months after Nonso’s funeral, her mother told her that “the divorce was not about Nonso”. She felt “as though Nonso was the only one capable of being a reason, as though you were not in the running.”(194). How did he die? Who is responsible for his death? Nonso seemed to be alive even after his death. She had created her own story about Nonso’s death. Though Nonso had cracked his head and died on the spot after falling off the tree, “she chose to believe Nonso was alive after he fell”(194). The secret of his death was safe with Dozie. However, forgetting is not easy. Not even after 13 long years. Within this family only Nonso will inherit the earth, and suddenly. Yet 18 years later, "you are weeping, standing alone under the avocado tree" – fittingly at the spot where Nonso fell to earth. She remains silent as she realizes that Dozie was filled with guilt at what had happened. But she was unmoved. She thought she would be noticed in the absence of her brother. But things get worse and she ends up having a ruined life.

## **Conclusion**

In 'Cell One' through the eyes of a neglected daughter we see her favoured brother degenerate from stealing from their parents to joining cult gangs at University where her parent are lecturers. However, in 'Tomorrow is Too Far', the invisible sister takes matters in her hands with tragic consequences. However, in both the stories, the daughters desperately attempt to catch the attention of their parents. The crisis of their brothers makes them invisible.

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