

## **“Many Stories Matter”: Narrations beyond the Boundaries of the ‘Postcolonial’ in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Short Stories**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Over the last few decades the idea that postcolonial theory and its praxis have to be appropriated to our cultural needs has gained ground. This has led to examining various questions relating to postcolonial issues; questioning the relevance of the need to ‘write back’ to the empire; the need to rewrite history and question how long can one countenance the ‘post’ situation. In this context literary texts from erstwhile colonies have been read to locate them within the parameters of ‘postcolonial’ where the ‘post’ situation seems to be an “infinite aftermath”. Writers need to go beyond the historical instrumental hypothesis without making the colonial encounter the primary structure of history. A new discursive space has to be created with discourses that produce national cultures by moving out of historical imbalances and cultural inequalities engendered by the colonial encounter.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one such writer from Nigeria whose themes have moved beyond those imposed by the parameters of postcolonial theory. Adichie’s short stories mark a shift from postcolonial concerns where her works focus on a new world order with diverse themes like the conflicts faced by young writers from Africa in *Jumping Monkey Hill* or rejection of Nigerian Identity in *The Arrangers of Marriage*. This paper is an attempt to study how Adichie’s works mark a shift in our understanding of new issues and help to transcend the limitations imposed by the term ‘postcolonial’.

**Key Words: Empire, Erstwhile colonies, Cultural inequalities, discursive space, Historical imbalances, Postcolonial concerns**

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

*The Danger of a Single Story*

Adichie's words underscore the enormous power of stories as a medium to voice, account for, express and demonstrate narratives of prejudice, oppression, sufferings and survival, resulting from specific social and political dynamics of societies. Stories from societies which were once colonised have for long been centred on themes such as writing back to the empire, rewriting the distorted versions of the colonisers, reasserting the past or nation building after independence. Due to colonisation there has been loss of stories, language and dignity and succeeding generations have inherited these losses. These losses are reflected in the writings of post independent writers. But to read their works only as postcolonial texts defined by the parameters of postcolonial theory has its own limitations. Texts by writers such as Adichie should not be read only as postcolonial literature but need to be seen as emerging voices in world literature which requires a transcending of the 'postcolonial'.

Transcending the 'postcolonial' raises questions relating to the term postcolonial and its use in literature. Is the issue of colonialism still relevant at all, since all colonies have achieved political independence? Does the empire still need to write back to the centre long after the dismantling of imperial structures? How long do we need to emphasise that one event in the history of a nation? Do writers from former colonies still need to rewrite/reassert their past and resist colonial constructs of their people and their history? Or, perhaps should they be constrained to limit their themes to those that owe their genesis and currency to colonial domination? How long can one countenance the 'post' situation in postcolonial theory? The answers to these questions would pave the way for a new reading of texts by writers who have so long been placed within the postcolonial canon. Today post colonialism and postcolonial methods of reading appear to be out of step in a world where divisions are based on powers which control transnational transactions. Today dividing lines are very often determined by location, income, gender etc. In this changed scenario one cannot continue to hold on to the political history of colonisation.

Over the last few decades the idea that postcolonial theory and its praxis have to be appropriated to our cultural needs has gained ground. And it is in this context that Adichie's short stories are read to see how her narration transcends the boundaries of postcolonial discourse. Her stories not only make "a strongly felt political point about who should be writing the stories of Africa" (Adichie, *Interview*) but also present an authentic cultural voice which mirrors how we all "share a common and equal humanity." (Adichie, *Common wealth Lecture*) Here she is not merely referring to the situation occasioning the rewriting of stories as the postcolonial situation demands but also the freedom to write new stories. As Judie Newman says, "When colonialism ends writers must have the freedom to write about trees or love." (Newman, *The Ballistic Bardix*)

The freedom over choice of themes requires an appropriate response to the political and social changes and interpretation of contemporary realities. Adichie constructs an image of Africa that respects the traditions while recognising the demands of a cosmopolitan, international audience. She reclaims her heritage and at the same time foretells and directs constructive changes while adapting to a global economy. Adichie combines the old and the new through the help of the story. Chinua Achebe's comment on the creative energy of stories is worth recalling here:

So important have stories been to mankind that they are not restricted to accounts of initial creation but will be found following human societies as they recreate themselves through vicissitudes of their history, validating their social organisations, their political systems, their moral attitudes and religious beliefs, even their prejudices ... but they also serve to sanction change when it can no longer be denied. At such critical moments new versions of old stories or entirely fresh ones tend to be brought into being to mediate the changes and sometimes to consecrate opportunistic defections into more honourable rites of passage. (Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* 163)

Adichie's stories reassert the fact that art ultimately and always has a purpose and a meaning beyond what apologists for "art for art's sake" indicate. They also emphasise that stories must be told or else without this imaginative act, any coherent world view collapses and all that we are left with are malignant fictions. They also go on to reiterate the significance of literature not merely in aesthetic but also in social and political terms.

Stories about Africa have for long been distorted and disfigured by the prejudiced vision of western writers who have created stereotypes. Adichie believes that:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

(Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*)

Africa's representation as dark, different and negative has seen counter narratives which have contested these versions. There have been reassertions of the glorious past as well as sagas of nation building after independence, but all these are read only as postcolonial writings. To transcend the 'postcolonial' which still appears to be an "infinite aftermath" (Aijaz Ahmed, *Race and Class*, 7) it needs to be emphasised that the history of the former colonies do not begin with the coming of the colonisers. What also needs to be emphasised is where the stories are located. Adichie says:

Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story. (Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*)

According to her stories are defined by the principle of power as, "How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power." (Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*) She goes on to add that, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." (Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*)

Adichie in her novels has narrated the Biafra war (*Half of a Yellow Sun*); about growing up in ordinary times (*Purple Hibiscus*) and in disturbing times (*Americanah*). But her short stories are on diverse themes ranging from stories of Biafra in *A Private Experience* and *Ghosts*; present day Nigeria with all its corruption and the struggles of people to survive in *Cell One*, *The American Embassy*, *The Shivering*; reclaiming history in *The Headstrong Historian*, to an African writers meet in *Jumping Monkey Hill*. Her stories also deal with themes like the changed power relations today which are no longer between coloniser\colonised but decided by those who have access to knowledge and economic power. That is why the USA features in a number of her stories where it is seen as an escape from Nigeria (*The American Embassy*) or the disillusionment of dreams (*The Shivering* and *The Arranger of Marriages*) Her stories narrate the ordinary lives of people who confront situations that upset the ordinariness of their routine existence, effecting their capabilities to dream, hope, love, trust,

accept and protest. They bring in sense of loss, helplessness, courage and defeat in the face of insurmountable difficulties, and their vulnerability at the enormous face of catastrophes. All told with the purpose of recognising common links that bind humanity.

Adichie strongly upholds her belief in narrating many stories to recognise common familiarities when she says:

I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasises how we are different rather than how we are similar. (Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*)

It would be apt to begin a study of her stories with *Jumping Monkey Hill*, a story about writers from different African countries meeting at a writers' workshop outside Cape Town. Writers from Kenya, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Nigeria attend a workshop conducted by the British Council. The backdrop is a resort which has thatch roof cabins with names like "Porcupine Place" and "Zebra Lair" where "discreet black maids ...left wild flowers in handcrafted vases." (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, 96) Under the gaze of a British lecturer the participants write and review each other's stories. A story on killings in the Congo is praised because it is "urgent and relevant" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, 109) whereas Ujunwa's story of a Nigerian girl's search for a job and her exploitation is called "agenda writing" and not a real story of real people" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 115) This story highlights what is still expected from African writers and the urgency to write stories about the problems faced by African countries today. This sense of concern and commitment universalises the Nigerian conditions which are no longer only postcolonial issues.

Adichie's theme in *The Headstrong Historian* shifts to reclaiming one's history. Nwamgba names her granddaughter Afamefuna, which means 'my name will not be lost' because she feels that her husband Obierika's spirit has returned. Afamefuna grows up watching her grandmother skilled hands at pottery and her father's disregard for every traditional Igbo way of living. At school she reads a chapter in history called "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria" written by a British administrator; learns that a London educated Nigerian named Gboyega would not consider African history as a subject which cause her great sadness and make her "make a clear link between education and dignity, between the

hard, obvious things that are printed in books and the soft, subtle things that lodge themselves into the soul.” (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 216) She would be disturbed by the stories of destroyed villages which would lead her to sift through archives and write “Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria”

Reclaiming history is not just a narration of how colonisation changes the past. In *Imitation Obiora* tells Nkem how “...the British had stolen original masks in the late 1800s during what they called the Punitive Expedition; how the British had had a way of using words like “expedition” and “pacification” for killing and stealing. The masks...were regarded as “war booty” and were now displayed in museums all over the world” (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 25) But it is Nkem who looks at the bronze head and realises that human heads were used to bury kings and how the people who had to kill would have felt, “The people who had to kill for their king. I’m sure they wished they could change the way things were, they couldn’t have been *happy*.” (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 40) Adichie writes about Nigeria’s past with its imperfection and flaws as much as she writes about the brutalities of colonisation. This reminds of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* where there were those who knew that killing Ikemefuna or discarding twins was wrong, but were helpless.

The brutalities of colonisation led to appropriation of African territory which led to redrawing maps at the Berlin Conference resulting in far reaching consequences even after African nations became independent because lines had been drawn cutting across traditional tribal boundaries. The Biafra War is one such consequence which left millions dead in ethnic violence and fight for freedom. The Biafra war features in Adichie’s short stories as how ordinary people were caught in it and how their lives were changed forever. In *A Private Experience* two Igbo and Hausa women find shelter in an abandoned shop when ethnic clashes break out between Christian Igbo and Muslim Hausa. As they both wait for the bloodshed to end, they find comfort and solace, unaware of the death of their loved ones outside. The insensitiveness of the killers outside is shared by the news on BBC where the newsreader calls the riots “religious with undertones of ethnic tension” (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 54) *Ghosts* narrates life in Nsukka university before and after the Biafra war. During the war, the campus was occupied by Nigerian forces and had to be vacated in a hurry. After the war people returned back to a life, empty of loved ones lost in the war, to face the hardships of rebuilding lives, made difficult by the memories of the good old days.

Adichie narrates present day Nigeria with its corruption and lack of opportunities in her stories such as *Cell One*, *The American Embassy* without presenting a glossy picture of the prevailing conditions in her country. Rejection of Nigerian identity also features as a theme in *The Arranger of Marriages*. Escaping to the USA does not offer any relief as her characters face problems of immigration laws and fear deportation as in *The Shivering*. Some prefer to stay back and plant ixora flowers on her son's grave rather than use his death to get an American visa. Some return back with feelings of guilt as in *Tomorrow is too Far*. For some the American dream is shattered by betrayal as in *The Arranger of Marriages*. The USA is presented as a land of "abundance and unreasonable hope" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 26), a "country of curiosities" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 37) which looks at Africa with a "Mixture of ignorance and arrogance" (Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* 116)

Adichie's stories address human concerns from a specific location but find a resonance in the outside world for although we all belong to the same human race yet history and politics affect us differently. It is stories that connects us, preserves the wisdom of world cultures and helps to explain our world and our place in it. It kindles in us the ability to think and learn creatively through the shared experiences. Her stories keep alive the African tradition of storytelling and will not be lost in the maze of theoretical reading and re-reading, but would serve to "instruct and delight" as she believes (Adichie, *Commonwealth Lecture*). Adichie's works belong to a rich and dynamic universal literary tradition which inspires readers all over the world. It is this universal quality that refuses to categorise her writings as only postcolonial.

It is in her portrayal of ordinary lives that names often forgotten because of their assumed insignificance in master narratives, are recalled and remembered so that they would not be lost. As the world outside changes, human lives do not remain unaffected, but what remains are the shared values. It is the recognition of the common familiarities which make Adichie's stories transcend the boundaries of postcolonial discourse and usher in new ways of writing and reading texts.

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