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Introduction - The Thing Around Your Neck

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in 1977 in Nigeria the fifth of six children. At the age of 19 she moved to the United States and pursued her writing career. At the age of 21 she published a play *For Love of Biafra* and a poetry anthology, *Decisions*. She studied Creative Writing and African Studies earning a Master’s Degree in both areas. Adichie enjoys writing as it makes her feel fulfilled. In her writing she explores ethnicity and what it means for Africans at home in Nigeria and those living in the United States. A common theme is the challenges faced by first-generation migrants.

Adichie has won the Orange Broadband prize for fiction and the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Her novels, titled *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* have been translated into many other languages.

In 2009, she published *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a short story collection. Most of the stories deal with Nigerian people who migrate to the United States and the conflicts and surprises that need to be faced.

“Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize.” - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Questions

1. Create a brainstorm page about what you know about Nigeria. If you know nothing about it, what do you imagine about it? Discuss with others before putting pen to paper.

2. Find out more information about the author.
Setting - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Research Tasks and Questions

1. What may be the advantages and disadvantages of being situated where Nigeria is?
2. Find out what the population, climate, products and living conditions are like in Nigeria.
3. Looking up some websites and/or newspaper indexes in your Library; find out if Nigeria has been in the news over the last two years. If so, for what reasons?
4. As a country, what geographical challenges does Nigeria face?
5. Find the statistics relating to people who have left Nigeria. Where have they gone?
Historical Context - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

1472 - Portuguese reach Nigerian coast.

16-18th centuries - Slave trade: Millions of Nigerians forcibly sold/sent to the Americas.

1830s-1886 - Civil Wars in the South.

1861-1914 - British colonisation – ‘indirect rule’

1922 - Kamerun is added to Nigeria under League of Nations mandate.

1960 - Independence, with Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa leading.

1962-63 - Controversial census fuels regional and ethnic tensions.


1966 July - Ironsi killed in counter-coup, replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon.

1967 - Republic of Biafra created by 3 states combining - causing a bloody civil war.

1970 - Biafran leaders surrender, former Biafran regions reintegrated into country.

1975 - Gowon overthrown, replaced by Brigadier Murtala Ramat Mohammed.


1979 - Elections bring Alhaji Shehu Shagari to power.

1983 - More than one million foreigners, mostly Ghanaians expelled

Major-General Muhammad Buhari seizes power in bloodless coup.

1985 - Ibrahim Babangida seizes power in bloodless coup, curtails political activity.


1993 November - General Sani Abacha seizes power, suppresses opposition.

1994 - Abiola arrested after declaring himself President.

1998 - Abacha dies, succeeded by Major-General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Chief Abiola dies

1999 - Elections. Olusegun Obasanjo sworn in as president.

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Historical Context - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Nigerian Timeline**

2000 - Adoption of Islamic, or Sharia, law by several Northern states as Christians protest. Hundreds of deaths.

2001 - Tribal war in Benue State, thousands of people displaced.

2002 February - Hundreds killed over religious clashes.

2003 12 April - Controversial elections; allegations of corruption. President Obasanjo's People's Democratic Party wins parliamentary majority.

2004 January - UN talks between Nigeria and Cameroon about disputed border.

2004 May - State of emergency is declared in the central Plateau State after more than 200 Muslims are killed in Yelwa by Christian militia; revenge attacks are launched by Muslim youths in Kano.

2004 August - Deadly clashes - death toll of 500

2005 July - Paris Club of Rich Lenders agrees to write off two-thirds of Nigeria's $30bn foreign debt.

2006 October - Spiritual leader of Nigeria's millions of Muslims, the Sultan of Sokoto, is killed in plane crash.

2007 April - Umaru Yar'Adua - People's Democratic Party is proclaimed winner of the election.

2008 November - Several hundred people are killed during clashes between Christians and Muslims.

2009 July - Hundreds die in Northeastern Nigeria after the Boko Haram Islamist Movement launches a campaign of violence to have Sharia law imposed on the entire country. Leader killed.

2010 - At least 400 people are killed during violence between Christian and Muslim gangs. President Umaru Yar'Adua dies. Vice-president Goodluck Jonathan becomes President.

2010 October - Nigeria marks 50 years of independence. Celebrations marred by bomb blasts.

2010 December - Christmas Eve bomb attacks and reprisals kill about 300 people.


2012 July - Nigeria signs a $4.5bn deal with US-based Vulcan Petroleum to build six oil refineries.

2013 - Massacres throughout year – hundreds killed in various occasions.
Background Context - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Task:

- Go to the website FIND THE DATA to check out the differences and similarities between Niger and Nigeria. [http://www.findthedata.org/](http://www.findthedata.org/)
- Which country is poorer and why?
- What major challenges do both countries face?

Historical Overview

As you can see from the abbreviated timeline, Nigeria has come through a tumultuous history on all levels, especially political. The past has been filled with corrupt leaders, endless political fighting and overthrows and religious battles which still continue. Parts of Nigeria have become Muslim states which of course has caused protestation from the Christians. The Muslims have fought to introduce Muslim or Shari Law throughout the country which has been strongly opposed. Whenever one side attacks there are always reprisals from the other side so it seems a never ending battle.

As it is an oil rich country, Nigeria is economically positive; at least on paper. However much of its recent history has been marred with leaders misappropriating and stealing funds. Aids is a major problem in Nigeria thanks to the level of government denial, as in most African countries. Clearly there has been a lack of stability and sense of safety for many people which has triggered migration to other countries.

Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Cell One**

Cell One is akin to George Orwell’s Room 101 where people are tortured with their worst fears and nightmares. Cell One is also notorious for its no holds barred cruel torture and punishment of prisoners and those awaiting trial. The story is from the point of view of the sister who talks about her brother Nnamabia. They both live on the grounds of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka University in what is clearly a privileged life. Nnamabia is especially indulged by his mother who often makes excuses for him. There is also a suggestion he may be involved with gang violence but this is unclear. He has often broken the law in small ways and now in more serious ways. He is a spoilt and youthful young man; as the story opens he has staged a burglary in his parents’ home for his mother’s gold. He believes he is deserving of everything as his father is an academic at Nsukka University who has always bailed him out of his run ins with the law.

At 20 years of age he finds himself detained at the Enugu Police Station, where he is visited by his family. At first everything is taken in stride, but then Nnamabia is enraged at the way an elderly male prisoner is treated by the guards. They are enjoying humiliating and abusing him as he is powerless. Unable and unwilling to hold back, he criticises the guards for the mistreatment of the man, and as a result he is transferred to Cell One and then an even worse place on the outskirts of town. Due to his harsh treatment, Nnamabia appears to learn a lesson and has been subdued. Having witnessed the brutality and corruption of the Nigerian authorities, Nnamabia leaves the prison having truly learned a lesson about harsh reality. His sister and parents appear to be living in oblivion to the seriousness of what has taken place. It is also important to point out that the story touches on the reality of campus life and some of the problems being caused by students in Nigeria.

**Cell One Key Points:**

**Plot structure** - This story begins with backstory to set the context of the characters and the story. It then moves to present action ‘This is how it happened’ to tell us the events. The backstory sets the scene and gives us the background of the mischievous brother. We learn that he is spoilt and that the family are well off and living in a uniquely protected environment, University, away from the cares of general Nigerian society. This is clear throughout the story as the family appear to be ‘playing’ at life and overprotected – Cell One is when it starts to become real for Nnamabia.

**Characters**-

**Nnamabia** is the key character, the focus of the story. He is described by his sister who says ‘I knew my brother so well’, but perhaps she is deluding herself to some extent.

**Physically** - Nnamabia is described as sharing many of his mother’s features and he has ‘good looks’; ‘my handsome brother’.

**Personality** – ‘Nnamabia was very popular’ says his sister. We learn that this is because he is very sociable and outgoing, quite the life of the party. The girls loved him and the guys respected him. His nickname was ‘The Funk!’.
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck* - *Cell One*

**Narrator** - Nnamabia’s sister seems to be invisible, as though living in her brother’s shadow. He is the centre of attention, not her. Her role, at least in this story is to remain in the shadows, observing and recalling the events. Any information about her is gathered as she reacts and comments on her family’s behaviour. She is not impressed by her ‘professor father’ who is clearly living a tidy life on paper and not one to get his hands dirty. We know she is appalled by her mother’s response and overprotection of her brother as ‘I wanted to slap her’. Perhaps there is a sense of sibling rivalry as she does not seem too concerned by her brother’s ordeal.

**Tone** - The narrator’s tone is one suited to an objective observer, detached from any invested emotion. This only changes when she becomes impatient with her parents and brother. She does become quite agitated when describing the ‘Cult wars’, which ‘was senseless’. Although seemingly passionless, there is a tinge of sadness at the end of the story.

**Time** - Nnamabia’s experiences in the present time cover about 10 days and the story is interspersed with flashbacks and flash forward ‘Later I would realise that at that moment each of us suspected privately that Nnamabia had been killed…’

**Suspense** - At the start of the story we do not realise the seriousness that is about to follow, especially as there are so many possibilities and ambiguities regarding whether Nnamabia is involved with the Cult boys and if he is really guilty. If so, to what extent? These unanswered questions raise the tension and create suspension.

**Themes** - The story is about growing up and reaching maturity. Clearly Nnamabia is self-centred and immature. It is only until he is in the prison cell with the old man that he starts to get ‘real’. In sticking up and defending the old man he has seen that he has just been playing at life and being a silly rebel, but real life must not be ignored. Through the parents we also see the generation gap between the siblings and their parents, who have fought hard to ensure their children are protected from the outside world, almost a rejection of Nigerian culture. Instead they have been bred on American television and consumerism and living in denial.

**Questions**

1. What was stirred inside Nnamabia that made him complain about the old man’s treatment?
2. How connected is the family in this story? Discuss.
3. Although the family in this story live a fairly quiet and protected life on the campus, what darker elements almost intrude on their ‘protected’ existence that reflect wider Nigerian issues?
4. Describe the role you think the narrator has in this story.
5. Find three quotes from this story that support the themes.
6. Which elements of this story are global and could happen anywhere else in the world? Discuss.
7. Cell One represents corruption, brutality and lawlessness – hinted at in the story. To what extent is this a serious problem in Nigeria? (Research)
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**On Monday of Last Week**

Kamara arrives in America to live as a married woman with her husband and life changes very suddenly. For financial reasons, Kamara stops studying her Master’s Degree to take up a poorly paid babysitting position to look after Josh in his parents’ home. Here Kamara begins to observe Americans and American life, which in this case is clearly middle classed. Josh’s mother Tracy fascinates Kamara, and slowly she begins to alter parts of her appearance and behaviour so that she can fit in better. Tracy spends all day in the basement where she has set up a studio and is not to be disturbed.

In particular Kamara is bemused by Josh’s father Neil, who is an over the top, overprotective and anxious parent, where every detail is fretted over. Josh, the child, is obedient and docile, almost to the extreme. Neil neurotic obsessiveness provides some entertainment for the reader as it is hard to take him and his wife’s attitude to parenting one child seriously. We see little real emotional connection in the family, just a series of logistics to be planned and organised. Kamara is able to calm down Neil and reassure him that he is panicking for nothing. It is funny to think that Kamara is using such an atypical family to represent American families, although clearly there are differences between American and Nigerian attitudes to child rearing.

**Narrative** - This story is written in the third person narrative voice. Use of dialogue is interspersed throughout effectively recreating characters speaking such as Josh.

**Characterisation** - Told from the point of view of Kamara and what she is learning and changing about herself. The relationship between the child and Kamara is clear, especially with their little routine regarding the glass of spinach juice! The details about the household and the finicky, organic ‘health’ foods the family eats, and expects the child to eat tell us the family has a)more than enough money to buy such overpriced goods and b) a tendency to obsessiveness. Neil is especially a nervous type; it is amazing he can function at work. The couple seem to have a great deal of time on their hands and certainly are not struggling to make ends meet or care for a large, demanding family.

**Plot** - The story begins from the moment of the present when Kamara started to change and observe herself in comparison to Tracy and American women. It then goes back to when Kamara and her husband met and their later plight to settle into America. Then we are back in the present time with further references to last Monday, when Tracy and Kamara met. Is there sexual tension between the two?

**Themes** - The story seems to be asking us to look at parenting and family; what makes a loving family? What do children need? Perhaps there is a suggestion that reading parenting books incessantly is not where the answers are? Furthermore there is clearly a natural affection and connection between Josh and Kamara, which almost causes a problem with Neil, when he discovers that Josh has made her a card that thanks her for being in his family. One wonders how the parents will cope with the onslaught of adolescence – Neil has not seen anything yet!

**Question** - What is the lure of Tracy? Discuss their encounters.
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Imitation**

This story is representative of one of the many diverse experiences many women have as migrants to America. The main character Nkema is living a privileged life in America imitating the best life can offer to her in America. Her children go to the best schools and her husband is having an affair back home in Nigeria where he spends most of his time on business. She is feeling inner turmoil and emptiness, especially as she feels she is imitating someone else’s life that has nothing to do with who she really is. Changes begin to take place; she cuts off her hair, starts openly confiding with others and confronts her husband regarding the affair. This is interesting because traditionally, Nigerian men practise polygamy.

Adiche has said in interviews that this story is typical of the experiences of Nigerian women and even men to some extent. They buy into the American Dream and convince themselves this will make them happy, only to realise they have bought into a consumer delusion. It also points out the reality of the isolation and emptiness many migrants feel in a new country.

(This story is not on the VCAA list of stories to be read)

**Questions**

1. What do you think happens once someone has migrated to a new country with so many hopes and dreams, only to find it was not really what they expected?
2. Find three quotes to suggest that Nkema is unhappy.
3. What aspects of the ‘other woman’ back at home seem to play on Nkema’s mind?
4. Discuss the symbolism of the hair cutting and the Benin Masks.
5. Does the story end on a positive note with regards to Nkema’s future? Discuss.
6. Isolation is a significant reality for many immigrants. How can this be avoided?
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**A Private Experience**

This story is set in Nigeria and sadly represents many of the religious based violence that has taken place in the past and continues to do so, between Muslims and Christians.

When a Christian man drives over the Qur’an in Kano, he is seized and decapitated. This sparks a frenzy of violence in the streets. At this time, Chika and Nnedi are visiting an aunt in Kano and when the violence breaks up they become separated. Chika, an Igbo Christian ends up finding refuge in an abandoned shop with a Muslim/Hausa woman. The two women are both just trying to survive against the craziness outside. Whilst together in the shop, they begin to talk to each other and share information. When the Muslim woman discovers Chika is a medical intern, she asks her to check her burning nipples and Chika gives her some advice. There is tenderness and kindness between them, even though outside the fighters are hacking each other to pieces with machetes. It is almost surreal, as though what is going on outside is not their domain but something else altogether.

Perhaps this highlights that much of the inter-religious fighting is more political and ideological rather than really representing the angst of the people. It was most likely an accidental running over of the Qur’an, as the Christian was on his own in a Muslim district. The response was fanatical and tyrannical. The observer ‘who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book’.

Incredibly, this results in hundreds of corpses strewn around the streets and ‘it will strike her that she cannot tell if the partially burned man is Igbo or Hausa, Christian or Muslim…’.

The politics of hate have become ingrained within the media as ‘Later Chika will read in ‘The Guardian’ “that reactionary Hausa-speaking Muslims in the North have a history of violence against non-Muslims.”’ It is almost as if a game is being played out. (Igbo Nigerians are usually Christian; Hausa Muslims are from North Nigeria)

**Questions**

1. What statement is Adiche making about religious intolerance and the politics of hate?
2. Do we ever find out what happened to Chika’s sister?
3. Why do the two women in the shop not discuss the violence?
4. Do you think the media – local and international are helpful to countries like this? Discuss.
5. The two women quickly find somewhere safe to hide; what does this suggest?
6. What is the Qua’ran?
7. Describe the style and structure of the story.
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Ghosts**

In this story, three elements are deftly tied together by the author. Firstly, James Nwoye, a seventy one year old retired professor keeps going back to the University where he worked to ask about his pension, which is long overdue. On one such occasion he meets an old friend Ikenna Okoro whom he had assumed was dead. When they begin speaking about the past, we discover the professor’s daughter Zik died in the Nigeria-Biafran war and he has another daughter who is now working as a doctor in America. During the war the family had escaped to the United States and then returned, but could not face the mess that had been their former home. Now the professor’s wife, Ebere is dead, but he still feels her presence as she visits him as a ghost and comforts him by moisturising his skin as she used to when she was alive.

There seems to be a motif of powerlessness throughout the story as people struggle with issues, especially with the government. The Professor must constantly be asking for his well-deserved pension. This powerlessness also ties in with impotence in both America and Nigerian life.

We see the poverty-stricken Nigerians sitting under the flame tree, shouting abuse at the vice chancellor, accused of embezzling school funds. “His penis will quench,” His children will not have children” (58). The victims of the Biafra war feel helpless in such a corrupt nation. The professor and Ikenna have also lost any fight. Nwoye says that Ikenna’s laugh has become “discolored, hollow, nothing like the aggressive sound that reverberated all over the Staff Club in those days” (62). This is of course a clear sign of aging, but the people seem defeated and overwhelmed with life.

Adiche claims she enjoys this story because the professor is ‘…this man who should be a person who automatically thinks that ghosts are ridiculous, but instead, actually, finds that a ghost has become a source of joy’. She also sees this as a story about the importance of education.

**Questions**

1. Discuss the themes in the story.
2. What do you make of the fact that the professor says he sees his wife as a ghost? To what extent can we understand this?
3. Describe the various experiences of ‘home’ in the story for the characters.
4. Why is the professor not receiving his pension?
5. What is the significance of America and speaking English in this story? Discuss.
6. How would you describe the mood and tones of the story? Where do they vary?
7. Do you agree that this story is about powerlessness?
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**The Arrangers of Marriage**

This story depicts the experiences of Chinaza, and her new life in New York with Dave her new husband. They are both from Nigeria and Dave has already settled in the flat before his new wife arrives. It is clearly an arranged marriage, and we see how eager Dave is to lose any hints of Nigeria and embrace America. Right from the start, Chinaza is not impressed; the flat is barely decorated and small; her doctor husband is just a resident in the local hospital and making very little money. She had come to America expecting a big house with a big driveway, like she saw on the programs on television. Not so. The story is narrated by Chinaza who keeps a running mental list of what the ‘arrangers of marriage’ had not told her. This is interesting as it contrasts what she is thinking and feeling with her seemingly selfish husband who does not seem to be aware of her needs and views. We see this in the way he ‘makes love’ to his wife, no consent or foreplay, sex is just about his experience and his pleasure.

It is not hard to imagine being unimpressed, although Chinaza bides her tongue until the final revelation, that Dave was previously married here in the United States in order to get a Green Card. When she begins to wonder where her Green Card is, she finds out her husband has not even lodged it. Although she wants to leave immediately, Chinaza realises she is stuck at least for the present while.

In this story, food and language are used metaphorically to represent two approaches to the migrant experience. Ofodile (Dave) has tried to wipe out his culture and past by forcing himself to totally embrace and imitate American language and culture. His choice of name change to ‘Dave’ is comical as it seems very out of place. His adaptation of American culture is extreme and artificial, but he forces himself to take it seriously – and he does. Dave is actually doing this out of fear of not belonging and not making it in America. Hence when Chinaza arrives, he is constantly teaching her the appropriate American words to substitute – ‘cookies’ not ‘biscuits’ and ‘elevator’ instead of ‘lift’. In particular he does not want his wife to speak anything but correct American English, especially around Americans.

When Chinaza makes some tasty food, Dave is paranoid that it has a strong smell and may draw attention to their ‘otherness’. In fact it does when one neighbour comes in to check on the smell that has permeated the whole block of flats - ‘It smells really good….the problem with us here is that we have no culture, no culture at all.’ Although this story addresses serious issues, it is quite a humorous story.

**Questions**

1. ‘Speak English...There are people behind you.’ Describe Dave’s idea of fitting into America.
2. What are the positives and negatives of Dave’s adaptation to America?
3. How do we know that Chinaza has bought into ‘The American Dream’?
4. In your opinion, what may be the consequences of losing your own culture and adapting a completely foreign/new one?
5. To what extent do countries expect their immigrants to ‘adapt’? Discuss, with reference to Australia.
6. What is the purpose of Nia in this story?
The Shivering

Two tragic events have occurred in Nigeria; the death of the First Lady and the crash of a plane. Back home in New York, Nigerian woman Ukamaka is desperately trying to find out more information, especially about her ex-fiancé as he has been travelling to go to a wedding. Another Nigerian man, from the third floor of her building, Chinedu, comes to offer her comfort and support during this dark time as she tries to find out if her ex-fiancé is one of the dead in the plane crash. They spend time praying together and talk about many things, including Chinedu’s homosexuality. In the end everything is all right as the ex-fiancé was not on the plane.

Questions

1. Describe Chinedu and Ukamaka, using quotes to support your answer.
2. What is the main theme of the story and why.
3. Why was Ukamaka reluctant at first to let Chinedu into her home?
4. Why did they pray Pentecostal prayers?
5. How is religion perceived in this story? Discuss.
6. What fears is Chinedu facing?

The American Embassy

Set in an exclusive part of Lagos, this story brings us face to face with military brutality and corruption. A woman joins a large crowd and long line waiting in to obtain American visas. The military is used to keep them under control; often resorting to violence. ‘A soldier was flogging a bespectacled man with a long whip...the man’s hands were raised as if to ward off the whip.’ The woman thinks back —“two days ago, she had buried her child in a grave near a vegetable patch in their ancestral hometown of Umunnachi.” This occurred because the government sent gunmen to her home, to find and arrest her husband who was a pro-democracy activist who published ‘controversial’ material. Her husband managed to escape but their son Ugonna was shot dead. This is what has brought her to the Embassy seeking an asylum visa to the United States. Her interviewer keeps asking her for ‘evidence’ but she has none. She then gets up and leaves as the interviewer calls out “Ma’am?”

Questions

1. What is going through the woman’s mind as she walks away from the interviewer?
2. Discuss the tone of the story?
3. Why do you think Adichie wrote this story?
4. How do you perceive the end of the story – as positive or negative? Discuss.
5. Is there any explanation to explain the brutality of the military officers?
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Jumping Monkey Hill**

Writer Ujunwa Ogundu is a writer who goes to Jumping Monkey Hill in Cape Town to be part of a two week writing residency/workshop retreat with other African writers. Ujunwa does not see writing as therapy and wants to avoid the painful family problems she has experienced, especially in relation to her father.

Ujunwa writes about a character named Chioma who is looking for a job and finds one in the bank, which eventually falls through due to her sleazy boss and his expectations of her. The instructor, Edward, sees himself as an expert in fiction and rejects her story as it has an ‘agenda’, whilst informing the group what makes an African story (even though he is a white, British male). To make it worse, everyone is disgusted with the sleaziness of the teacher who has become obsessed with Ujunwa’s body.

Adichie has stated that this story is quite ‘autobiographical to an extent...But for me really it was about having the...it’s almost the audacity to tell a group of young, impressionable writers from different countries in Africa what an African story was, what qualified as African.’

**Questions**

1. How is the sexual discomfort created by Adichie?
2. Why does Edward insist he knows what makes an ‘African’ story? What are the underlying assumptions and values behind this belief?
3. Describe the characters in this story, complete with a quote.
4. In what way is the story of Chioma ironic?
5. What would Edward have to say about Adichie’s short stories? Discuss.
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Tomorrow is Too Far**

Written in the unusual second person narrative, this story starts with a young woman remembering what had happened many years ago. It was the hot summer when her brother Nonso had died. We are taken back to that summer and the family dynamics, and it is clear that Nonso is always given the best treatment as her grandmother explained “Nonso was her son’s only son, the one who would carry on the Nnabuisi family name.” Clearly, cousin Dozie and the narrator are given less preferential treatment.

Sadly, this sibling rivalry turns into something more tragic when the young girl tricks her older brother into climbing to the top of an avocado tree. Whilst this was not unusual, she goes on to scream that the poisonous snake whose bite kills in ten minutes was nearby. Nonso loses his grip and falls out of the tree to his death. She remembers that she just stood calmly and watched him die, as she held hands with her cousin Dozie, whom she was in love with. This secret has burdened the narrator since then as no one has known her role in the story. It was a desperate attempt to not be the ‘invisible girl’ any longer. To make matters worse, the girl lied to her mother and others about the death, blaming the grandmother.

There is a haunting sense of fatalism in remembering the story for the narrator. ‘That summer eighteen years ago was the summer of your first self-realization. The summer you knew that something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive.’ In fact there was a tacit understanding between the narrator and Dozie that Nonso had to go as he was taking up all the attention.

At the end of this reminiscence, which takes place back at the old avocado tree, we see the sense of regret and sadness as the narrator weeps.

**Questions**

1. Why is the narrator weeping at the end of the story? For herself or for Nonso?
2. How does the second person narrative impact on your reading of the story? Discuss.
3. Describe the dynamics of this extended family. Create a mind map showing the relationships and interactions.
4. Can we excuse or understand the narrator’s actions? Discuss.
5. In eliminating Nonso, was life better for the narrator? What changes, if anything, happened?
6. Culturally, we see the reason Nonso is given preferential treatment. How has this impacted on the narrator, being his ‘invisible’ sister?
7. What are the strengths and of this story? Are there any weaknesses?
Stories and Questions - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**The Headstrong Historian**

Nwamgba is to marry Obierika however there are concerns from Nwamgba’s family that Obierika’s side of the family have low rates of fertility. However Nwamgba was determined to marry him and had faith that all would work out. The couple are happy together, but they suffer many miscarriages before giving birth to a son- Anikwenwa.

Tragically, Obierika dies and Nwamgba suspects her two greedy cousins were behind the death. Anikwenwa is sent to the Catholic Mission so he can be taught English. She wants to empower her son so he will be able to defend himself in the future against her good for nothing cousins.

Anikwenwa does well at school and completes further study, which is very exciting. On the down side, the more he becomes educated the more he distances himself from his Nigerian roots and culture. The story covers three generations of the family, and there is a sense of hope by the end, with the strong bond between grandmother and granddaughter (Grace), who is at her bedside when she dies.

‘It was Grace, who feeling an odd rootlessness in the later years of her life...would go to the courthouse in Lagos and officially change her first name from Grace to Afamefuna’.

**Questions**

1. This story is about empowerment and change, but also about loss and grief. Is it possible to move forward and be educated without losing one’s cultural roots? Discuss.
2. List the characters in the story and describe their strengths.
3. The story shows us the superiority ascribed to men in the Nigerian culture, yet it is the women in this story who are outstanding. To what extent do you agree?
4. Throughout its history, African countries have been inundated with Christian Missionaries who offered education and some support, as long as the ‘natives’ converted to their faith, learned English and to a certain extent left behind their cultural roots. This has been greatly criticised today for ethical reasons. What do you think?
5. Why are people so eager to leave behind their old culture to embrace a newer, different culture such as American culture?
6. Describe the tone throughout the story.
7. What is the significance of the title of the story?
The Thing Around Your Neck

The Thing Around Your Neck deals with the Nigerian experience of migrating to America. It deals with the often unrealistic expectations people have about their new country and that there is a human tendency to assume that life will be so much better after migration. What often greets the individual are substandard living conditions, the desperate need to find any type of work and to work long hours. This story is told in the second person narrative style and deals with the reality of homesickness, experienced by the 22 year old narrator. After much longing, she receives an American visa and leaves her home in Nigeria to live in Maine, USA with her Uncle. ‘They spoke Igbo and ate garri for lunch and it was like home.’ Things do not turn out well at the Uncle’s place as he tries to sexually assault her and she realises she must leave this house. With great courage she gets on the Greyhound bus and ends up in Connecticut, finding work in a restaurant. As she is on her own, she feels isolated and lonely, finding the American way of life confusing. Furthermore her educational dreams are compromised as she has to work hard to pay for her meagre accommodation. Finally she begins a romantic affair with a restaurant customer and she begins to see a little hope – love and belonging. The ending is ambiguous as she returns home to Nigeria as her father has just passed away; she says she will return.

Questions

1. Why do you think the author chose to write in the second person narrative ‘you’?
2. What is this story saying about the migrant experience?
3. None of the characters in the story are named – why?
4. Discuss the quote from the Uncle ‘the trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot too’?
5. How does the narrator experience American people?
6. Explain what the narrator meant by ‘white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same – condescending.’
7. Was the blank fortune cookie a positive or negative omen? Discuss.
8. How do people respond when they see the narrator and her boyfriend together? Discuss.
9. Why did it take the narrator a long time to write home?
10. What assumptions does the narrator make about Americans?
11. What contributes to the narrator’s feelings of not belonging and her sense of alienation?
12. Discuss the ‘give’ or compromises the narrator had to make in America.
13. To what extent do the characters in this story have options, choices and free will?
14. Do you believe the narrator came back to America? Discuss.
15. List the stereotypes that abound in this story.
Creative Tasks - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

1. Choose a story and imagine you are one of the characters, writing in a diary. Write an excerpt for the diary showing how you feel and why you feel this.
2. Create a collage inspired by this collection of stories.
3. Write a poem based on a story.
4. Choose a story and change an element or character in the story.
5. If you met the author, what three questions would you like to ask?
6. Choose a short story and re-write the ending.
7. Choose a short story and write it from a different narrative point of view.
8. Create a poster celebrating an aspect of Nigerian culture.
9. Whatever happened to...? Choose a story with an ambiguous ending and revisit the main character a few years later. (e.g. The American Embassy, the woman who walks out on the interview)
10. Create a piece of art work in any medium, inspired by one story or the whole collection.

Essay Topics - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

1. ‘You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so too.’ Reality can never live up to the fantasies and dreams of immigrants. Discuss.
2. Betrayal is everywhere for the Nigerian people in these stories, even betrayal at the hands of their own government and people. Discuss.
3. ‘We hardly talked about the war...we had survived’ To what extent has the Biafran War and other violent clashes impacted on the present day lives of the Nigerians in the stories from ‘The Thing Around your Neck’?
4. Does moving forward and improving one’s quality of life always involve moving away or losing one’s cultural roots? Discuss.
5. The women in the stories of ‘The Things Around Your Neck’ show courage and intelligence, even if they are culturally suppressed. Discuss.
6. To what extent are those Nigerians who have migrated to America happy? Discuss.
7. ‘At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep.’ Discuss in relation to the stories in ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’.
8. The assumptions and stereotypes held by people cause a great deal of disappointment in the stories from ‘The Thing Around Your Neck.’ Discuss.
9. Education is a privilege. Discuss the role of education in Adichie’s short stories.
10. Not belonging and feelings of alienation are typical feelings experienced by all immigrants, not just those from Nigeria. Discuss.

***
Themes - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

**Immigration and Adaptation**

One of the key themes and issues that the stories expose in *The Thing around Your Neck* is hybridism or self-adaptation, which is what happens when migrants leave their country and are exposed to another dominant culture. Many immigrants feel they must change themselves on all levels so they can fit into their new culture/country. As a result their own culture may be suppressed or ‘forgotten’. Some governments in fact expect this from immigrant arrivals, and historically the politics of assimilation was the way to go. Most African nations have experienced in their past, the problems and trauma of European imperialism as their countries were taken over and colonised. In various ways, attempts were made by the Europeans to have ‘civilising missions’, which ends up resulting in a possible loss of people’s beliefs and pride in their language, their environment, their heritage, their unity and everything else. So people do not even have to leave their country of origin to feel the need to adapt themselves and let go of their own culture. Even in Australia, there was a concerted effort made by the government to erase Aboriginal culture, language and ways of life – leading to the forced removal of children and that shameful disaster – the stolen generation.

Inevitability, one of the side effects of what happens when life is not good in one’s own country is that people chose to find a better path, often resulting in migration. Other people are not so lucky; as they may have to flee war, terrorism, political instability and so on, seeking refugee or asylum status. Once people migrate to a new country, we see a tendency to adapt and perhaps lose the original culture.

Many of the stories in ‘The Things Around Your Neck’ deal with the psychological trauma of being a migrant which includes facing hurdles of life in the new country. Many immigrants face solitude, the sensation of not belonging to either the new or old culture anymore and generally a lack of a sense of home, including in themselves. Therefore many of Adichie’s stories cover not only issues in Nigerian society, but also many of the other post-independent African societies. A question to ask ourselves is, why have the characters in the stories decided to migrate? How does migration impact of their sense of identity and belonging?

The collection is also about teaching Africans how important it is to maintain one’s culture in order to personally develop, rather than lose their culture. As no two societies are similar entirely, it is not uncommon to find cultural differences which create problems for individuals who are caught between them. In these cases, such an individual suffers from inner conflict and may feel like they don’t belong anywhere. Feeling caught between cultures encourages a sense of being a victim and living in a divided world where there are two cultures that are antagonistic to one another.

Of course one does not need to move from a country as there can be psychological migration. Many African cultures have experienced great stress and historical trauma, because of slavery, revolution, civil war, political mass murder, oppressive military regimes, the loss of cultural identity and the like. There is much to be healed in these societies. As Salman Rushdie said in his article *Imaginary Homeland*, “My present, my foreign, and my past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city of lost time”. Most of the narrators of the stories are young and female, so family and exile are major themes in the collection.

Feeling a sense of nostalgia for a lost home often results in a dilemma, identity crisis, psychological limbo and cultural purgatory. Homesickness becomes a reality and many immigrants often reflect on the unusual nature of a new country’s culture and the fact they are silent and invisible. They are no one in their new country. This is where the title of the text comes from, “At night something would wrap itself around your neck, something that would very nearly choke you”.


Themes - Displacement and Alienation

There are various social, economic, political and other factors that force people away from their home land to migrate. Africans have especially migrated in large numbers every year. Some of the reasons have included post-colonial disillusionment, insecurity, corruption, poverty, lack of infrastructure, misconceptions, poor education and resources. Some may leave to be married, to give birth or to improve their status. The image of the ‘American Dream’ is one that has global reach and has been spread by popular culture via television, films and the Internet. This leads people to construct a fantasy that life in a western country will be easier and filled with opportunity. Nearly always, such high expectations are never met and often a new set of problems become a reality for the migrants. Many migrants experience great suffering due to solitude, racism, loss of identity, a lack of a stable sense of self, despair, trauma and they live permanently in regret, pining for their home. The author Adichie is an African who has lived in the United States and has found that displacement is usually followed by a nostalgic longing for the past because the new environment has failed to satisfy.

The African Diaspora

Diaspora refers to a group of people who live outside the area in which they had lived for a long time or in which their ancestors lived. It can also refer to mass migration or exodus from one country. After wars and other traumatic events, many people choose or are forced to leave their country of origin and migrate to another country. Therefore stories of immigrant settlements around the world are referred to as stories of the (for example) African Diaspora. These stories feature common elements yet are unique in some special way, as we are all individuals.

Other Themes...The Thing Around Your Neck

Family
Identity and Belonging
Violence and War – Conflict
Power and Powerlessness
Journey
Discovery
Religion and Society
War and Peace
Ethnic Identity – a Reading

Summary of: *Ethnic Identity Inspiration and Well-being: An Interactional Perspective*

By Jean S. Phinney, Gabriel Horenczylc, Karmela Liebkind and Paul Vedder


The psychological outcome of immigration is complex. In the paper ‘Ethnic Identity’ the researchers found a clear connection between the individual immigrants’ own attitudes and connectedness with the ‘receiving, society’ or country of immigration. New migrants arrive in a new country/society with their own personal and social make up. There are usually compelling circumstances related to the country that they are exiting which will also impact on their new sense of identity in the country they are trying to settle into. Over the last sixty years, many immigrants have come from war torn countries, unstable political leadership and crisis. Many would have preferred to stay in their country of birth but were instead forced to flee.

When they settle into their new country, many migrants have to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder as well as the shock of being in a new country.

Living in a new country involves ‘acculturation – adapting to the new culture and preservation of one’s heritage culture.’ Research shows that migrants use varying strategies ‘in dealing with acculturation.’

The four acculturation strategies include:

- Integration – blending the original culture with the new society
- Annihilation – gives up the old to show new
- Separation – holding onto the old culture and rejecting anything new
- Marginalisation – complete outsider in the new country

There is no need to give up cultural origins in order to live successfully in a new country – assimilation into a new country does not have to be all or nothing. Holding on to one’s culture leads to a fuller multicultural society.

‘Previously, ethnic identity refers to an individual’s sense of self in terms of membership in a particular ethnic group’. Ethnic identity is personal and dynamic – constantly changing and has nothing to do with ‘ethnicity’ or how others view ethnic groups.

Ethnic groups include some or all of the elements of culture, religion, language, relationships with family/overs. Needless to say, migrants are often treated negatively by the host countries which may lead to self-esteem and belonging problems but a positive home and extended network can assist in overcoming problems. In fact it is important that individuals maintain a strong ethnic identity, as this will lead to psychological well-being.

The ‘Phinney Report’ also found that as time passes there is a greater sense of belonging and fitting into the new society without a conflicting loss of identity. Gender may or may not be an issue, although with many new arrivals, the women traditionally have domestic roles and stay at home which may encourage a tendency to hold onto the past. The ideal solution is ‘that most immigrants prefer integration... that is retaining their culture of origin while adapting to the new culture.’

- This is in stark contrast to Dave in *The Arrangers of Marriage* who is desperately suppressing everything about his Nigerian self/past so that he can be accepted into American society.
- Multiculturalism is not the same thing as integration, as it is often tokenistic and condescending.
Reviews - *The Thing Around Your Neck*

“Powerful... Arresting. The distilled world of the short story suits Adichie beautifully: She shows a rare talent for finding the images and gestures that etch a narrative moment unforgottably in the reader’s memory... Many of the characters in the book divide their time between Nigeria and the United States. A very solid collection, [one that] resonates with an aching undercurrent of dislocation and loss of identity... Exquisite stories that will take you to places you didn’t know existed.”

-Mary Brennan, *The Seattle Times*

“Haunting...Adichie deploys her calm, deceptive prose to portray women in Nigeria and America who are forced to match their wits against threats ranging from marauding guerrillas to microwave ovens... The bones: tragic, defiant, revelatory.”

-Michael Lindgren, *The Washington Post*

“I dislike *The Thing Around Your Neck* for the parallels that abound in its stories, the immigrant stories especially. The reader keeps encountering almost the same thing, time and again. What’s more? The personification of most of her male characters is one-sided. I feel for the poor things, but that is simply Adichie.

That Adichie is a gifted storyteller needs no more proof. Her stories teem with depth and originality. However, whenever she is mentioned, I often demand that she is saved the hype that comes off. She is a good writer. That’s all.”

-Oyebanji Ayodele- Critical Literature Review blog, September 2013

“So what about Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie? Sure, her stories have all the necessary ingredients—that is, they have characters, settings, plots, resolutions, and all that. Her stories are technically perfect. They carefully navigate all the moods, conflicts, and changes. But is that enough? No. At best, the stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* simply follow familiar recipes. At worst, they’re leftovers. The only things distinguishing them their unfamiliar settings (primarily Nigeria), sprinklings of a foreign language (Igbo), folk wisdom, and other cultural markers (foods, dress, customs, and sayings). Like the characters in the stories of her more accomplished predecessors, Adichie’s characters are embroiled in questions of identity and allegiance, face the challenge of reconciling their upbringing with the demands and pressures of a new cultural environment (in this case mainly New England), and find themselves at odds deciding where they fit in, aching for familiarity, the security and comforts of “home.” Adichie is certainly an accomplished technician, one deftly handling plots often hinged on misunderstandings, misreadings, doubts, and fears within unfamiliar settings. But as I read her stories I repeatedly asked whether command of conventional storytelling craft was enough.”

By John Madera, Open Letters Monthly online; 2009

Tasks:

1. What is your response to the above reviews? Discuss.
2. Write your own review of Adichie’s book aimed at a specific audience.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short Story- Blank Worksheet</th>
<th>Story Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>• What is the plot of the story? What is the theme in the story?</td>
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<td>• What are the main conflicts in the story?</td>
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<td>• How are the characters revealed?</td>
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<td>• In what way are the characters in the story connected and relating?</td>
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<td>• Why is the story titled the way it is?</td>
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<td>• What is revealed in the story about the past and the future?</td>
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<td>• What comment does the author make on human values?</td>
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<td>• Describe the language the author uses</td>
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<td>• What makes this an effective short story? Or otherwise?</td>
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<td>• How does the structure of the story influence the story?</td>
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<td>• To what extent is the ending of the story appropriate or satisfying? Discuss.</td>
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The Thing Around Your Neck - Text Quotes Worksheet

- Find some significant quotes from the text and comment on their meaning and significance.
- What theme does it explore?

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<th>Quote and Story:</th>
<th>Theme and Comment:</th>
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