

**Norms of Gender, Desire and Female Sexuality in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing around Your Neck***

By

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the celebrated African experimental novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). This study is an exposition of Adichie's concern with the socially constructed gender roles and sexuality assigned to women. It represents a range of female characters from the repression of social construction by projecting the potentials of women through their lifestyle. The aim of the paper is to examine the ways in which Adichie resists sexism and her attempt to intensify the awareness of the sexual politics of language, norm and style in her literary creation. As a theoretical framework, the study employs feminism cum Psychoanalysis to bring out a more clear-cut understanding of African females, their roles and importance towards addressing, exploring and devising solutions, through a literary medium, to finding freedom in their relationship with men. Finally, the study reveals the devices utilized by Adichie's female characters to overcome subjugation and achieve their freedom and emancipation.

**Keywords: Desire, Gender, Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Sexuality.**

**Introduction**

The African fiction writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a writer intensely concerned with issues such as gender roles and sexuality in her narrative works. The recurring motif in her most recent collection of twelve short stories entitled *The Thing Around Your Neck* is sexuality and this helps her to develop her themes of gender, female desire, oppression, subjugation and how her female characters achieve their freedom and emancipation.

Over the past few centuries, the themes in African novels revolve around sociological issues such as colonialism, culture conflicts, nationalism, politics, bad governance, corruption, female subjection, and so on, and the attendant criticism on African literary works take into cognizance mostly these themes. Curious enough, representations of sexuality within African narrative, when they exist are condemned. However, new and

innovative Nigerian fiction writers have particularly faced much criticism from older generation of critics, for constructing in their own estimation a literature of the “flesh”, a genre of literature that features carnal human desire.

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the short story of Adichie from the feministic cum psychoanalytic perspective. Since the most prominent charge, brought against new Nigerian fiction writers, as Adichie is the validation of patriarchal anti-women vision with regard to sexual temperament of women. Accordingly, the work of Adichie needs critical re-evaluation, to set the prejudice against Adichie right, through feministic cum psychoanalytic criticism of her work that encourages African females to live according to their bodily desires, take charge of their bodies, have the right to pleasure and choose whom to love.

Trying to understand some aspects of how and why we behave and do the things as we do is better than judging, disrespecting and mistreating one another as it may keep us from self-destruction. Again, reading literature critically may be one of the ways in which individuals may come to learn about themselves as well as others. Thus, a work of literature is one of the possible places, to encounter and see different types of human natures at work, as revealed through characters that make up the imaginary world of literary texts.

However, one of the greatest passionate changes in the literary world, in the last decade has been the growing of a large corps of African literature, which has the fascinating power of opening our minds to the unknown and provoking us to reimagine the familiar. This state of affairs has intensely altered in the contemporary years and African women are presently making valuable contributions to the literary scene, conveying their own experiences as women in form of thrilling female characters who challenge not only a chauvinistic world, but also a sexist one.

Presently, Nigerian female writers such Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Kaine Agray, Helen Oyeyemi and Unoma Azuah have shattered or recreated the previous representation of women in their stereotypical and dominated positions in their works. In Adichie's work, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, female characters endeavour to recreate their identities in a new soci-cultural settings.

Keeping this in mind, this paper examines the implications of sexual activities in Adichie's, *The Thing Around Your Neck*. We have also embarked upon the study of Adichie's short

story because we feel that Adichie has a vision to share with humanity, to save the fundamental gender relationship enunciated in this text.

Pointedly, the first significance of this study is a social one. Implicated, is the fact that this reading might enlighten readers, to the importance of trying to understand the *whys* of the actions of people, as an alternative of reaching at wrong conclusions that might widen the gap between them and the individuals concerned, which in turn might entail in the creation of irreconcilable differences amongst them.

The next is an academic significance, as the essential constituent of what the literary critic and scholar should project. Clearly, the intellectuals should not be prescriptive but move away from preconceived notions of writing, particularly female writings to instruction “of literary studies” that “can no longer fall back on a standardised received methodology” and how they are “now urgently looking for guidance in a rapidly changing critical environment” (Maud VI).

Although, in contrast, there appears to be a scarcity of critical literature on Adichie’s short story collection *The Thing Around your Neck*. Critical studies been conducted on the works of Adichie and understanding these provide grounds for the present study. Katherine Frank calls for positive representation of female characters, concluding that “we need to turn to the growing number of women novelists in Africa in order to find female characters with a destiny of their own” (15). This assertion is also of great value to this study because it provides additional information on the aspects of women’s life in general. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi maintains that Adichie’s fiction is very enlightening, in that “female characters” in African “women’s writing therefore are portrayed not in stereotypical subservient, unchanging roles, or in roles that are deliberately limiting. Instead, they come alive as speaking subjects and agents for change” (151).

### **Conceptual Thrust**

Prevalent gender conventions have reflected an uneven balance of power between the sexes diffused into the minds of all members of society. The norms and conventions of society, socially or culturally influence the minds of people, and the gender conventions results in many types of inequalities between men and women. Gender signifies the description of the self, the condition of being man and woman. The term ‘Gender’ is commonly confused with the term ‘Sex’, but in a social context sex is different from gender. ‘Gender’ refers to the socially constructed roles, qualities, behaviours, activities, identities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women, and ‘Sex’ refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.

In the context of this study, gender norms are social ideologies that regulate the behaviour of men and women in society and confine their gender distinctiveness to what it considers suitable. On its part, desire has to do primarily with individual/ female sexual needs for wholeness or satisfaction. This study explores Adichie's portrayal of sexuality as a means of power play in human relations, principally in the perspectives of gender and oppression as recreated in her work. Close analyses reveals, that the work interrogates society's norms, on unpredictable, multi-faceted, panoramic view of each character's behaviour. If we follow Adichie's narrative sufficiently carefully, we shall note that she superbly sketched her characters in complex ways as her plots. Adichie chose to adopt a technique of selective revelation, allowing the reader insights of the full stories only in bits and pieces and eluding chronological order. This is not to suggest, that Adichie, has not ordered the experiences she presented in her work, but she has ordered them "novelistically" rather than systematically. The texture and structure of her narratives reflects the complexity of the real world and reveals how human behaviour is, in part, socially and culturally constructed.

Gender is clearly a dominant theme in all Adichie's short story alongside the psychological conflicts her characters experience. Her real achievement as she writes, in on sexuality as an important subject in which emotional conflicts are sketched for readers to draw their own conclusions; preserving for the reader the understanding of dealing directly with sexual subjects which are rarely conveyed in African fictional writings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The analytical framework employed in this study is the feminist cum psychology perspectives. This is because the exploration takes into consideration the appeal of feminism as a tool to examine the rights between men and women; and psychological notion to establish the complex delineation of oppressed women's nature and ways they learn to live with subjugation and liberate themselves. More striking is that, we consider feminism and psychology as well suited and mutually beneficial to literary interpretation. As a formidable body of research, the psychological stance reflects the profound changes in the status of women and addresses issues these changes pose. Feminism on the other hand, serves to catalyze the understanding of women. By using a feminist-psychological perspective, this paper analyses female sexuality in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. This study discusses Adichie's female characters as having very powerful presence in the anthology and presented in an assortment of roles ranging from female characters as objects and victims of sexual abuse, as homosexuals, and as forceful, strong and resilient females.

Given the scope of this paper, our discussion of the conceptual stance of this paper will be necessarily brief. We begin by defining the concept of feminism. Feminism as a term is a system of belief and theories that focuses special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. With beautiful economy, Bell Hooks rightly and most accurately defines feminism as "the struggle to end sexist oppression (26). As Marilyn French asserts "Feminism is the only serious, coherent and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures" (442). For Mojisola Shodipe then:

The central concern of feminism is not only to validate the claim that women are oppressed by patriarchal order or to demythologize negative images of women... but most importantly, to evolve a feminist basis of social relations aimed at enhancing women's self-esteem and helping them to find their voice in a male dominated social order. (242)

Concerning the role of feminism in literature Miti Pandey declares:

Feminism in literature refers to a mode that approaches a text with foremost concern for the nature of female experience in it. The fictional experience of characters, the rational, intuitional or imaginative capacity of an author, the experience implicit in language of structure that interrogates the cultural prescriptions, that subordinate and trivialize women and treat them as inferiors are the primary concerns of female fiction writers from feminist perspective. (1)

Clearly, the intent of feminism is to bring about change in society to offer equal opportunities between men and women and to preclude discrimination and oppression based on gender category. Since a feminist analysis of literary works enable readers to comprehend the position of the female characters within any given society, Zia Ahmed underscores how literature proves vital in the portrayal of social changes in the society (90).

Psychology refers to the study of the human mind and the mental states of human behavior. Accordingly, the psychological method as a critical tool is a distinctive form of criticism in that it utilizes psychological principles in its interpretation of works of art. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren describe psychological exploration in literary works as the "study of the writer, as type and as individual, or the study of the creative process, or the study of the psychological types and laws present within works of literature, or, finally, the effects of literature upon its readers" (81). As Derek Hook points out, the psychoanalytical approach engages "with the form and structure of texts, seeking how literature itself is exemplary of psychic structures" (272). Specifically, the psychological approach portrays human drives from the perspective of the mind of a character rather

than from external observations. With this in mind, Robert Mollinger very convincingly defines psychoanalysis as “a theory of the mind that can serve as an explanatory model for literature” (31). Pointedly then, the psychological approach is expressly valuable for literary analysis, in that it seeks to discover the concealed sources of the observably illogical behavioural forms in societal life. The psychoanalytic approach is employed for this study, since it contributes to the understanding of the inner conflicts of the minds of the female characters, which are laid bare for the edification of the readers. It prompts this paper also to reassert here that the psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks is appropriate to the understanding of the forms of female sexuality that manifests in the short story, *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

### **Critical Analysis of Adichie’s *The Thing around Your Neck***

Some stories in Adichie’s collection of short stories stand out, not because of any peculiar narrative technique, but because of the peculiarity of their content. “On Monday Last Week”, “Jumping Monkey Hill” and “The Shivering” feature characters who declare themselves as homosexuals or as having homosexual/ lesbian tendencies – something unusual in most African literature. Although not explicitly a sexual text, Adichie in her short story collection has made an excellent case for the claim of a range of lesbian desire and relationships on the African continent. In this relative sense, we may rightly say that critical study of homosexuality will leave profound marks upon understandings and add significant contributions to African literature.

In “On Monday Last Week” the focus is on Kamara, a Nigerian who arrives the United States of America and takes up the job of a nanny. While she is there, Kamara experiences for the first time excitement and desire for her fellow female. The narrative intimates us that she finds herself sexual attracted to Tracy, the woman whose child she is supposed to be looking after. Kamara’s critical desirability for Tracy appears to signal the general reaction of Africans to homosexuality/lesbianism. A quotation from the text would do us good: “A fellow woman who has the same thing that you have? Her friend Chinwe would say if she ever told her. Tufia! What kind of foolishness is that?” (80).

On a deeper level, Kamara offers detailed picture of her feelings and mental processes in reflecting her experience. The narrative recalls: “Tracy’s hand was still on her chin, slightly tilting her head up, and Kamara felt, at first, like an adored little girl, and then like a bride. She smiled again. She was extremely aware of her body, of Tracy’s eyes, of the space between them being so small, so very small” (87).

The point not to miss is the fact that Kamara's sexuality manifested in America and not in Africa. What we may deduced is that Kamara's choice of sexuality may have been suppressed in Africa due to its negative stance.

In addition, in "Jumping Monkey Hill", the freedom of sexual preference is conveyed through the character, Ujunwa, who declares herself "a lesbian" (102) at a writing workshop. Reacting to the story she had written, the paternalistic Edward articulates that such "homosexual stories" are not "reflective of Africa" (108). To this, Ujunwa, retorts to his comment compellingly: "Which Africa?" (108). What is at issue then, is that homosexuality is not alien to Africa, but it is only considered a taboo subject.

Again, Adichie presents a gay character, Chinedu in "The Shivering." The story brings to the fore similar shared experiences of Ukamaka and Chinedu. The readers are made to understand that Chinedu had sexual encounters with Udenna, Ukamaka's ex-boy, who treated them unfairly. As Ukamaka remarks: "I'm just saying that" your lover "sounds a bit like Udenna. I guess I just don't understand this kind of love" (161). Like Ukamaka, Chinedu dated a man who tried to control and order Chinedu's every move. By his own confession, asserts: "How can a person claim to love you and yet want you to do things that suit only them?" (161). Chinedu's declaration as a homosexual creates no surprises for Ukamaka and Chinedu is relieved to come clean about his relationship with a man. To be sure, Ukamaka encourages Chinedu to "tell" her "about this love" (159). From the above, one can comfortably say that Adichie wants the reader to understand that homosexuality in African is not unthinkable or strange. That love is intricate and can come in sundry ways, shapes, and forms. Women can feel that intimacy of desire as intensely as men can. To drive the point home, Adichie writes about homosexuality and considers same sex relationship as instrument and exposé to emancipate people from controlled rules of social categorization.

There are also issues of sexual objectification and sexually oppression of female characters. The short stories "Jumping Monkey Hill", "The Thing Around Your Neck", and "Arrangers of Marriage" amplify these issues. In "Jumping Monkey Hill", the focus is on Ujunwa whom Edward Cambell treats as a sexual object. The narrative tells us "Edward often stared at her body" (106) and makes sexually evocative comments and advances towards Ujunwa. We are informed, "Edward had moved a little and sat closer to her." (96). A little later, he tells Ujunwa: "I'd rather like you to lie down for me" (106). To complete the picture, the narrative informs us that: "Edward's eyes were always leering when he looked at Ujunwa; the white South African said Edward would never look at a white woman like that because what he felt for Ujunwa was a fancy without respect" (109).

As a further source, Akunna in "The Thing Around Your Neck" is sexual assaulted by her uncle. As the narrative makes, "your uncle came into the basement where you slept ... and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning" (116). Additionally, Chinaza from "Arrangers of Marriage" is treated as a sexual object for her husband's pleasure. We see this in his sexual relations with his wife, which she does not consent to, nor does he initiate foreplay to prepare her. As Chinaza says bluntly, "My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine..." then, "He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist. "Wait—" I said ... so it would not seem so hasty..." what is more, "When he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs" (168-169).

Adichie also presents different female strategies of resistance to patriarchal domination in the the short story collection, *Thing Around Your Neck*. The memorable strategies employed by female characters to assert themselves from male constructed social structures and the realisation of their full liberation and independence include recreation of strong female characters who regain their voices, identity, and affirm themselves, pursue valuable means of liberation and empowerment. Adichie's primary objective is to give female characters the voice and locus in their own affairs. We see that some protagonists in Adichie fiction take leave of their matrimonial homes, to seek their individuality and self-realisation. True enough, Chinaza from "The Arrangers of Marriage", walks out of her matrimonial home when she discovers her husband is still legally married to the woman he contracted as a mutual arrangement to enable the speedy acquisition of his immigration documents after arriving in America.

Adichie equally presents a number of female characters who are rebels. In the short story "Imitation", Nkem, before giving up and deciding to move back to Nigeria, fights against her husband's cuckoldry, cuts her hair in a clear act of rebellion; which stems from a desire to mimic a woman in her sexist resistance. For Nkem, it is "the Nigerian woman she met once ... at a wedding in Delaware ... and who had short hair although hers was natural" (28). Ultimately, Ujunwa from "Jumping Monkey Hill" as well as her fictional character Chinwe, clearly rebel against male domination by resisting sexual exploitation, female objectification and slavery.

In the short story collection, there are female characters who take the bold step of liberating themselves from the objects of their subjugation in order to seek independence, autonomy and individuality. In "Imitation", Nkem decides to move back to Nigeria away from America where her husband stashed her and the children in order to continue with his extra-marital affairs in Nigeria unhindered. Thus, Nkem's move back to Nigeria is to



regain her autonomy, independence and voice, which she had at will given up as she came to live in America. Akunna in "The Thing Around Your Neck", also liberates herself by walking out of her supposed uncle, and out of his lecherous and excessive desire for sexual favours from her, in exchange for and as payment for all he had done for her.

### Conclusion

This paper scrutinized the varying presentations of sexual issues and freedom of sexual preference in Adichie's *The Thing around Your Neck*. Moreover, what comes across from the study of Adichie short story is the attention drawn to the sexuality of her characters. From the short stories examined, it is evident that Adichie believes in the psychology of sexual expression. Thus, homosexuality and lesbianism portrayed in the short story are simply human characteristics; not "unAfrican" codes of behaviour. In the light of the foregoing, this study presented and demonstrated the strategies used by Adichie to equip her female characters to defy the patriarchal dictates, institutions, and stereotypes, and liberate themselves. The study revealed that although Adichie places her female characters in oppressive, subjugating, and subsuming conditions and situations, she however, offers and equips them with strategies to overcome their situations.

In sum then, the representation of gender and female sexual identity in *The Thing Around Your Neck* by the Nigerian female writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, thus, reveals the text as a worthy body of literature contributing to the advancement and aesthetic study of gender, desire and female sexuality.

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