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**CIRCUMVENTING CULTURAL REIFICATION:  
A STUDY OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S  
*THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK***

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**Abstract:** *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues in her 2009 collection of short stories that in as much as brutal dictatorship together with extreme underdevelopment propel young Nigerians for immigration, inaccurate and often scandalizing media portrayal also has nonetheless an important share in the sad drama. Her drama proposes way of circumventing cultural reification caused by inaccurate media representation.*

**Keywords:** *cultural reification, dictatorship, immigration, underdevelopment*

## **1. Introduction**

The young Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) instantiates in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) the corollaries of cultural reification on Nigerians in particular and Africans in general. It is not necessarily that cultural reification materializes only when Nigerians relocate to the United States. Adichie advances the idea that even when they stay back in the homeland, Nigerians are unconsciously engrossed in an exteriorizing process whereby they ultimately become estranged from themselves. Exposure to American movies and television reality shows implies propulsions towards crude capitalistic mores and norms that have become more and more transnational in scope and nature. The writer finds exceptionally intriguing and culturally eroding such an unsolicited exposure to mass media. Adichie's stories show that nearly all parties, American nationals as well as Nigerian immigrants, and even non-immigrant Nigerians cannot but stimulate overall cultural reification. Accordingly, the promise for a materially stable and satisfying life as circulated publically through the media hides a nefarious call for false ideals and self-estrangement.

## **2. Method Deployed and Its Advantage**

For purposes of elucidating reification, Adichie seems to jettison the insights of the major Frankfurt School thinkers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in regard to the tantalizing and homogenizing reflexes which embed cultural modernity. Adichie's selected short stories do not propose a superficial depreciation of modern capitalistic values like consumerism the way this is handled by the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah in his celebrated works, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1970). Following a trajectory slightly different than other writers, Adichie's stories have moved from the early visceral attacks on the material aspects of modernity, blaming Africa's ills on the

colonial past. Instead, Adichie is more in favour of an erudite self-examination of global capitalistic culture; she dispenses however with the call for a mythical return to an ancestral past in order to face the present cultural malaise.

To begin with, for the purposes of this article, reification is the situation where a given character who is always an immigrant or a candidate for immigration is unable to think of his/her wretched circumstances in a coherent and rational manner. Readers find that instead of approaching tight economic and political conditions in Nigeria on the one hand, and alluding to Hollywood media products as separate and isolated variables, on the other, Adichie, in her dramas, stresses the need to see the connection. To her, the connection is a relation of cause and effect. Rather than incite viewers or consumers to ways of answering their aspirations in a stable democracy and competent economy, media products confuse their African viewers by reifying their vision of the world and making them believe in banal ripostes to their complex situations like betterment through immigration. While communal development at home has been so far a fiasco, Nigerian youth seek individual salvation.

That cheap but alluring appeal of the movie industry for consumers, its conquest of African minds and markets in particular, confuses fact with fiction, falsifies historical dynamics and make the African youth gullible to effortless calls of individual success and economic freedom. The result is reification of life which translates subsequently in disappointment and failure, as historical dynamics and social contexts do not matter. Immigration in the African context appears like a spontaneous choice of self-redemption, while in fact it is portrayed by the author as resulting from cultural reification. In short, reification tends to blind Nigerians from locating the exact source of their maledictions. Military dictatorship and massive fraud at home together with alluring Hollywood films and songs conspire and ridicule the typical Nigerian and cheat him or her in a legitimate pursuit for a better life. In the end all he or she gets is a fetish.

Adichie's principal characters in the selected three stories are all immigrants or potential immigrants; nevertheless, the author's subject matter undeniably delineates how immigrants' modes of perception are largely shaped by the totalizing dimension that characterizes the media. Differently put, uncritical exposures to Hollywood movies, cartoons and TV documentaries at home, translates in massive circulation of pipe dreams and empty promises for a better life. As a result, almost all Nigerians are transformed into potential immigrants. Given the Nigerian experience, the media industry feeds on and practically exacerbates the frustrations caused by military dictatorship, massive fraud and abject poverty. In this context, the media-related reification takes the shape of coercive manipulation, otherwise it could not have such a phenomenal impact. Interestingly, this author's narrative offers both a solid and a complex approach whereby one can review modern Nigerian reality.

As is often the case, observers might be drawn to think of immigration as a spontaneous choice of the Nigerian youth, who in an attempt to better their living standards, look for immigration to extricate their legitimate frustrations from the political and economic performance at home. Instead of this reductive understanding, Adichie in her *The Thing Around Your Neck* illustrates that far from being a spontaneous embrace of the immigration-as-the-answer, the fetish aspects of the culture industry involuntarily intimidates a typical Nigerian to revert to immigration as an illusory answer to vindicate his or her dreams. In this sense, entertainment in terms of hit movies and songs are never processed as value free; they are made significant only in so far as they hypnotize the youth (the potential immigrant) into a mode of Utopic existence. Differently put, the entertainment of the media industry takes place in a highly charged context; dictatorship and impossible living conditions are not left at the back stage when consuming the entertainment products. Thus, Adichie's collection stipulates the pressures the media exercises, ending in African youth embracing irrational choices, and confusing them even further all towards dystopic alternatives.

Indeed, such depth and relevance have escaped the attention of early reviewers; the most noticeable finds only “inspired critiques of Britain and America” (Madera 2009, online) or simply “...uncontrollable desire to live in America” (Asoo 2012:15). Other commentators have spotted only a “three-fold concern with ethnicity, colonization and migration...” (Tunca 2010:293). Daria Tunca assumes that Adichie is famously credited with founding a genre called ‘diasporic literature’ as “several of her short stories indeed feature Igbo characters who have left Nigeria to settle in the USA and occasionally in Britain” (Tunca 2010:295). Other readers appreciate Adichie’s attempt to highlight “...the need to understand the varied and changing ways in which people strangers to themselves” (Miller and Onyeoziri 2014:199). This last study takes a psychological edge that typifies immigrants as deranged cases in need of help.

One critic explains the Nigerians’ frenzied determination to leave home on existential grounds:

People who are used to being politically and economically deprived, typically are not driven to escape their dismal, although they may be faced with unfamiliar circumstances, it is only when everyday deprivation becomes conspicuous and measurable, relative to some other imagined or experienced state that it can impel people to act in order to change their lives. (Wirngo 2012:18)

Remarkably, Wirngo never listed details as to what pushes these youth for immigration. If tight economic and political conditions are not the sole reason for people, extreme cases of such tightness cannot exclusively be a reason. The role of reifying media seems to be missing from Wirngo’s discussion.

“*The Thing Around Your Neck*, [...] like most colonial literature, aims to deconstruct colonial representations of “the African”, but in the process manages to bid Africa and the West even more tightly together” (Warah 2001:187). Such accentuated connections construe the need for a contrapuntal reading in order to appreciate Adichie’s insights. Towards this end, it is interesting to observe that Adichie evokes parallel standpoints with the German cultural theorist and art critic, Theodore Adorno (1903-1966) in regard to America, and in the context of high capitalism. During his exile years from Nazi Germany in the United States, Adorno expressed deep distrust in the ideological reification embedded in what he and his colleague termed as the “culture industry”. In its supposedly forward march towards the liberation of man from myth and fear, the Enlightenment has witnessed a relapse into a new kind of myth and fear, often of an unacknowledged dimension (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1944]). The triumph of science has been marked by the fact that reason has abandoned critique leaving only understanding as a proxy of reason. Adorno calls this latter instrumental reason. Named as such, this variation of reason is a sort of a blinded mechanism whose ideals generate only exchange value and commodity fetishism and the primacy of commodities.

Given its complicity to bourgeois lifestyle, instrumental reason encroaches on the life of non-bourgeois populations through the culture industry. In his reading of “The Limits of Enlightenment” chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Karyn Ball finds out that the aim of that seminal study was “... to reveal the instrumental identitarianism underlying ‘efficient’ survival in an increasingly rationalized society, to expose the circular logic of positivism as the Janus face of the anti-Semite’s myth-prone Solipsism” (Ball 2005:118). Similarly, in “The Culture Industry” chapter of the same study, media and mass entertainment are approached as “...a totalizing and self-reproducing economy that regulates reception by replacing spontaneous thought with formulaic consumption” (Ball 2005:125) The few remaining pre-capitalistic residues of culture are thought to have been eroded as a result of ‘the culture industry’. Likewise Adichie, through this collection, reports the same level of alarm and distrust in American culture due to its self-erasing potential, particularly for immigrants, which characterizes mainstream American culture. Like Adorno, Adichie is vocal

when it comes to the ways in which American culture, defined principally as excessively materialistic, develops into the singular model for success upon which Nigerian immigrants measure their daily performance and success.

To ensure his or her effective survival, a Nigerian immigrant under the hypnotic influence of the mass media trusts the homogenizing ideology of the cultural industry. Through the dramas in “The American Embassy”, “The Arrangers of Marriage” and “The Thing Around Your Neck”, Adichie skilfully portrays the cost of such an excessively materialistic view of culture to her compatriots living in the United States. These stories are chosen on the ground that they handle Nigerian immigrants’ life situations. These latter are portrayed as initially ‘ensnared by’ America. Their passion for America slowly degenerates into cynicism which is but the expression of their impairment with their initial expectations. As such, the present reading of Adichie’s short stories dispenses with the classical feminist taxonomies as these are judged to be shortsighted. In order to uncover the pathologies that mark capitalistic culture, Adichie deploys disturbing devices varying between the grotesque, abjection, disgust, irony. These are narrative devices serving to destabilize readers and situate them in a more receptive position where they can reflect on reification together with its far-reaching costs and dynamics.

### **3. The Inflammatory Role of the Media**

What distinguishes the stories under consideration in this article is their thematic harmony with one another. Probably, the first aspect which only a few people can miss is that in as much as conditions of life in Nigeria during the 1990s worsened, an unprecedented fever for immigration to America was underway. The way Adichie’s narrative makes meaning is that America, for a large section of young Nigerians, represents a promise to vent off their media-induced dreams in a better life. An initial contradiction, caused by the amount of reality TV shows, commercials and movies Nigerians have been exposed to, marks their life. The more this “better life” seems attainable and ready at hand, the more they do not realize the extent to which it stays capricious and reductive. “Films and radio no longer need to present themselves apart. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944:121). In this, Adichie is in line with a number of other writers to whom cogitating on the reasons, as well as the implications behind young Nigerians’ choice of America as an ideal destination for fleeing the motherland comes as a first concern. One can highlight in this regard other fiction writers like Ike Oguine, *A Squatter’s Tale* (2000) as both Adichie and Oguine share the same preoccupations.

### **4. Political Dictatorship in “The American Embassy”**

In a story entitled “The American Embassy” readers find out that the brutal dictatorship of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) impairs their legitimate aspirations to live under the auspices of a truly stable and egalitarian democracy. Indeed, that dictatorship, readers cannot fail to note, is responsible for the long queuing line outside the American embassy in Lagos. At the centre of the drama lies the narrator of the story, an anonymous mother who has just buried her four year old son. Because of her husband’s pro-democracy newspapers, her apartment was only a couple of days earlier stormed by furious and revengeful government soldiers seeking to arrest the husband. As she is sexually harassed by those soldiers, she impetuously jumps from her second storey balcony forgetting meanwhile all about Ugonna, her son. Asleep, that son receives a bullet when the safety of one machine gun goes off. The assaulting soldiers express no regret for the death of the little boy; on the

contrary, the drama portrays them caught in a festive spirit as they eventually realize how much they have to loot. In a long line outside the U. S. embassy, where the story starts, the mother's absent-minded demeanour and lack of focus speaks of the fact that she has been prescribed tranquilizers as the tragedy is still fresh. The story of her tragic loss is interspersed with her story first outside and later inside the U. S. embassy.

The exulting atmosphere surrounding the circumstances of the little boy's death heightens the mother's tragic loss. This is probably not the only element that lasts in the reader's mind. The incident brings in elements of "farce" and shows the extent to which the absence of law can exacerbate barbaric scales of existence, particularly when the military are in control. Despite all claims to the contrary, the Nigerian military has perpetuated acts of aggression and barbarity which, according to Adichie, no one can either dispute or contradict. As portrayed in the story, the country relapses into a state of lawlessness and overarching fear. As a result, civil Nigerians are forced to adopt a passive stance. Indeed, the festive air that besets the killing of the little boy provides a pertinent parallel between the works and also the historical contexts from which both Adichie and Adorno start their reflections. While Adorno remains haunted by the image of Auschwitz death camps, which served as the leitmotif for nearly all his sociological and philosophical reflections, Adichie's imagination is equally agonized by the figure of the little Ugonna. With this background in mind, readers can easily compare General Abacha's soldiers with Hitler's infamous SS men. What happens outside the embassy and later inside, as the interview goes on, seems to resonate with the hazards of having to live in Abacha's Nigeria. Bringing that sense of fear, intimidation and humiliation, lest one should have an end similar to the narrator's boy, encroaches on Adichie's drama as a principal motive. Indeed, Adichie is careful to provide a consistent background to such an unprecedented craze for fleeing Nigeria. She proceeds towards this end through a carefully studied handling of what appears at first only side stories or insignificant secondary plots. For it seems that the full purpose through such secondary stories that the full purport of the author's major preoccupation starts to gather momentum and be convincing.

The far reaching significance of "The American Embassy" should not be limited to a simple and probably an inconsequential step towards condemning the Abacha years. Asoo adequately notes the centrality of this story in Adichie's collection. For him, "'The American Embassy' serves as a canvas on which the entire Nigerian scenario is painted" (Asoo 2012:24). Indeed, the story aims higher than a condemnation of the military takeover and the bruises, both psychological and cultural, which that takeover leaves. Here Adichie does not succumb to the call of outlining only the failure of political independence, a narrative line often taken by first and second generation African writers. Wole Soyinka's fiction works an excellent demonstration. Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* too proves this point. Instead, the story seems to be more about the immeasurable degradation of the self-esteem of Nigerians that shapes this period (the 1990s) to the extent that any lie, any humiliation, becomes bearable as long as one's passport ends up stamped with the all-important American visa. After a night spent in the queue and after hours standing in the blazing sun of the morning before office time, only the first fifty applicants are granted access to the insides of the embassy premises. The embassy security guard informs dizzy applicants that fifty is the maximum number of files the personnel can take for the day.

Interestingly, newspaper vendors assault the long queue with their services. Beggars also flood the line and find it profitable; they sing their prayers "God bless you, you will have money, you will have good husband, you will have good job..." (Adichie 2009:138) This surreal ambiance of prayer chanting goes on in Pidgin English, Igbo and Yoruba where all languages are invoked in order to win favours and tokens from God-supplicating applicants. Similarly, quick camaraderie develops between visa candidates as they impatiently wait for their turns in the line. And in order to raise their dwindling morale, applicants try all frauds to

outsmart snob visa officers: while in line, they stage mock visa interviews and they match the stories they intend to fake with relevant forged documents so that they do not sound too naïve for American visa officers. In a detached interior monologue, Ugonna's mother accounts for the ridiculousness of the situation by detailing on how the killing of her boy is supposed to take the back stage while all attention has to be directed towards outsmarting the visa officer and gaining the status of an asylum seeker:

He sounded like the voices that had been around her, people who had helped with her husband's escape and with Ugonna's funeral, who had brought her to the embassy. Don't falter as you answer the questions, the voices had said. Tell them all about Ugonna, what he was like, but don't overdo it, because every day people lie to them to get asylum visas, about dead relatives that were never born. Make Ugonna real. Cry, but don't cry too much. (Adichie 2009:134)

Queuing in the long line outside the embassy, the anonymous narrator goes over the remarkably unrestrained and unsolicited advice advanced in good faith by family relatives, friends and various good wishers about the precariousness and uncertainty of asylum applications. The applicant behind her reconfirms what has been previously suggested, a little piece of information which indicates that every Nigerian is aware of the details of the visa regulations. This confirms the opinion that almost all Nigerians are potential candidates for immigration. Albert Memmi pertinently finds out: "... faced with a dead-end future, the decolonized dream of escape. They are, in effect, potential émigrés, virtual immigrants within their own country, which seems to them increasingly limited and oppressive" (Memmi 2005:67).

What cannot be downplayed from the drama of "The American Embassy" is that in the face of the large amount of lies and identity forgeries carried out by an excessive number of soliciting applicants, still good willing and envious relatives assume it is morally acceptable for the bereaved mother to make a gentle reference to her dead boy. The same caring relatives assume that if the tragic incident is not emphasized, her application might be rejected. The focus on receiving an asylum visa is processed in a Machiavellian dictum where the end, no matter how immoral, always justifies the means. Despite the humiliation that goes with the application, the visa remains the all important commodity. For the people around Ugonna's mother, there is no pang of conscience if the dead boy is referred to (for the mother, the boy is practically abused, if not actually killed twice) only to get an asylum status. That is probably why the bereaved mother finds making reference to her dead baby for the sake of winning an asylum visa too demeaning and in practice she recoils from it as immoral. She does not want to add insult to injury and turn her dead boy into a fetish. Alternatively, the boy would be turned into a ticket for entry to the U.S. Before the visa officer, Ugonna's mother cannot add another statement beyond: "Yes, but I buried it yesterday. My son's body" (Adichie 2009:140).

One can notice how Adichie shows the extent to which the promise fostered by the irrational influence of the media that life can be all restarted cannot be appealing for anyone with dignity. That capacity of undoing one's past in the United States where all past misfortunes can be 'magically' reversed remains a gross distortion. Ugonna's mother could not sustain the lie and walk away from the visa interview judging her application and her attempt for an escape as worthless and self-degrading. She proves her point in circumventing cultural reification by simply resisting the urge to turn her dead boy into a fetish.

## **5. Domestic Dictatorship in "The Arrangers of Marriage"**

Similarly, in "The Arrangers of Marriage", Adichie introduces a distinctive agency behind Nigerians' relocation to America. Beyond simply political violence and instability of civil life caused by the military, there lies the extent of what can be referred to as domestic

dictatorship. As it can be guessed from the title, Chinaza Okafor, the narrator and the principal character of the story has been subject to a marriage arranged by foster parents. Trusting that they have acted from the best of intentions, as the husband is introduced as a doctor in America, Chinaza cannot but accept the arrangement. She *ipso facto* has no say in a decision that not only will touch but ultimately recast her life for ever after. As Chinaza's trustees, they have introduced this marriage as a final achievement carried out by dutiful and loving spirits, and with which they are to culminate their guardianship. Reification is here showcased as crude unthinking, which massively diffuses the idea of America as a worry-free country. Uncle Ike, the narrative points out, actually was "beaming" as he stresses Ofodile's job for the first time to Chinaza. Aunty Ada spices her intense excitements over the groom with: "What have we not done for you? We raise as our own and then we find you an *ezigbi di!* It is like we won a lottery for you!" A doctor in America!" (Adichie 2009:170).

At repeated readings, the narrative makes no allusions that the people in charge of Chinaza were not genuinely overjoyed over the prospects of having Chinaza marrying in America. Readers have the feeling that even the elderly Uncle Ike and Aunty Ada wish they had struck similar luck themselves. According to them, they feel no twinges of conscience or second thoughts about what might await their orphan as all possible scenarios are processed as better than if their trustee had stayed at home in Nigeria. They eliminate all possible adversity and hardship. America is approached as the last place in the world where Chinaza could be harmed or that could ever be a source of worry. Such a wide circulating assumption annuls spontaneity and introduces America as a worry free location. Obviously, this sorry state of affairs can be traced to the unreasoning influence of the media which keep perpetuating effective and enslaving myths.

Indeed, it is the media that makes it possible for Chinaza's foster parents to believe, despite the astounding lack of evidence, that any fate, any prospects awaiting any Nigerian in America are as a matter of course better than when having to stay home. Adichie's drama supplies plenty of evidence to the contrary. Her works indicate on a number of occasions that she is horrified at people who look sometimes incapable of considering the striking evidence that contradicts or limits their media-induced and over generalized assumptions. And here lies the central argument introduced in the first part of this article. In the absence of a stable democracy and equal access to wealth, the media continues to inflame ordinary Nigerians' imagination and induce them to try their luck somewhere else, preferably in America. Near the end of "The Arrangers of Marriage", when Chinaza shows her anger about why she has not been informed very early about Ofodile's paper marriage with the American woman, the latter answers in a flat and self-righteous voice: "It wouldn't have made a difference. Your uncle and aunt had decided. Were you going to say no to people who have taken care of you since your parents died?" Ofodile soon adds: "Besides, with the way things are messed up back home, what would you have done? Aren't people with master's degrees roaming the streets, jobless?" (Adichie 2009:183) Very possibly, readers cannot fail to notice that political dictatorship is but one side of a multifaceted cultural phenomenon that can be referred to as domestic dictatorship.

The net result of such a murky situation, together with the misleading influence of the media, leaves everyday Nigerians engaged in self-flattery scheming to relocate to the United States so that, once there, their lives start to be served better. 'How better' remains unanswered because it is not thought to be important. With the help of her African American friend, Chinaza leaves Ofodile's apartment. As she does not expect her foster parents to take her back, she decides to stay in America, find a place of her own and free herself from the fetish that she was meant to be. The open-ended termination of the story suggests that Adichie is aware that breaking free and circumventing cultural reification cannot be an easy task. But the writer portrays it as an act of will that is vital for one's self definition and peace of mind.

## 6. Chattel Slavery all over again in “The Thing Around Your Neck”

Absence of democracy and family constraints are not the only driving motives impelling Nigerians to flee their country. “The Thing Around Your Neck” is yet another example in Adichie’s short stories where the narrative opens with a widely-circulating assumption Africans make in regards to life in America. “You thought everybody in America has a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too” (Adichie 2009:115). The opening sentence’s apparent simplicity soon gives way to the value laden implications regarding the nefarious role of the media, mainly the movie industry, in disseminating superficial and sometimes banal portrayals of how life in America is easy and how all dreams of self-improvement get fulfilled. This reified understanding (a proxy for reason) is brought on equally by both the media reifying influence and tense economic conditions, like the ones readers come across in “The Thing Around Your Neck”. Akunna, the protagonist of this story, comes from a family not only of no means but of appalling poverty. She tells her white American boyfriend the incident of that rainy day back in Lagos when her father bumped the old Peugeot 504 against a colossal car belonging to one newly rich junky:

The roads became muddy ponds and cars got stuck and some of your cousins went out and made some money pushing the cars out. The rain, the swampiness, you thought, made your father step on the brakes too late that day. You heard the the bump before you felt it. The car your father rammed into was wide, foreign, and dark green, with golden headlights like the eyes of a leopard. Your father started to cry and beg even before he got out of the car and laid himself flat on the road, causing much blowing of horns. Sorry sir, sorry sir, he chanted. If you sell me and my family, you cannot buy even one tire on your car. Sorry sir.

The Big Man seated at the back did not come out, but his driver did, examining the damage, looking at your father’s sprawled form from the corner of his eye as though the pleading was like pornography, a performance he was ashamed to admit he enjoyed. At last he let your father go. Waved him away. The other cars’ horns blew and drivers cursed. When your father came back into the car, you refused to look at him because he was just like the pigs that wallowed in the marshes around the market. Your father looked like *nsi*. Shit. (Adichie 2009:122)

The imagery of “the pig wallowing in the dirty marshes around the market” is by no means intended only to be rhetorically impressive, for the circumstances where Akunna recalls this car incident at this stage in the story suggest the abominable conditions ordinary and hard working Nigerians are reduced to. The writer wants to highlight the inhibitive circumstances without which Akunna would not have even tried the U. S. lottery visa program. Much as Akunna loves and esteems her father, she detested him that day of the accident. When moral values are reversed in a society, a ‘Big Man’’s car is much more valued than a head of family with no means. One needs to pay attention to the ways in which Adichie stresses the reaction of the driver who enjoys the despicable performance. Akunna qualifies her father’s excuses as a shameless scene that is as abominable as pornography. The mixture of chanting, pleadings and cravings at the centre of the muddy road, and the pleasure derived from that scene on the part of the driver takes its toll on Akunna. What should not be missed is the fact that not only is the driver a certifiable lunatic, but the reaction Akunna adopts is similarly paranoiac. She decided that she should not miss any opportunity coming her way for the sole purpose of bettering her family’s material condition. Despite the fact that her decision to leave Nigeria looks motivated by the best of intention, deeper in her heart she only emulates that arrogant and sick driver by succumbing to his false purchase power. Akunna’s case speaks of a situation similar to the return of the repressed; at best it is a momentous resolution to reverse roles. Under such circumstances, the American visa lottery is unconsciously processed as a phantasmal relief from the daily humiliation. It shines as an occasion for a mythical revenge



on the humiliation caused by that arrogant driver or the precariousness of any similar situation.

Adichie makes sure that Akunna's conditions are exceptional and in tune with most Nigerians who experience a life that lacks in dignity day in, day out. In the above excerpt, readers can still find out that Akunna's cousins make extra money on the road when it rains, by helping drivers of battered cars out of the road. Some people's misfortunes work to the advantage of some other people. Sitting alone in her small Connecticut room, Akunna cannot help thinking about:

...aunts who hawked dried fish and plantains, cajoling customers to buy and then shouting insults when they didn't; your uncles who drank local gin and crammed their families and lives into single rooms; your friends who had come out to say goodbye before you left, to rejoice because you won the American visa lottery, to confess their envy...your mother whose salary was barely enough to pay your brothers' school fees at the secondary school where teachers gave an A when someone slipped then a brown envelope. (Adichie 2009:117-118)

Here the writer draws attention to the seamy side of contemporary Nigeria where abject poverty remains the primary motive behind what seems at first people's unreasonable resolve to leave home. Envy is the last emotion which Akunna remembers drawn on her relatives' faces when they come to wish her goodbye. Witness also the fact that without practically cajoling passers-by, a performance that is little different from harassing them with stuff they apparently have neither the desire nor the means to buy, managing a small income-generating activity becomes more and more a herculean undertaking. And even though it requires so much entreating and self-abasement, the deal is never certain. Similarly, the fact of bribing teachers in order to have high grades signals another variation on the theme of systematic poverty, as the education staff need to generate some extra money to ensure that they can meet certain ends.

Amidst such degrading levels of poverty, it is interesting to note that falsified media portrayals about America have been processed by Akunna as the only way out. This could not be the case if Nigeria has been keen or a little too kind to Akunna. Similarly, nearly all of Akunna's extended family members are brainwashed as to the difference immigration to America can do to their dejected existence. The envy in their eyes and their request for petty gifts—as the quote from the early part of the story—suggest their familiarity with big cars and houses only through screen TV.

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: in a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans. They trooped into the room in Lagos where you lived with your father and mother and three siblings, leaning against the unpainted walls because there weren't enough chairs to go round, to say goodbye in loud voices and tell you with lowered voices what they wanted you to send them. In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the thing they wanted were minor—handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes. You said okay, no problem. (Adichie 2009:115)

The media-induced opportunities which America seems to offer for Nigerians are processed by these same frustrated Nigerians not as prospects that one can seize and that in due time, coupled with hard work, may lead to some relative success. Instead, they are approached as self-evident truths or facts of nature that guarantee material extrication towards the American heaven. For by virtue of having made it to the U.S., all past misfortunes disappear and finally this Nigerian can gain the reward he or she has longed for and which he or she fully deserves. This biblical or millennial approach draws a caricatured image of success, which the writer stresses as originating in reification. It is so because it ignores a set

of historical variables that are indispensable for a pertinent discussion how and why the conditions of Nigerian youth are murky and desolate.

In order to counter this cultural march towards myth and fetish, Adichie makes sure that two conditions are there: falsified media portrayals uncovered, in addition to exasperating economic and political conditions eased. Only when too late, Akunna realizes in real terms the perplexity and precariousness of her situation. Her course of action is never to fail in helping her immediate family with all what she can afford, but remarkably, too, she never attempts to explain her exact situation even to those immediate family members. This is what accounts for her sending half what she earns each month to parents, but "...you didn't write a letter. There was nothing to write about." (Adichie 2009:118). Akunna's abstention from writing an explanatory note while "sending crisp notes in an envelope" features the futility of all explanations in the context of reifying media coverage. However eloquent and extended her explanations would be, she cannot shake off her people's consciousness from the effects of decades of media fetishizing influence:

In later weeks, though, you wanted to write because you had stories to tell... you wanted to write that rich Americans were thin and poor Americans were fat and that many did not have a big house and car; ... It wasn't just to your parents you wanted to write, it was also to your friends, and cousins and aunts and uncles. But you could never afford enough perfumes and clothes and handbags and shoes to go around and still pay your rent on what you earned at the waitressing job, so you wrote nobody. (Adichie 2009:118-119)

"The Thing Around Your Neck" is probably the most daring story in the collection, and for this reason Adichie dedicated its title to the entire collection. In the face of the impossibility of explanation, a situation that translates into being denied a chance to be appreciated, understood and thus possibly pitied, Akunna experiences loneliness that is reminiscent of old chattel slavery. She seems to communicate that 'you could have my money as you expect me to contribute to your table, but you cannot have my news because you lack the means whereby you could genuinely understand my situation'. Readers can note the author's decline to deploy first and third person type of narratives. For the sake of efficacy in handling such an exceptionally intriguing experience like Akunna's, the narrator cannot manage herself as a know-all figure; meanwhile, she cannot stay an outside observer. Thus, the choice of the limited omniscient point of view spells a loving keenness and early awareness with the principal character's exilic experience. While Omowumi notes Adichie's use of this narrative technique, he stays silent as to its convenience (Omowumi 2011). Again, this type of narrative can register the author's consciousness of the need to circumvent cultural reification.

## **7. Conclusion**

When circulated in massive proportions in Africa, inaccurate portrayals of realities in America can only lead to African youth embracing irrational choices and mythic fantasizing. Instead of elevating the African youth's consciousness with the world and forging communication between peoples and nationalities, the media stigmatizes these same social groups and erodes their respective experiences. The inflicted punishment on Nigerians is this involuntary recourse to myth, which is yet another manifestation of barbarity at the political, social and moral levels.

Equally valid is that through *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie has been able to effectively evoke and thus convince readers how cultural reification remains still a critical issue today, exactly like when it was noted with the Marxist cultural critic George Luckács back in the 1920s. The issue that Adichie addresses is that while the task of outsmarting colonialism has been successfully carried out, Africans still have to outsmart the reifying compulsions of the media industry if they ever aspire to meaningful freedom and look for a

truly egalitarian society. Positive discourses, like immigration to the U.S., and the U.S. as a utopia for societal and economic organization, have been shown to be imprecise overgeneralizations, lacking concrete evidence. By perpetuating such ‘instrumental reason’ the media emits African unhappiness and misery as fate. For instead of inaugurating the precept of a happily functioning society, the same media celebrates the flattening of ideals, madness and dystopia. In Africa, such determinist trend of thinking has spelt incompetent, corrupt and bloody leaderships of which Sani Abacha’s is but the tip of the iceberg. What Adichie’s readers most likely retain from the stories of *The Thing Around Your Neck* is the conviction that what stimulates dictatorship as a mode of social organization on the one hand and the long queue outside the U.S. embassy in Lagos on the other is principally the same mindset. Critically reflecting over self and that same self position in history implies a way, probably the only way, of breaking with the present cultural dyad. In line with the insights brought by major Frankfurt School thinkers, Adichie ascertains that media consumer products in Africa have demonstrated unmistakable drifts towards perversion, myth and barbarism.

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