

(Re)Examination of The American Dream in selected short stories from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Short Story Collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story collection The Thing Around Your Neck (2009) explores a tapestry of themes, while the American Dream (and/or the American Nightmare) from the perspective of (transnational) migrant Nigerian women, stands out as a prominent one. This paper has a twofold aim: to explore the representation of the American Dream in a transnational context and text of three distinct short stories from this collection, namely "Imitation", "The Thing Around Your Neck", and "The Arrangers of Marriage", and to observe the voice of (trans)migrant women in relation to the American Dream and American Nightmare.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Transnational Literature, American Dream, American Nightmare, *The Thing Around Your Neck*

1. Introduction

As the perception of the American Dream steadily changes over time, the way in which it appears as a motif in American literature transforms synchronically. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's literary creation and attempt to examine the American Dream in a modern context reflects the latest trend where the American Dream is being discussed from the perspective of a (im/trans)migrant² to the United States of America, particularly for the reason that she is a migrant herself. Apart from that, she considers the position of a woman, or to be more precise, the position of an immigrant woman in her venture to pursue an American Dream. This paper intends to scrutinize the American Dream in short stories "Imitation", "The Thing Around Your Neck", and "The Arrangers of Marriage" from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story Collection titled *The*

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² Immigrant and/or transnational migrant.

Thing Around Your Neck (2009) as observed through the optics of transnational American and transnational Nigerian literature. However, before starting with the discussion of the American Dream in these selected short stories, it is essential to consider some of the numerous theories of the American Dream.

James Truslow Adams coined the expression "The American Dream" in his *The Epic of America* (1931) by proposing that it refers to "*that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement*" (404). Harold Bloom offers a similar interpretation of the American Dream by arguing that it stands for "*a nation in which all of us are free to develop our singularities into health, prosperity, and some measure of happiness in self-development and personal achievement*" (2009, xv). Yet, it is impossible to observe the American Dream from the context of a single definition, as "*there have been as many American Dreams as there have been Americans, and, thanks to immigration, American identity has been something as much imagined and acquired as it has been inherited, reborn with every new citizen*" (Cullen 2011, 20), especially since the number of immigrants to the U.S. is continuously growing, and they accelerate the process of reconstruction and deconstruction of the American Dream both in social imagery and (transnational) literature. However, the American Dream does not necessarily lead to success. All those who attempt to live the American Dream may end up living the American Nightmare, or the American Dream's "*evil twin*" (Samuel 2012, 9). While Lawrence L. Samuel reminds us that "*the potential of an American nightmare was frequently conjured up since the very beginning of the Dream*" (2012, 9).

There are different categories of transnational authors. According to the one delivered by Selma Raljević, there are four classes of transnational American writers/authors: those who were born elsewhere and who became U.S. citizens over time, those who were born in the U.S. and come from immigrant parents, those who are of mixed Native American descentance, and lastly those who do were not born in the U.S., and who do not live in the U.S., but they write about the events placed the U.S. and who speak to the U.S. audience (Raljević 2020). Being someone who moved from Nigeria to the U.S. in order to pursue her studies without officially being a U.S. citizen, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche belongs to the last group of transnational authors; she writes about events happening in the United States of America, and she addresses both American and Nigerian audiences in her literature, and also in her short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Even though the stories generally

belong to fiction, there are traces of autofiction³ in some of them. For instance, in her story “The Thing Around Your Neck”, Adiche places the main character, Akunna, who obtains a U.S. lottery visa, which mirrors the events from the author’s life. Hence, the American Dream in this and other stories I proposed for analysis are autofictionally rendered and highly influenced by the author’s transnational and/or transcultural (Tsimpouki 2023) identity.

In my paper titled “Liminal Transitions in Semezdin Mehmedinović’s *My Heart*” (2024), I demonstrate how Semezdin Mehmedinović as a transnational American and Transnational Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian/Montenegrin, and/or Former Yugoslav author, generates the sense of in-betweenness in his novel *My Heart* (2021), being placed between the two places. The same may be observed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*, as the action frequently moves from the U.S. and Nigeria, and vice versa, creating a liminal setting placed between the two countries, while she⁴ belongs to both of them equivalently.

2. The Portrayal of the American Dream in Selected Short Stories from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a collection of twelve distinct short stories written as feminist fiction with segments of autofiction. Although the events in different short stories from this collection are not mutually connected – which is not uncommon for collections of short stories, all of them share the same themes and/or motifs, such as migration, displacement, identity, the position of (Nigerian) women,⁵ marriage, love, betrayal, and so on and so forth, while the American Dream remains the most prominent motif which stretches throughout the entire short story collection. In an interview with Susan VanZanten, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks about the (transnational) immigrant nature of characters in her literary works:

³ Hywel Dix, in his book *Autofiction in English* (2018), explains that autofiction stands for literary genre where the author projects elements of his life into his literary works. He adds that autofiction is a very complex term to explain. For him, autofiction has the “effect of combining the factual with the fictive through aesthetic and stylistic means” (3). Furthermore, although autofiction typically implies that the literary character has to share the author’s name, Dix claims that it is not always the case, but “there are numerous other ways in which authors can cultivate an affinity with the character they construct: age, occupation, cultural interests and so on” (14). This is best seen in third person works “where narrator and character ostensibly do not share an identity, that is also possible to talk about the possibility of autofiction in the third person” (15).

⁴ And her literature. Not only her *The Thing Around Your Neck*, but also some of her novels, such as *Americanah* (2013), or *Purple Hibiscus* (2003).

⁵ The stories discuss both the position of a Nigerian women both in Nigeria and America.

I was asked recently why my male characters seem to react to immigration differently, about how they seem either overly enthusiastic or clueless. I don't intend for them to be. Men also struggle. But I'm primarily interested in exploring women's experiences, I think because that's what I know. It's not just my story. It's my sister's and her friends' and my cousins' and their friends'. I suppose identity is central to one's work in how it shifts depending on where one is. I have often said that I didn't know I was black until I came to the U.S. It had never occurred to me. I'd read Roots and I was very moved by Kunta Kinte, but I never thought of myself as black. I remember in Brooklyn, after I had been in the U.S. maybe a month, an African-American man referred to me as "sister," and I thought, "How offensive! I don't want it." I had watched TV and I knew that to be black was not a good thing, so I thought, "No, don't include me in your group. I am not part of you." It took reading and asking questions and understanding African American history, which I didn't have much of a sense of, to accept that identity, which I am completely happy with now (Adichie 2010).

In this interview, Adichie confirms that her literary creation is based on the experience of women, primarily based on her own experience but also on the experiences of other women close to her, such as her sister, cousins and friends. More importantly, she reaffirms that there are elements of autofiction while creating her characters. Aside from that, she speaks of her African identity – she never before had to think of herself as being black, but upon her arrival in the U.S., the matter of race became something she often thought about, and that is also mirrored in her *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and her other literary works. Actually, the metaphorical word "thing" in the title *The Thing Around Your Neck*, could be understood as a burden which is preventing Nigerian women from fully immersing themselves in their American Dreams.⁶

2.1. The American Dream in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Short Story "Imitation"

The American Dream in "Imitation" is demonstrated by the story's protagonist, Nkem, who lives in the U.S., while her husband lives back in Nigeria. Already at the beginning of the story, the author reveals that Obiora, Nkem's husband, has a mistress back in Nigeria, signaling that the focus of the story is American Nightmare, rather than the American Dream. Soon after, the author retrospectively⁷ moves the action back to time when Nkem and Obiora initially moved to the U.S., describing

⁶ This analysis focuses on identifying the "thing" that prevents female characters of this short story collection to pursue their American Dreams.

⁷ The action is not chronological, but the action constantly moves between the present and past in order to provide more context about the current events being described.

their beginning colored by hopes and expectations particular for the American Dream:

She [Nkem] was pregnant when she first came to America with Obiora. The house Obiora rented, and would later buy, smelled fresh, like green tea, and the short driveway was thick with gravel. We live in a lovely house near Philadelphia, she told her friends in Lagos on the phone. She sent them pictures of herself and Obiora near the liberty Bell, proudly scrawled very important in American history behind the pictures, and enclosed glossy pamphlets featuring a balding Benjamin Franklin (Adichie 2017, 24).

The American Dream for Nkem seems to be a secure family life in the U.S. with her husband, Obiora, where they would raise children together and provide a better future for them. In Nkem's words, the United States of America represents "*the abundance of unreasonable hope*" (Adichie 2017: 26), and that is her American Dream; the dream of hope. Their new beginning promised a happy and welcoming future, although the issue of non-belonging was present from the start, as demonstrated in the text:

Her [Nkem's] neighbors on Cherrywood Lane, all white and pale-haired and lean, came over and introduced themselves, asked if she needed help with anything – getting a driver's licence, a phone, a maintenance person. She did not mind that her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless to them. She liked them and their lives. Lives Obiora often called "plastic." Yet, she knew he, too, wanted the children to be like their neighbors', the kind of children who sniffed at the food that had fallen on the dirt, saying it was "spoiled." In her life, her childhood, you snatched the food up, whatever it was, and ate it (Adichie 2017, 24).

Although they were nicely welcomed by their neighbors, the author brings up the issue of race. Nkem feels different, and her foreign accent emblemizes her feeling of alienation in the U.S. Yet, she admires the lives of her neighbors', hoping she could live a resembling life. This quote displays Nkem's admiration and her wish to live similarly, but it also demonstrates Obiora's unoptimistic view of such "plastic" lives. Hence, the two of them clearly do not have the same expectations from the American Dream. Moreover, it is evident that Nkem's attempt to pursue the American Dream is affected by her Nigerian origin, which is both a blessing and a curse: Nkem envisions a future for her children where they would not deal with issues she had to deal with as a child, but they would be raised in an elite setting with an abundance of choices and opportunities. In some sense, we could even say that Nkem's

American Dream is corrupt; it focuses on status, looks, and materialistic easement. However, as a Nigerian woman performing her “gender role” of being a housewife who raises children, Nkem is obedient to her husband, even when he decides to return to Nigeria, leaving her and their children in the U.S. by themselves.⁸ With this, the story demonstrates that materialistic comfort is not enough to be fully satisfied, but emotional fulfillment is equally important.

After this nostalgic recollection, the story switches to the present time when Nkem has two children: Adana and Okey, while Obiora comes to the U.S. to them only once a year. When Nkem meets another Nigerian woman in America, she discovers that the two of them share the same destiny. With this, the author criticizes the misfortunate destiny Nigerian women are predisposed to live both in Nigeria and America. More than anything else, the focus is on the experience of Nigerian women in the U.S., who are being hunted by negative and harmful expectations that women need to fulfill in order to make their husbands satisfied:

The women had complained saying “our men,” familiarly, as though Nkem’s husband and hers were somehow related to each other. Our men like to keep us here, she had told Nkem. they visit for business and vacations, they leave us and the children with big houses and cars, they get us housegirls from Nigeria who we don’t have to pay any outrageous American wages, and they say business is better in Nigeria and all that. But you know why they don’t move here, even if business were better here? Because America does not recognize Big Men. Nobody says “Sir! Sir” to them in America. Nobody rushes to dust their seats before they sit down (Adichie 2017, 28-29).

Nkem’s position as a married Nigerian woman living in the U.S. is best exemplified in the above-mentioned quote. In fact, the story’s narrative creates an atmosphere where (Nigerian) women are treated as objects, as “housegirls” who unquestionably do everything their husbands ask for. Although it is clear that Nkem’s life is quite comfortable with all the “big houses and cars”, we cannot say that she lives the American Dream as she feels deep dissatisfaction and betrayal. After calling her home

⁸ The transnational nature of the story placed between countries is best reflected in Obiora, who lives in Nigeria: “Obiora stayed the first few months, so the neighbors didn’t start asking about him until much later. Where was her husband? Was something wrong? Nkem said everything was fine. He lived in Nigeria and America; they had two homes. She saw doubt in their eyes, knew they were thinking of other couples with second homes in places like Florida and Montreal, couples who inhabited each home at the same time, together” (Adichie 2017, 24). However, living between countries is not necessarily a good thing in Nkem’s case. It implied that she had to live separately from her husband, who lived a double life with his mistress in Nigeria, while Nkem raised their children by herself in the U.S.

in Nigeria and discovering that a new houseboy works in her home, Nkem imagines all possible scenarios where her husband and his mistress create their own memories in her and Obiora's home. And this is also the point when she realizes that she wants to return back to Nigeria forever, and surprisingly says to Obiora the following: *"We have to find a school for Adana and Okay in Lagos. We are moving back." She had not planned to say it, but it seemed right, it is what she has always wanted to say* (Adichie 2017: 41). And she continues elaborating on that:

"We are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back." She speaks slowly to convince him, to convince herself as well. Obiora continues to stare at her and she knows that he has never heard her speak up, never heard her take a stand. She wonders vaguely if that is what attracted him to her in the first place, that she differed to him, that she let him speak for both of them (Adichie 2017, 41).

Although it is unclear whether they actually returned to Nigeria or not, Nkem courageously communicated what she wanted. In other words, she broke the chain of behavior where she would silently accept everything her husband says, and this behavior could be affected and inspired by her newly construed American segment of identity. When it comes to her American Dream, which was never completely viable without her husband, Nkem decides to extinguish any possibility of pursuing her dream while deciding to leave the U.S. and to return to Nigeria. More precisely, Nkem sacrifices her American Dream, and the possibility of her children growing up in America in order to try to save her marriage by returning to Nigeria and live with her husband. Yet, the American Dream she sacrificed was rendered by materialistic comfort and social status, and the author poetically demonstrates that the materialistic aspect of the American Dream can never substitute its emotional aspect and feeling of fulfillment.

2.2. The American Dream in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Short Story "The Thing Around Your Neck"

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" is introduced by an autofictionally rendered event where the story's main character, Akunna, moves to the United States of America with high expectations of the American Dream, as the following excerpt from the story suggests:

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 (Adichie 2017, 115).

The first thing we see here is that the story is told in second-person singular, so the story leaves an impression of being a conversation between the author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Akunna, the story's protagonist. Akunna's expectations of the American Dream included the stereotypical understanding that many believe the American Dream promises: a big house, a big car, a high salary, and so on and so forth. However, her expectations transfer into an American nightmare soon after she reaches America. To be more precise, she experienced a series of disappointments after another. The first disappointment is present in the form of discrimination that Akunna faced during her first job as a waitress: *"They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you'd see a car before coming to America. They gawped your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids?"* (Adichie 2017, 116). The feeling of not-belonging discussed in "Imitation" is present in this short story as well. Nkem is being treated as a foreigner and that would be something she needs to get used to while living in the U.S. However, while other "white" Americans express their interest in the way Akunna looks like, they also hurt her, making her feel as if she would never belong to the U.S. Akunna's next disappointment, or rather the worst nightmare follows soon after when her uncle tried to sexually abuse her, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

You laughed with your uncle and you felt at home in his house; his wife called you nwanne, sister, and his two school-age children called you Aunt. They spoke Igbo and ate garri for lunch and it was like home. Until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with old boxes and cartoons and pulled you forcefully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning. He wasn't really your uncle; he was actually a brother of your father's sister's husband, not really by blood (Adiche 2017, 116).

Besides seeing the attempt of rape, we see that Akunna lived in a basement, and in very bad living conditions: the opposite to what she anticipated before coming to the U.S. Right after this event, Akunna runs away hoping to become fully independent, but she faces a harsh reality where she cannot find a well-paid job as a foreigner. She starts working again, but she earns less than a minimal salary. Her dream of going to school also seemed unrealistic at this point: *"You could not afford to go to school, because now you paid rent for the tiny room with the stained carpet. Besides, the*

small Connecticut town didn't have a community college and credits at the state university cost too much" (Adichie 2017, 117).

The glimpse of the American Dream appears again in Akunna's life when she finds a boyfriend, but as much as she felt nice and in love, she also felt uncomfortable and disconnected from him: *"You said no the following four days to going out with him, because you were feeling uncomfortable with the way he looked at your face, that intense, consuming way he looked at your face that made you say goodbye to him but also made you reluctant to walk away"* (Adichie 2017: 121). Again, the author creates the atmosphere where Akunna feels uncomfortable and even discriminated against in her relationship with her boyfriend, and this feeling is carried over into the following development of the story:

Once, at Chang's, he told the waiter he had recently visited shanghai, that he spoke some Mandarin. The waiter warmed up and told him what soup was best and then asked him, "You have girlfriend in Shanghai now?" and he smiled and said nothing... Later you told him why you were upset, that even though you went to Chang's so often together, even though you had kissed just before the menus came, the Chinese man assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and he had smiled and said nothing. Before he apologized, he gazed at you blankly and you knew that he did not understand (Adichie 2017, 124).

Hence, even in her relationship, she feels ashamed, different and alone. The fact that her boyfriend did not correct the waiter, implied that he truly is ashamed to admit publicly that he was in a relationship with a black woman. Everything that followed afterwards was just a disappointment, especially when Akunna found out that her father had died, and she decided to leave back for Nigeria as soon as possible, and break up with her boyfriend. Hence, the American Dream here, just as in the previous short story discussed, represented hope to build a stabile life in the U.S., but everything that followed resembled the American Nightmare. Again, the possibility of pursuing the American Dream is stopped when Akunna leaves back to Nigeria, without indicating whether she will return to the U.S. or not.

2.3. The American Dream in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Short Story "The Arrangers of Marriage"

The title of this short story already reveals the story's main point, although the story itself has an unpredictable nature. The author starts the short story by introducing Chiana, the main character of the story, after she married and moved to the U.S. Already at the beginning, we see Chinaza's expectations from the American Dream, but also the disappointment in it:

My new husband carried the suitcase out of the taxi and lead the way into the brownstone, up a flight of brooding stairs, down an airless hallway with frayed carpeting, and stopped at a door. The number 2B, unevenly fashioned from yellowish metal, was plastered on it.

"We're here," he said he had used the word "house" when he told me about our home. I had imagined a smooth driveway snaking between cucumber-colored lawns, a door leading into a hallway, walls with sedate paintings. A house like those of the white newlyweds in the American films that NTA shows on Saturday nights. He turned on the light in the living room, where a beige couch sat alone in the middle, slanted, a though dropped here by accident. The room was hot; old, musty smells hung heavy in the air (Adichie 2017, 167).

The expectation of the American Dream where Chinaza would live in a house resembling a "newlywed" house from some American movies immediately led to disappointment, as her husband brought her to an old and cheap apartment, generating despondency. In some sense, this feeling of initial disappointment is present in all three short stories, although each story is told in a different manner; the first story is written in third-person singular, the second story is told in second-person singular, while this story is told in first-person singular, placing Chinaza both as the story's protagonist and narrator, yet, for moments we can also see second-person singular narration as in "The Thing Around Your Neck".

The question of identity which is present in previous stories is being raised in this story as well. In fact, when Chinaza uses her mother native language while talking to her newly married husband, he replies in English, discreetly indicating that they should leave her past lives behind: *"'Ike agwum,' I said, placing my handbag down on the bedroom floor. 'Yes, I am exhausted too he said'"* (Adichie 2017, 168). This atmosphere stretched throughout the story as her husband repeatedly corrects her language, encouraging her to speak English.⁹ The real shock follows when Chinaza realizes that her husband, Ofodile, does not use his real name, but Americanized name Dave: *"'I'm not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave,' he said, looking down at the piles of envelopes Shirley had given him"* (Adichie 2017, 172). Moreover, he assigns her a new name as well: *"Agatha Bell"* (Adichie 2017, 172). This was his attempt to assimilate into American society, although Chinaza seems to feel quite uncomfortable, creating an atmosphere where she should be ashamed of her real name and the Nigerian identity she came to the U.S. with. Yet, the ultimate American Nightmare

⁹ Ofodile imposes the sense of Nigerian inferiority in relation to the U.S., which is best exemplified here: *"'This is not like Nigeria, where you shout out to conductor,' he said, sneering, as though he was the one who had invented the superior American system"* (Adichie 2017, 173).

appears when Chinaza finds out that her husband is already married to another woman:

"The American women I married to get a green card is making trouble," he said, and slowly tore a piece of chicken in two. The area under his eyes was puffy. "Our divorce was almost final, but not completely before I married you in Nigeria. Just a minor thing, but she found out about it and now she's threatening to report me to immigration. She wants more money" (Adiche 2017, 182).

With this, the author creates a feasible scenario that many Nigerian women might experience.¹⁰ Although Chinaza had not known about her husband's previous marriage, she does not have any other option but to stay with him, which Ofodile reaffirms by telling her *"It would not make any difference [telling Chinaza about the marriage with another women]. Your uncle and aunt had decided. Were you going to say no to people who have taken care of you since your parents died?"* Hence, Adiche vividly illustrates the toxic relationship between spouses in arranged marriage, where woman is always subordinate and forced to obey her husband. Although the story does not reveal what happens afterwards (we only know that Chinaza has no option but to live with her husband), we get an insight into another failed American Dream, modeled by Ofodile's excessive need to assimilate into American society, which requires self-erasure that Chinaza detests.

3. Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* mainly discusses the difficulties Nigerian women face upon their arrival in the United States of America. All three stories I selected for analysis have a similar tone, while the American Dream in their context generates disappointment, rather than fulfilling the expectations and hopes the characters had initially in these stories. With these stories, Adiche demonstrates that Nigerian immigrant women do not actually have equal chances to live the American Dream, especially if they are married, but the Nigerian segment of their identity actually haunts them, preventing them from living their dreams. This is best seen in "The Arrangers of Marriage", where Chinaza suffers

¹⁰ Even when Chinaza asked Ofodile why he married her, he said *"I was happy when I saw your picture," he said, smacking his lips. "You were light-skinned. I had to think about my children's looks. Light-skinned blacks fere better in America"* (Adichie 2017, 186). Besides perceiving Chinaza as an object, Ofodile himself raises the question of race, as he chose Chinaza as his wife only because she was light-skinned. However, it is confirmed here again that he is doing everything only to assimilate easily and to be as much "same" as everyone else as it is possible.

due to a practice which is common in her culture (the arranged marriage), which causes her to suffer even while in the U.S. However, the American Dream is consequently represented as an illusion that comes with a cost, best reflected in a need to assimilate while erasing the existing identity.

Furthermore, the stories imply that living the American Dream as a (trans)migrant is quite challenging, especially as when (trans)migrants arrive to the U.S., some of the negative practices from their cultures also become dislocated, and carried over to the U.S. In addition to this, the issues of identity, race and belonging are given special attention, and they are the elements that prevent African women from fully living their American Dreams and strangling them while being around their “neck(s).”

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