

EFFECTIVE SPACE IN *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*

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Abstract

Chimamanda Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* is an influential and an important story collection. She exposes so many issues throughout this text such as: gender, politics, patriarchy, and identity. Through her eloquent writing Adichie takes her readers through a compelling journey as she exposes the "thing" around the characters' necks. She does this by discussing different people in different situations. Adichie's writing is bold as it calls attention to many issues that warrant an immediate response. She uses her platform and her voice to give women a space and a voice to find out who they truly are and to be comfortable in that space. The space that Adichie creates is symbolic of the space that women need but do not have in many aspects. The stories in this collection can be applied to life and also teach a very valuable lesson. Her writing is so pure that it takes the readers on an emotional journey. Through her writing, Adichie urges her readers to not succumb to the "thing" around your neck.

Chimamanda Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a powerful group of stories that are threaded together by common themes such as: family, culture, gender, and identity. The title itself seems to be an ongoing theme throughout each of the stories. In each story, there is a "thing" around the characters' necks. Some of the things could represent anxiety. At times, the "thing" could also symbolize gender related issues, or at other times, the "thing" could represent a feeling of not belonging. The characters in the collection are connected in many ways. Many of them are connected by the inevitable struggle to maintain their African culture and their principles, while trying to assimilate the American culture. *The Thing Around Your Neck* takes readers on an emotional journey while highlighting various social and political issues.

One of the interesting aspects about Adichie's writing in *The Thing Around Your Neck* is how she describes gender issues. Gender is a delicate topic, but through her eloquent writing, she depicts how drastically different things are for women than for men. Even today, there are still patriarchal societies in Africa that make it difficult for women to get ahead. In each story, we get a glimpse of that very thing. For example, in *Cell One* the narrator is unnamed. The fact that the female narrator is unnamed further proves the point that women are seen as "less than," especially since we do not know much about the narrator or the mother in the story. All we really know about the mother is that her jewelry was stolen, she makes excuses for her son, and that she takes pride in how he looks because he got his complexion from her (*The Thing Around Your Neck*). We do not gain any real knowledge about the narrator except that she appears to be living in her brother's shadow trying to find her place and her voice.

In addition, her brother—Nnamabia, has done so much, but both of his parents seem to be at his every beck and call. This act, in my opinion, propels the notion of patriarchy because his parents, especially his mother finds solutions to all of his problems solely because he is a man. His parents try using bribery with money, Jollof rice, and meat as a way to get him better treatment while he was imprisoned. If the circumstances were different and the female narrator were in the same position, is it likely that their parents offer the same treatment to her? Probably not. I believe the narrator knows it, which adds to her frustration regarding Nnamabia's situation. He has caused so much trouble, but his parents are treating him like a king.

While researching, I read an article called *Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's The Thing Around Your Neck*. This article maintains that "space and place inform and dictate human life, society, culture, and gender relations," (Space as the Representation, pg. 24). The article discusses space as in social "space" and how that space affects our practices and perceptions. For example, in *Cell One*, the article analyzes the spaces created in the text. The Nsukka campus, their home, and the prison are all major settings in the story (*Space as Representation*).

To add, the university "space" represents a male-dominated place. The space represents a "tool of thought and action, and a means of control, domination of power. This explanation of space includes the protagonist's home," (*Space as Representation*, pg. 24). This article proves the notion that patriarchal societies in a way forget about women in order to coddle the male ego. For example, in *Cell One* even after the narrator's parents knew what Nnamabia had done, they—especially the mother, turned a blind eye. They manipulated the space he was in to make him more comfortable (*Space as Representation*).

What is so interesting in it all is that Adichie uses her voice and her influence in the text by defying patriarchy and giving the narrator a voice (*Space as Representation*, pg. 26). She even created a "space" for her to use it. An example of this is when she—the narrator was upset that her parents wanted to go back up to the jail. She finally had enough and in a way, she lost it. She cracked the windshield, which resulted in either one of them visiting the prison that day. (*Cell One, That Thing Around Your Neck*). I submit that this was the first time that the narrator felt like her opinion really mattered.

The same idea reigns true in *Tomorrow is too Far*. There is definitely some juxtaposition regarding patriarchy. The narrator, also unnamed, is a woman like the narrator in *Cell One*. The narrator in *Tomorrow is too Far*, is in a way jealous of her brother, Nonso. The notion of patriarchy is also threaded throughout the story. The narrator's family is partial to her brother, especially her "Grandmama." She—her grandmother was obsessed with who would carry on the family name. Even after Nonso passed, one of the first things her grandmother questioned was who would carry on the family name. The narrator wanted some attention from her family. She yearned for it, but deep down she knew that if she passed away, her family would not be as upset as they are about Nonso (*Tomorrow is too Far, The Thing Around Your Neck*).

From researching and reading, it is evident that in some societies such as Nigeria, it does seem that boys are more valued than girls. We see this same element in *Cell One*. In saying this, the narrator lived in and operated in the same space as the narrator in *Cell One*—a male-dominated one (*Space as Representation*). In my opinion, Adichie provides a space in this story for young women who have gone through the same thing to break away from the bounds of patriarchy and find their voice. In providing this “space,” she allows them to grow by offering a safe space within the text to find their voice. The space that is created is not provided by the narrator, but it is provided through Adichie’s eloquent writing as she forces the space for issues to be discussed.

Another thing that is of profound importance in the story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* is the role that food plays. Food seems to be a constant theme threaded throughout the text. It is something that holds the characters together and keeps them close to home. Food served a dual purpose in these stories. Yes, it kept the characters close to home, but it also was a form of control in my opinion. When thinking about this notion, two stories come to mind: *The Shivering* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*.

In *The Shivering*, Ukamaka has broken up with Udenma, but she still allows him or the thought of him to have control over her. She still uses hot peppers when she cooks even though she does not like them. It is almost like she uses food as an excuse to keep talking about him or to still remain close to him. This connection to food could also be brought back to *Cell One* as the mother used food to help her gain control or influence over her son’s challenging situation. The exact thing can be said in *The Arrangers of Marriage*. “Dave,” obsessed with being “Americanized” does not want to maintain his African culture. In return, he wants his wife, Chinaza to do the same. He goes through great trouble to convince Chinaza to do the same as he goes through great measures to ensure she becomes “Americanized” as well. He takes her to McDonald’s, gets her an American cookbook, and instructs her on not saying “biscuits.” Because of his extreme longing to assimilate American culture, he controls his wife as he tries to get her to not cook Nigerian food. This is interesting to me because Africans are proud people. Their culture and heritage are rich, and they take pride in who they are. It is quite unfortunate that he cares more about assimilating another culture rather than preserving his own culture in a new country.

In talking about control, we cannot ignore the way that women are treated in this collection. It is very interesting the way that women are treated in this collection. Through this, I believe that Adichie is creating “space” to highlight how patriarchy has affected women. Throughout this collection, it shows how women are tossed aside and forgotten. Take Nkem, in *Imitation* for example. She is married to a rich Nigerian business man named Obiora. She lives away from him in America, but she finds out that he has a live-in girlfriend. Nkem knows deep down that there is nothing she can do because they live in two separate places—transcontinental (*Imitation, The Thing Around Your Neck*). This also accounts for the control we see in other stories in this collection. Nkem’s unfortunate predicament also shows how women are trapped inside the bounds of a patriarchal society. From the context of the story, it is evident that Nkem is cared for and provided for solely by her husband. I can deduce that she is dependent upon him, and she probably

has no other option but to accept his treatment. While this is unfortunate, one can certainly understand, especially with having children and living away from family.

Imitation mimics the same type of “space” described in the article, *Space as Representation*. There are a couple of spaces in this story: Philadelphia and Nigeria. These different places represent domestic and social “spaces.” Philadelphia represents the domestic space as she is a mother, takes care of her children, cooks, and cleans. On the other hand, Nigeria represents “a hybrid, border setting,” (*Space as Representation*, pg. 28). In my opinion, in both spaces, she yearns to please her husband. In *Cell One*, the narrator despised patriarchy and wanted a voice, and she showed us through her actions. Thus, Adichie provided the narrator with the space to use her voice.

On the contrary, *Imitation* is quite different. Although Nkem was displeased with Obiora’s infidelity, there is nothing she can do. She asked him or told him that she wanted to move back to Nigeria. He told her that they would talk about it. Nkem knows that it is a done deal. She is not going to be able to move back. She accepts the male dominated space. She is passive and remains quiet. She loses her voice and does not have a space of her own (*Space as Representation*). Unlike the unnamed narrator in *Cell One* who asserted herself within the space provided, Nkem settles into her reality without a fight. She deems herself defeated in her cause.

Likewise, *A Private Experience* also encompasses this same use of space. In this story, it is somewhat of a single space rather than multiple spaces because there is a clear switch from past to present—even future. This time though, the space is a violent one. The space is occupied by Chika, who is an Igbo Christian woman and a Hausa Muslim woman, whose name we are not privy to. The women are running from a riot. Within the space, we learn what happens to the women and what happens to their relatives.

The outside space that surrounds the two women is violent and oppressive. The article suggests that the women are placed in a space that is just like prison—isolation. With the riot going on, all they really had was each other. Chika was privileged, the other lady, whose name we have no knowledge of was not. Through her writing, Adichie puts these two women in the same space. There is truly a lesson to be learned here. Material things and status don’t really matter when chaos is around (*Space as Representation*).

Adichie’s writing is very powerful and very profound. In *That Thing Around Your Neck*, space is a powerful force. It shows the tools of thought and domination through the eyes and experiences of the characters. Adichie is writing from a post-colonial point-of-view. “She exposes and deconstructs the power structure that dictates society, culture, politics, and most importantly human life and gender relations,” (*Space as Representation*, pg. 34).

Another interesting thing about *That Thing Around Your Neck* are the preconceived notions or obsessions about America or Africa. Both groups of people have romanticized ideas about each location. Our African/Nigerian characters get a rude awakening upon coming to America as they

find out it is not all what it is cracked up to be. They all seem to have a distorted “American Dream.”

For example, when analyzing the story *That Thing Around Your Neck*, Akunna, who has just won the visa lottery to be able to come to America, shows the readers this very thing. She believes that everyone who lives in America has a huge house, a car, and a gun. It is definitely hard for Akunna to fit in. She is not comfortable. She does not have much to keep her connected back home, especially since her boyfriend likes the smell of African food.

Likewise, in *Arrangers of Marriage*, the same thing happens. Chinaza moves away from home to be with her husband. Once she gets there, she realizes that she does not like the food, and she does not seem to be a huge fan of her husband.

While studying the collection *That Thing Around Your Neck*, I was very surprised to see how many characters abandoned their culture. They put their culture aside to immerse themselves in Western culture. It is almost as if the characters forgot where they came from and wanted their spouse to do the same. Take a look at “Dave.” He abandoned his true African name to assimilate an American name and wanted Chinaza to do the same.

I find that interesting because again, Africans take pride in their names and their cultures and I cannot see one just abandoning home with no regard, risking the danger of losing one’s culture. There is an undeniable tension between Western culture and African culture. This makes me believe that maybe the characters could have assimilated to protect themselves. I am certain that it is quite difficult to be in a new place and not know anyone. At some point we’ve all been uncomfortable; however, if “Dave” wanted to protect Chinaza, he could have been honest with her from the start.

This also shows how women are unfortunately more often times than not at the mercy of their husbands. Think of how shameful and humiliating it is to conform to something with no say so. Of course, a woman cannot or will not, in part because of pride call home and say things did not work out. I find this quite intriguing because in movies and different shows regarding African culture, this was not the case. Many African men value their wives as she is the cornerstone of the family. It is disheartening to see that so many women do not have a voice, especially since we are discussing issues after the post-colonial period.

Adichie does some beautiful work in this collection. What is so unique about her writing is its relevancy and how these issues and lessons within the text can be applied to everyone’s life. She uses complex situations in a way that provides healing. Her writing is so eloquent. Her beliefs, in my opinion, are woven throughout the text. She gives her readers anecdotes of which to ponder.

In this collection, she has exposed many things such as: corrupt government, marriage, the American Dream, gender roles, tradition, and family among other things. Adichie uses the

characters as a platform to uncover these injustices. I submit that there is a lesson to be learned from the text. One cannot abandon his or her past and expect to be successful in the future.

Adichie shows us that the past works together with the present to form a bright future. She shows us this in each story of *The Thing Around Your Neck*. In most, if not all of the stories, the protagonist has to deal with the past (home) to get closure. Take the poor narrator from *Tomorrow is too Far* and Akunna from *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Both of these characters found, in my opinion, that home was what gave closure. It does not matter how long one has been away. Home is home.

Adichie shows her readers that it is okay to go home because sometimes we find our strength there. Through the characters, namely the women characters, she shows that it is okay to struggle and to not know who you are. The most important thing to do is to stay connected and not to lose one's self—whether it be in a man, in life, or any other circumstances. One should always stay true to one's self. Don't let "that thing around your neck" get in your way.

Bibliography

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