

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI

ADICHIE'S "THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK"

IDENTIDADE CULTURAL E CRISE DE IDENTIDADE EM "THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK" DE CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to analyze the short story "The Thing Around Your Neck", by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009a), under the perspective of cultural identity and identity crisis in postmodern societies. In order to do so, Stuart Hall's (1996) "The Question of Cultural Identity" is used as the main reference in sociological studies, alongside with the analysis that Roland Barthes (1952) makes of *Je vivrai l'amour des autres*, by the French writer Jean Cayrol (1947), and contributions by Jane Tutikian (2006).

Keywords: African literature; postmodernism; cultural identity.

RESUMO: Este texto tem como objetivo analisar o conto "The Thing Around Your Neck", de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009a), sob a ótica da identidade cultural e da crise de identidade nas sociedades pós-modernas. Para tanto, usa-se como principal referência no campo da sociologia o texto "The Question of Cultural Identity" de Stuart Hall (1996), combinada com a análise literária que Roland Barthes (1952) executa de *Je vivrai l'amour des autres*, do escritor francês Jean Cayrol (1947), bem como contribuições de Jane Tutikian (2006).

Palavras-chave: literatura africana; pós-modernismo; identidade cultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity crisis is not at all an unusual theme in contemporary philosophic and social studies. In fact, some authors assume that the constant change of everything we

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know is a determining factor of modernity. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2007, p. 12), in their *Communist Manifesto*, stated that “[c]onstant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. [...] All that is solid melts into air”. In a broader perspective, Stuart Hall (1996) claims that the transformations triggered by modernity affect not only the structure of society but also the deepest personal constructions we have such as class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality. Therefore, the modern subject loses its social and cultural stability and its personal traits and characteristics. Hall (1996, p. 597) concludes that “[t]his set of double displacements — decentering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves — constitutes a 'crisis of identity'”. Therefore, this turmoil is an unavoidable consequence of modern (and post-modern) society.

It is evident that this theme would soon have consequences on Literature. Even in the beginnings of literary theory it was accepted that Literature works by representing reality, an idea that can be seen in works as early as Aristotle's (1993) *Poetics*, through the concept of *mimesis*. Furthermore, it becomes even more urgent for Literature to depict something so present in contemporary reality when the topic is Cultural Identity, since, in the words of Jane Tutikian (2006, p. 15, our translation), “[l]iterature is a source of culture and culture is a source of identity.”² It is in this context that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009a) writes “The Thing Around Your Neck”, a short-story capable of showing the power of displacement suffered by the postmodern subject in a unique and beautiful manner.

The narrative tells the struggles of Akunna, a Nigerian girl, while trying to make a living in the United States of America. There is no direct reference to the specific period in which the story takes place, but it is safe to assume it is probably around the late

² In the original: “[...] a literatura é fonte de cultura e cultura é fonte de identidade.” (TUTIKAN, 2006, p. 15).

1990's or early 2000's. This time frame can be inferred by small details in the story, such as the reference to the fight against AIDS in Botswana, that started in the late 1980's (UNAIDS, 2017) and to the Walt Disney Picture's movie *The Lion King*, released in 1994. Furthermore, we can also deduce that the story happens before the second half of the 2000's, since Akunna communicates with her family through letters, which indicates that the internet is probably not a common tool during the time the narrative is set. In her journey, she goes through severe cases of xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and other types of prejudice due to her origins. Being harassed by close ones, working an underpaid irregular job and being seen as an "exotic piece" by some are but a few examples of what the protagonist has to go through while in the land of the "American dream".

There have been a few studies focusing on Adichie's style and on the autobiographical aspects present in her writings (ONUKAOGU; ONYERIONWU, 2010; SACKKEYFIO, 2013). However, not many have focused on the literary construction of her characters, or even on how she portrays the construction of their identity. This paper aims at focusing on the aspects dealing with culture and construction of identity in the aforementioned short story. In order to do so, in the first part, we present some information about the author herself and the relations between her biography and the short story. In the second part, we take a closer look into the chronological sequence of the short story while comparing it to *Je vivrai l'amour des autres*, written by the French author Jean Cayrol (1947), assuming Roland Barthes' (1952) critical analysis. Then, we proceed to the conclusion, emphasizing the aspects that guide this paper, namely cultural identity and cultural crisis.

2. CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE AND AKUNNA

It is possible to find some insightful information in the author's biography about the protagonist of the short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" (ADICHIE, 2009a). According to Daria Tunca (2018), Adichie was born and raised in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Daughter of a university professor, she was raised in an academic environment and has been largely awarded due to her knowledge and dedication. By the age of nineteen, she left to the United States due to a Communication scholarship she earned from Drexel University, in the state of Philadelphia. This fact would deeply affect her works, as we can see in "The Thing Around Your Neck". Later, she moved on to acquire a degree in Communication and Social Studies at Eastern Connecticut State University. Adichie graduated in 2001 with *summa cum laude*, and soon after, in 2003, she got a master's in Creative Writing through John Hopkins University, in Baltimore. Five years later, she would receive her second master's degree from Yale University, this time on African Studies (TUNCA, 2018).

As one would expect, Adichie's works are permeated by her life experiences, and many of her stories are related to her own history. Through literature, she explores the experiences of Africans living in foreign countries, a topic she has plenty of property on to discuss, while also taking up on gender issues and black feminism. "The Thing Around Your Neck" is no exception to this: the main character shares a considerable number of similarities with the author herself. Both are immigrant Nigerian women, both belong to the Igbo ethnic group, and both moved to the United States at a young age (Adichie by the age of nineteen and Akunna at the age of twenty-two). However, "The Thing Around Your Neck" is far from being a biographical work. Major differences are noticeable between the character and the creator, and maybe the most blatant contrast is the economical one. According to Adichie, in her 2009 TED Lecture *The Danger of a*

Single Story (ADICHIE, 2009b), the soon-to-be writer lived a plentiful life in Nigeria. Her family was not rich, but her parents' wages working in the University of Nigeria could afford them a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. The same is not true for Akunna.

As we can see in the short story, Akunna comes from a poor family. The passage in which Akunna's father crashes his car into the one of a rich man, one of the most powerful parts in the story, is a good example of this: "Sorry sir, sorry sir, he chanted. If you sell me and my family, you cannot buy even one tire on your car. Sorry sir" (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 122). In fact, short before this moment of the story, the protagonist is distanced from Adichie, when it is stated that "you knew you had become close when you told him that your father was really not a schoolteacher in Lagos" (p. 122). Here, the narrator states that the main character's father does not have a profession like that of the author's father. Another difference regards the fact that Adichie moved to the United States to study at a university, whilst Akunna went there aiming to work and save money to help her family. The protagonist of the short story apparently even wanted to get an education there, but was again stopped by her economic situation: "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" (p. 117). It is clear, then, that the similarities between the character and the writer are not enough to say that Akunna is a projection of Adichie in all possible aspects.

So far, we have been calling the main character Akunna as if this name was a given aspect of the tale. However, this is not what really happens. The protagonist's name is only mentioned quite late in the development of the story, on the sixth page (of a thirteen page total). In fact, it is only mentioned once, and it can easily go unnoticed by an inattentive reader. Sometimes, it even seems that "Akunna" is there merely as a "dummy", a placeholder for the character to have a name, since it is not that what identifies her. Therefore, we can almost say that the character is "nameless". From here,

we have two possibilities of interpretation (and both can coexist and be equally appropriate): 1) the lack of a name is another tool to make the reader relate to the story and empathize with the main character; and 2) the lack of a name is a representation of the identity crisis suffered by the protagonist. Both will be explained now onwards.

The first possibility here proposed once more relates to the narration structure: as said, through most part of the short story, the protagonist is not referred to by a name, but by “you”. The initial absence of a name takes away her identity, and leaves the gap open for the reader to complete it with his/her own. This is why it is important for the name to appear only in the middle of the story: if it was given early in the development, the character would be marked by it through the rest of the narrative, and the link between reader and story might not be as strong. By showing it later on, the interlocutor has already associated the protagonist to himself/herself, since he/she has been used to understanding it as “you”, and not as “Akunna”. That is why we can claim that the name given works more as a placeholder than as a proper name. The main point of this narrative is not to tell the story of Akunna, but to tell the story of “you”.

To reinforce the idea that the name of the character is suppressed to make it more relatable, it is also noticeable that other relevant characteristics are equally concealed. For example, there is minimal description about the protagonist’s physical appearance. The only references that can be found are about her hair, telling that it has braids (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 116) and that they are “dark and bouncy like the filling of a pillow” (p. 125). Furthermore, there is also minimal description on gender: the character is never directly addressed as a woman or a girl, or even referred to as “she” or “her”. We only get vague mentions about her gender, such as being called “sister” and “aunty”, being a waitress or being the girlfriend of her lover.

If we embrace the idea that the objective of the narrator is to deeply connect the reader to the protagonist of the story, then the use of a second-person point of view is completely justified. By using this technique, the author literally puts the reader in the

position of the character and forces him/her to walk on someone else's shoes. Especially if we imagine that the majority of Adichie's readers are not Nigerian girls, this structure becomes a powerful way of showing them how uncomfortable these situations are. Since the average reader is not familiar with the circumstances undergone by the protagonist, forcing the interlocutor to imagine himself/herself in those same situations creates a bond and a feeling of empathy that probably would not be established so intensely with any other type of narrator.

The second possibility of interpretation is relatively more complex, and it requires a little bit more of context about the story. In "The Thing Around Your Neck", the protagonist (which from now on will not be referred to as "Akunna" anymore) moves to the United States after winning the American visa lottery, and proceeds to live with her uncle. Early after he received the protagonist at the airport and partially described what his life in America was like, the uncle summarized all the experience of the "American way-of-life": "America is give-and-take: you gave up a lot, but you gained a lot too" (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 116). After being sexually assaulted by him, she decides to move to another city and starts to live alone in a small room and to work in an irregular job at a restaurant.

In the restaurant, she gets to know a man who shows interest in her and insists on going out with her. He is a well-read man who has already known a plethora of different countries and different cultures. As so, he is used to interacting with foreign people and he does not perceive the protagonist as someone different or strange. At first, the protagonist is allured by the man, because of the way he makes her feel comfortable and normal, but later on she developed a strange relation with him, feeling both attracted and cowed by him, a feeling that "made you say goodbye to him but also made you reluctant to go away" (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 121). Due to this sensation, she refuses his invitation multiple times, but, when he gave up on insisting, she panicked and accepted to go out with him. Since then, they became closer every day and

exchanged life experiences and stories (such as the aforementioned case regarding her father), with the protagonist feeling progressively more comfortable with the man.

Even though they got along well, one afternoon, when dining at a Chinese restaurant, the protagonist felt bad about him not admitting she was his girlfriend to the waiter. From then onwards, they would start to have arguments and culture shocks, due to the somewhat snobbish way he looked down on other countries, the “list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at *his* life” (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 125, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, they would later make up and get back together. The protagonist would then get to know the parents of her significant other in a dinner, and they were surprisingly welcoming and faced their relationship as something completely normal, unlike most of the Americans. The protagonist “that they did not examine you like an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk” (p. 126). However, the protagonist later got angry with her companion because of his issues with his parents and his unwillingness to travel with them, although she apparently could not tell why.

In the final part of the short story, the protagonist finally decides to write to her family, and, upon receiving the answer, she discovers her father has been dead for five months. She then breaks down and cries, while her companion consoles her. The protagonist decides to go back to Nigeria to see her family, and states she needs to go alone. The narrative finishes at the airport, where the couple says the last farewell, with the uncertainty of getting back together in the future.

3. “THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK” AND *JE VIVRAI L’AMOUR DES AUTRES*: POINTS OF CONTACT

Now that we have the story in mind, we can proceed to the analysis of the second possible interpretation for the absence of a name given to the protagonist since the very

beginning of the narrative. As mentioned earlier, the lack of a name can be a representation of the lack of an identity, and this lack of identity is due to the misplacement felt by a foreign in a strange country. The situation faced by the protagonist of “The Thing Around Your Neck” is astonishingly similar to the one lived by the main character of a novel called *Je vivrai l’amour des autres*, written by Cayrol (1947), and which is divided in two tomes, *On vous parle* and *Les Premiers Jours*. The first tome tells the story of a likewise unnamed character, living alone in a rented room apparently as a stranger in France. He passes most part of the narrative interacting mainly with the objects inside his room, describing them and making their characteristics his own. Throughout the novel, he barely interacts with other people. When he does interact with someone else, the action is done just as if the person was also an object.

In his analysis of Cayrol’s novel, Barthes (1952, p. 491, our translation³) claims that “at the heart of it, men are no more than objects: they have their flat and cruel nature, familiar and strange; they are the moments of a walk, the Cayrolian man roams them, touches them but does not narrow them down”. This picture will only change in the second tome, which starts when the protagonist is evicted from the room he lived in and starts to live with a couple that owns a café. Due to the change of scenario, the protagonist then starts taking part in real social interactions, no longer seeing people as objects. Furthermore, by being part of a community and relating to others, he then receives a name, Armand.

Although Cayrol’s novel is clearly focused on the psychological aspect of isolation while Adichie’s focuses on historical and sociocultural differences, we can identify some similarities in both. The protagonist of “The Thing Around Your Neck” is clearly isolated too, in her own way. Although she talks to her boss and other customers and eventually

³ In the original: “Les hommes ne sont, au fond, d’abord, rien d’autre que des objets: ils ont la nature lisse et cruelle, familière et insolite; ils sont les moments d’une marche, l’homme cayrolien les parcourt, les frôle mais ne les étreint pas,” (BARTHES, 1952, p. 491).

other people she meets in her daily routine, her relationships with those subjects are visibly shallow and superficial, and similarly to the protagonist of *Je vivrai l'amour des autres* she interacts with people as though she was interacting with objects. Her first interaction with someone genuinely interested in her is when her future boyfriend starts talking with her and asks her about her life. Then, and only then, we get to know her name. Just like the main character of *Je vivrai l'amour des autres*, the protagonist receives a name only when she gets reinserted in a society in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, not only the protagonist receives a name after recovering a relevant relationship, but she does not even receive the opportunity of giving herself a name, for her name comes from the lips of a third character. At no time she states, "I am Akunna", or "My name is Akunna", or, using the narrative style of the short story itself, "You told him your name was Akunna". Instead, what we do get is "He asked your name and said Akunna was pretty" (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 120). The first time we get to know how to call her, it is by someone else saying her name. This reinforces the idea that the identity is not her own, it is given by others, and she lives in a strange world. This assumption becomes even stronger when we add the sociocultural factors to the analysis: she is a foreign black woman, living by herself in an environment where no one knows her. By being part of a political, ethnic and gender minority, she is completely denied the right of having a voice of her own in her story. The only solid trace of an identity we have from her is given by a middle-class white man. Angela Y. Davis (1983) shows how black women in America have been denied a story of their own ever since the slave ships arrived there. Once more, it is the Caucasian dominant culture speaking on behalf of a culture that has been marginalized by it. According to Edward Said (1995), the power of a narrative is an important factor in an imperialist context, since it is through culture that the deepest aspect of domination shows itself. The extension of Imperialism through literature is subtly tainted at by Adichie in this excerpt. It is also worth mentioning that, later on the story, the protagonist tells that, when watching the TV

show *Jeopardy*, “you rooted for the following, in this order: women of color, black men, and white women, before, finally, white men — which meant you never rooted for white men” (ADICHIE, 2009, p. 121-122). This is exactly the opposite order in which people in the United States of America have their rights, such as the right to vote, secured, as observed by Davis (1983).

Another similarity we can observe between the character of *Je vivrai l'amour des autres* and the one from “The Thing Around Your Neck” is the backstory of the characters (or the lack of it). In Cayrol’s (1947) novel, the protagonist has absolutely no personal history. No references to a past life are made, nor does he make references to memories or past experiences. In Adichie’s (2009a) short story, we do get to know some information about the past of the protagonist, about her family and her life back in Nigeria. However, not only is this information scarce, but it is also completely unknown for most of the other people around her. Instead of getting to know her story and her identity, the Americans she interacts with prefer to create their own version of her story and sometimes even accept it as the truth. This can be seen when her college peers assume that English was not her mother tongue, that she did not have a real house in Africa and that she had never seen a car. The protagonist’s uncle would later tell her that his neighbors assumed he was eating squirrels, for they believed that Africans would eat any wild animal (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 116). Later on, in the short story, her customers at the restaurant would frequently assume she was Jamaican or would imagine that life in Africa was directly related to elephants and safaris (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 119). Once more, we find the white western culture taking over the voice of African people, rewriting their history and erasing their identities. As we get to see the examples, more and more the face of Imperialism shows itself in the pages of the short story. When getting in the United States, the protagonist has no family, no friends, no one close to her, no one who knows her story. She becomes just another immigrant amidst the crowd. This is clearly referenced in the moment it is stated “[n]obody knew

who you were, because you told no one. Sometimes you felt invisible and tried to walk through your room wall into the hallway” (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 119). In fact, this excerpt appears just before the first mention to “the thing around your neck”.

4. THE THING AROUND HER NECK

Soon after the passage in which the protagonist feels like a ghost, it is said that “[a]t night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep” (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 119). This is what gives the short story its title, and it is never completely revealed what this “thing” is. However, having in mind now that this narrative is deeply related to the concept of cultural identity and analyzing the context in which this “thing” appears, we may be able to deduce what it might be.

This first appearance of “the thing” happens at the top of the character’s depersonalization. She is a shadow of a being in the United States, with no one close to her or caring about her. She had left her uncle’s house and was living alone, in an underpaid irregular job, longing for her family and the friends she had left in Nigeria. She still does not have a name, and her future boyfriend has not appeared yet. Nonetheless, he would appear soon, merely two paragraphs later. After that, she becomes comfortable with the situation, and starts to regain her personality. Having someone with whom she can share her life experiences and stories brings her back to the real world, to a society, and by contrasting the elements of this new society with the elements from the one she used to live in, she can even get back to it and return to her roots, recovering her cultural identity. This is exemplified in the part in which she cooks *garri* and *onugbu* soup to her boyfriend (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 123). Just like she felt ill when she ate a hot dog upon arriving in the USA (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 115), having to digest a different culture, she now restates her own culture and makes others digest it,

causing her boyfriend to throw up⁴. Furthermore, this is also a representation of what Daniel-Henri Pageaux (1989) would call a relation of *phobia* between two national cultures, when one culture considers itself superior to another and refuses to absorb it, causing it to (in the case of the short story, literally) throw it up. This passage shows our protagonist getting increasingly stronger, recovering her identity, and even being able to resist the imperialistic culture and to respond to oppressive situations, just as we can see in the two arguments she has with her boyfriend (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 124-125). After this second one, when they make up and get together, we have the second mention to “the thing”.

“The thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go.” (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 125). Here, we can see that she has already recovered her strength, and that the thing that once harmed her is not so harmful or paralyzing anymore. Although the protagonist would later be depicted in what could be considered “fragile” moments, such as the one in which she breaks down after getting to know that her father died, it does not mean that she is still in a completely weak or disabled state. On the contrary, she is powerful enough to leave the life and the relationship she had established in the United States to return to her family in a moment of need, breaking the chains that had tied her to an imperialistic culture and reaffirming herself.

Although it may seem contradictory that she regains her identity by inserting herself in a different culture, this is also part of the consequences of a postmodern society. Hall (1996) claims that the postmodern subject is composed by many different identities, some even paradoxical, that coexist inside us and present themselves in

⁴ Although this theme is not going to be developed any further in this essay, it is interesting to notice that, in “The Thing Around Your Neck” (ADICHIE, 2009a), food stands also as a strong sign of culture and identity, and using it to represent a character having a physical impact on another one is a deep sign of strength and self-affirmation. Basically, food is a sign representing national identity, a part of “a system of cultural representation.” (HALL, 1996, p. 612, emphasis added). It becomes clear then why the protagonist’s uncle refers to that hot dog as an “introduction to America”.

different situations. “Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about” (HALL, 1996, p. 598). In a close reading, it becomes clear that Adichie (2009a) is constructing her protagonist in such a manner, since her identity as a Nigerian is reinforced and reaffirmed when faced with her newly acquired identity as an immigrant in a foreign land. Besides that, there is also the idea that globalization disintegrates the national identities, because of the homogenization process it naturally triggers, while they are simultaneously reinforced by local groups as a form of resistance to this process. Both situations occur simultaneously and in the same conditions, generating the contradictions we can see in the short story. Hall (1996) refers to this dichotomy as “tradition and translation”.

5. FINAL REMARKS

We can conclude that the concepts of cultural identity and identity crisis are intertwined throughout the whole story, being even directly related to the element that gives title to the tale. As so, “The Thing Around Your Neck” (ADICHIE, 2009a) reveals itself as an important narrative in contemporaneity. Not only it gives voice to a growing minority group, since we are living the worst migration crisis since World War II (MCKIRDY, 2016), but also explores a universal theme in the present postmodern society in a brilliant and innovative manner.

In this paper, we intended to show how many of the problems being discussed in cultural studies appear in Adichie’s (2009a) short story mainly through the work of Hall (1996) and Tutikian (2006), while also shortly exposing how these problems are a direct consequence of capitalism’s cyclical crisis, as described by Marx and Engels (2007) in the mid-19th century. This is directly reflected in the points of contact between “The Thing Around Your Neck” and *Je vivrai l’amour des autres*, by Cayrol

(1947), since both narratives were created in moments of world crisis provoked by capitalism, i.e., the contemporary immigration crisis in the first and the post-war Europe in the latter.

Furthermore, the idea presented by the protagonist's uncle early in it, that "America is give-and-take: you gave up a lot, but you gained a lot too" (ADICHIE, 2009a, p. 116), can be noticed throughout the story. The character gave up a normal wage to gain a job, gave up a house to gain her honor back, gave up her pride to gain her boyfriend and, in deeper levels, gave up her identity to gain America and later gave up America to gain her identity back. Adichie then creates a narrative that not only stands as a story of a painful loss of the persona and the even more painful recovery of it, but "The Thing Around Your Neck" is also the story of a transformation, a journey of self-discovery.

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Recebido em: 18/08/2020

Aceito em: 25/09/2020