FEMINISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN THE SHORT STORIES OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

Roxana Elena Doncu
Lecturer, University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Carol Davila", Bucharest

Abstract: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one of the most powerful voices in the contemporary postcolonial literature, documents the lives of Nigerians affected by their colonial past and by the demands of a globalized world from the 'embodied' perspective of a black woman and a feminist in her 2009 short story collection, The Thing Around Your Neck. Adichie is less interested in the fine theoretical distinctions between biological sex and cultural gender or how the two are often conflated, with the result that cultural difference becomes naturalized; her main interest lies in charting the negative consequences that gender roles defined by oppressive patriarchal regimes have on individual characters and sketching possibilities of resistance.

Keywords: gender, feminism, postcolonialism, culture clashes

Listed by *The New African* among the 100 most influential Africans in 2013 and by *The Time Magazine* among the 100 most influential people in 2015, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most powerful voices of the postcolonial literature of the 21st century. Born and raised in Nigeria, she went to the United States to study communication and political science at the age of 19. She is the author of three novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013), and of a short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Her short stories document the lives of Nigerians affected by their colonial past and by the demands of a globalized world from an 'embodied' perspective, that of a 21st century "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels for Herself and Not for Men", as Adichie ironically refers to herself in her TEDxEUSTON speech "We Should All Be Feminists".

Adichie gives voice to her own brand of feminism, less theoretical, more inclusive and with a strong emphasis on educational value not only in her famous speech "We Should All Be Feminists", but also in the short stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck.* Both men and women are negatively affected by the colonial heritage and the political instability of the rapidly succeeding postcolonial regimes (most of them military dictatorships), which continue to imprison them into clear-cut gender roles. Adichie is less interested in the fine theoretical distinctions between biological sex and cultural gender or how the two are often conflated, with the result that cultural difference becomes naturalized; her main interest lies in charting the negative consequences that gender roles defined by oppressive patriarchal regimes have on individual characters and sketching possibilities of resistance. In "Cell One", the first story in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the narrator, a young girl, recounts the story of her brother's transformation from a reckless teenager that stole their mother's jewelry into a courageous young man that dares to stand up to the brutal policemen in order to defend an old man. Nnamabia is a victim of his own culture, of the over-indulgence that the family shows towards him just because he is a boy and of their relatively high social status. As "the thieving boys were the popular ones", the narrator explains, "Boys who had grown up watching Sesame Street, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast, attending the university staff primary school in smartly polished brown sandals were now cutting through the mosquito netting of their neighbours' windows [...] and climbing in to steal Tvs and

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VCRs." (8) Parental authority is at its lowest: the mother loves Nnamabia too much to punish him and the father just makes him write a report on how he stole and sold the jewelry. As the apple of the parents' eye, Nnamabia gets away every time he does a bad thing:

> When, at eleven, Nnamabia broke the window of his classroom with a stone, my mother gave him the money to replace it and did not tell my father. When he lost some library books in class two, she told his form-mistress that our houseboy had stolen them. When, in class three, he left early every day to attend cathechism and it turned out that he never once went and so he could not receive Holy Communion, she told the other parents that he had malaria on the examination day. When he took the key of my father's car and pressed it into a piece of soap that my father found before Nnamabia could take it to a locksmith, she made vague sounds about how he was just experimenting and it didn't mean a thing. When he stole the exam questions from the study and sold them to my father's students, she shouted at him, but then told my father that Nnamabia was sixteen, after all, and really should be given more pocket money. (8-9)

Condoning Nnamabia's misdeeds and protecting him from facing the consequences of his acts only encourages him to proceed further on the path of criminal behaviour. The mistake of the parents will have bitter consequences: Nnamabia will be imprisoned and then brutally beaten up by the policemen. In prison, however, witnessing the humiliations to which the police were subjecting an old man that had been imprisoned for the crimes of his son, Nnamabia finds in himself the courage and the dignity of speaking the truth, even if this gets him into the infamous Cell One. The way Nnamabia manages to redeem himself in the end shows the negative consequences that this kind of education, the product of colonial relationships, has on young boys. As Adichie puts it in her speech, "We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. [...] We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak – a hard man." The pressure that societal expectations exert on boys force them to "prove their masculinity" and thus Adichie concludes that "boys are more likely to steal money from their parents" (12) as they have to pay for bills even as teenagers that go out with girls.

The social gendering that turns Nnamabia into a criminal will have more dire consequences for Nonso and his sister in "Tomorrow is too far", a story which rewrites the Christian story of the fall, with Adam and Eve as Nonso and his sister and the snake *echi eteka,* Tomorrow is too far. Indeed, for Nonso, Grandmama's favourite and the one who is supposed to carry on the family name, there will be no tomorrow, as his jealous sister will take advantage both of Nonso's frailty and his desire to prove his masculinity and cause him to fall from an avocado tree. "Tomorrow is too far" dwells on the gender inequality that makes Nonso and his sister fall apart and at the same time fall from grace; the brother dies, while the sister gradually alienates herself from her family, her country, even from the cousin (Dozie) for whose sake she had lured Nonso to his early death. The story is narrated by the sister, from a strange informally-impersonal point of view, which works well in exposing the psychological rift that had determined her to cause Nonso's fall, her double personality, the tension between reality and appearance: "It was the last summer you spent in Nigeria, the summer before your parents' divorce, before your mother swore you would never again set foot in Nigeria to see your father's family, especially Grandmama. [...] It was the summer Nonso died." (115) This kind of impersonal interior monologue allows the reader to have an insight into the psychology of a girl torn between jealousy and love as well as take into account the circumstances that led to Nonso's death, the socio-cultural interpellations that drive boys to "prove their masculinity" and condemn girls to powerlessness and silent plotting for revenge:

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> It was the summer Grandmama taught Nonso how to pluck the coconuts. [...] She didn't show you, because she said girls never pluck coconuts. Grandma cracked the coconuts against a stone, carefully, so that the watery milk stayed in the lower piece, a jagged cup. Everybody got a sip of the wind-cooled milk [...] and Grandmama presided over the sipping ritual to make sure Nonso went first.
>
> It was the summer you asked Grandmama why Nonso sipped first even though Dozie was thirteen, a year older than Nonso, and Grandmama said Nonso's was her son's only son, the one who would carry on the Nnabuisi name, while Dozie was only a nwadiana, her daughter's son. It was the summer you found the molt of a snake on the lawn [...] and Grandmama told you the snake was called echi eteka, Tomorrow is too far. One bite, she said, and it's over in ten minutes. (115)

While Grandmama chooses to side with the patriarchal order that assigns leading roles to men and prescribes submission for girls, Nwambga in "The Headstrong Historian"becomes the founder of a line of strong women: she chooses her own husband, against the will of her parents and the taboo on Obierika's family (whose women lost pregnancies), after she had wrestled her own brother to the ground, a fact that her father found so disturbing that he took precautions not to let anybody find out about this. When Obierika dies, poisoned by his cousins, in order to protect her inheritance and her son from the greed of her male relatives that had taken Obierika's ivory tusk (and with it his authority as a leader), Nwambga thinks of different strategies: her first idea is to kill the cousins with the guns of the white men (as they were more effective than their own weapons), and then, as the white people take control of their land, she sends Anikwenwa to the Catholic mission, so that her son would learn the white language and protect them against their relatives in the white men's court of justice. Strangely enough, she does not send Ani to the Anglican mission, where missionaries were less strict and instruction was done in Igbo, but to the Catholic mission, where the white people were harsh to natives, because "all that mattered was that he learn enough of the language to fight his father's cousins." (126) Adichie shows that the process of colonization required that the colonized be complicit - she is far from early anti-colonial militants such as Franz Fanon, who advocated an aggressive decolonization. On the contrary, Adichie shows that the burden of responsibility for colonization should be attributed not only to the white people and the violence they perpetrated by means of their guns, but also on the natives' lack of unity, their internal misunderstandings and family disagreements: on the one hand, Nwambga wants Ani to learn English so that he could fight against his relatives in court; on the other, while criticizing the white people for their lack of unity, she seems blind to the fact that it was their own lack of unity that had determined her to send Ani to the Catholic missionaries. Having internalized the social prescriptions of her clan, for whom performing one's ascribed role was essential, she judges the white people who "did not seem to know that one must, in front of strangers, pretend to have unity." (126). She consents too easily to Ani's baptism, without realizing that renaming implies changing one's identity: Ani, baptized Michael, will gradually distance himself from what he calls her "heathen ways". Having lost her land to her husband's cousin and her son to the white missionaries, Nwambga hopes that the spirit of her dead husband will come back in her grandson. In contrast to Grandmama, whose complicity in the patriarchal rule is total, Nwambga, herself a rebel in her youth, is quick to notice that whereas the grandson lacks the spirit of the magnificent Obierika, it is her granddaughter who has inherited it: "she knew that it was the spirit of Obierika that had returned; odd, to have come in a girl, but who could predict the ways of the ancestors?" (130) The politics of renaming is reversed and Grace, called Afamefuna (My name will not be lost) by her grandmother, will be the one to become the headstrong historian who reclaims the history of her own people and finally, in a symbolic gesture, officially changes her name from

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Grace to Afamefuna.

Naming and re-naming as signs of cultural and identity change are the subject of yet another story, "The Arrangers of Marriage", that touches on an important point in Adichie's feminism: the social pressure to marry that women are subjected to in patriarchal societies such as the Nigerian one. In her talk, Adichie elaborated on the different social status of married versus unmarried women and argued that society and education force women to regard marriage as a kind of personal fulfillment:

> Because I am female, I'm expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choice always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. [...]
> I know a Nigerian woman who decided to sell her house because she didn't want to intimidate a man who might want to marry her.
> I know an unmarried woman in Nigeria, who, when she goes to conferences, wears a wedding ring because she wants her colleagues to – according to her - „give her respect". (13)

And she concludes: "The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations." (14)

Together with her new husband, Chinaza Agatha Okafor acquires a new country (the US) and is supposed to acquire a new identity, too. The shock of an arranged married overlaps with the cultural shock that she experiences as a new-comer to the US. While in Nigeria, she and her husband were called Ofodile Emeka Udenwa and Chinaza Agatha Okafor. As soon as they arrive in New York, she finds out that her husband is calling himself Dave Bell. To fend off her surprise, he enlarges upon the benefits of acculturation: "You don't understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere, you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here." (106) Consequently, the name that he enters for Chinaza on the Social Security Number application is Agatha Bell. However, it is not only her name that has to change, but her language/languages also. First, Ofodile/Dave refuses to speak Nigerian in the US, not even at home, and scolds her for using Nigerian words in a supermarket. Secondly, he corrects her everytime she uses British words, and tells her to use the American equivalents instead: busy for an engaged telefone line, lift for elevator, cookies for biscuits. Although she has been raised and educated to be 'homely' (the Nigerian word for a good wife) and to respect her husband, Chinaza starts questioning the validity of her marriage. She cares for her native culture and identity and is less eager than her husband to give them up. Her divided loyalty (between her home culture and her husband) is humorously rendered in the text by the double language she uses: first the British word (which ironically, as one of the effects of colonialism, stands for her Nigerianness) and in brackets the American words, the one indicated by her husband. Ofodile/Dave illustrates Fanon's description of the division at the heart of the black man: "The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro.", a division perpetuated by the desire to master the language of the Other. Fanon's observation that "The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter […] in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language." (8) seems to fit Ofodile/Dave perfectly. On the other hand, women's steadfastness in the face of acculturation and their resistance to an alien culture/language is, indirectly, an effect of gendering: while the black men's priority is their ambition to emulate the white men and succeed (Dave wants to live the American dream by becoming a doctor), the black woman's priority will be her husband, and so she will keep her attachment to the native culture. Chinaza's unwillingness to give up cooking Nigerian dishes comes partly from her education, where emphasis on a woman's ability to cook comes from

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her having to nourish the family as a wife. After visiting the American food courts, Chinaza suddenly remembers her aunt's advice: “Don't let your husband eat out too much, [...] or it will push him into the ams of a woman who cooks. Always guard your husband like a guinea fowl's egg.” (109) This is exactly what Nkem, the main character in “Imitation” does: when finding out from a friend that her husband is having an affair with a younger woman in Nigeria, she decides to save her marriage by going back to Nigeria and giving up on her children's education in the States. Her life, which has always revolved around men - “Ikena, a businessman, had paid her father's hospital bills after the hernia surgery. Tunji, a retired army general, had fixed the roof of her parents' home and bought them the first real sofas they had ever owned.” (23) -, is as much of an imitation as the Benin masks that her husband Obiora likes to buy, a copy of a copy (the mask is in itself an imitation of a face, and thus the copy of a mask is a double copy), a simulacrum. Nkem embodies what Adichie in her talk calls bottom power, the power of a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men and which, in Adichie's opinion is not power at all, “because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a good route to tap another person's power”. (16)

The cultural rift between Nigeria and the US is also explored in “The American Embassy”, where the main character, a woman still suffering from a nervous breakdown after the death of her four year old son (accidentally murdered by a group of soldiers belonging to the Abacha administration) is applying for political asylum in the US. The inefficiency of the American government (and of similar neocolonial governments) is first hinted at when the people who stand in line for the visa witness how a soldier beats up an old man just under the windows of the American embassy. The woman, tormented by the images of her late son, tries to concentrate on the interview, but she fails: she stars seeing her husband, a human rights fighter against the Abacha government, as partly responsible for the death of her child. She remembers the “look of the excited messiah” (84) that had appeared on her husband's face when, freshly released from prison, he was celebrated by his friends and “everyone supportive of the pro-democracy press” (83). She explains her husband's heroism as “simply an exaggerated selfishness” (84) as some months before he had refused to participate in an important family event just to be able to have an interview with an arrested journalist. Adichie juxtaposes the private world of women and the public one of men in order to show that fighting for democracy and human rights is just as important as it is to care for one's children: the perspectives are different, yet equally important. The husband's heroism, widely acclaimed nationally and internationally, becomes, in the private world of a woman who had lost a son, a sort of selfishness, a failure. Faced with the visa interviewer, an American who has no idea how the psyche of a victim works and who wants to measure suffering and loss objectively, to translate pain into words, the woman suddenly decides that it would be better to die “at the hands of the man in the black hooded shirt or the one with the shiny bald head before she said a word about Ugonna to this interviewer, or to anybody at the American embassy. Before she hawked Ugonna for a visa to safety” (86). Although it is men that make politics and political wars, women are caught in the middle and suffer the tragic losses. The inhumanity of military dictatorships like the Abacha government is more poignantly visible in the affected lives of the women who lose sons, husbands or family in the political wars than in the heroic resistance of journalists and human rights activists. In “A Private Experience”, Chika, an Igbo Christian, strikes a friendship with a Hausa Muslim woman during a riot, as they both hide in an abandoned house and tell each other about the sister and the daughter they lost in the riot and whom they know they will never see again. The tragedy they share is more important that their outward clashing identities, the cause of many ethnic genocides in Nigeria. Again, women are depicted as better preservers of their native culture and traditions, compared to men: Ugonna's father, a revolutionary that reminds us again of figures like

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Fanon, perpetuates the violence of colonization by replicating its language.

Adichie describes her position as a Nigerian woman writer and the reasons for her outspoken feminism in "Jumping Monkey Hill": Udenwa, a young Nigerian woman writer, tries to make her voice heard at an African Writers' Workshop held in South Africa, outside Cape Town. The workshop is organized by the British Council, and while the organizer, Edward Campbell, an Oxford graduate with a passion for African literature keeps staring at her body, the other African writers try to come up with a definition of real Africa that panders to the tastes of Western neo-colonialists like Edward. The ridicule of debating whether being homosexual is African or not ("how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?") reveals the hegemonic relations still at work between the former colonists and the formerly colonized. It is still Edward, the white Oxford graduate that can tell African writers what their identity should be while at the same time claiming that "he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues". (67) Udenwa is appaled and tries to resist this neocolonial discourse regime, but her resistance, against the background of the others' compliance results in her realistic story being labeled as "agenda-writing" by Edward at the end of the workshop. Fighting neocolonialism is equal, for Undenwa as well as for Adichie, with fighting gender inequality. When one fights against dominant regimes (be they of power or discourse) one cannot choose to fight one while complying with the other. Resistance is either complete or not at all.

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