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Implications of Functionalist Linguistics for Language Varieties: Instances of English Speeches from Charles Dickens' <i>Oliver Twist</i> and <i>Hard Times</i> Michael Thomas Abah	1
The Short Story and Diasporic Discourse in Chinmamnda Ngozi Adichie's <i>The Thing around Your Neck</i> Kadir Ayinde Abdullahi	20
Bilingualism and the "Unchallenged" Sway of an Ex-colonial Official Language in Education: The Case of French in Porto-Novo. Wale Adeniran	36
Assessing Nigerian Primary School Pupils' Responses to Reading Comprehension Questions in English Adetokunboh Abayomi Adepoju	52
A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's <i>The Joys of Motherhood</i> . Olukemi O. Adesina & Olusegun O. Jegede	72
Women as Victims of Misrepresentation in the Society: A Speech Acts Analysis of Some Yoruba Proverbs T. A. Alabi & G. A. Olaleye	101

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The Short Story and Diasporic Discourse in Chinmamnda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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Abstract

Within the context of postcolonial theory, this essay demonstrates the distinctive epistemological and artistic uniqueness of the short story and its contribution to the literary discourse of diaspora. The essay studies Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* as a sub-genre of prose-fiction dealing largely with diasporic identity in its form and characterisation. The study examines Adichie's *The Arrangers of Marriage* and *American Embassy* from the perspective of how they contribute to the diasporic experiences of racial relation, politics and identity crisis. The argument, thus, reveals the socio-economic realities of life in diaspora contrary to the expectations of the families at home. Contrary to the common perception among the migrants that America is a paradise, Adichie presents a picture of the situations in the two worlds-the foreign nation and the homeland.

Keywords: diaspora, identity, disillusionment, postcolonial, epistemological

Introduction

In spite of the enormous texts from Nigerian writers dealing with diaspora discourse, their criticism still remains largely inadequate, especially from the perspective of the short story. The objective of the study is to account for how Adichie has aesthetically responded to migration discourse in the emerging postcolonial studies within the framework of the short story. Essentially, the short story contains the elements of prose-fiction which encompasses setting, character, point of view, plot and theme. The short story has its own uniqueness that is attracting the attention of literary critics. Over the year, the short story has been exploited by many renowned African writers, especially in the former apartheid South Africa, as a convenient medium of responding to the traumatic and often dehumanising condition of life. As the world advances in terms of the new technologies, a lot of short stories are being produced from the diasporic post. In the postmodern era, the viability of the short story as a genre of prose-fiction is being exploited by most black authors in the diaspora to give an account of the often dehumanising conditions of living under the draconian racial policy in Europe and America.

Adichie as a committed writer portrays the socio-political events in the post-independence Nigerian nation. She portrays the postcolonial disillusionments that characterise her native land and its overall effect on migration. The stories also capture such issues as the military intervention in Nigerian politics, injustice, abject poverty, oppression, social unrest, corruption and traumatic memories of the Nigerian Civil War. Her short story draws from the oral traditions of local ethnic nationality. Her creative ingenuity as a writer is commended by literary critics of which Achebe's comment being instructive (2006)

We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners, but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers. Adichie knows what is at stake, and what to do about it. She is fearless or she would not have taken on the intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war. Adichie came almost fully made (Adichie, 2012, par. 1).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in the Eastern part of Nigeria in 1977. She is a celebrated writer who has authored three major novels that won several awards. The novels are *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2003) and *Americanah* (2013). Adichie's awards and distinctions include; the Orange Prize for Fiction (2007), a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (2008), popularly known as "America's genius award" and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award for *Americanah* (2013). (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009>, p.1). She has also published a short story entitled *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) which has twelve collections. Each of the stories focuses mainly on the lives and experiences of Nigerian men and women in the diaspora. Most of the stories present characters who are struggling with displacement, loneliness, disappointment and the attendant dejection and disenchantment on their new lives and new marriages in a racially hostile European world. Most of the characters are also caught up in political and religious violence. In view of the interrelatedness of the stories in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, two stories namely; *The Arranger of Marriages* and *American Embassy* are purposively selected and analysed to account for the push and pull factors that are rapidly influencing the migration of Nigerians to foreign countries as well as their disillusionments in those places as aesthetically depicted. African women's identities are changing as they overcome new social and economic forces as well as traditional barriers like patriarchy and local norms and customs. Globalisation has thrust African women beyond the boundaries of the motherland to a world where they must renegotiate their living in an alien Western environment (Sackeyfio, p.102). African women have not only surpassed the confinement of the voiceless position, they have advanced to the centre through their creative works. To display their parallel struggle with their male counterparts in the enthronement of a refined nation, most diaspora writers chronicle their homeland experiences in their works. To Leela (2007), diaspora creates a desire for home, which in turn produces rewriting of home.

Theoretical Conceptualisation: The Postcolonial Theory and Diaspora Discourse

The postcolonial theory is regarded by critics to be complex, eclectic and wide in its scope and reference point. By virtue of its scope, it accounts for a wide range of experiences and all kinds of response to the structures and institutions of imperialism everywhere in the world where colonial contact had occurred. The subjects that the postcolonial theory admits include slavery, culture, race, exile, diaspora, migrancy, difference and authenticity. The theory also covers some of the academic disciplines such as History, Performance Arts, Cultural Studies Anthropology, Sociology, and Political Science among others. Aschroft et al (1995) define the postcolonial theory as involving a field of critical and intellectual inquiry which investigates the tensioned interactions between the imperial experiences and local responses in all its practicalities and significations. The critics go further by describing the postcolonial theory as "writing by those people formerly colonised and all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day (1995, p.2).

Essentially, the postcolonial discourse stands as a descriptor for an aggregate of contrapunctual tempers of intellectual responses to the processes, institutions, and implications of colonialism on the colonised culture and society. The ideas behind postcolonial discourse is the feeling that modern civilisation, which hitherto seen as a progressive force, had become a regressive agent. The strategies of reading and critical specifics of postcolonial theory were first spelt out in Aschroft, et al's *The Empire Writes Back* (1998).

In the crowded field of postcolonial theory, diaspora enjoys a pride of place. Historically, three main factors can be identified in the evolution of African diaspora. First and foremost, the Atlantic Slave trade contributed mostly in creating a large community of African origins in the American continent, especially in the United State and Brazil. This is the first wave of forced African migration. The second wave of African diaspora migration came as a result of decolonisation process starting from the 1950s. This diaspora was mainly the product of voluntary migration in which emigrants willingly left the African continent in search of better lives and education. The third wave of diaspora started in the 1980s when many African emigrants were fleeing from broken states, wars, hopelessness, poverty, unemployment, political persecution and many more. This wave of African migrants influenced all parts of European and American societies. As of today, African diaspora is one of the most active communities of citizens outside of their countries.

The concept of 'diaspora' gained recognition in the 1960s in the English speaking world, especially in the United States. As pointed out by *African Diaspora Encyclopedia (2005)* none of the major intellectual forerunners of African diaspora studies, from Edward Blyden (1832-1912) the influential nineteenth century Caribbean-born Liberian thinker to E.W. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), the renowned African-American scholar and activist, used the term diaspora. The Negritude writers from Francophone African countries and the Caribbean also did not use it. Instead, the term used to define and mobilise African population globally is Pan-Africanism. Hence, there are several conceptual challenges in defining the African diaspora. Contemporary theorisation of the term 'diaspora' tends to be preoccupied with the relationship between diasporans and nation and the dualities or multiplicities of diasporic identity and subjectivity. The term 'diaspora' is often used arbitrarily in a fuzzy, ahistorical and uncritical manner in which all forms of migrations and movements across border and even within the countries are included. Scholars are no longer paying due attention to the historical conditions and experiences that produced diasporic communities and consciousness- how dispersed populations became self-conscious of diasporic communities (African diaspora.com, 2005).

The diaspora discourse has raised some fundamental issues about social, economic and political debates that are prevalent in African society. The writings of diasporic experiences and adventures have greatly re-defined the frontier of global relations. In view of the controversies surrounding the concept, various schemas have been suggested for diaspora studies in general and African diaspora in particular. Robin Cohen cited in (African diaspora.com, 2005, p.3) based on what he regards as the nine common features of diaspora distinguished between 'Victim diaspora' (Africans and Armenians), 'Labour diaspora' (Indians), 'Imperial diaspora (British), 'Trade diaspora'(Chinesse and Lebanese), and 'Cultural diaspora' (Caribbeans). Kim Butler (African diaspora.com, 2005, p.4) also provides five analytical schema for diasporan studies; namely, reasons for and conditions of the dispersal; relationship with homeland; relationship with the host land; interrelationships within diasporan groups; and comparative study of different diasporans.

Diaspora writers recreate the agonies, economic and political turbulence militating the transformation of their homeland. Nigerian writers in diaspora grapple with a plethora of issues affecting the diasporas, one of which is attachment to home. To overcome the challenges of homelessness, Leela emphasises the need to summon the homeland through writing in the diaspora. Likewise, Aderounmu (2007), for instance, asserts that

Based on our new (or old) experiences and encounters out here, we are quick to draw comparisons with what we see. We make jokes of most of these things but in reality, we are disappointed and hurt by the system in Nigeria. Sometimes though, we wished we were back in Nigeria, but the decision to return is one of the hardest to make.

This critical assertion clearly reveals that though Nigerians in the diaspora are neither comfortable as they were in their homeland, they prefer abroad to confronting the economic strife that gripped the nation since its political independence. Aderounmu (2007) argues further that despite the shortcomings here abroad and some humiliating treatments, one is not quick to make a reverse. Many writers, thus, unravel the mystery behind the permanent stay of most Nigerians outside their homeland. The literature mirrors the lives of contemporary African diaporas who grapple with challenges of disappointment and displacement. The emergence of women writers, particularly those from Nigeria, has again added substance to diaspora writings in the past decades. As harbingers of change, female writers are now spear heading agitations that would reposition their homeland. In acknowledging the foregoing, Sackeyfio (2013) asserts that diaspora literature chronicles a new reality of social change and modernity that transforms the lives of African women within a global arena. Distinctively, their works feature females as central characters in a turbulent patriarchal society and reflect the challenges encountered as hybrid writers in diaspora and in the homeland. This perspective is a departure from the earlier portraiture of women as docile characters in the literary creation of male artists.

Themes in Adichie's *The Things Around Your Neck*

According to Friday (2016) Adichie employs multiple narrative viewpoints in order to avoid boredom and make the stories excitingly expressive. The prevailing scholarly opinion is that Adichie's stories have moved from the early visceral attacks on the material aspects of modernity which blames Africa's ills on the colonial past. Now, she rather focuses on self-examination of global capitalistic literature. She dispenses however with the call for a mythical return to an ancestral past in order to face the present cultural malaise. Besides writing about her homeland experiences in her works, she portrays the challenges facing Nigerian migrants in the Diaspora. Several thematic concerns as homesickness, homelessness, the rejection of home or longing for it become a motivating factor in this new writing. Home can only have a meaning when one experiences a level of displacement from it. *The Thing Around Your Neck* focuses on the false and over-bloated expectations of Nigerians whose ambition is to migrate to the United States. Many characters in diaspora texts are shown to be unfulfilled. Lamming while providing a similar illustration in *The pleasure of exile: nation, time, language and space in Hispanic literatures* (1960, p.58) argues that:

The exile is a universal figure. On the political level, we are often without the right kind of information to make argument effective. On the moral level, we have to feel our way through problems for which we have no adequate reference of traditional conduct as a guide. Chaos is often, therefore, the result of our thinking and our doing. We are made to feel as a sense of exile by our own inadequacy and our irrelevance in a society whose past we cannot alter and whose future is always beyond us. Idleness can easily guide us into

accepting this as a condition. Sooner or later, in silence or with rhetoric, we sign a contract whose epitaph reads: to be in exile is to be alive.

The import of what Lamming observes is well illustrated by Adichie. Most of the lofty expectations are not usually realistic. Adichie's *The Arrangers of Marriage*, for instance, is a narrative of an ordeal of a Nigerian woman who joins her husband, Ofodile Udenwa in America. Among Nigerians, there are cases of arranged marriages. Most times, the bride price of the woman is paid without both parties knowing each other until after the marriage has been solemnized according to tradition. In this story, the arranger of marriage include Chinaza's Aunty, Ada and her Uncle, Ike who arrange marriage for Chinaza Okafor and gets her married to an American based Doctor, Ofodile, invited home to marry having been away for eleven years. The wedding completed and the new couple booked flight to America. This journey marks the beginning of a new life for the bride. The bride, though, expects a comfortable apartment sees reverse as the case. What was supposed to be a fantastic opportunity for Chinaza turns to be a great disappointment. The man is not a successful doctor as he presented himself to be in the first case, he is also an authoritarian and abhorrent. Asoo (2012) asserts that migrants hope for comfort, employment and general economic and social security with additional feelings that excesses will be sent home to augment the conditions of relatives. The image of diasporic feeling is also better understood in the light of submission expressed by Nurudin Farah, a prominent Somalian novelist in an article "In Praise of Exile" cited in Zezela (2005, p.32)

One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become master of your destiny, your past and if need be, create an alternative life for yourself...You are a community when you are away from home.

In diaspora, marriage is threaten majorly by challenges of pressures and influences from the new society as the wife's expectation fails. The new environment usually fails to meet up with the pre-conceived desires and notion nurtured from the homeland. On arrival, even though the bride is tired, the husband demands for sex. The bride narrates thus, "my husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine. His chest tended my breasts." She says without wasting time, "He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist" (168). Ofodile relaxes after consummating the marriage. He, thereafter, remembers what they ought to have done immediately they arrived. He remarks that, "We have to call your uncle and your aunt to tell them we arrived safely. "Just for a few minutes; it costs almost a Dollar a minute to call Nigeria; Dial 011 and then 234 before the number"(p.169). Apart from Ofodile's sexual exploit, a more disheartening scenario occurs when he "turned on the light in the living room, where a besiege couch sat alone in the middle, slanted, as though dropped there by accident. The room was hot, old and musty smells hung heavy in the air" (167). As Ofodile takes Chinaza round the house, she observes that:

The smaller bedroom had a bare mattress lodged in one corner. The bigger bedroom had a bed and dresser, and a phone on the carpeted floor. Still, both rooms lacked a sense of space, as though the walls had become uncomfortable with each other, with so little between them (167-168).

The wife also observes that "one of the dining table's legs was shorter than the rest, and so the table rocked, like a seasaw, when Ofodile leaned on it" (172). As part of measures to adjust to a reality, Ofodile instructs Chinaza to always buy "store brand" biscuits (cookies) that are relatively "cheaper, but still the same thing" (174). He however promises that when he becomes an Attendant, he will stop buying store brands. But for now they have to. One unique attribute of Ofodile, like other immigrants, is that he is hopeful and optimistic, hence, he maintains that:

Also when I become an Attendant, we will not live in a neighbor-hood like this"...See how they have bars so you can't take the shopping carts out? In the good neighbourhoods, they don't have them. You can take your shopping cart all way to your car... Look at the people who shop here; they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries" (175).

Through the character of Ofodile, Adichie reveals the plights of many Nigerians living abroad as well as their determination to cope with the ugly situation until things improve. The story exposes the challenges facing Nigerian migrants in their struggle to obtain a green card in the United States. Ofodile discloses his first marriage to an American woman to Chinaza when he perceives danger. He tells his bride that:

The American woman I married to get a green card is making trouble...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 money" (p. 182).

Ofodile considers his marriage with the American woman as a mere practice that every migrant does to have a permanent residence. He explains to his new wife who laces her "fingers together because they had started to shake;". He says, It was just on paper. A lot of our people do that here. It's business, you pay the woman and both of you do paperwork together but sometimes it goes wrong and either she refuses to divorce you or she tries to blackmail you (p.183). In spite of the explanation, Ofodile's wife was confused and disappointed for failure to hear this development before their marriage in Nigeria. She insists; "I deserve to know before we got married. I sank down on the chair opposite slowly, as if the chair would crack if I didn't." (183) Though Chinaza ought to know the marital status of her husband before arriving America, this would not have changed the minds of her uncle and aunt who were looking for an opportunity such as this to give her away in marriage. Ofodile, thus remarks that:

It wouldn't have made a difference. Your uncle and aunt had decided. Were you going to say no to people who have taken care of you since your parents died?" Besides, with the way things are messed up back home, what would you have done?... Aren't people with master's degrees roaming the streets, jobless?" I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin...I probably should tell her how wrong she was (184-185).

Ofodile reveals some issues which would make his new wife to be absolutely complacent. Firstly, Chinaza is an orphan. She is not a virgin as his mother had thought. There is massive unemployment in Nigeria which has made life difficult to cope with. Adichie, thus,

probes into the mind of the characters to exposes how the mass migration to America though eventually ends up in disillusionment, appears inevitable. Ofodile calls himself Dave, and even changes his last name to Bell because “Americans have a hard time with Udenwa”. He urges his new wife to adapt as much as she can to her new life in the US, and even forces her to change her name to Agatha Bell (p.172). The narrator says:

You don’t understand how it works in this country. If you want to anywhere you have to be at mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here (p.172).

According to Pereira (2016, p. 15) “Adichie is critical towards hypocrisy that lies behind renaming. Dave insists on how important to be assimilated, and he praises wonders of America even if the price to pay is the complete abolition of his African origin”. For instance, he would not let Chinaza speak Igbo or even cook Nigerian food. “This is not like Nigeria, he said, sneering, as though he was the one who had invented the superior American system” (p. 173). The disparity between the so-called American system and the Igbo tradition is reflected in most of Adichie’s stories and it is treated in different ways. Just like Akunna is *The Thing Around Neck*, failure is the dominant fear of most diasporas. The story foregrounds this incident to present the search for happiness and safety in diaspora as a voyage in futility. The theme depicts allotted to the quest as replete with incidents that expose the vanity not just of the dream but of the place as well. Crude as this representation may be, the dream and its pursuit appear as a platform that only serves to deride such idealistic ventures on the one hand, but also those who cash in the gullible African diasporan search for livelihood on the other.

The theme of this story reveals the dark aspects of human relationships. It points to the deceptive dealings that Diasporas are subjected to. The migrants’ experiences mirror numerous notions premised on considering the diasporas as rich people to fleece with. The import of this narrative is to re-orientate prospective Nigerian migrants, especially new brides, who always feel the Western world is a paradise. It is apparent that many Nigerians end up engaging in menial jobs and fraudulent practices. Adichie’s *American Embassy* also aptly illustrates the humiliation and unpleasant experiences of the protagonist who applies for asylum visa in Nigeria. According to the narrator, “they don’t give poor people immigration visa anymore, unless the person is rich by American standard. But I hear people from European countries have no problem getting visa” (p.134). This story imaginatively reveals the plight of a woman whose child has been murdered by political thugs hunting for her husband. She suffers the many petty tribulations and humiliations shared by anyone who has ever applied for a visa from a poor African country to a wealthy Western nation. Though there are faint notes of optimism, overall of these are dejection, unpalatable stories of disappointment and endurance rather than hope. The theme is more of disappointment and dejection that follows the dashing high expectation.

Was she imagining it, or was the sympathy draining from the visa’s interviewer’s face? She saw the swift way the woman pushed her reddish –gold hair back even though it did not disturb her, it stayed quiet on her neck, framing a pale face. Her future rested on that face. The face of a person who did not understand her, who probably did not cook with palm oil. She turned slowly and headed for the exit (P. 41).

Adichie's writing is suffused with social and political comments. The story depicts the economic hardship noticeable at the American consular where Nigerians struggle to make both ends meet. The narrator observes:

A market sprung up during the American embassy hours and disappeared when the embassy closed. There was the chair-rental outfit where the stacks of white plastic chairs that cost one hundred naira per hour decreased fast. There were the wooden boards propped on cement blocks, colorfully displaying sweets and mangoes and oranges (130).

The Nigerian economy is so bad that both the young and old devised means of earning their living in a way that is precarious. The ugly economic situation of the country is doubtlessly a major factor that encourages the migration of Nigerians abroad. As Komolafe (2001) emphatically states:

Nigerian migrants move predominantly to the countries where they are more likely to adjust rapidly in terms of being able to understand the host country's language, to secure gainful employment, and to reunite with members of their family, friends or associate with other people from their country of origin. For these reasons, the United Kingdom, United States and Canada are some of the most popular destinations for Nigerian migrants.

Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* shows how diaspora migration is usually ignited by the postcolonial disillusionment emanating from myriads of predicaments ranging from poor leadership as evident in wars, repressive regimes, dictatorship, armed banditry, greed, poor facilities, joblessness and over bloated expectations. These are negative forces that push citizens away from their homeland in search of comfort, livelihood and security. These forces have been referred to as push factors. The host lands, though, does provide some level of comfort for the fleeing characters in form of pull factors, it is not without attendant discomfort, maltreatment, discrimination, and disappointment. The stories therefore present the socio-economic realities of life in diaspora contrary to the expectation of the families at home. Contrary to the common perception among the migrants that America is a paradise, Adichie presents a picture of the situations in the two worlds-the foreign nation and the homeland.

In conclusion, Adichie's collection of short stories, especially *The Arrangers of Marriage* is indicative of how many women fall victim of pretensions of men whom they marry with high expectation of blissful life in the diaspora. The story depicts a man who is lustful with little or no regard for women's feeling and views. The narrative exemplifies an unrealistic expectation and exposes all sorts of illegalities that most Nigerians indulge in order to make both ends meet and secure their residence permits. Most of the characters end up jobless and lack decent accommodation. They suffer various hardships, live in perpetual fear and anxiety unknown to the families at home.

In *American embassy*, Adichie exposes the common issue of discrimination in the business of getting visas. Racial discrimination is a major challenge to Blacks and it manifests in various dimensions. Through the limited opportunities imposed on the diasporas by racial identity and discrimination, the American dream quickly dissipates and the feelings of loneliness, homeless and disappointment hang around the neck of migrants. In this way, Adichie's characters reflect the complexities of the diasporic experience and the evolving relation between individuals and nationhood. The story moves towards the reformation of the

nation and national belonging. Most of the characters become fictional representation of the inching for self-definition with fragmented identities and discourse. Adichie calls attention to how Nigerian nation needs to be re-constituted within and outside the territorial margins. Nigeria needs to take into account the experiences of her diasporas and the challenges her citizens face while trying to shape their relation to both their homeland and the host land.

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