

**Akunna: The Narrative of the Dislocated Subject in the Short Story
“The Thing Around Your Neck,” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie /
*Akunna: a narrativa do sujeito deslocado no conto “No seu pescoço”, de
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie***

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses issues enmeshed with the experience of the diaspora, the situation of black immigrant women affected by the feeling of geographic dislocation, adopting the perspective of female-authored Nigerian literature. The object of study is the short story “The Thing Around Your Neck,” part of the collection of short stories of the same name, by the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The study aims to discuss the problems faced by black women in transit between the African continent and the United States, as well as the conflicts in the process of identity building that surround their lives in societies that oppress and silence them. The investigation is guided by the post-colonialist approach and problematizes both quotidian and gendered forms of racism grounded in the representations about Africa and its peoples. The analytical reading of the object of study indicates that the short story “The Thing Around Your Neck” presents itself as a treaty against the victimization of Africa and Nigerian women.

KEYWORDS: Nigerian literature; “The Thing Around Your Neck”; Black immigrant woman; Racism

RESUMO

O presente artigo aborda questões relacionadas à experiência da diáspora, a situação da mulher negra imigrante afetada pela experiência de deslocamento geográfico, sob a perspectiva da literatura nigeriana de autoria feminina. Tem-se como objeto de estudo o conto “No seu pescoço”, integrante da coletânea de contos homônima, da autora Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. O estudo objetiva discutir as problemáticas enfrentadas pela mulher negra em trânsito entre o continente africano e os Estados Unidos, bem como os conflitos no processo de construção identitária que circundam sua vivência em sociedades que a oprimem e a silenciam. A investigação norteia-se pela abordagem pós-colonialista, e problematiza-se o racismo cotidiano e genderizado a partir das representações construídas sobre a África e seus habitantes. A leitura analítica do objeto

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de estudo sinaliza que o conto “No seu pescoço” se afigura um tratado contra a vitimização da África e da mulher nigeriana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura nigeriana; “No seu pescoço”; Mulher negra imigrante; Racismo

Initial Brief

The scenario of literary studies is still a challenging area for researchers whose object is the African literature. Thayane de Araújo Morais (2017) classifies the fact that literature produced in African territory has not yet managed to break through the barriers imposed by social and aesthetic prejudice, fed back by representations of the African continent as an exotic and rudimentary territory as one of the faced hindrances.

The construction and propagation of annihilating images about the African continent have their origins in the period of its colonization. Nigerian writer and literary critic Chinua Achebe (2009)¹ argues that, in Africa, European colonizers established a relationship with colonized people governed by political actions that demarcated the unequal power relationship of those over them. For him, colonial ideology, in addition to political and economic issues, had, in education, one of the main instruments through which the mechanisms of alienation have been introjected into the culture of colonized peoples. The colonizer's strategy, according to Achebe, acted with the aim of delegitimizing the history, symbols and culture of the people he colonized and, in the opposite sense, to overvalue the metropolis, depriving the *colony* of any value.

By tensioning the historical legacy of centuries of colonialist spoliation, Achebe, in his essayistic work *The Education of a British-Protected Child: essays* (2009),² narrativizes his memories of the European colonialism, discussing how the colonizer's actions would have transformed Africa into a historically condemned continent to represent the most shameful side of human attitudes. This work includes the essay “Africa's Tarnished Name,” in which Achebe, based on what he foreshadows in the title, rejects the ideological representation of a primitive Africa devoid of any positive traits.

¹ ACHEBE, Chinua. Africa's Tarnished Name. In: ACHEBE, Chinua. *The Education of a British-Protected Child: Essays*. New York. Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. pp. 77-95.

² For reference, see footnote 1.

According to the author, the impoverished ways of looking at Africa, propagated by derogatory images which justified human trafficking in conditions of slavery, “[...] gave the world a literary tradition that is now, happily, defunct, but also a particular way of looking (or, rather, not looking) at Africa and Africans that endures, alas, into our own day” (Achebe, 2009, p. 79).³ This racist and prejudiced imaginary of thinking about Africa, that Achebe alludes to, takes up the colonizer’s violent discourse, which still echoes in the present time.

By using strategies that subjugated local societies, the colonizer imposed an existential deviation on Africans, depriving them of any trace of humanization, by way of spreading the image of Africa as a backward territory, without memory or values. Furthermore, the use of a zoological language (Fanon, 1961)⁴ which, by dehumanizing Africans, animalizes them, the colonizer propagated his own created narrative about Africa being populated by primitive people, personified as the violent and threatening *other*.

The dissemination of a Westernized imaginary about the African continent is also problematized by the writer, Achebe’s fellow countryman, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009).⁵ The author emphasizes that the danger of these images would lie in the ease with which they are absorbed by those who, due to lack of geographic knowledge, see Africa not as a continent, but as an exotic country, inhabited by a predominantly black, underprivileged and hungry population that must be saved from their abundant misery.

For Adichie (2009),⁶ the construction of a single and unified story operates by way of the principle of power structures and the desire of one to be superior to the other and the “ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” The argument raised by the author about the uniqueness of a story is that, by shielding the ability to think in complex ways, it compromises the subject’s ability to contrast narratives and tell different versions of the same event.

³ For reference, see footnote 1.

⁴ FANON, Frantz. *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Paris: François Maspéro, 1961.

⁵ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Danger of a Single Story* [conference]. TEDGlobal, July 2009. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare.

⁶ For reference, see footnote 5.

It is common knowledge that the hierarchization of Western discourse had a major impact on the construction of the narrative of Africa as a subordinated continent, on historical and social levels. In order to recover the positive image of Africa, based on the point of view of Africans, writers of African literature claim the right to narrate their own past by disputing supposed Western supremacy. This initiative of intellectual emancipation opposes the unique discourse about Africa, by elaborating the discourse of difference, in which literary productions discuss the limiting stereotypes of its cultural plurality. In this context of demystification of the Western imagination about the African continent, African literature must be effectively understood.

In the search for facts that strengthen national identities, African writers find themselves faced with the challenge of boosting local narratives in order to produce cohesive sets of collective images and symbols shared by African nations. According to Adilson Vagner de Oliveira and Agnaldo Rodrigues da Silva (2013), this process, despite being created collectively, opens up space for African writers to follow different paths in the (re)interpretation of Africa's history, politics and cultural conflicts.

To illustrate such attitude, we have the aforementioned Adichie, author of the collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009),⁷ especially regarding the short story of the same title. In her narrative process, the author gives centrality to the impact of colonialism on the experiences of her characters and to Nigerian social problems, which includes the experience of the diaspora. Her writing works towards denouncing social ills, questioning and reviewing the roles and stereotypes attributed to historically marginalized subjects, especially Nigerian women, commonly represented under the gaze of others.

This study is divided into four sections, starting from this introductory segment; the second discusses the framework of Adichie's writing, highlighting the themes she approaches and problematizes in her works. In the third segment, we contextualize and analyze the translated version of the short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" (2009).⁸ taking into account situations of dislocation and the successive everyday racist attitudes experienced by the protagonist. Subsequently, we make final considerations and present bibliographical references in case of further research.

⁷ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. London: Fourth State, 2009.

⁸ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. In: ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. London: Fourth State, 2009. pp. 115-127.

1 The Framework of Adichiean Writing

African literary writing of post-colonial nature experiences an important advance in the struggle to break the Eurocentrism phenomenon, despite understanding that the marks of colonialism are still present in the recent history of this continent. Let's take Nigeria as an example, where Adichie, author of the short story entitled "The Thing Around Your Neck"— object of analysis in this study – originates from. Even after more than half a century of independence from English domination, the African country continues to suffer and deal with the consequences of this colonization.

In the years leading up to its independence, Nigeria was governed by successive constitutions (1947, 1951 and 1954), which, due to the short period of time between each promulgation, highlight the difficulty Nigerians have faced in order to build a nation on a democratic basis. The political fragility of the country in its infancy came to light, as explained by Xênia de Castro Barbosa and Márcia Letícia Gomes (2022), following the various *coups d'état*, threats of separation, ethnic-regional disputes, the civil war, historically known as the Biafra War, and ensuing from the lack of a social project that could respond to the needs of the population. The lack of social cohesion and the diversity of interests, not always aimed at the collective, would also have fostered the creation of internal barriers, so that, "at independence in 1960, Nigeria was a collection of fragments held in a fragile clasp" (Adichie, 2006, p. 155),⁹ which, despite having been constituted in legal terms as a country, did not perceive itself as a nation.

Nigeria's independence was thus marked by internal fragmentation – motivated by the political and ethnic interests of each region –, marginalization of the Igbo people, political rivalries and strong mutual distrust between groups in each region. In common, these regions had only a dispute over control of the new country's resources. One of the consequences of this sociopolitical instability, according to Maitrayee Misra and Manish Shrivastava (2017),¹⁰ was the high number of upper and middle class Nigerian families who chose to send their children to Europe or the United States (USA), to study, work or protect themselves from internal rivalries. Nigeria witnessed, as Stuart Hall (1992, p.

⁹ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Fourth Estate, 2006.

¹⁰ MISRA, Maitrayee; SHRIVASTAVA, Manish. Dislocation, Cultural Memory & Transcultural Identity in Select Stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck*. In: EMENYONU, Ernest N. (ed.). *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. Woodbridge; Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2017. pp. 185-198.

306)¹¹ refers, a huge “[...] movement of peoples from the peripheries to the centre in one of the largest and most sustained periods of ‘unplanned’ migration in recent history.” Adichie joins the list of Nigerians who migrated to America to study, obtaining, in 2001, a degree in Communication and Political Science at the University of Connecticut.

Migratory flows, in the context of Nigeria’s conflictual independence process, is one of the issues discussed by Adichie and other African authors. In the midst of turbulent political moments, Nigerian writers use literature as a source of social engagement, resistance and denouncing the oppressive reality undergone by Nigeria, like other African countries. According to Priscilla de Carvalho Maia Ventura (2020, p. 262), the country, in an effort to overcome the painful experience of colonization, “[...] sees the flourishing of literary compositions committed to criticizing the country’s social situation, publicizing the horrors of wars and rescuing the traditions that the colonizer had intended to delete.”¹² Literature is then taken by Nigerian authors, in its micro aspect, as an instrument for creating a feeling of national consciousness to be built in the post-independence process and, in the macro aspect, as a space of refusal to colonial literature and thought as stated by Ventura (2020).

The movement of rewriting the history of Africa based on the African subjects themselves, intends, as Achebe (2009)¹³ points out, to lead people back to Africa. For Oliveira and Silva (2013), this process, despite being generated collectively, opens up space for African writers to follow different paths in the (re)interpretation of history, politics and cultural conflicts in Africa, problematizing facts by way of literature, employing their own writing styles and addressing themes at their discretion. In the midst of such combative and resistance situation, African literary production seeks to establish a debate with the metropolises, by bringing to the scene the recovery of the history of African people and culture, the right to the past and memory that, for long, had been denied to them.

¹¹ HALL, Stuart. The Question of Cultural Identity. In: HALL, Stuart; HELD, David; McGREW, Tony (Eds.). *Modernity and Its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Open University Press, 1992. pp. 273-325. (Understanding Modern Societies, 4).

¹² In Portuguese: “[...] vê florescer composições literárias preocupadas em criticar a situação social do país, divulgar os horrores das guerras e resgatar as tradições que o colonizador tencionara apagar.”

¹³ For reference, see footnote 1.

In Adichie's case, the process of retelling Africa's path is taken as a "literary project of rewriting the history of Nigeria" (Nunes, 2016, p. 130),¹⁴ bringing up plural stories, with a view that opposes the reductive conceptions of Nigeria. Throughout Adichie's narrative construction process, she gives centrality to the impact of colonialism on her characters' living experiences and to Nigerian social problems, which includes immigration and the issue of transcultural identity, with special attention to female dislocation.

The issue of dislocation, so emphatic in Adichie's writing, according to Misra and Shrivastava (2017),¹⁵ reflects the author's own diasporic background and the contribution her dislocation and memory of the Nigerian cultural space to her writings by tensioning issues of cultural assimilation and the shaping of a transcultural identity. As Adichie divides much of her time between the USA and Nigeria, Misra and Shrivastava argue "[...] it is natural for her to depict the first-hand experience of the dislocated individuals striving hard for cultural assimilation in the host country in a credible manner" (2017, p. 187). By constructing fictionalized characters that superimpose with her own reality and with the experiences of the collective to which she belongs (Evaristo, 2020), Adichie resorts to *escrevivência* [lifewriting], a term coined by Conceição Evaristo, to narrate contemporary Nigeria, as explained by Luana Thibes (2022).

The term *escrevivência* [lifewriting] refers to lived experiences recovered through literary writing. For Evaristo (2020), this writing is woven into the efforts of black women to insert themselves into the world, with their stories, their lives, which are, sometimes, devalued by society. Writing the experience sustains the author. It is consistent with existence, with being alive in the world, with enjoying one's own original ethnic condition, which implies the affirmation of belonging and the celebration of ancestry. The author explains this is because

Escrevivência is meant as if the subjects of writing were writing to themselves, being the fictional reality, the very inventiveness of their writing, and it often is. But, when writing to themselves, this action expands and, without coming out of their own, authors collect lives and stories from their surroundings. And this explains why *escrevivência*

¹⁴ In Portuguese: "projeto literário de reescrever a história da Nigéria."

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 10.

does not end in itself, but deepens, expands, encompasses the history of a collective (Evaristo, 2020, p. 35).¹⁶

Evaristo's considerations about *escrevivência* as a literary genre that does not revolve around an individualized subject, but around someone crossed by a collective experience, according to Thibes (2022), opens up space to think about a place of literary kinship between Evaristo's and Adichie's writing. The writing of both authors is engaged with the denunciation of social ills, by questioning and reviewing the roles and stereotypes attributed to historically marginalized subjects, especially black women, commonly represented under the gaze of others. Adichie, by bringing traits of herself to her writing, weaves her plots with life stories gathered from her surroundings, mixing her personal experiences with those of her characters. For example, we cite the collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009),¹⁷ that dialogues with the author's origins.

Daughter of a university professor, Adichie underwent the dynamics of the Nsukka University Campus, the setting for some of the stories. Like the author, her protagonists are part of the same ethnic group, the Igbo, and some migrated abroad (mainly to the USA), either to study or in search of better living conditions. Even though the author's episodes are mingled with those of her characters, in Adichie's writings, the stories are created to talk about what should not be forgotten or ignored. Adichie problematizes the consequences of the Biafra War in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006)¹⁸ and *Purple Hibiscus* (2003).¹⁹ In *Americanah* (2013)²⁰ and *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009),²¹ she highlights the racism suffered by African immigrants and the exclusions faced by black women in transit between the African continent and the USA, and the conflicts faced in the process of identity construction that surround reality of black women in societies that oppress and silence them.

¹⁶ In Portuguese: "A Escrivência pode ser como se o sujeito da escrita estivesse escrevendo a si próprio, sendo ele a realidade ficcional, a própria inventiva de sua escrita, e muitas vezes o é. Mas, ao escrever a si próprio, seu gesto se amplia e, sem sair de si, colhe vidas, histórias do entorno. E por isso é uma escrita que não se esgota em si, mas, aprofunda, amplia, abarca a história de uma coletividade."

¹⁷ For reference, see footnote 7.

¹⁸ For reference, see footnote 9.

¹⁹ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003.

²⁰ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Americanah*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.

²¹ For reference, see footnote 7.

2 Akunna and the Narrative of the Dislocated Subject

The Thing Around Your Neck (2009)²² is a collection of twelve short stories, through which Adichie takes a plural look at the African continent. The stories give centrality to immigration, stressing the cultural shock that affects the subject in a situation of displacement, who, when experiencing the situation of mobility, has to deal with cultural, racial and gender prejudice in this unknown environment. In the work, the plots woven from the perspective of the experience of those who leave their homeland are tensioned by the problematization of diasporic consciousness and the political and religious conflicts that affect those who remain in Nigeria.

Each short story in the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* features a female character. Adichie's protagonists – trapped between two cultures and with no references on which to rely – are affected by the constant threats of cultural erasure that pervades the discourses that constitute them. Disappointment, loneliness and despair are some of the feelings that gradually affect the protagonists' psychological profile, triggering identity crises.

The short story "The Thing Around Your Neck," part of the collection and object of this investigation, tells the story of a young Nigerian woman from the city of Lagos, belonging to a low purchasing power family who finds herself in a situation of dislocation, when she is included in the American visa lottery. The focal point of the plot is the protagonist's immigration to the USA and her struggle to find, in her own way, a place in the new cultural space to which she has access. Immigration is problematized based on Nigeria's socioeconomic precarious situation, which would justify the protagonist's motivation to leave the country in search of better survival conditions.

Akunna's story is told from the perspective of a narrator who gives a speculative tone to her life events, whether in her homeland, Nigeria, or in the USA, the country where she migrates in the hope of a better life for herself and her family. Adichie's narrative begins with the vocative *you* used in a generic way, possibly a strategy of the author to bring the protagonist closer to the immigrant identity, woven by way of a narrative of disappointments inherent to the many illusory assumptions about America.

²² For reference, see footnote 7.

The representation of the USA in Nigeria as the land of financial prosperity is demythologized by the narrator, to the extent that she shows understanding with Akunna regarding her disillusionment when faced with a very different country from that they had described to her:

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house (Adichie, 2009, p. 115).²³

The protagonist's immigration, as Ode Ogede (2023)²⁴ argues, is fueled by the representation of the Nigerian imagination that the USA is the place where wealth becomes instantaneous. However, when using the lottery as a metaphor, Adichie highlights that obtaining a visa via lottery – American, in this case, – is a rare feat, given the high number of applicants and the small number of vacancies. This is why being drawn is taken as great luck by the people around Akunna. Getting the American visa, is celebrated, by Akunna's family and battalions of relatives and friends, as a miracle, due to the belief that the financial problems would be resolved magically.

On the other hand, regarding the fascination that Nigerians have for the USA, Cláudio R. V. Braga (2019) argues that this excessively idealized image increases the frustrated expectations and disappointment in the diaspora, which takes shape, according to the author, when the real America reveals itself to the immigrant. These expectations, states Braga (2019), when not met, turn into frustrations of great proportions that seem to have overwhelming consequences for the Nigerian diasporic subject in the USA and act to increase the problems they experience.

Akunna's trip to the USA reminds us of people who aspire the *American dream* but are faced with the hostile reality of being an immigrant. Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis (2001, p. 129) points out that "[...] the 'American dream' consists of the belief that the United States is inherently the land of opportunities, [...] the place where success is a

²³ For reference, see footnote 8.

²⁴ OGEDE, Ode. Allegory, Migration, Mock-Epic, and Unspeakable Subjects: The Lure of Glamour, Empire of Material Things (Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*). In: OGEDE, Ode. *Nigeria's Third-Generation Literature: Content and Form*. London: Routledge, 2023. pp. 71-112.

right to be claimed by any citizen who is well-connected and well-liked [...].”²⁵ However, for the immigrant, opportunities are scarce: Akunna faces difficulties even in getting a job and accepting lower wages than she was supposed to, taking up a work that, by itself, does not pay a fair salary, just to be employed somehow. For the protagonist, as time passes, the dream turns into a reality that is difficult to bear.

Once on American soil, the protagonist of the story faces difficulties due to her social condition – black-woman-African immigrant – a personal status America would hardly view favorably. In the confrontation of the American dream with real America, the joy of being in the USA turns into disillusionment, when faced with attitudes of despise and inferiorization, whether in a subtle or blatant way. The traumatic experiences, such as prejudice about origin, gender inequality and racial discrimination indicate that the displacement movement from space to another does not necessarily represent the end of oppression.

In America, Akunna is welcomed by the brother of her “father’s sister’s husband” (Adichie, 2009, p. 116),²⁶ whom, due to his proximity to her family, she considered as an uncle as well. In addition to enrolling her in a community college, her uncle advises her on how to apply for a job at a gas station. He also offers her accommodation in his own house, despite it being a cramped basement, a space she would have to share with old boxes and packagings. At her uncle’s house, the protagonist’s affective memory of a now distant Nigeria was triggered as they used the Igbo language and the Nigerian cuisine – always present at meals. The warm welcome from the host and his family made Akunna feel like she was in her own home. However, the blessings were not given to her freely, which she soon came to understand when her uncle entered the basement and pulled her “forcefully to him, squeezing [...] [her] buttocks, moaning” (Adichie, 2009, p. 116).²⁷ The sordid intentions behind the apparent emotional security that her uncle offered her were justified by the logic of favor that, in America, it is in giving that one receives.

The sexual harassment of which Akunna was a victim revives a discursive memory about female subjugation. In a similar way to the institutionalized rape of which

²⁵ In Portuguese: “[...] o ‘sonho americano’ consiste na crença de que os Estados Unidos são inerentemente a terra da oportunidade, [...] o lugar em que o sucesso é um direito a ser reivindicado por qualquer cidadão que seja bem relacionado e benquisto [...].”

²⁶ For reference, see footnote 8.

²⁷ For reference, see footnote 8.

black and enslaved women were victims, according to Angela Davis (1981),²⁸ the uncle, as the owner of the house, also believed he had the right to his guest's body. For Davis, institutionalized rape was evidenced since the deprivation of black women from any moral or humanity traits. In addition to increasing the condition of women's vulnerability, this type of violence also disseminated the objectification of the black female body, as *currency* with which black women should pay for their livelihood, or for the reduction of punishments.

Not too different from what Davis points out, the sexist oppression experienced by Akunna, shows how the black female body is considered an object of use and delight, which should be at the service of male pleasures. The process of inferiorization not only affected the body but also the intellect of black women. For the uncle, women were considered bodies deprived of minds, as we are able to infer from the following excerpt: "If you let him, he would do many things for you. Smart women did it all the time. How did you think those women back home in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City?" (Adichie, 2009, p. 117). The use of the conditional *if*, followed by Akunna's uncle's questions, shows that there was an expectation on his part that she would renounce her autonomy in exchange for a comfortable life – maintained at the expense of sexual favors. This negotiation refers to the idea that, in the ideological construction of gender, relationships are defined by the servility of the female body to male domination.

The condition imposed to her to enjoy the comfortable life that her uncle offered reinforces the idea that women still suffer from the yoke of male domination and points to the patriarchal power that pushes the female subaltern subject, as stated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988),²⁹ into the deepest obscurity. Still according to the author, the subaltern subject is the one belonging to the lowest social strata constituted by specific ways of market, political and legal exclusion, as well as denial of the possibility of becoming full members of the dominant social stratum (Spivak, 2000).³⁰ Akunna, as a

²⁸ DAVIS, Angela. *Women, Race, & Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.

²⁹ SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. Can the Subaltern Speak? In: NELSON, Cary; GROSSBERG, Lawrence (Eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. pp. 271-313.

³⁰ SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. Foreword: Upon Reading the *Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. In: SCHWARZ, Henry; RAY, Sangeeta (Eds.). *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. pp. xv-xxii.

poor black woman, coming from a colonized nation with no political voice, meets all the requirements of subalternity: poverty, origin, gender, color, qualifications that make her remain in the marginal place, ideologically demarcated for her.

Akunna refuses to enjoy the security of a comfort zone founded on oppressive values. When moving away, she does not take silence as protection; on the contrary, she transforms silence into action of resistance. Upon leaving her uncle's house, a new journey begins, now through the interior of the USA, more precisely, the state of Connecticut. Akunna gets a job as a waitress, but has to abandon her studies.

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. So you went to the public library, you looked up course syllabi on school Web sites and read some of the books. Sometimes you sat on the lumpy mattress of your twin bed and thought about home (Adichie, 2009, p. 117).³¹

Akunna's experiences in America are woven into a narrative of disappointment. Unlike the big house that she was led to believe she could buy in the first month, she had a tiny room where she slept on a "lumpy mattress." Braga (2019) argues that the lack of a minimally comfortable bed to rest after a strenuous work day is characterized, in a metaphorical way, in the impossibility of rest, in the absence of a peaceful and cozy space for the diasporic subject, in the society that receives it. The uneasiness that the character experiences materialize in the impossibility of economic advancement and of not meeting the material expectations of her relatives and of continuing her studies.

The university became a forbidden place for Akunna, as there were no community colleges in Connecticut and she did not have the financial means to bear the high cost of credits at the state college. Akunna, for being a black woman, is placed at the base of the social pyramid, which means that she belongs to the group that works the most and earns the least. However, she tried to overcome the barrier of lack of education, creating her own self-education mechanisms. Even being confronted with the harsh reality in Connecticut, she survived by working on irregular basis in a restaurant. The financial instability makes it imperative for the protagonist to be always on alert for imminent

³¹ For reference, see footnote 8.

mishaps. In the black-diasporic context tensioned in the narrative, these issues are heightened. It means to say that even living in a reputed developed country, the violence and subalternation processes, underwent by the character, still remain and living conditions are also similar to those to which, in the past, she committed herself to escape from.

3 The Stigmatized Subject and the Unspeakable Pains of Racism

In her work *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* (2010),³² Grada Kilomba examines the timelessness of everyday racism, based on the meanings that words *memories* and *plantation* evoke. For her, both terms appear to be a return to the colonial past, a re-enactment of a historical past that is present in the traumatic reality of racism experienced by black subjects.

When defining *racism*, Kilomba³³ highlights three characteristics that constitute it, starting with the construction of the difference within which the black subject is seen as different from the whiteness – constructed as a point of reference. The symbiotic relationship of difference with hierarchical values is another neuralgic point, since this identification of the subject as *different* is engendered through stigmatization, dishonor and inferiorization. The author also cites the historical, political, social and economic powers, which, combined with prejudice, give shape to racism.

Experiencing racism, according to Kilomba (2010),³⁴ is an unspeakable pain that, cannot be put into words. For the author, racial oppression acts cyclically: when it manifests itself in the oppressed subject as a physical pain, it brings along psychic repercussions, and this psychological suffering is accompanied by bodily sensations. In Akunna's case, physical and psychological pain are manifested in routine discrimination, traumatic experiences and systematic violence commonly present in the lives of black people.

³² KILOMBA, Grada. *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*. 2. Ed. Münster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2010.

³³ For reference, see footnote 32.

³⁴ For reference, see footnote 32.

Akunna daily racist experiences exposed her to a continuous pattern of abuse (Kilomba, 2010)³⁵ frequently replicated in the spaces where she circulated. Throughout the plot, situations of misrepresentations about her culture are constantly described. At the community college, she is faced with what Kilomba defines as a *colonial dialectic*, circumstances in which the white subject is situated as *normal* and define her as *eccentric*:

They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you'd seen a car before you came to America. They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids? They wanted to know. All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb? You smiled tightly when they asked those questions. Your uncle told you to expect it; a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, he called it (Adichie, 2009, p. 116).³⁶

The images of a wild Africa evidenced in the questions Akunna had to answer about her own, indicate the perennial narratives which reflect discourses of outdated power structures and act with the purpose of depriving her of any human trace. She is challenged with a hostile culture, which for not being receptive to her phenotypic traits, turn such features into excluding factors. By using the invasive questions as controlling formulas that American girls around her, supposedly white people, exert a power relation that emerges in the interpellations about her linguistic abilities, her origin and hair. These questions, far beyond curiosity, unveil misconceptions about the African continent. Africa's representation as a place of uncivilized people is dictated by an intended hierarchy, which delineates the USA as a civilized nation and Africa as a primitive continent.

Many episodes reaffirm that the view of the occidental subject over African peoples are still fed by XIX century fictions created by scientists and writers of that time. Akunna's uncle, for example, relates "[...] the neighbors said, a few months after he moved into his house, that squirrels had started to disappear. They had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals" (Adichie, 2009, p. 116).³⁷

Akunna is also a target of speculation, gazes and discourses that place her as *the other* as the narrator informs:

³⁵ For reference, see footnote 32.

³⁶ For reference, see footnote 8.

³⁷ For reference, see footnote 8.

Many people at the restaurant asked when you had come from Jamaica, because they thought that every black person with a foreign accent was Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African told you that they loved elephants and wanted to go on a safari (Adichie, 2009, p. 119).³⁸

Other faces of everyday racism, present in the mentioned episodes, are marked by the ideological construction of difference based on hierarchical values. In the construction of the prejudicial imaginary, consolidated by way of racism, Akunna and the uncle become *storage places* for fears and for the fantasies of north American white people with whom they interact. Kilomba (2010, p. 44)³⁹ defends that “within everyday racism one [the black people] is used as a screen for projections of what the white society has made taboo.” This projection, as explains the author, is a strategy that white people use to divert attention from their history of oppression; for this, positive representations about white people and negative representations about black people are constructed. The latter – the personification of the primitive, the violent and threatening other; the former – the decent and civilized.

In “The Thing Around Your Neck,” the everyday racism experienced by the protagonist becomes more evident when she, when diving into the intricacies of an interracial relationship, comes into conflict with her ethnic identity. Her romantic involvement with a white man with olive-like colored eyes caused social discomfort, filtered by Akunna in the slanted looks directed at her and by

[...] the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice. The old white men and women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose pitying eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem, your self-loathing. Or the black women who smiled swift solidarity smiles; the black men who tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too-obvious hi to him; the white men and women who said “What a good-looking pair” too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open-mindedness to themselves (Adichie, 2009, p. 125).⁴⁰

³⁸ For reference, see footnote 8.

³⁹ For reference, see footnote 32.

⁴⁰ For reference, see footnote 8.

The protagonist Akunna, a Nigerian woman, by means of the interracial relationship in which she becomes involved, is confronted with the reality of racial hierarchies existing in America, something that does not exist in her country due to the considerable ethnic and racial homogeneity that constitutes it. Coming from a country where skin color is not a factor of great relevance, given that the vast majority of people are black, Akunna, citing Kabengele Munanga (2006, p. 20), is impacted “[...] due to the conscience of differences, and not because of the differences *per se* [...]”,⁴¹ a context in which their black identity is redefined by the ideological constructions of race and social hierarchy.

Akunna’s skin color, as a marker of social differentiation, acts as an element of stigmatization on which racism is based. The perception of racism that permeates the behaviors that the character filters is manifested in the expressions of estrangement from a society that is not receptive to the involvement of a black and African woman with a white, American man of a high social class. This intolerance appears to be interracial violence practiced by people who cannot see black and white affection as something constructed. This violence is part of what Kilomba (2010)⁴² called gendered racism.

Using Essed (1991), Kilomba (2010, p. 99)⁴³ explains genderized racism refers “[...] to the racial oppression of Black women [...] structured by racist perceptions of gender roles.” For this theorist, the reality of black women is a hybrid phenomenon that goes through the double burden imposed by racism and sexism. This double racial and sexual oppression confines black women to an empty space, which makes it impossible to recognize black women as women, since this space overlaps with the racial category. In this space of erasure and vacuum, black women, before being considered as women, are seen as black.

Akunna, as a woman and black, is a victim of gendered racism, due to the association of dark-skinned women as inferior subjects. This association, which seems to be built by the return to a collective memory about black women, is structured in the repetition of the narrative of African colonization and female subalternization. Akunna's interracial relationship, when crossed by racism and sexism, shows that these categories,

⁴¹ In Portuguese: “[...] pela tomada de consciência das diferenças, e não pelas diferenças em si [...].”

⁴² For reference, see footnote 32.

⁴³ For reference, see footnote 32.

as they are structural and structuring of society, expose black women to vulnerability, stigmatization and violence imposed on their black body.

Experiences of gendered racism became constant in Akunna's life, and it was from a foreign position that she felt susceptible to the subtleties of Americans regarding prejudice against interracial relationships. In certain situations, that which has not been said – silence – spoke as loudly as verbalizations of a racist nature. This is what can be learned from the episode she experienced below:

Once, at Chang's, he [the boyfriend] told the waiter he had recently visited Shanghai, that he spoke some Mandarin. The waiter warmed up and told him what soup was best and then asked him, "You have girlfriend in Shanghai now?" And he smiled and said nothing. [...] the Chinese man had assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and he had smiled and said nothing (Adichie, 2009, pp. 123-124).⁴⁴

The representation of the rejection of Akunna's interracial relationship is repeated in the waiter's incredulity about her being a white man's girlfriend, despite the couple being regular visitors to the restaurant and the public displays of affection. The waiter's speech strengthens the micro-violence marked by everyday racism and gendered racism. In turn, a double colonization is evidenced in the smile and silence of Akunna's boyfriend. By smiling without saying anything, he implies that a romantic relationship between a white man and an Asian woman is more likely than between a white man and an African woman.

Although Akunna's boyfriend subjected her to a kind of subliminal objectification, given that the interest he had in her initially seemed to be an extension of the interest he showed in exotic things, he was the only person who made her feel visible. However, throughout the narrative, he leaves traces of domination arising from his stereotypical view of other peoples. Avidly, he searches for stories that confirm his imagination about the subordination of other cultures in relation to the American culture. Subtly, he tries to convince her to adapt to American standards. Gifts such as clothes and shoes that do not match Akunna's style exemplify his effort to Americanize her. For Akunna, a subject who had been placed in a position of otherness in relation to the white

⁴⁴ For reference, see footnote 8.

subject, is left to the experience of living with an *alienated image of herself*, as her real images and identities are not exotic enough.

What draws attention in this relationship is that it ends up being the trigger for breaking the inertia in which Akunna found herself. What was wrapped around her neck and causing her a feeling of suffocation begins to loosen (Adichie, 2009).⁴⁵ The feeling of suffocation begins to diminish, as she questions her boyfriend's misconceptions and, gradually, she begins to feel like she owns her voice again, until she recovers it completely, taking heart to write to her family and return home.

Final Considerations

The narrative woven in "The Thing Around Your Neck" is forged from the experience of mobility and the problematization of conflicts common to the diasporic subject, by bringing, to the center, the subaltern subject, here understood as the black-Nigerian-immigrant woman. The issue of being a Nigerian woman in America is considered by Adichie (2009)⁴⁶ based on the perspective of breaking the stigmas and stereotypes that surround the subject of the diaspora.

The protagonist's experiences, as an immigrant subject, open possibilities for understanding how psychological violence, silencing, cultural intolerance and social inequality profoundly affect the emotional health of the subject in transit. From this perspective, Adichie's fiction problematizes structural racism by revealing situations in which the migrant subject is oppressed by naturalized racism, xenophobia and various prejudices.

In this short story, Adichie, by tensioning the ways in which the protagonist, as a diasporic subject, adheres to different identities in different spaces, draws attention to the importance of denaturalizing stereotypes about African immigrants. In "The Thing Around Your Neck," the Adichiean narrative presents itself as an important literary instrument in the deconstruction of the mythologized imaginary about Africa and African women.

⁴⁵ For reference, see footnote 8.

⁴⁶ For reference, see footnote 8.

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Statement of Author's Contribution

The authors of the article “Akunna: the Narrative of the Dislocated Subject in the Short Story ‘The Thing Around Your Neck,’ by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie” declare below their individual contributions to the production of this article:

Edna Sousa Cruz: conception of the proposal, analysis and interpretation of data; writing the article; final approval of the version to be published; and responsibility for all aspects of the work in ensuring the accuracy and integrity of every part of the work.

Larissa Sá Mota: conception of the proposal, analysis and interpretation of data; writing the article, final approval of the version to be published.

Milene Oliveira Assunção: conception of the proposal, analysis and interpretation of data; writing the article, final approval of the version to be published.

Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso [*Bakhtiniana*. Journal of Discourse Studies] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review II

The article is consistent with its title. The purpose of the work is clearly stated, the development is coherent and the parts are well linked. The development of the article text is in accordance with the proposed theory, demonstrating the good use of the bibliography, which is current and relevant. Although it presents a very well-structured chain of ideas, the text does not present an original theme, as there are many other authors who have analyzed this story from the same perspective. The contribution that I identify in the text to the field of knowledge lies in the initial considerations and reflection on the tissue of Adichiean writing. Overall, the language is clear and suitable for a scientific work. There are, however, small mistakes in the writing that can, of course, be overcome by the author, thus not compromising the evaluation of the text.

Ex1. The regency of the verb attribute in the sentence below:

Thayane de Araújo Morais (2017) attributes as one of the causes of challenge the fact that literature produced in African territory has not yet managed to break through the barriers imposed by social and aesthetic prejudice [...].

Ex2. USA agreement in: The idea propagated in Nigeria about the representation of America as the land of financial prosperity is demystified by the narrator, when he shows understanding with Akunna regarding her disillusionment when faced with a USA very different from the one they had described to him.

As explained in the review, although the article analyzes the story from an already well-explored perspective, the two parts preceding the analysis itself (which is correct in its

proposal) offer some authenticity to the text, justifying its publication. MANDATORY CORRECTIONS [Revised]

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