

# A M U S A N I F E O L U W A M A R Y

ADAPTING TO LIFE IN AMERICA: CULTURAL LOSS IN THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK  
BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

## Résumé

L'œuvre de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reflète la mondialisation et les séquelles de la colonisation, tant dans les anciennes colonies qu'auprès des populations coloniales fréquemment déplacées dans le monde. Sa fiction est souvent centrée sur la migration massive de Nigériens, mais aussi d'autres nationalités, vers les États-Unis d'Amérique. Cet article vise à élucider la description des cas de perte culturelle et les techniques d'adaptation employées par les immigrants nigériens pour faire face à la vie en Amérique et à son impératif d'assimilation culturelle.

**Mots clés :** perte culturelle, assimilation, transculturation, acculturation, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In this paper, I propose to examine instances of cultural loss in Adichie's stories through the analysis of the portrayal of the characters' long struggle to integrate and become part of American society. Focusing on three short stories, namely "Imitation," "The Thing Around Your Neck" and "The Arrangers of Marriage" of the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), I employ the theoretical concepts of assimilation, acculturation, transculturation to elucidate the cultural negotiations that characters undergo in their efforts to adapt to the new country.

The selected stories for this study are representative of the author's phenomenal portrayal of the Nigerian lower

## Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work reflects on globalization and the aftereffects of colonization both in former colonies and colonial populations often displaced around the world. Her fiction frequently centres on the mass migration of Nigerians, as well as other nationalities, to the United States of America. This paper aims to elucidate the depiction of instances of cultural loss and the adaptive techniques employed by Nigerian immigrants to cope with life in America and its imperative of cultural assimilation.

**Key words:** cultural loss, assimilation, transculturation, acculturation, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

and middle-class population, who find themselves living in America in precarious conditions. The characters all experience initial shock as they are confronted with the stark differences between their original culture and the host culture, and thus have to transition beyond that initial stage of shock to an active negotiation with the dominant culture in a quest for survival.

I will examine the coping strategies these characters use as they adapt and integrate within the host culture in the face of cultural differences. Some choose to acculturate, having a utopic vision of becoming assimilated Americans, while others decide to hybridize culturally, subjecting their original culture to the

influences of the dominant one, which results in a transcultural identity. In both forms of adaptation, cultural loss is unavoidable and characters are plunged into a space of in-betweenness, which reveals how hard it is to retain one's entire home culture or to fully assimilate to the dominant one.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's upbringing and rich cultural heritage has contributed to her writing. She was born in 1977 in Enugu to academics: her father is the first professor of Statistics at the Nigerian University of Nsukka, Nigeria's first university, and her mother is the institution's first female registrar. Adichie left Nigeria at the age of nineteen to pursue a degree in Communications and Political Science at Drexel University in Philadelphia. It gave her a diasporic perspective that has shaped her literary creativity and career as a prolific writer. Her experience with culture shock in America, as recounted in an interview with Hope Reese, gave her insight into the meaning of assimilation, race-based stereotypes, and discrimination (Reese). This experience is the primary influence for her novel *Americanah* (2013). The impact of the transcultural identity she developed by dividing her time between Nigeria and America appears in many of her stories, which address Nigerian postcolonial society in relation to globalization. This

allows her to identify prevalent problems of race and identity from a local and global perspective (Murphy 96). Although the 12 short stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* also touch on gender, stereotype and war, I have chosen the stories that particularly address her concerns of cultural loss, assimilation and the inevitable hybridity that leads to a transcultural identity for this study.

The first, "Imitation", is the story of a Nigerian, middle-class family who navigates between Nigeria and the United States of America. The story clearly portrays cultural loss and the different adaptive strategies of the husband and wife as each struggle to integrate into American culture. The characters in this story settle for hybridizing Nigerian culture with an American way of life in order to cope with cultural loss. The second story, with the same title as the collection, "The Thing Around Your Neck", portrays the experience of a young woman from a lower-class family in Lagos, Nigeria, who immigrates to the United States. After her arrival in America, she is quickly confronted with cultural differences, and numerous stereotypes directed at her, which she surmounts by making an effort to integrate into American lifestyle, while retaining memories from her home culture. The last selected story, "The Arrangers of Marriage", depicts cultural loss as seen

through the relationship between a lower class, Nigerian-born American resident doctor and his arranged bride, who is newly arrived in America. The doctor willingly chooses acculturation as the only means of integrating, and tries to impose this adaptive strategy on his new bride. She, on the other hand, after undergoing a number of difficult experiences, decides to retain some elements of her home culture while blending with her husband's American dream.

Understanding the concepts of cultural loss, acculturation and transculturation is particularly productive for the study of cultural negotiations in the selected stories. Cultural loss signifies the resultant effect of negotiating between an acquired dominant culture and an original one. As explained by L. Hall, it occurs "when a smaller group becomes [entangled] with a larger, more dominant culture" (44). This is the case when it comes to assimilation, especially in the American form which implies that immigrants' original culture suffers the loss of key elements, including their language and way of life as they integrate into American society. Assimilation is the natural consequence of a long process of transformation of the original culture through cultural loss and the progressive adoption of the host culture. The term acculturation describes the full acquisition

of the dominant culture at the expense of the original.

Fernando Ortiz's critical conception of acculturation is defined as the "transition from one culture to another culture, [having] manifold repercussions" (98). He argues that the concept does not sufficiently capture the transformation of the original culture in the face of a dominant one. In his perspective, the process does not simply entail the loss of one's culture in the process of adaptation to a new dominant one, but rather necessitates "the creation of a new cultural phenomenon" that retains traces of both cultures (102-03). Hence, his coining of the term "transculturation". Transculturation suggests that immigrants often resolve to blending aspects of the host culture into their original culture, thus generating a new, hybridized identity containing characteristics of both cultures (Welsch 198). Domínguez further elucidates the impossibility of being able to fully convert into the new culture as acculturation suggests. This gives rise to the notion of transculturation in which there exists no one-sided give and take between the cultures, but a mixture (64). True to his view, the process of adaptation tends to create in immigrants a state of identity crisis, resulting from the impossibility to totally discard their original cultural identity and exclusively identify with the culture of the host country. This space of in-

betweenness is effectively breached by the adoption of a transcultural identity which is able to integrate both cultures.

In Adichie's story, the characters who travel to America are faced with the necessity of adaptation in order to survive in the new country, but struggle with their cultural identity which for some, is seen as an impediment to their individual quest for better livelihood and living standards. Their engagement with American life becomes, to a great extent, an effort to develop coping strategies to adapt. This largely involves either aspiring to embrace American culture completely or retaining their Nigerian identity to some degree, a decision that involves cultural negotiation.

The corpus for the present study, composed of stories depicting realities of postcolonial Nigeria in relation to immigration and globalization, has not received close critical attention. Globalization is an ever-expanding phenomenon in our world characterized by the rise in migration, technological advancements, economic and political interrelations and communication (Amoko 140). Its objective is to make the world a global community where the aggregation and interaction of national and local cultures is possible. However, one of the factors that led to a globalized world is the colonial experience. Assimilation policies adopted by powerful Western nations

sought to mold their colonial territories – about 80% of the rest of the world— after Western modernism, creating a power imbalance which continues to impact ex-colonial territories after colonization (Amoko 136-37). The effect of the colonial period manifests in forms of economic inequality, political instability (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 186) and abject underdevelopment in the ex-colonies. As a result, the only recourse for many former colonial peoples is migration. The mass movement of the population of the weaker nations, mostly impoverished, into richer ones for better opportunities is a major component of globalization that was prompted by colonization.

Generally, globalization is a contemporary assimilative tool for the West. It is designed to induce the conformity and assimilation of the majority of the world's weaker nations and their cultures to the model of powerful, Western, ex-colonial rulers. This assimilation occurs through different aspects of globalization like technology, media and economic interactions (D. E. Hall 117). Likewise in migration, assimilation requirements of countries like the United States imply that an immigrant from a poorer nation must submit his identity and culture to the dominant ones of the nation he has immigrated to in order to survive. This is not altogether a simple, achievable feat.

Though an immigrant might readily, out of necessity, submit to the dominant culture, he is confronted with the disparity between the culture of his home-country and the new. This results in a struggle to detach from the cultural habits and practices of the original culture, which involves a degree of initial self-inflicted trauma necessary to survive in the host country. Eventually, the immigrant experiences some loss of their original culture, adopting or blending as much as is necessary for survival within the dominant culture.

In my view, the stories selected for this analysis are dramatic portrayals of cultural loss in the face of assimilation in the United States. Clark refers to assimilation as "a way of understanding the social dynamics of American society [and as] the process that occurs spontaneously and often unintended in the course of interaction between majority and minority groups" (Clark qtd. in Dasgupta 3). In this study, the minority group is the Nigerian immigrants, who, willingly or forcefully, understand and pattern their lifestyles to the demands of American society in order to survive and escape the hardship of their poverty-stricken postcolonial society.

In the first story, "Imitation," Nkem, in submission to her husband (as Nigerian culture demands), finds herself in America as the wife of one of the "Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to

America to Have Their Babies" (Adichie 21). She, without any agency, is subjected to adapting her existence to the demands of American society according to her husband's dictates. Nkem is uncomfortable with the mutual separation which exists between her family and her husband, Obiora, who is based in Nigeria and only visits intermittently. However, she succumbs to the arrangement because, as a survivor of economic and socio-political problems in Nigeria, living in the house that smells like green tea in the lovely American suburb and having her children attend school with the children of the American elites are a dream come true (21). The need to escape the poverty known to her lower-class family compels her to adopt the dream of many poor Nigerian girls: to be the wife of a successful man, who owns a house in America. Maitrayee and Shrivastava call her dislocation in America "a purposeful one, meant only for the realization of her dream space" (189). Securing the children's future is worth the sacrifice of having to cope with the shock of realizing that food items native to Nigeria are not available and the recipes have to be blended to suit the different, but available resources in America. Not having real African yams hinders her from achieving the traditional *ji Akwukwo* pottage. However, instead of discarding the dish for an American food, she hybridizes the rest of the recipe with the

“imitation yams, the American fibrous potatoes” (24-25). Though she would have preferred Uncle Ben’s rice, common to the Nigerian market for jollof rice, as a “translated being, with the need to translate the typical Nigerian dishes in order to adapt them to American ingredients,” she learns to tolerate the Basmati rice (Murphy 98).

Through the discussions with Amaechi, the help, they encounter the disparity between American and Nigerian culture. In the Nigerian custom, children are expected to speak reverently with an elder when voicing their opinion, but they discover that American children address elders as equals. Despite this evidence of loss of Nigerian culture manifested in Nkem’s children, the need for their integration into the dominant society makes such conduct acceptable for the parents. Obiora, for instance, is proud to make a show of the children to friends, referring to how their manner of speech makes them *Americanah*<sup>1</sup> (Adichie 28). Nkem attests to the fact that Obiora criticizes their neighbours, calling their way of life “plastic,” yet he secretly craves that his children become like them, “sniffing at the food that had fallen into the dirt calling it spoiled” (19). From her childhood experience, what is commonly seen in

Nigeria is a child picking up that kind of food and eating it. This is in part due to the lack that characterized her poor background. Maitrayee and Shrivastava claim that “she like Obiora has also learnt to cope with the culture of America and to an extent enjoys her partial assimilation in the new American cultural space, finding it rather safer than her past life in Nigeria...” (189). This is true because though she notices that her accent, which announces her foreignness, makes her seem helpless to her neighbours, she craves their lifestyle; she therefore adopts cultural elements like the Pilate class she attends with her neighbour twice a week (Adichie 28). To survive differently from her former wretched Nigerian lifestyle where urine-drenched weeds substitute for vegetables, she has to embrace as much as is required to blend into this new society in which one meal is large enough for three persons.

Obiora made living in America comfortable for his family by creating a hybridized environment where “acts of mimicry” (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 189) like the African arts and a Nigerian housemaid coexist with the American styled house, yet he prefers to spend most of his time in Nigeria. This is because culturally in a Nigerian setting, successful

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<sup>1</sup>The word “Americanah” is a Nigerian slang word used to address Nigerians trying to change their Nigerian identity or mimicking the American way of life in a quest for assimilation.

men like Obiora thrive on the worship of their ego. According to Nkem's acquaintance from Delaware, "America does not recognize Big Men. Nobody says 'Sir! Sir!' to them in America. Nobody rushes to dust their seats before they sit down" (Adichie 22). Obiora's strategy of coping with this cultural loss is to keep two homes: one in America where he visits occasionally and another in Nigeria, where Nkem and the children visit during Christmas. Physically, he dwells in a space between both cultures, with the ability to negotiate within both. As a person who passionately keeps elements of Nigerian culture, and criticizes, yet desires, the American way of life and aspires for his children to be fully assimilated, he can be said to have a transcultural identity born out of duality and the inability to acculturate in American society. Similarly, Nkem has effectively transitioned into a transcultural space, that is, "a place where identities are ever-changing, a place where new identities arise [...]" (Murphy 97). Though she did not opt for American foods despite the inadequacy in resources to make the Nigerian dishes, she has mastered baking cookies which is highly regarded in her children's American classes. She is able, at the same time, to adopt an egalitarian lifestyle with the housemaid (23): an unusual situation in a typical Nigerian society, forced on her by loneliness in

America. For Maitrayee and Shrivastava, instances of retaining the memories of her background and life in Nigeria make her nostalgic, and holding Obiora's stories about masks as cultural memories in her imagination signify periods of identity crisis (190). However, it also reveals how fluid she has become as a transcultural subject, who blends into the American cultural space and is able to journey into her home culture through her memories. They, as a couple, represent transcultural individuals, who exist in duality and have to lose much of their home culture to adopt an American lifestyle. Still, they are unable to completely detach from their home culture to fully acquire the dominant one.

"The Thing Around Your Neck", narrated in the second person, tells the story of Akunna, who wins the American Visa Lottery and arrives in America for the first time. Siccardi claims that "*le choix du pronom "you" met la jeune femme à distance, renforçant un isolement que son incapacité à écrire à sa famille intensifie. Il semble ainsi faire exister Akunna dans un "non-lieu", un à-côté, un vide existentiel*" (5). Her isolation and existence in a non-place are due to the initial feeling of invisibility resulting from her inability to fit into the unfamiliar American cultural space because of the cultural disparity and the distance from her Nigerian relatives and friends. If she had money for gifts, she

would have loved to write to them about the strangeness she observes in American culture: the openness of the Americans, the food wastage, the upset American child whose parents cajole, Americans who have tattered wears and the differing physique of the rich and poor Americans (Adichie 81). She finds this odd because in Nigeria, privy information is kept personal, not divulged to strangers; food is a treasure which must not be wasted; upset children are spanked or are scolded by their parents, which ends up settling them; only poor night watchmen in front of rich people's homes wear tattered clothes; and obesity is a symbol of wealth, while leanness represents poverty.

These differences, coupled with the stereotypes that she endures, upset her as she finds it difficult to initially conform to the system, which impedes her social interactions (Siccardi 6-7). However, for survival, she has to adapt to her new environment, according to her uncle's advice. While she is at his house, a "homely cultural space" (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 192), they eat *garri* for lunch and speak Igbo (Adichie 80). He tells her that the strategy for survival is to "understand America [as a place where] a lot is given to gain a lot" (79). This confirms Clark's definition of American assimilation policy as "a way of understanding the social dynamics of American society [...]" (qtd. in Dasgupta 3). In the months following her

arrival, Akunna embraces understanding America as her uncle had predicted. She discards her views on disclosing personal information and becomes openminded like the Americans in talking about her family with her boyfriend; and she slowly gets used to the differences and stereotypes she perceives. Despite adopting an American lifestyle by dating an American, working in a restaurant that serves Americans and visiting Chinese restaurants with her boyfriend, she still remembers home in Nigeria and cooks *Onugbu* soup and *garri* from the items she buys at the African store (Adichie 84). Akunna, unlike Nkem and Obiora, represents a dislocated individual who does not employ acts of imitation in adapting to American society (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 193). She, like her uncle's family, is unable to completely detach from the memories of the home culture, and simply creates, through a transcultural identity, a new space where both cultures serve the need for survival. Although she understands that American society demands that she loses some aspects of her home culture, she does not feel forced or make any attempt to fully embrace the new culture.

In "The Arrangers of Marriage", Chinaza Okafor, the arranged bride from Nigeria, has had to battle cultural disparity and loss at the immigration checkpoint while entering America. The customs

officer in charge of her luggage pokes at her Nigerian food items as if they were spiders and ends up confiscating some. However, her dilemma compounds when her hew, dictatorial husband, Ofodile, a resident doctor in America, strips her of her identity. He, having the utopic dream of becoming a fully assimilated American, changes her name from Chinaza Okafor or Udenwa to Agatha Bell (Adichie 118), and insists that only American English will be the form of communication inside and outside the house. At her disapproval, he tells her: “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” (117). For him, the only means of adapting to American society is to acculturate, stripping himself of anything that relates to Nigeria and mimicking American culture as much as is necessary. This is his “strategic tool for cultural assimilation” (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 191). He believes that people who retain their foreign identity in America will not progress and will be stuck in poverty, if they do not acculturate or “adapt” (Adichie 119), as he puts it. He not only bans the use of the traditional Igbo tongue, but also of British English common to Nigerians. The word “engaged” becomes “busy,” “biscuits” becomes “cookies” and “lift” replaces “elevator.” According to

Siccardi, this linguistic disparity also signifies “*une divergence culturelle*” (5). In his quest, Ofodile changes his name to Dave Bell, “a more appropriate name in the American context” (Murphy 97), and cancels the preparation of fragrant Nigerian dishes because he “does not want [them] to be known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food...” (Adichie 122). Also, he consciously masters American pronunciation and sneers, condemning any act foreign to American culture. Engaging in all these deliberate acts of cultural loss, however, cannot change his identity from being a typical, traditional Igbo man, who believes that wives are tools for pleasure and reproduction. Though America is an egalitarian society where men and women are treated as equals, it does not affect Ofodile’s attitude toward his wife. He imposes rules and regulations on her without her permission and abuses her verbally and sexually. As much as he seeks to wipe “any cultural trace of the language of his homeland” (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 191), his otherness is still obvious as Chinaza notices when he takes a sip of water without fully chewing his food (Adichie 125). Though desperately trying to completely rid himself of the Nigerian culture, he unconsciously finds himself as a transcultural individual.

Chinaza, on the other hand, chooses to deal with the cultural loss enforced upon her by her husband differently. Her dependence on him for survival in America makes her incapable of refuting his American dream. Although she speaks English as he instructs, cuts coupons like Americans, and learns to cook American dishes, she persistently preserves her cultural habits and practices while he is away for work, by, for example, cooking the Nigerian dishes that suit her taste. Also, as a way of resisting cultural loss, she speaks Igbo to herself while cooking in the kitchen, her “comfort zone” (Maitrayee and Shrivastava 191) and teaches Nia, the neighbour at apartment 2D, some Igbo words. Her reluctance to adapt to an American lifestyle is depicted as she makes up her mind to survive separately from her husband once she gets approval on her work permit. This is after she learns about her husband’s previous marriage to an American in order to obtain his Green Card and gets upset about his unapologetic manner in relating the issue to her. As much as Ofodile tries to acculturate by erasing his identity (Murphy 97), he ends up with a transcultural identity because his cultural background makes it impossible to evade Nigerian traditions and become fully assimilated into American society. Chinaza, understanding that her survival depends on adopting parts of American

culture, does not seek to erase her foreignness. Rather, she embraces it and merges what she learns of America with Nigerian culture.

In conclusion, my study of three of Adichie’s story in *The Thing Around Your Neck* reveals the degrees of cultural negotiation involved in the transition to life in the United States for Nigerian immigrants. All characters, regardless of their gender and their economic and cultural condition, experience an initial shock and respond differently to the cultural loss required in the process of adaptation to the new culture. It is impossible, as seen in Akunna’s case, to retain a one-sided cultural identity outside the boundaries of the home country no matter how hard the immigrant tries. In addition, the dream or desire of an immigrant to acculturate and become fully assimilated into the culture of the host country becomes shattered when the realization of the impossibility of that dream hits. Nkem and her husband, Obiora, in coping with cultural loss, crave a completely assimilated American life because of the opportunities it offers, but cultural memories in forms of art, cuisine and customs impede them to fully accommodate that life. Similarly, Ofodile is unable to fully become American as he wishes because his cultural background hinders him from that dream. Akunna and

Chinaza's way of dealing with cultural loss shows that transculturality, a creative mixing of cultures, remains one of the best ways to integrate into a new society. Moreover, as much as the other characters try to acculturate, they cannot not help but be transcultural. Consciously or unconsciously, elements from both cultures merge to reveal a new form – even if what is adopted from the dominant culture outweighs what is retained from the original culture – and thus a transcultural identity prevails.

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