

The culture of violence in Chimamanda N. Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

BUHENDWA KATORO Johnny *

Abstract

The objectives to deal with this study is first of all to enable the audience to perceive the different kinds of violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and call on one's consciousness on a kind of the world needed for living life in a peaceful manner, in order to live life peacefully on the earth. The paper aims at enabling prospective readers to really understand the way husbands carryout their responsibilities in households on one hand, the rationality of men as opposed to their wives in the process of breeding children in the house hold on the other hand. Not only this, but also the drawback of wars in time of war of course, violence related to the misunderstanding of religious doctrines etc. Literature remains the expression of human experience. It does instruct and teach a lesson of life. It is indeed a mirror that helps us to perceive things at different levels and leave the choice to decide.

Key words: *Culture, violence, sexual violence, tradition, The Thing Around Your Neck.*

Résumé

La présente étude est menée sur la culture de violence perçue dans le roman **The Thing Around Your Neck** de l'auteur Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. L'œuvre romanesque englobe différentes sortes de violence telles que la violence conjugale, la violence basée sur les incompréhensions doctrinales religieuses, la violence basée sur le genre etc. La littérature demeure une science au service de la société. Elle se veut un miroir à travers lequel nous nous percevons, percevons les autres ou toute une société, et par la suite, décider comment conduire ou orienter notre vie selon les perceptions reflétées dans l'œuvre.

* Associate Professor and English Teacher at the University of Goma – UNIGOM –; PhD Diploma, Didactics of English language and literature, from the National University of Pedagogy, Faculty of pedagogy and Didactics of disciplines,. E-mail: buhendwakat@gmail.com.

Mots clés : Violence, culture, violence sexuelle, tradition, The Thing Around Your Neck.

I. Introduction

The present study investigates the culture of violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The research consists of carrying out a literary critical analysis of this literary production and try to understand the way the author manipulates and handles characters so as to ascribe them in the logic of any kind of violence depicted in the novel.

The role of the critic here then, is currently to perceive the culture of violence and its impact on Africans' everyday living according to traditions and beliefs in the novel.

Literature remains with no doubt the mirror of the society. Life is so mirrored thanks to the efforts of writers enabling readers to understand life in different angles. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie for example, tackles violence in some of her short stories condensed in the work entitled '*The Thing Around Your Neck*' (2009) enabling the reader to view life in these particular lenses and so understand the atrocities and other difficulties gone through by a certain category of people in different circumstances of life.

Although fiction does often include made-up or imaginary elements, it has the potential for being 'true', true to the nature of reality, true to human experience (Kelly G. 1982:24)

This study is about literary analysis. And to assess the value of an analysis, Louis Hebert (2022: 8) suggests that we can ask the questions: "what do we know now that we did not know before the analysis, and better still, what do we know now that we could not have known without this particular analysis?".

The achievement of the present study enables the audience to perceive the world of the novel in general and that of the real society to really understand the way the world runs in these days. As for G. Kelley (1982: 14), «Works of literature are fictional; they have the capacity for being 'true'. This paradox creates one of the most important and pleasurable tension in literature-the fictionality of literature as against its truthfulness in conveying the reality of human experience»

II. Methodology

This research falls in the field of literature, as there are too many literary approaches to the analysis of literature, three of them have been selected to serve the purpose of the current study. These are New criticism approach, Reader –Response or Reader- oriented approach and Textual approach. The above approaches appear to be appropriate and fair to the present research in that they call for intrinsic analysis which urges the reader,(implied) to focus on what is written on the page of a literary text (*The Thing Around Your Neck*) and try to respond on it in an adequate and real manner as suggested by the text itself, thanks to some hints or clues to orient the meaning of the reader.

➤ *New criticism Approach*

New Criticism, which dominated literary studies from the 1940s through the 1960s, has left a lasting imprint on the way we read and write about literature. Some of its most important concepts concerning the nature and importance of textual evidence, the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations, have been incorporated into the way most literary critics today, regardless of their theoretical persuasion, support their readings of literature (L.Tyson 2006:196). The ‘text itself’ became the battle cry of the New Critical effort to focus our attention on the literary work **as the sole source of evidence** for interpreting it. According to Thomson (1992), the world of a literary work is self-contained, and readers must exercise total objectivity in interpreting the text.

John Crowe Ransom (1937:588) quoted by Louis Hebert (2022:114), “New Criticism was an influential formalist movement in North American literary theory from the 1930s to ’50s which emphasized the close reading of literary texts and the self-sufficiency of the literary object. New Criticism rejected the tenets of literary historicism, according to which a work must be understood through acknowledgment of its historical context, the situation of the author, etc. In contrast, New Criticism emphasized the closed esthetic unity of the poetical text as one that transcends or circumvents social and biographical influence. John Crowe argues that “the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature” (opcit 588).

Referring to the above quoted proponents of literature, close reading of ‘**The Thing Around Your Neck**, is the only means enabling the researcher to collect

information related to the culture of violence in the novel under study, and the interpretation of some extracts should be carried out objectively in order to meet the intention of the author, i.e knowing what we did not know or we could not know in these short stories. So, extracts of any kind of violence stretched in the novel and the hints/clues enlightening the researcher's interpretation should come within and not without.

➤ ***Reader-Response Approach***

As its name implies, reader response criticism focuses on readers' responses to literary texts. Rosenblatt (1978) quoted by Lois Tyson (2006:254) points at five crucial theories to consider in the Reader-response activities. One of these is what Rosenblatt calls Transactional reader response theory where he talks about the transaction between text and reader. Rosenblatt does not reject the importance of the text in favor of the reader; rather he claims that both are necessary in the production of meaning. The crucial connection between the reader and the text is explained by Rosenblatt's theory of literary reading, which describes the transactional relationship between a reader and a poem. The events that take place in a literary work occur at a particular time and place, and different readers react to the events in different ways, depending on their unique interests and experiences. How does this transaction take place?

As we read a text, it acts as a STIMULUS to which we respond in our own personal way. Feelings, associations, and memories occur as we read, and these responses influence the way in which we make sense of the text as we move through it. The text is examined closely, often line by line or even word by word, in order to understand how it affects/stimulates the reader in the process of reading. Shortly speaking, The Thing Around Your Neck is to be closely read with a particular focus on every sort of violence within it. The reader that we presently become when we read the novel in the way it was intended to be read is what's meant by an implied reader (J. Hawthorn 1985). This is the reader suggested by the author, the initiated reader; the one assumed to read a literary text and analyze it objectively as intended by the author himself.

➤ ***Textual approach***

Jeremy Hawthorn (1985: 73-4) argues that "textual approaches refer to those critical discussions of novels which restrict themselves to information gained from the actual texts of novels discussed". The author pursues saying that "critics concentrate on the actual words of the novel(s) they are studying rather than bringing what is called extrinsic

information into their criticism”. From the view of Hawthorn, the current study focuses of words, phrases or simply extracts from Chimamanda N. Adichie’s **The Thing Around Your Neck** and try to find out the way the latter reflect different kinds of violence, and how an implied reader responds to.

III. Violence in **The Thing Around Your Neck**

➤ *Short story one: CELL ONE*

Cell one is the first short story in « The Thing Around Your Neck » it tackles the story of Nnamabia the main character as being spoilt by her mother due to bad basic education despite his father to be a highly educated person and a university professor, who finds himself in a conflicting situation with his wife (Nnamabia’s mother) for not having a common educational and instructional objectives.

❖ *Domestic violence*

Nnamabia’s mother though a wife of a professor; the nature of womanhood does not enable her to think rationally in the process of educating her children from the early age. Nnamabia, a boy who has inherited his mother’s beauty is seen affectionately spoilt by his own mother who covers all his misbehaviour dominated by robbery and theft. The mother’s irresponsibility and irrationality is felt in the excerpt here below.

When, at eleven, Nnamabia broke the window of his classroom with a stone, my mother gave him the money to replace it and not tell my father. When he lost some library books in class two, she told his form-mistress that our houseboy had stolen them....., when he stole the exam questions form ... and sold them to my father’s students, she shouted at him but then told my father that Nnamabia was sixteen, after all, and really should be given more pocket money. (TAN P8)

The story being told in the first person point view, it gives the reader the vividness and freshness to be understood in its fullness.

Nnamabia's mother is irresponsible and irrational at the same time. All Nnamabia's vices are seen virtues into his mother's eyes, which puts Nnamabia in a dangerous situation for the future. All children grow near their mothers than the fathers and for this reason; the basic education is acquired from the mother's knees. Nnamabia's misbehavior started at the early age (11 years old), but all the time, his mother was all the time cherishing him and covering his bad deeds. This is an early age whereby the mother could have started showing children what is right and what is wrong but...the mother does not perform her educational task as it is required from her. Any parent is to condemn if not punish his children's vices and encourage virtues. But Nnamabia's mother does not. She does not only cover but also protects Nnamabia's vice. In so doing, Nnamabia does not happen to feel the consequence of his misdeeds and goes on stealing and associating with hooligans. Violence is anything done by force to someone without his/her consent. Nnamabia's behavior is a kind of violence done against his parents.

The next morning, a security man came to tell my parents that Nnamabia had been arrested with some cult boys at a bar and had been taken away in a police Van. My mother screamed, « Ekwuzikwana ! don't say that ! My father calmly thanked the security man. (TAN P11).

The lack of the mother's punishment lets Nnamabia feel he was on a good track and that he had better continue. Now he is growing into a good bandit. For the mother, she does not see the vice of her son but rather, his suffering. As said earlier, the father has always been rational. He who understands that vices are to be punished; thanks the security man for having arrested Nnamabia. Which is not the case for the mother who is gripped by emotion and seriously overwhelmed as if she knew nothing about her son's misbehavior. Banditry is a form of violence. Anybody called bandit is a violent person. Nnamabia's mother does not understand it the same way.

The second week, I told my parents we were not going to visit Nnamabia... my mother looked at me, surprised, and asked « what do you mean ? » my

mother eyed me up and down and headed for the door and said nobody was begging me to come ; I could sit there and nothing while my innocent brother suffered.

Nnamabia's brother is revolted and would like his parents to stop visiting him in order to let him feel the suffering and perhaps make him change. But the mother does not view things in the same way. She only thinks about Nnamabia's suffering but never about why she is in prison. For in the mind of the mother, Nnamabia did not want to hear such an idea preventing her visit her lovely and supposedly innocent son. This is a one more proof that so far she does not understand that Nnamabia needs a punitive action that would let him think twice about his bad behaviour. Looking at his son from the head up to toes is too expressive. even the use of the verb to "beg" is so significant. To mean if you want, join me, if you don't want, stay there, I'll go myself. The mother's reaction towards her son is violent since she tries to force him to go and visit his young brother arrested for banditry. Mother is actually violent in front of anybody who opposes against visiting Nnamabia..

❖ *Irrational violence*

My mother rushed at him and pulled at his shirt. « where is my son ? where is my son ? my father pried her away and the policeman brushed at his shirt as if she had felt some dirt there... « where is our son ? my mother asked in a voice so quiet, so steely, that the policeman stopped. « they took him away, sir » he said. (TAN P 19)

It is true that the policeman's answers creates suspense and confusion in the mind of Nnamabia's mother but this would not be conclusive that Nnamabia was necessarily killed. This is a quick idea that comes to the mind of Nnamabia's mother and that makes her gripped of emotion and fear ; she does not want to be told anything other than being shown her son Nnamabia. As for the father, he still holds his breath and succeeds to contain himself until he gets more and clear details on his son's absence in cell one. This is where his wisdom and perspicacity is felt. While his wife loses the mind shouting and

pulling the policeman abruptly. This is another violence perceived from Nnamabia's mother who can only react with the heart rather than with the mind.

➤ *Short story II: A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE*

❖ *Violence based on religious doctrines*

A private experience is about religious and ethnic violence that generates riots in a market in Kano. Indeed, the conflict is between Muslims and Christians. The beginning of this religious and ethnic violence is highlighted in the quotation hereafter:

All started at the motor park, when a man drove over a copy of the holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in, the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book.(p46)

Muslims are the ones who started violence by lack of patience and tolerance. Cutting off someone's head with a machete simply because he had driven over a copy of the Koran perhaps, by lack of attention is not right and wise. As it is felt, the conflict is not only religious but also ethnic by the fact that this man, who made such a mistake is an Igbo (Christian), whereas the men who avenge themselves are Hausa (Muslims). Such behavior does not promote peace or peaceful cohabitation in a way that what a Hausa does against Christians is likely to promote hatred and violence as a pay back from Christians. The killing of an Igbo Christian generates a serious violence as the following quotation asserts:

She (Chika the main character) was buying oranges and Nnedi had walked farther down to buy groundnuts and then there was shouting in English, in Pidgin, in Hausa, in Igbo. "Riot! Trouble is coming, oh! They have killed a man!" Then people around her were running, pushing against one another, overturning wheel barrows full of

yams, leaving behind bruised vegetables they had just bargained hard for.(p45)

The killing of an Igbo by a Hausa brings trouble in the market and makes innocent victims from an unknown situation. Peasants had cultivated, sowed and harvest but at the end their crops are overturned, bruised and trodden down by people trying to save their lives. All is now lost and the effort of a whole year working in the farm is reduced to nothing. What is surprising is that the riot does not affect the only one community but all the market people even that of Hausa pretending to avenge the one who desecrates the Holy Koran. Victims are also counted among the Hausa and not only from the Igbo hated by Muslims. The way Hausa treats Igbo due to their religious belonging is found in these lines:

“Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones” (p44)

The drawback of ethnic and religious violence is well described in the quotation below, whereby market people undergo the consequence of what they do not know, causing innocent victims to fall down.

The streets where she ran blindly, not sure in which direction Nnedi had run, not sure if the man running beside her was a friend or an enemy, not sure if she should stop and pick up one of the bewildered-looking children separated from their mothers in the rush, not even sure who was who or who was killing whom (p46).

The violence makes a lot of victims and many separated children from their mothers. In war, there is no enemy among civilians. All run and seek to save their lives. As it can be seen in the quotation up, Nnedi who had gone to buy some groundnuts is a victim of riots without knowing why. She runs blindly to save her life. As she ran, she could not know who was a friend and who was an enemy as everyone wants to save his life. This means that Igbo, Hausa all are affected by the riot caused by Hausa. During such a confusion, no one knew who was killing who as everybody is gripped and affected by the violence. The source and causers of violence are indicated in the following extract:

“...riots do not happen in a vacuum, that religion and ethnicity are often politicized because the ruler is safe if the hungry ruled are killing one another“(p49).

It is well stated that such kinds of violence are always instigated by politicians who take advantage from them. People are usually duped and sent to kill their fellows without knowing the exact cause. What is to note is that even those who are blindly sent to kill their alike have their family members killed too, while politicians who send them are fully safe with their families and watch them dying. As the quotation asserts, the rulers are safe if the hungry ruled are killing one another. This is both a warning and a message of wisdom to all those who blindly accept to kill their fellows for nothing. Additional drawback and side effects of violence are described in these lines below:

She and the woman stand silently in the store for a while, looking out of the window they have just climbed through, its squeaky wooden shutters swinging in the air. The street is quiet at first, and then they hear the sound of running feet. They both moved away from the window, instinctively, although Chika can still see a man and a woman walking past, the woman holding her wrapper up above her knees, a baby tied to her back.(p46).

There are always many victims of violence. Chika and the other woman are hidden in an old building they had climbed through and can look from a window all what is happening in the street. The holding of the wrapper up to the knees provides a visual imagery suggesting that the woman had been running in order to save herself and her baby tied on the back. The normal and usual people's traffic has disappeared and the street is seen deserted by its goers. All is quiet, and nothing goes as during the moment when all is fine; where people move here and there and can conduct their everyday business peacefully without any threat.

Short story III: THE ARRANGERS OF MARRIAGE

❖ *domestic violence*

This is a story in which a newly married wife arrives in New York city with her husband, and finds she is unable to accept the rejection of the Nigerian identity. Chinaza,

one of the main characters and newly arranged wife of Dr Ofodile (known as Dr Dave) her husband, who makes proof of chauvinism as a sign of her cultural identity. Domestic violence is one of African culture whereby husbands think their wives are their object of sexual pleasure. To take sex from one's wife does not require negotiation, but rather a traditional right.

My husband woke me up by setting his heavy body on top of mine.

His chest flattened my breasts. Good morning, I said, He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist. « wait – I said, so that I could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty.

But he had crushed his mouth down on mine. Another thing the arrangers of marriage failed to mention-mouths that told the story of sleep, (TAN P 168-9)

In the mind of Ofodile, (Dr. Dave), Chinaza might have been warned about the wifely duties, and for this reason especially in traditional gender roles, sexual intercourse in bed is not a matter of negotiation. That is why Dr Ofodile, Knew that having sex from one's wife does not require warning. Chinaza, who is actually asleep is surprised to find her husband on top of her without having been warned. Though coming home exhausted for the long journey made from Nigeria to America, this does not prevent Dr Ofodile to have sex before everything. Of course, sex is also the husband's duty toward his wife. A husband who does not perform this task in bed is not considered to be a husband in front his wife. That is why, before all, Ofodile has to fulfill his manhood duty.

What matters is the way Ofodile does this. He does not warn nor negotiate his wife before climbing on top of her. This is a domestic violence since one cannot take sex from his wife without her own consent. What the author wants to emphasize is the manipulation of the wife like an object. The wife is asleep, but she is awoken by the heaviness of her husband's body on top of her, his mouth now glued on hers, with his chest flattening her breasts. Not only this, but also the fact of raising his body in order to pull down her night dress without even saying a word to his partner is too significant. This shows how much a husband has nothing to negotiate with the wife when it comes to be the matter of having sex. But the reaction of the wife (Chinaza) is meaningful when

she says “good morning” while awakening. A polite manner to mean “who are you”? “can’t you talk to me when you want sex from me?”. The fact of managing to pull down the night dress herself proves how much the husband did it with abruptness, the wife did it herself in order to avoid its tearing while the husband pulled it violently. African wives grow with the African traditional belief that a husband is a master, a lord, someone to obey at great extent. Chinaza proves this traditional trend in her household. .

Findings

Three short stories from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s **The Thing Around Your Neck** are critically approached namely:

1. CELL ONE
2. A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE
3. THE ARRANGERS OF MARRIAGE

What comes out from the analysis of these short stories is that:

- ✓ Cell one proves much enough that household conflicts are inherent in all families. This is what makes the truthfulness of literature as highlighted by Kelly Griffith (1982: 14)
- ✓ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie emphasizes the irrationality of the woman through Nnamabia’s mother who refuses to see the truth with objective lenses. Rather, the nature of womanhood leads her emotions and feelings. She is characterized by sympathy, pity and commiseration towards her son Nnamabia, rather than holding her responsibility of as a mother from whom children acquire basic education to orient their future life. The side taken by Nnamabia’s father is diametrically opposed to that of the mother in that in Africa, women are traditionally considered irrational. Nnamabia’s mother proves this much enough.

In the second short story ‘*A private experience*’, the write instructs on the danger of ethnicity and misinterpretation of religious doctrines. This should be handled with much care. People belonging to different ethnic groups and religions remain dangerous if not well accompanied by leaders of the city. Community cohesion and the living together should be fostered in order to promote peace in the community. But also, it is to be noted that politicians take advantage of such ethnic and religious conflicts for their personal interest. They instigate trouble among people who formerly lived together peacefully in order to access to power with the pretention that they are defenders of one side against

another. The community lack of tolerance among themselves in terms of ethnicity and religion proves that cohesion remains a big problem in the society of this literary production.

In the “*Arrangers of marriage*”, the strength of culture and belief remains a sword over the neck of women who continue to be treated in accordance with African traditional beliefs and culture. Women are viewed to be victims of all kinds of violence, especially domestic violence. Getting married by parents arrangement, being deprived of their own decision vis-a vis their sex which is seen to be the private property of one’s husband who, is likely to dispose it the way he wants and whenever he wants without a minute willingness of the wife.

IV. Discussion

The discoveries here up made from the three short stories in **The Thing Around Your Neck** are very instructive and essential to guide the view of any potential reader of literature. The story proves how much customs; traditions and mores are still the ones orienting lives of African households. By this story, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a feminist and African writer woman, become an ambassador of the African woman when she decides to mirror the household life of the latter.

Literature remains the mirror of the society. Its role has always been multidimensional since it mirrors life in all angles of human experience. Some of these important roles in societies are:

- **Preserving culture and history** i.e stories, poems pass down traditions, beliefs and past events from one generation to another.
- **Teaching moral values** i.e many traditional tales are meant to show what is right and wrong, often through heroes, villains, and lifelessons.
- **Educating and informing** i.e it helps people learn language, ideas, and ways of thinking about the world.
- **Expressing human experience** i.e, writers use literature to express emotions, struggles, love, pain, and hopes of individuals and communities.
- **Strengthening social unity** i.e, shared stories and myths help build a sense of identity and belonging within a group or nation.

What is developed in the above three short stories reflects in a holistic sense what literature is used for, over the fact that it is fictional; it takes the sense of being true when what we read brings us back to our real life, our everyday experiences. This is what Rastier (2001:300) quoted by Louis Hebert (2022:37) calls mimetic mode. According to Rastier, mimetic mode is the type of relationship that exists between the world created by the text (a constructed world) and the “real” world (the empirical world).

Conclusion

This study focused on the culture of violence. Since there are different kinds of violence, the three short stories analyzed reveals different life experience regarding violence. *Cell one*, a short story recounting the difficulty faced by Nnamabia’s father due his wife misperception of the wrong doing of his son Nnamabia. The child is spoilt to the extent that Nnamabia’s mother fail to read between lines the danger to which her son is exposed. Rather, she is carried out by the impulsion of motherhood which blinds her entirely. Despite the father’s attempts to educate Nnamabia through some punitive actions and reactions, the mother becomes a big obstacle.

The second story, *private experience*, mirrors the reader regarding problems of ethnicity and religious doctrines of two ethnic groups belonging to two opposed religions, each with its religious doctrines. The misunderstanding of one’s religious doctrine becomes the source of conflict generating civil violence which causes innocent victims. This violence, it is said, is most of the time instigated by politicians who make advantage of it, pretending to protect one ethnic group on the behalf of the other. So, people leave in a latent psychosis to the extent that a minute mistake of an ethnic group against the other, makes the bomb explode.

As for *The arrangers of marriage* is concerned, Chimamanda N. Adichie takes side as an ambassador of the African woman. As an African woman writer, she exposes what an African woman undergoes in the household, especially the domestic violence which African wives undergo day by day without crying. The author shows that the wives’ sex does not belong to them but to their husbands who, may use it whenever he wants and anyhow.

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