"WE SHOULD ALL BE ANGRY": WOMEN'S RESPONSES TO TRAUMA IN THE SHORT STORIES OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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Abstract: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an internationally acclaimed, award-winning writer of Nigerian origin, now living in the United States. Her short stories and fiction deal with the negative effects of the colonial legacy and how it affects men and women differently. The political instability of the rapidly succeeding postcolonial, often 'necropolitical' regimes imprisons both men and women into clear-cut gender roles. Women, affected by the traumatic loss of children or relatives in the numerous ethnic-religious riots are plagued by feelings of guilt and inadequacy. While identifications with either the pre-modern structures of the tribal society or the deeply split (post)colonial discourse regimes seem to be destructive to the formation of female identity, women who find creative outlets for their anger manage to put up resistance and carve out a small space of independence.

Keywords: trauma, anger, gender politics, necropolitics

Listed by *The New African* among the 100 most influential Africans in 2013, and by *The Time* among the 100 most influential people in 2015, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most powerful voices in today's postcolonial literature. An admirer of the Nigerian Igbo writer Chinua Achebe, Adichie adds feminism and globalization to Achebe's favourite topics, decolonization, Igbo and Nigerian identity. Her short stories and novels deal with the dire consequences of the colonial legacy, with how it affects men and women differently, documenting the lives of postcolonial Nigerians from an 'embodied' perspective, that of a 21st century "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels for Herself and Not for Men", as she ironically dubs herself in her TEDxEUSTON speech *We Should all Be Feminists.* In the famous speech that she later turned into a published essay as well as in *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto*, Adichie outlines the salient points of her feminism, less ideologically and more pragmatically oriented. Her main interest is gender politics, charting the ways in which gender roles defined by oppressive patriarchal regimes straitjacket individuals and at the same time outlining possibilities of resistance. Unlike the first and second generation Nigerian writers like Achebe[1], Adichie's fiction reveals what Hewett calls a "transnational intertextuality", resounding "with a wide range of texts, from Nigeria, other African nations, and throughout the Black Atlantic." (75)

Women undergo a double subjection in postcolonial patriarchal[2] societies like Nigeria and the forging of feminine identity is a complicated and hazardous process. Having to cope

1Adesanmi and Dunton note that the imperative of first generation writers was to deconstruct the colonial master narrative that they had been born into, which "led to a traditionalization of creative space and idiom, spelt out in the valorization of rural settings in the fiction of Achebe and Elechi Amadi or the privileging of rituals in the drama of Soyinka" (15).

2Even though Nigerian society is depicted in her fiction as largely patriarchal, Adichie herself belongs to the Igbo ethnic group, a community with a strong matriarchal tradition. Da Silva relates Adichie's favourite themes of "gender relations and women's empowerment" to her overt engagement with the matriarchal Igbo tradition (456), and defines her writing as "raw and confrontational" (455).

with the pressures of finding a husband, getting married and caring for the family often leaves women without enough psychic resources for maintaining their own individuality. Whatever role they choose to adopt, either in postcolonial Nigeria or as immigrants in the U.S., they will have to fight stereotyping and prejudice.

In the short story collection *The Thing Around your Neck*, Adichie's narratives coagulate into a response to the traumatic experiences that women undergo in oppressive, military or civilian, postcolonial regimes. Adichie's stories engage with the female experience of suffering and loss, and reveal that trauma is often the result of mistaken self-perceptions or uncritically assumed societal and cultural stereotypes.

The negative consequences of social gendering – quite extreme in traditional societies like Nigeria, where boys are expected to rule and women to obey – become evident in "Tomorrow is too far", a version of the Christian story of the fall, with Adam and Eve recast as Nonso and his sister, and the snake *echi eteka (*meaning "tomorrow is too far"). For Nonso, the apple of Grandmama's eyes – because he is supposed to carry on the family name - there will be no tomorrow, as his jealous sister will set a trap and by challenging Nonso to prove his masculinity will cause him to fall from the avocado tree. The story is centered on the gender inequality that makes two children, brother and sister, fall apart and simultaneously fall from grace: the brother dies and the sister, plagued by feelings of guilt, becomes gradually alienated from her family, her country, and even from the love interest (her cousin Dozie) for whose sake she had lured Nonso to his premature death. The narration, from a strange informally-impersonal point of view, is meant to expose the psychological rift that had made the sister cause Nonso's death, her split personality, the ongoing tension between reality and appearance: "It was the last summer you spent in Nigeria, the summer before your parents' divorce, before your mother swore you would never again set foot in Nigeria to see your father's family, especially Grandmama. [...] It was the summer Nonso died." (115) This type of impersonal interior monologue offers the reader an insight into the psychology of an adolescent girl torn between jealousy and love, and into the circumstances that led to Nonso's death. Although there is no direct comment of the socio-cultural interpellations that force boys to "prove their masculinity" and condemn girls to passivity, the narrative form gives voice to the repressed feelings of injustice that drive the girl to commit murder:

It was the summer Grandmama taught Nonso how to pluck the coconuts. [...] She didn't show you, because she said girls never pluck coconuts. Grandma cracked the coconuts against a stone, carefully, so that the watery milk stayed in the lower piece, a jagged cup. Everybody got a sip of the wind-cooled milk [...] and Grandmama presided over the sipping ritual to make sure Nonso went first.

It was the summer you asked Grandmama why Nonso sipped first even though Dozie was thirteen, a year older than Nonso, and Grandmama said Nonso's was her son's only son, the one who would carry on the Nnabuisi name, while Dozie was only a nwadiana, her daughter's son. It was the summer you found the molt of a snake on the lawn [...] and Grandmama told you the snake was called echi eteka, Tomorrow is too far. One bite, she said, and it's over in ten minutes. (155-6)

In "Imitation", Nkem[3] starts questioning her life in the U.S. when one of her friends tells her that her rich husband has a girlfriend in Lagos. As an *ada* - the first daughter - in a poor family, Nkem has the duty to find a rich husband to provide for her family. Her relationships with men gravitate around money: "Ikenna, a businessman, had paid her father's hospital bill after the hernia surgery. Tunji, a retired army general, had fixed the roof of her

3In Igbo, 'Nkem' means 'my own', and it is often used as a term of endearment similar to 'darling'. The implied possessive alludes to Nkem's status as one of her husband's prized possessions.

parents' home and bought them the first real sofas they had ever owned." As a result, a woman's worth is carefully appraised: despite her perfect face, Nkem "still mixed up her English tenses" and "was still, essentially a Bush Girl". Conscious of her deficiencies, she counts herself lucky when Obiora asks her to marry him. As he had already been very generous with her and paid for her siblings' school, Nkem already considered herself his property: when Obiora proposed to her, "she thought how unnecessary it was, his asking, since she would have been happy simply to be told." (29)

In America Nkem comes to realize that both she and Obiora are 'mimic men', leading lives that are as inauthentic as the imitation masks that her husband is collecting. The Benin mask displayed in their house is "one of the best imitations". Nigerians have to settle for these imitations, and rich Nigerians have the means to acquire the best, because, Obiora explains, all the original masks had been stolen by the British in the 19th century, "during what they called the Punitive Expedition" (24). The spoliation of Nigerian culture (the mask, as a cultural artefact, has a spiritual significance) by the British is revealed to be the underlying cause of the "imitation" lives that Nigerians like Nkem and Obiora have to lead as immigrants. Even the food Nkem is preparing in the U.S. is fake: not real African yams, but "fibrous potatoes that American supermarkets sell as yams" (30). The mask, as the sign of power that a ruler has over his people, becomes alienated from its rightful owners, who are similarly deprived of their historical and cultural dignity. The end of the story, with Nkem deciding to go back to Lagos and Obiora managing to buy an original Ife bronze head, offers some hope for the reconstruction of their lives.

If imitation is one of the consequences of the trauma of spoliation and displacement engendered by colonization, it is no doubt a 'soft' one, one that people can still live with. Violent religious riots (not to mention the Nigerian Civil War) are another result of the 'divide and conquer' policy of the British colonizers, who set ethnic and religious factions against each other, so that they could easily rule them. Or as Chika from "A Private Experience" puts it, "Riots do not happen in a vacuum, […] religion and ethnicity are often politicized because the ruler is safe if the hungry ruled are killing one another." (43)

In the middle of a riot between Hausa Muslims and Igbo Christians, while men are hacking each other with machetes or clubbing innocent victims with stones, Chika, an Igbo Christian is saved by a Hausa Muslim woman. They are drawn together by their loss: Chika has lost her sister Nnedi in the market, and later will look for her in all the hospital mortuaries, while the Muslim woman has lost her first daughter. A feeling of solidarity gradually develops between Chika and the Muslim woman, in spite of their ethnic, religious and class differences(the Muslim woman is a poor illiterate onion-seller who can barely speak English, while Chika is middle class and educated). The conversation between the two frightened women, hiding from the violent rioters, reveals the commonalities of their experience as women. As the family's natural protectors and nurturers, violence is, in the words of the Muslim woman the "work of evil". Hearing that Chika is a medical student and has just begun her clinicals, the Muslim woman, who is breast-feeding her sixth child, tells her that her nipples "are burning like pepper" (43). Finally, after the riot subsides and she is safely home, Chika reads that "the reactionary Hausa speaking Muslims have a history of violence against non-Muslims" in *The Guardian.* Standing against the ideological pull of this formal account that privileges black and white explanations of complex events is the force of Chicka' memory of having "examined the nipples and experienced the gentleness of a woman who is Hausa and Muslim" (48). This story is illustrative for Adichie's conceptualization of the role of women in deeply divided postcolonial societies. She is concerned with exploring the ways in which women who have internalized and identified with the roles of child bearers and nurturers ascribed by society, when faced with the trauma the same society inflicts on

them – first by 'programming' them to raise children, then destroying the fruit of their labour – can create a world of their own and forge relationships that contrast sharply with the (male) world of physical violence. There is nothing outrageously revolutionary about this conceptualization; on the contrary, Adichie keeps faithful to a kind of common sense realism and close to the ordinary flow of life. It is precisely in this ordinary world that one can find the extraordinary: two women who choose to forget about the war outside, and endeavor to preserve their femininity – and also, in a larger sense, their humanity. For that matter, discussing the literature on trauma memory Dan Ben Amos calls for "a shift in the perception of collective memory from the monumental to the mundane, from the archives to everyday life" (297). Adichie's stories do that and more: they show that the shift from the monumental to the mundane becomes possible only with the shift from the emphasis on male experiences of trauma to a female 'embodied' perspective.

In "The American Embassy", the intrusion of male aggression on the feminine world of nurturing and protection has tragic consequences for the nameless heroine, who loses both her husband and her child. Both the wife and the husband are nameless; they illustrate the drama of resistance in military regimes exerting necropolitical domination. The postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe remarked that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides [...] in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die"(11). The military regime of General Abacha, who had invented the plot of a military coup so that "he could kill and jail his opponents" can be considered such a necropolitical system of domination, relying on a "fictionalized notion of the enemy" (16), exercising "control over mortality" and defining life as "the deployment and manifestation of power." (Mbembe 12) The husband works as a journalist for the democratic press, trying to uncovering the machinations of such power regimes, which, according to Mbembe, lie outside the scope of reason[4], and thus outside Western notions of democracy. While, after being arrested and tortured by the soldiers loyal to General Abacha, he manages to escape the country, the wife and child are left behind. A drunken soldier from a party that were looking for her husband shoots and kills Ugonna, their two-year old boy. Blaming herself for failing to protect the child, the wife jumps from the balcony: she survives the fall, but becomes mentally unhinged, dependent on the tranquilizers that the doctor prescribes. The limitations of her universe become visible through the trauma she experiences: she sees her husband's heroism, his determination to fight for freedom not as courage, but as "an exaggerated selfishness" (113). She cannot understand why her husband neglects family relations, refusing to go to her cousin's wedding because he is preparing an important interview with an arrested journalist. Her small familial universe is contrasted with the broad democratic ideals of the journalist, and while the reader is allowed an insight into her intellectual limitations, his empathy is awakened by her moral and mental suffering. The faults of a regime which imprisons women into traditional roles and forces men to be violent and aggressive become all too obvious, and so the only escape is that into the civilized world, into the West. If the journalist makes it due to his connections, things do not go equally smooth for his mentally unhinged wife. The interview between the American visa officer and the mother who has just lost her child discloses the paternalism of Western states like the U.S., whose neocolonialism continues to reproduce the binaries of colonial regimes.

The American visa officer, herself a woman, is impermeable to the trauma of the now childless mother. Confronted with the statement that her son had been murdered by government agents, the American clerk callously harasses her into giving details and providing evidence. Already tormented by feelings of guilt, the nameless mother is ready "to

4Mbembe argues that necropolitical systems of domination are based on an alternative modern concept of sovereignty, in which biopower and the state of exception are used to justify "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations."(14)

die gladly at the hands of the man in black hooded shirt or the one with the shiny black head, before she said a word about Ugonna to this interviewer, or to anybody at the American embassy. Before she hawked Ugonna for a visa to safety." (115) When the interviewer repeats that the U.S. can provide a new life for the victims of political persecution but only if there is solid evidence, this inhumane bureaucratization of freedom is set against the painful limitations of a woman who has chosen to identify herself with motherhood:

It was Ugonna who had given her a new life, surprised her by how quickly she took to the new identity he gave her, the new person he made her. "I'm Ugonna's mother", she would say at his nursery school, to teachers, to parents of other children. At his funeral in Umunnachi, because her friends and family had been wearing dresses in the same Ankara print, somebody had asked, "Which one is the mother?", and she had looked up, alert for a moment, and said "I'm Ugonna's mother. (116-7)

The freedom offered by the U.S. to her husband and now to her is a freedom for which she had paid with her child's life, and thus becomes meaningless. The new life she desires is connected with her dead child: "She wanted to go back to their ancestral hometown and plant ixora flowers, the kind whose needle-thin stalks she had sucked as a child. One plant would do, his plot was so small. […] And afterwards, she wanted to arrange the sucked flowers side by side, like Ugonna had don with his LEGO blocks." (117) The organic link between mother and child has to be recovered through a ritualistic re-enactment of one's own childhood. The resurrection of the dead child afforded by the planting of the ixora flowers and the communion with its flesh through the sucking of the flowers, an allusion to Christ's death and resurrection, lends her tragedy symbolic proportions. This unnamed grieving mother, a modern counterpart of Virgin Mary, stands for the loss of thousands of Nigerian children during the Biafran War[5] and the suffering endured by their mothers. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the Igbo mother carrying the head of her daughter in a calabash on the train stands for a similar trauma. It is not just one woman's loss; its national, cosmic and religious proportions transform it into a symbolic loss: Nigeria comes to resemble old father Time, devouring its children, and with them, its opportunities for the future.

If women who have chosen to identify with the roles ascribed to them by an oppressive patriarchy are doomed to live through the experience of loss and suffering, this may turn out to be some form of indirect criticism. Maybe what the new Nigerian woman needs is to become an intellectual and get involved in gender politics. There are two stories that deal with the ways female intellectuals understand and reflect on their condition: "Jumping Monkey Hill" and "The Headstrong Historian". In the first, Ujunwa, a young Nigerian writer is invited to participate in a literary workshop in South Africa. The African Writers' Workshop, organized by The British Council and chaired by the Oxford-educated Edward Campbell, turns out to be an intellectual enterprise where the colonial stereotypes are repeated and reinforced. Whereas Edward claims to speak for the natives, passing himself as a life-long fighter for "the cause of African literature", his wife, an animal-rights activist, is totally unaware of the blunder she commits when she asks Ujunwa if she comes from Nigerian royal stock, because of her "exquisite bone structure". Ujunwa feels offended by the implication of this question: "The first thing that came to Ujunwa's mind was to ask if Isabel ever needed royal blood to explain the good looks of friends back in London". Though Edward, through his long experience of teaching in South Africa should have developed at least some cultural competence, he proves every bit the colonial tyrant, requesting native Africans to conform to his idea of Africa. Even the all-inclusive idea of Africa that he

5The Nigerian Civil War or the Biafran war (1967-1970) led to the death by starvation of thousands of Nigerian children and became synonymous wih famine and kwashiorkor (a disease caused by lack of protein, whose characteristic sign was the distended abdomen of rickety children).

entertains, lumping together people of different ethnicity and nationality, is felt to be offensive by the participants in the workshop. For example, he dubs the topic of a story about a childless couple who seek the assistance of a witch doctor as "passé" (90), and when a writer from Senegal reads an excerpt from her work, a story about homosexual love, Edward's comment is that "homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really." Ujunwa, offended by his presumptuousness, asks him "Which Africa?". Edward's attitude betrays the colonizer's mentality: "he looked a Ujunwa in the way on would look at a child who refused to keep still in Church and said that he wasn't speaking as an Oxford trained Africanist, but a one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues." His further question "How African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?" (91) reveals that the binaries that served to characterize Africans as inferior still function, with the adjustments provided by the new liberation (colonial and sexual). If sexual liberation can be thought of an attribute for the white Westerner, things are different for African women. "Real" Africa is not homosexual. Edward's stereotyping works much in the same way as the old colonial discourse, establishing a regime of hegemonic power where the white male is the only one yielding authority.

On the other hand, there is a great deal of indirect criticism aimed at the submissive attitudes of the other participants in the workshop. By mimicking Edward and his wife and echoing their opinions, they unwillingly reinforce one of the oldest European stereotypes of black people, that of the "monkeys" which the title alludes to. Ujunwa is the only one who dares to speak out and criticise Edward. His revenge will come at the end, when, after she reads her own story, an account of how she had to give up her job at a bank because her boss was sexually harassing his female employees. Edward dubs her story "agenda-writing", saying that "the whole thing is implausible" and "it isn't a real story of real people" (96). His argument is that "Women are never victims in that sort of crude way and certainly not in Nigeria. Nigeria has women in high positions. The most powerful cabinet minister today is a woman." (95) The irony of having her story dubbed 'agenda-writing' hits Ujunwa hard, but she does not surrender. In spite of the shame she is experiencing, she makes everybody understand that this particular story is true, as it has happened to her.

The story itself, Adichie confesses in an interview with James Mustich "is the one story in the collection that is quite autobiographical, and it is a story that was propelled by rage". Anger at oppression or injustice, Adichie feels, is a positive feeling, because it can be the first step towards liberation. In her TEDxEUSTON speech she confesses that: "Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. I am angry. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change." (*We Should All*, ch. 2)

The incident that prompted Adichie to write "Jumping Monkey Hill" was her participation in the inaugural workshop of the Caine Prize for African writing. When the administrator of the prize complained that her story was not authentic, Adichie remembers having thought to herself"This is the result of 200 years of history; we can sit here and be told what our story is.". The story thus came out as Adichie's questioning of "the idea of somebody deciding for you what your story really is". The issue of the power behind story-telling is an important one for Adichie, and she had repeatedly underlined the connections between power and narrative: "I am constantly aware of how important stories are. I think it's important who tells them, how they are told, how the telling is conditioned, how history controls that conditioning, and how power plays a huge role". (Adichie, "A Conversation")

While "Jumping Monkey Hill" is about the importance of who tells the story of whom, "The Headstrong Historian" is a detailed analysis of the historical conditioning of story-telling. Adichie explores the ways in which education contributed to the successful colonization of African natives in the story of Ani's conversion to Christianity. In the

interview with James Mustich, she makes it clear that "the curse of may people from formerly colonized countries, particularly in Africa" is that they have "this absurd education that doesn't tell you anything about yourself" ("A Conversation"). On the other hand, education can be a valuable tool for the 'decolonization of the mind', in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's phrase: only through education will Grace-Afamefuna take control over her her own and her people's stories.

Nigerian women are strong, as long as they dare to speak for themselves. Nwambga from "The Headstrong Historian" (modeled on Adichie's fierce grandmother) becomes the founder of a line of similar strong women: going against the will of her parents and the taboo on her future husband's family (whose women lost pregnancies), she makes her own choice of a husband. Nwambga is not an ordinary submissive girl: "sharp-tongued" and "headstrong", she wrestled her own brother to the ground, a fact that her father found so shameful that he took precautions to hide from the other members of the village. After Obierika's cousins poison him, in order to protect her inheritance and save her son from the greed of her male relatives who had appropriated Obierika's ivory tusk (the symbol of his authority as a leader), Nwambga thinks of different strategies. First she thinks of killing the cousins with the guns of the white men, and afterwards, as the white people take control of their land, she sends Anikwenwa to the Catholic mission, so that her son would learn the white language and thus be able to defend their family in the white men's court of justice. Strangely enough, she does not send Ani to the Anglican mission, where missionaries were less strict and instruction was done in Igbo, but to the Catholic mission, where the white people were harsh to natives, because "all that mattered was that he learn enough of the language to fight his father's cousins." (172) Adichie reveals how the process of colonization required that the colonized be complicit - she is far from early anti-colonial militants such as Franz Fanon, who advocated an aggressive decolonization[6]. On the contrary, Adichie shows that the burden of responsibility for colonization should be attributed not only to the white people and the violence they perpetrated by means of their guns, but also on the natives' lack of unity, their internal misunderstandings and family disagreements: on the one hand, Nwambga wants Ani to learn English so that he could fight against his relatives in court; on the other, while criticizing the white people for their lack of unity, she seems blind to the fact that it was their own lack of unity that had determined her to send Ani to the Catholic missionaries. Having internalized the social prescriptions of her clan, for whom performing one's ascribed role was essential, she judges the white people who "did not seem to know that one must, in front of strangers, pretend to have unity." (126). She consents too easily to Ani's baptism, without realizing that renaming implies changing one's identity: Ani, baptized Michael, will gradually distance himself from what he calls her "heathen ways". Having lost her land to her husband's cousin and her son to the white missionaries, Nwambga hopes that the spirit of her dead husband will come back in her grandson. In contrast to Grandmama, whose complicity in the patriarchal rule is total, Nwambga, herself a rebel in her youth, is quick to notice that whereas the grandson lacks the spirit of the magnificent Obierika, it is her granddaughter who has inherited it: "she knew that it was the spirit of Obierika that had returned; odd, to have come in a girl, but who could predict the ways of the ancestors?" (176) The politics of renaming is reversed and Grace, called Afamefuna (My name will not be lost) by her grandmother, will be the one to become the headstrong historian who reclaims the history of her own people and

6Adesanmi contends that Adichie belongs to the "lthird generation of African writers", whose interests lie in addressing the problems of the new post-colonial states rather than in an anti-colonial literature. (121) Da Silva also notes that "lWhat distinguishes the work of 'third generation African writers is the confronting manner in which they explore the post-colonial nation's fraught identity and the themes once deemed too problematic, such as domestic abuse, gendered violence and sexuality". (457)

takes control over her own story.

In conclusion, while identifications with either the pre-modern structures of the tribal society or the deeply split (post)colonial discourse regimes prove to be disastrous for the formation of female identity, it is only by becoming angry with one's own circle or at one's circumstances that women manage to put up resistance and carve out a small space of independence. Adichie is careful to differentiate between two uses of anger. On the one hand, Ujunwa, Nwambga, and Grace-Afamefuma find ways to translate their anger into meaningful action. Their rebellion, directed at whatever they feel as oppressive: colonial arrogance, tribal taboos, false narratives, expresses itself in creative ways. Strong women become leaders, paving the way for the independence and welfare of their family, tribe, and other women. In contrast, for the unnamed narrator in "Tomorrow is too far", who kills her own brother, the burden of colonial trauma proves too much. By being unable to properly identify "the root of all evil", the complex web of history which led to her oppression, she is unable to extricate herself from her current subjection. She is the victim turned criminal, a testimony to the unspeakability of trauma in Cathy Caruth's understanding. Being strong does not mean only refusing to comply with patriarchal male or colonial authority, it implies a capacity for understanding and action that the women in postcolonial societies have yet to develop. And sometimes, as the story of Nwambga and her granddaughter Grace-Afamefuma shows, liberation is the story of a trans-generational fight. It is the grandmother who provides the impulse, and the granddaughter who achieves international fame and success as the writer of the first African history.

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