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**EXILE, GOVERNANCE AND TRANSFORMATION: REFLECTIONS ON
TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK* BY
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE**

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Abstract: In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a collection of short stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the themes of exile, governance, and social transformation intertwine to offer a critical reflection on the tensions between tradition and modernity. These themes manifest through the fragmented experiences of characters who are often marginalized, uprooted, or searching for meaning between two cultural worlds. To better understand the significance of this reflection, we will use the narratological tool of focalization, which allows for the analysis of the point of view through which the story is filtered. This concept, central to modern narratology, provides a deeper reading of how narrative voices convey political, social, or identity-based critique. By examining who perceives and how events are perceived in these stories, focalization sheds light on dynamics of oppression, resistance, and change.

Key words : Exile - Governance - Transformation - Diasporas - Tradition - Modernity

Résumé: Dans *The Thing Around Your Neck*, recueil de nouvelles de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, les thèmes de l'exil, de la gouvernance et de la transformation sociale s'entrelacent pour offrir une réflexion critique sur les tensions entre tradition et modernité. Ces thématiques se manifestent à travers les expériences fragmentées de personnages souvent marginalisés, déracinés ou en quête de sens, entre deux mondes culturels. Pour mieux appréhender la portée de cette réflexion, nous mobiliserons l'outil narratologique de la focalisation, qui permet d'analyser le point de vue à travers lequel le récit est filtré. Ce concept, central à la narratologie moderne, offre une lecture approfondie de la manière dont les voix narratives transmettent une critique politique, sociale ou identitaire. En étudiant qui perçoit et comment les événements sont perçus dans ces récits, la focalisation nous éclaire sur les dynamiques d'oppression, de résistance et de mutation.

Mots clés : Exil - Gouvernance - Transformation - Diasporas - Tradition - Modernité.

Introduction

The Thing Around Your Neck (2009) is a collection of short stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that explores the condition of migrants, power dynamics, and identity dilemmas through often poignant narratives. In this work, Adichie particularly focuses on issues of migration, exile, governance, and the confrontation between tradition and modernity. The author, globally recognized for her ability to capture African and diasporic realities, subtly examines the impacts of globalization and exile on the individual. Through these stories, Adichie questions the tensions experienced by her characters, mostly Nigerians, between the social and cultural norms of their home country and the expectations of the Western societies that welcome them.

The main themes of this collection include forced or voluntary migration, the search for identity, and power relations in a world marked by colonial legacy. The stories often center on characters at a crossroads, torn between their African roots and the modernity imposed by Western societies. A key underlying question emerges in this confrontation: how do exile and modern governance structures transform the individual and their relationship with tradition? The central issue of this conference revolves around how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addresses exile, governance, and social changes in her stories while questioning the complex interaction between tradition and modernity. How are these themes expressed in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and what lessons can we draw from these confrontations?

This conference will strive to examine the deep connections between exile, governance, and societal changes in the stories of the collection. The aim is to understand how exile, both a space of rupture and opportunity, represents a profound transformation for individuals, and how the critique of governance in the countries of origin strengthens this reflection. We will also analyze how Adichie illustrates the impact of traditions on African societies while addressing the changes brought about by modernity, particularly regarding individual and collective

identity. The main challenge is to uncover Adichie's deep reflections on the influence of exile and modern social transformations on individuals, especially regarding the tension between traditional practices and the demands of globalization and modern societies. This work proposes reading *The Thing Around Your Neck* as an exploration of the imbalances between the past and the future, between roots and aspirations.

For this study, narratology will be used to deeply analyze the themes of exile, governance, and transformation, as well as the reflection on tradition and modernity in *The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In particular, the concept of focalization will be employed to apprehend the perception of the situation through the characters' senses. Obou (2023, p. 103). It will be used to explore how the narration structures the characters' experiences and highlights their interactions with the central themes of the collection. Focalization will allow us to analyze how the characters' point of view influences our understanding of exile, identity transformation, and the conflicts between tradition and modernity. By observing internal focalization and changes in perspectives, we will be able to grasp how each character perceives their environment and relationships, whether it is their experience of exile or their confrontation with governance.

1. Exile as a Form of Critique of Governance.

Exile in Adichie's work is often linked to a critique of the governance in the countries of origin. The characters who flee are, to some extent, pushed to leave a dysfunctional political environment, often characterized by corruption, violence, or poverty. In stories like *The American Embassy*, exile appears as an act of resistance against a political system where injustice prevails. Exile then becomes not only a personal matter but also an implicit denunciation of political regimes that fail to meet the needs of their citizens. Through her characters, Adichie offers a sharp critique of contemporary African governments, particularly how these regimes ignore the aspirations of younger generations.

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the escape to America is not only motivated by the desire for a better life but also by the search for a freedom absent in a country where governance and stability are lacking. The host country thus becomes a symbol of refuge, but also of reinvention and change, as is clearly seen in this passage from the work:

Are you applying for an immigrant visa or a visitor's? The man asked. "Asylum". She did not look at his face; rather she felt his surprise. "Asylum? That will be very difficult to prove. " She wondered if he read *The new Nigeria*, if he knew about her husband. He probably did. Everyone supportive of the pro-democracy press knew about her husband, especially because he was the first journalist to publicly call the coup plot a sham, to write a story accusing General Abacha of inventing a coup so that he could kill and jail his opponents. Soldiers had come to the newspaper office and carted away large numbers of that edition in a black truck; still, photocopies got out and circulated throughout Lagos. Chimamanda (2009, p. 135)

In this passage from *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the theme of forced migration as a direct result of oppressive governance, highlighting how political instability, repression, and the suppression of dissent drive individuals to seek asylum in foreign lands. The interaction between the protagonist and the man at the immigration office is significant because it illuminates the precarious position of those who oppose the government in a repressive regime like Nigeria under General Abacha's rule. Through the lens of the protagonist's personal experience, Adichie critiques how the abusive governance of such regimes forces individuals into exile, seeking refuge elsewhere to escape violence, persecution, and political retaliation.

The opening dialogue, where the immigration officer asks, "*Are you applying for an immigrant visa or a visitor's ?*", sets the stage for a stark contrast between voluntary migration and forced exile. The protagonist's response, "*Asylum,*" immediately signals the gravity of her situation. Unlike someone who would choose to move for reasons of leisure, education, or opportunity, asylum seekers are often compelled to leave their homes due to an untenable and life-threatening situation. Adichie's decision to focus on the protagonist's internal emotional response, "*She did not look at his face; rather she felt his surprise*", is telling. The protagonist's

avoidance of eye contact and her reliance on intuition over direct engagement highlight her emotional withdrawal and the deep isolation she feels as someone who is fleeing for her life due to political persecution. The officer's surprise at her request, in turn, reflects a system that does not readily acknowledge the human rights violations occurring under its nose, or perhaps a broader global indifference to the realities faced by those under oppressive regimes.

The internal locator's thought, "She wondered if he read *The New Nigeria*, if he knew about her husband," introduces the political context that propels her into exile. Her husband, a journalist critical of the government, becomes a key figure in understanding the reasons behind her asylum request. She reflects on the fact that her husband was the "*first journalist to publicly call the coup plot a sham*," which makes it clear that his actions directly challenged the government's narrative. In such a repressive environment, dissent is not only unwelcome but also dangerous. Those who speak out against the regime are subjected to violent repression, as evidenced by the soldiers' actions: "*Soldiers had come to the newspaper office and carted away large numbers of that edition in a black truck.*" The military's swift response to silence her husband's critical voice shows how the government utilizes its forces to quash any form of opposition, regardless of whether it's expressed through journalism or other means. This act of silencing and retaliation exemplifies the political climate under General Abacha's regime, where freedom of speech is stifled, and individuals who challenge the government are met with harsh consequences, including imprisonment, torture, or even death.

The reference to the soldiers' actions, removing and destroying copies of her husband's critical article also emphasizes the totalitarian nature of the government. The destruction of the newspaper's edition is not merely an act of censorship; it is an attempt to erase dissent and ensure that the regime's narrative remains uncontested. Yet, despite these oppressive measures, Adichie subtly points to the resilience of the press and the people. "*Still, photocopies got out and circulated throughout Lagos*" implies that even though the government attempts to control the flow of information, there are always ways to resist and spread the truth, a small act of defiance that endures despite the overwhelming power of the state. This situation encapsulates

the broader issue of governance in such regimes, where the very act of speaking the truth becomes an act of resistance, and such resistance often leads to exile as the only viable escape from the government's wrath.

The protagonist's decision to seek asylum, then, is not simply a personal choice; it is a necessary survival tactic in the face of a government that abuses its power to suppress opposition. Adichie uses this moment to critique the political climate of Nigeria under Abacha, where the lack of freedom of expression, the violent suppression of dissent, and the authoritarian governance model leave citizens with little option but to flee their home country. The protagonist's asylum request serves as a poignant reminder of the broader consequences of poor governance, when the state becomes a tool of violence and repression, its citizens are forced into displacement, seeking refuge elsewhere to escape persecution.

Moreover, Adichie subtly critiques the international community's response to such repressive regimes. The protagonist's hope that the immigration officer is aware of her husband's plight, "*He probably did. Everyone supportive of the pro-democracy press knew about her husband*", suggests an assumption that those who follow international media or pro-democracy movements are aware of the dangers faced by political dissenters in such countries. This assumption highlights a potential disconnect between international awareness and action. The officer's indifference to her situation, indicated by his surprise at her asylum request, could be seen as indicative of a wider lack of urgency or willingness to address the root causes of such displacement. It points to a broader critique of how international systems and governments may be aware of political persecution but remain either indifferent or ineffective in providing adequate support to those who flee these regimes.

To put it bluntly, this passage from *The Thing Around Your Neck* poignantly illustrates how poor governance, characterized by authoritarianism, violent repression, and the suppression of dissent, forces individuals into exile as a means of survival. Through the personal story of the protagonist and her husband, Adichie vividly captures the human cost of

political repression. Asylum is not a voluntary choice but a necessity for those caught in systems where free expression is punished and opposition is met with violence. The passage highlights not only the dangers of living under such regimes but also the broader global failure to adequately support those fleeing these oppressive governments. In this light, Adichie's work serves as both a personal narrative and a social critique, urging readers to reflect on the intersection of governance, human rights, and forced migration.

2. Governance and Power: Challenges of Social Transformation

In the stories of *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie often paints a stark and critical portrait of the power structures in the characters' countries of origin. The narratives explore how individuals are caught in the grip of corrupt, inefficient governments and social systems marked by inequality. Corruption, violence, and social injustice become pervasive themes that reveal the devastating effects of broken political systems. Characters frequently encounter governments that are indifferent or hostile to their needs, creating an environment where survival becomes a struggle against forces that are supposed to protect them. These themes expose how the failure of governance leads to societal disintegration, as the state's inability to safeguard the well-being of its citizens erodes trust and fosters a sense of despair among the people.

In *The American Embassy*, the protagonist's journey to seek asylum in the United States highlights the sharp contrast between the dysfunction of her home country's governance and the perceived promise of safety and justice elsewhere. The story illustrates the Nigerian government's failure to protect its people from political violence, and the protagonist's desperate quest for refuge at the American embassy symbolizes the collapse of local institutions. The embassy, a foreign institution, stands as the last bastion of hope, representing a form of justice that is otherwise inaccessible within her own country. Through this lens, Adichie critiques not only the immediate impact of government failure on individuals but also the broader implications of a state that has failed in its most basic responsibilities. In doing so,

she underscores the profound sense of betrayal felt by the citizens, as they turn to foreign powers for a semblance of security, while their own government remains an untrustworthy, ineffective force as it can be seen in the following passage:

See what that useless soldier is doing there,” the man behind her said. She turned to look across the street, moving her neck slowly. A small crowd had gathered. A soldier was flogging a bespectacled man with a long whip that curled in the air before it landed on the man’s face, or his neck, she wasn’t sure because the man’s hands were raised as if to ward off the whip. She saw the man’s glasses slip off and fall. She saw the heel of the soldier’s boot squash the black frames, the tinted lenses. “See how the people are pleading with the soldier,” the man behind her said. “Our people have become too used to pleading with soldiers. Chimamanda (2009, p. 129)

In this passage from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the violence exerted by authority figures, particularly soldiers, on the population is portrayed with stark clarity. The scene vividly depicts a soldier flogging a bespectacled man with a long whip, the violence manifesting in a physical assault that is both excessive and dehumanizing. Adichie’s imagery of the whip "*curling in the air before it landed on the man’s face, or his neck*" evokes a brutal image of force and control, symbolizing not only the physical violence inflicted but also the power dynamics at play. The man’s glasses slipping off and being crushed under the soldier’s boot becomes a powerful symbol of the destruction of identity, intellect, and individuality, reducing the victim to an object of the soldier’s power. This act of crushing the glasses, an item traditionally associated with reason and clarity, underscores the dehumanization of the man and, by extension, the broader population under military control.

The passage goes on to depict the power imbalance between the soldier and the civilian population. The man behind the protagonist remarks, “*See how the people are pleading with the soldier,*” pointing to a crowd that is begging the soldier to stop. This dialogue highlights the helplessness and disempowerment of the citizens who, having become accustomed to such violence, have internalized the need to appease the soldier, rather than protest or resist. Adichie uses this to show how authoritarian regimes use violence as a tool to maintain control and

silence dissent. The idea that the people have "*become too used to pleading with soldiers*" illustrates the normalization of violence in this society, where the population is left with no choice but to submit to the whims of military personnel. The plea for mercy, rather than for justice, reveals the tragic resignation of the people who are powerless against the authority that governs them.

This scene is not only a commentary on physical violence but also on the psychological and societal toll of living under such regimes. The brutality of the soldier's actions, paired with the victim's helplessness, creates a stark picture of oppression. The fact that the people are pleading shows that they no longer expect justice or mercy but rather the bare minimum of survival under an oppressive regime. The cycle of violence is depicted as so ingrained in the social fabric that it is no longer shocking or resisted, but merely tolerated. Through this passage, Adichie critiques the dehumanizing effect of authoritarian rule, where the exercise of power is based on control and submission rather than fairness or empathy.

In a word, this passage from *The Thing Around Your Neck* serves as a powerful representation of how the military, as an extension of state power, uses violence to enforce authority and suppress the population. Through visceral imagery and a commentary on the powerlessness of the people, Adichie highlights the devastating effects of living under a regime where violence is not only institutionalized but also normalized. The crushed glasses symbolize the destruction of individuality, while the pleads of the crowd underscore the internalization of oppression, showcasing the pervasive and enduring nature of violence in such societies.

3. Tradition and Modernity: A Dynamic of Cultural Transformation.

One of Adichie's major concerns is how her characters navigate between inherited traditions and the modernity imposed by their exile. The influence of Western culture and the expectations of the host society often clash with ancestral practices and beliefs. In stories like *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie illustrates this dilemma through characters caught

between two worlds: that of their country of origin, shaped by traditional expectations, and that of the West, where social codes and values seem radically different. The characters are torn between the desire to preserve their heritage and the need to adapt to a new, often hostile world. This cultural tension, which highlights the effects of globalization on African societies, is central to Adichie's work, and it is clearly seen through the following passage:

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. I never have, my English name is just something on my birth certificate. Chimamanda (2009, p. 172).

In this scene, Kehinde who has just arrived to America is given advice by Lola on how to navigate American society and integrate, emphasizing the pressure to conform to cultural and social norms, particularly the use of an English name to adapt and succeed. It touches on the tensions migrants face when navigating the intersection of their cultural traditions and the pressures of modernity, especially in a foreign context. Through the lens of the speaker's experience, the passage illustrates how migrants often struggle with the demands of assimilation and conformity to the mainstream culture in the host country, which may be at odds with their native traditions. The speaker begins by asserting that in order to "get anywhere" in the host country, one must conform to mainstream practices. This is a clear indication of the power dynamics at play, where those who deviate from the dominant culture face exclusion or marginalization.

The reference to the need to be "*as mainstream as possible*" highlights how the migrant experience often entails suppressing one's identity, values, and practices in favor of adopting those of the majority. The foreign environment can demand that migrants conform to an idealized vision of what it means to be "*successful*," often disregarding their cultural heritage. The phrase "*If not, you will be left by the roadside*" further underscores the harshness of this reality. It implies that any attempt to hold onto one's traditional values or identity might result in social and economic disadvantage. The migrant is presented as having to choose between

retaining their cultural identity or securing a place in society. This reflects a broader theme of how modernity (as represented by the "mainstream") can sometimes conflict with tradition. Migrants, particularly in diasporic contexts, are caught between these two opposing forces.

The modern world demands conformity to its fast-paced, globalized, and often homogenized ideals, while the traditions of their homeland may not align with these expectations. The speaker's experience with the "*English name*" serves as a poignant symbol of this internal conflict. The English name, which the speaker says is "just something on my birth certificate," signifies the process of adopting an external, often forced, identity in order to integrate into a foreign society. The name, which should be a part of the person's true identity, is reduced to a mere bureaucratic tool, stripped of its cultural significance and personal meaning. This reflects the migrant's sense of disconnection from the mainstream culture, which tends to prioritize Westernization and standardization over diversity. By stating that they have "*never*" used their English name, the speaker expresses resistance to the imposition of foreign norms. This refusal to embrace the English name becomes an act of self-preservation, an assertion of cultural identity in the face of alienation. It reveals the complexity of the migrant's struggle: while one is often forced to navigate a world that values mainstream conformity, there is also a yearning to preserve one's authentic self and remain connected to one's roots.

This passage is not just a personal reflection; it speaks to the broader experience of migrants who must contend with systemic pressures that push them to shed their traditional identities in favor of adopting those of the dominant culture. The migrant's challenge is not only one of personal identity but also one of survival and social mobility in a foreign land. The tension between tradition and modernity becomes a daily negotiation, where holding onto one's cultural heritage is often viewed as a barrier to success or acceptance in the host society. In conclusion, this passage encapsulates the profound difficulties that migrants face when they are caught between the expectations of modernity and the pull of their traditions.

The pressure to assimilate into the mainstream culture, as embodied by the need to adopt an English name, symbolizes the broader struggle for migrants to balance their cultural authenticity with the demands of integration and success in a foreign world. The conflict between these forces highlights the emotional, psychological, and social challenges of migration, making it clear that, for many, the journey abroad is not only physical but also deeply intertwined with questions of identity and belonging. It should also be noted that the encounter with modernity alters the social and cultural relationships of the characters. Family values, gender roles, and even the way community is perceived are disrupted by the arrival in a foreign environment. Exile, far from being a simple adaptation, is a place where social and cultural practices undergo profound transformations. This is clearly seen in the following passage:

He wasn't really your uncle; he was actually a brother of your father's sister's husband, not related by blood. After you pushed him away, he sat on your bed—it was his house, after all—and smiled and said you were no longer a child at twenty-two. 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?
Chimamanda (2009, pp. 116-117)

This passage from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* highlights how the experience of exile can significantly alter the cultural practices and moral frameworks of migrants, particularly in relation to gender dynamics and the compromises some may face in a foreign society. The speaker's encounter with the man, who claims to be a relative but is not connected by blood, reveals the complex and often disturbing changes that take place in the migrant experience, especially as they confront the unfamiliarity of a new cultural context.

The man's statement that "*smart women did it all the time*" suggests the normalization of morally ambiguous behavior in the context of migration, particularly as it pertains to women's relationships with power. His claim that women in both Lagos and New York City have to "do it" to achieve well-paying jobs signals the erosion of the traditional boundaries of morality and personal conduct. The reference to women back home in Lagos and even in New

York City illustrates how the experience of being abroad can change the way individuals view their roles within society, especially in terms of gender. In the host country, new survival strategies and cultural codes come into play, where traditional values may clash with the practical need to succeed and thrive in an unfamiliar environment.

Here, the character Akunna is caught between two worlds: one that is defined by her cultural upbringing, where relationships and behavior might follow stricter codes, and another that pushes her to rethink what is necessary to survive and succeed in a competitive, unfamiliar world. The idea that “*smart women did it all the time*” suggests that the foreign environment encourages a kind of moral flexibility, where individuals, particularly women, might be forced to engage in transactional or exploitative relationships to secure financial stability or social mobility. This is a stark contrast to the cultural practices and values the speaker would have grown up with, where such behaviors might have been frowned upon or considered immoral.

In clear, this passage highlights how exile, and the necessity to adapt to a new cultural and social environment, can transform the practices and values of migrants. The need to survive in a new land can lead individuals to question and sometimes abandon the cultural norms and moral frameworks that were once central to their identity. In this case, the speaker is faced with a harsh reality in which the compromises made by others in the name of success become normalized, forcing her to grapple with the painful tension between her heritage and the pressures of assimilation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the analysis of this theme in *The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda, this work has highlighted the importance of exile, governance, and cultural transformations in the construction of identity. Exile, as a catalyst for change, is both a personal challenge and a reflection on power structures. Adichie invites us to reconsider the tension between tradition and modernity, particularly in a world where these forces seem to be in

constant collision. The collection reminds us that the challenges of globalization are indeed real and things need to be done for transformations.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work paves the way for a broader reflection on the future of postcolonial societies and the struggles of Diasporas. Through her characters and narratives, she encourages us to imagine a world where literature can play a central role in the dialogue between tradition and modernity, and in reconciling the fragmented identities of exiled peoples. *The Thing Around Your Neck* urges us to examine the complexities of contemporary societies and to redefine governance and cultural models in a globalized world.

Furthermore, the concept of focalization in narratology has been instrumental in helping us delve deeper into this subject. By examining the different perspectives of the characters, we were able to better understand how their personal experiences of exile, governance, and cultural transformation shape their identities. Focalization allowed us to uncover the nuanced layers of meaning in Adichie's stories, revealing how the interplay between individual perception and societal forces plays a pivotal role in the characters' struggles and transformations.

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