insight text guide
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The Thing Around Your Neck

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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OVERVIEW

About the author

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an award-winning Nigerian writer born in 1977. She grew up in Nsukka, in south-eastern Nigeria, where a number of the stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) are set. As a young woman she moved to America to study – including postgraduate studies in creative writing – and she now lives in both Nigeria and America. Much of her writing is concerned with experiences of being Nigerian.

Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, set in Nigeria during a military coup, was published in 2003 and won a number of prizes, including the 2005 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, was published in 2006 and also won awards, including the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction. It is set during the Nigerian–Biafran war for independence, and was inspired by her grandfathers, who both died as a result of the war. *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* have been made into films. Adichie’s third novel, *Americanah* (2013), continues to explore themes of Nigerian identity and a Nigerian diaspora (particularly in America).

In addition to these novels, Adichie has published short stories in many literary journals, and some of these are republished in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. This collection includes stories of Nigerians living in Africa, and also tales of Nigerian immigrants in America. It has been shortlisted for a number of awards, including the 2010 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best Book (Africa).

While Adichie’s stories are fiction, it is not uncommon for characters to share biographical details with their creator – for example, names, locations and situations. In an article in *The Guardian*, Adichie discusses the difference between memoir and fiction, writing, ‘even when I base a character on a “real” person, the character is never quite that real person’ (Adichie 2013). This is a reminder that while Adichie may be inspired by actual events and people, what we read in her short stories is still fiction.
Adichie’s other published writing includes poetry, a play, and many essays and articles for journals and newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. She also teaches creative-writing workshops in Nigeria.

**Synopsis**

*The Thing Around Your Neck* comprises twelve short stories about Nigerian characters either in Africa or in America. The stories explore what it means to be Nigerian, whether as an immigrant or in Nigeria. Many of the central characters are young married women, but there are also older men, single women, young boys and a handful of non-Nigerian American friends, boyfriends, employers or neighbours. The notion of a Nigerian identity is central to the collection, though not necessarily foregrounded in every story.

The stories are independent of one another, although they often share settings, such as Nigeria in the 1990s during General Abacha’s military regime. The stories may be read with little knowledge of postcolonial Nigerian history, but contextual understanding helps to deepen the meaning.

The stories address a range of themes and ideas, from the domestic to the political, which recur throughout the collection. These include:

- marriage, relationships and infidelity
- civil war and its long- and short-term impacts
- gender and power dynamics
- postcolonial identity
- family relationships
- wealth and poverty
- regret and lost opportunities
- immigrant experience and negotiating multiple cultures
- agency and fate.
Other themes covered include sibling relationships, religion and its role in conflict, representations of Africa, fiction as therapy, parenting and academic life.

While many of the stories are intimate in scope – featuring the individual, subjective experience of one or two characters, often during a short period of time – there are many ways in which Adichie encourages us to extrapolate from individual narratives to read a broader commentary on Nigerian identity. Some such techniques include:

• the shifting chronological perspective (for example, in ‘A Private Experience’)
• unnamed characters (for example, representatives of African nations in ‘Jumping Monkey Hill’)
• the use of the second-person perspective.

These techniques are discussed in more detail in later sections of this guide.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Nigerian literary context

Adichie is one of a number of African writers who have been published to acclaim outside Africa. Her work, like that of many of her peers, tends to explore the experience of being African (specifically Nigerian). Nigerian writers who have preceded Adichie include Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, and Chinua Achebe, who died in 2013 and was one of Africa’s most celebrated authors. His 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, explores the influence of British colonisation on Igbo culture and people. Adichie has acknowledged the influence of Achebe’s work on her own and on that of other African writers. Like Achebe, Adichie’s heritage is Igbo, but the work of both novelists is in English (Nigeria’s official language) rather than Igbo.

Interestingly, Adichie grew up in the same house Achebe once lived in, although she did not realise the significance of this coincidence – growing up in the house once occupied by the writer whose work had been most influential on her – until well after she had begun her career as a writer.

Geography and history

All the settings in *The Thing Around Your Neck* are real places. Approximately half of the stories are set in various parts of America, and the other half in African countries. In the African stories, the location is important, though it is not always made explicit. Most are set in Nigeria (with the exception of ‘Jumping Monkey Hill’, set near Cape Town in South Africa), and specific Nigerian locations include the cities of Kano, Lagos and Nsukka.

**Nigeria**

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is a large country in the west of Africa, covering more than four times the area of Victoria, with an estimated
The country was federated after British colonisation in the late 1800s and remained part of the British Empire until 1960, when it became independent.

Kano
A large city in the north of Nigeria, Kano is heavily populated, and primarily Hausa Muslim. Hausa is one of the main languages. Kano is the capital of Kano State, and the groundnuts sold by the Hausa woman’s daughter in ‘A Private Experience’ are one of the main commercial products of the state.

Nsukka
Nsukka is a small city in Enugu State in southern Nigeria. Principally an Igbo-speaking area, Nsukka is home to the University of Nigeria, where Adichie’s father was a professor and where several of the characters in this collection have also worked (for example, the father in ‘Cell One’; James Nwoye and Ikenna in ‘Ghosts’). Nsukka was one of the towns in Biafra, and one of the first sites of conflict during the war, when Nigerian forces took the town and burnt the university (an event alluded to in ‘Ghosts’).

Lagos
Lagos is located in the south of Nigeria, in Lagos State, on the coastal edge of the country where the Gulf of Guinea meets the continent. It is the largest Nigerian city by population and one of the largest African cities. For most of the twentieth century, Lagos was the nation’s capital, and though this is no longer the case, it remains an important trade port and commercial centre for the country.

‘Which Africa?’
Adichie has expressed surprise and frustration that as a student in America, she was expected to represent not just Nigeria but also all of Africa. She has discussed differences between African nations, including in the article ‘Our “Africa” Lenses’ (Adichie 2006), and
sometimes in her fiction (for example, in ‘Jumping Monkey Hill’),
emphasising the inaccuracy of referring to a singular African identity.
While some experiences in this text represent an ‘African’ experience,
most are more specific, representing Nigeria, Lagos or even a smaller
milieu and culture (such as the university community in Nsukka).

Politics

British administration of the many geographical, religious and ethnic parts
of Nigeria created an artificial sense of nationalism and homogeneity.
The borders of the federated country did not take into account existing
borders between ethnic and religious communities, and conflict between
many of these groups continued after Nigeria attained independence
from the British Empire in 1960.

As well as being made up of many different states, Nigeria is also
populated by hundreds of different ethnic groups. The three largest –
Hausa–Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo – make up the majority of the Nigerian
population, and are often mentioned in the stories in The Thing Around
Your Neck. Many of the central characters are of Igbo ethnicity, like
Adichie.

The major religions in Nigeria are Christianity and Islam; religious
divisions roughly align with geographical divisions, with more Christians in
the south and Muslims in the north of the country. Minor religions include
those of traditional cultures such as the Igbo. Most Igbo people, however,
are Christian (though their Christianity is sometimes blended with Igbo
beliefs and traditions), and most Hausa are Muslim. Historically, political
divisions have also echoed geographical boundaries, with the largely
Christian south accepting more of the British rule and influence, culturally
and economically, than the north.

Nigeria has a history of internal conflict, and the Nigerian Civil
War, or Nigerian–Biafran War (1967–70), was a significant event in
the country’s contemporary history. It occurred when many southern
provinces attempted to gain independence from the colonially federated
Nigeria by forming an alliance, the Republic of Biafra. Biafra existed for