RESHAPING IDENTITIES THROUGH IRONY IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK (2009)

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Abstract: This paper examines Adichie's use of irony in (2009), particularly in "The Thing Around Your Neck" and "Imitation", as a means of exposing how Nigerian women navigate patriarchal and capitalist constraints. Irony reveals the illusion of choice they face, yet the situational irony they exist within ultimately catalyzes their shift from passivity to resistance. Applying Wayne Booth's theories of stable and unstable irony and Linda Hutcheon's discourse-based irony, this paper explores how Adichie critiques systemic oppression while reshaping postcolonial and gendered identities. By portraying Nigerian women as complex individuals rather than passive victims, Adichie challenges the "single story" and creates space for self-definition.

Keywords: postcolonial identity, irony, displacement, Nigerian literature, narrative resistance

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, now a celebrated Nigerian writer, did not achieve immediate success. In her 2009 TEDGlobal talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," she recalls how a professor dismissed her novel *Purple Hibiscus* for not being "authentically African" simply because her characters were middle-class Nigerians rather than impoverished figures. She notes, "People in the West often think of Africa as one thing, a monolith defined by catastrophe" ("The Danger of a Single Story" 05:47). In response, Adichie challenges these reductive narratives by portraying Nigerian women beyond colonial stereotypes and patriarchal constraints.

This commitment to representing complex female identities is grounded in both her lived experience and academic background. Born and raised in Nigeria, she moved to the United States at nineteen to

pursue higher education, earning a BA in Political Science from Eastern Connecticut State University and two MA degrees in Creative Writing from Johns Hopkins University and African Studies from Yale University (Adichie, "Welcome"). Growing up in a patriarchal Nigerian society and experiencing life as a foreigner in America shaped Adichie's perspective, inspiring her to examine what it means to be a woman in both Nigerian and American contexts.

Adichie rose to fame with her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which tells the story of a young girl coming of age as she struggles against the expectations of a patriarchal Nigerian society and the pressures of her own family (Adichie "Purple Hibiscus"). She continued tackling themes of power and displacement in her later works, including *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013) (Adichie "Books"). In addition to fiction, Adichie largely contributed to African feminism, particularly through her works *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) (Adichie "Welcome"). Her feminist approach aligns with Alice Walker's concept of "womanism," which "evokes the Black woman's glory and pride in their cultural heritage and provides them with a sociopolitical framework to fully engage in society" (El-Shennawy 374).

Adichie's short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) reflects many of the concerns explored in her previous work, offering a deep and complex insight into Nigerian female identity, displacement, and survival through irony. One of the key concerns in Adichie's writing is the misrepresentation of Nigerian women. While many scholars have examined her feminist and immigrant narratives, less attention has been given to how she uses irony to critique oppressive systems and as a tool of resistance. This study builds on these discussions but focuses instead on irony as a narrative and thematic device for reshaping female identity, showing how her characters, though not initially resistant, ultimately come to redefine themselves in response to the cultural and societal forces that confine them.

By applying Booth's concepts of stable and unstable irony, along with Hutcheon's discourse-based irony, this paper argues that Adichie's use of irony is not just a literary device but a way of highlighting the entrapment of Nigerian women within the opposing demands of patriarchy and liberal capitalism, family expectations and individual desires, and cultural heritage and Western influence. However, Adichie does not portray her female protagonists as helpless victims. Instead, through situational irony, their struggles become a catalyst for change, pushing them to take control of their own lives, even when their choices come with uncertainty and risk.

2. Theoretical Framework for the Study and Literature Review

Before examining Booth's and Hutcheon's theories, it is crucial to define situational irony, as it plays a central role in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Murfin and Ray describe situational irony as a "discrepancy between expectation and reality" that "derives primarily from events or situations themselves, as opposed to statements made by individuals" (385). Unlike verbal irony, situational irony arises from events, creating moments of crisis and realization for characters. This distinction is essential in understanding how irony functions in Adichie's stories, where characters face circumstances that challenge their assumptions about identity, power, and agency.

Adichie's female protagonists, particularly Akunna in "The Thing Around Your Neck" and Nkem in "Imitation," exist within situational irony. Akunna arrives in America full of hopes and dreams of a better life but instead experiences alienation and exploitation. Similarly, Nkem believes that she is privileged to live in the elite American suburbs, but her illusion of stability shatters after she finds out that her husband's mistress has moved in with him back in their Nigerian home. In both cases, irony forces the women to confront uncomfortable truths about their agency and position in the world. Rather than being passive victims of irony, these women transform their circumstances, although in ways that are not conventionally perceived as empowerment.

Wayne Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) lays the groundwork for understanding the complexities of irony and how it influences interpretation. He classifies irony into two distinct types: stable and unstable. Stable irony provides a clear and intended meaning, where the author and the reader ultimately share a common understanding. As Booth explains, in stable irony, "the meanings are hidden, but when they are discovered by the proper reader, they are firm as a rock" (235). It requires an act of reconstruction, but once that meaning is uncovered, it remains fixed. In contrast, unstable irony resists singular interpretation, continuously undermining any fixed meaning. Booth describes this kind of irony as one where "no statement can really mean what it says" (241), emphasizing that every assertion is subject to ironic undermining. One key distinction between these two forms is how they engage the reader. As Booth explains, some instances of stable irony are immediately recognizable and "require no special act of reconstitution or translation, because they assert an irony in things or events that the speaker has observed and wants to share" (236). He distinguishes these from covert stable irony, which requires more interpretation, and from unstable irony, which does not allow for such straightforward reconstruction.

This is particularly relevant to Adichie's work, where irony both reveals and complicates power structures. Some of her stories, like "Imitation," function as stable irony, the reader clearly understands the critique of gendered power imbalances. Others, such as "The Thing Around Your Neck," remain more ambiguous, leaving the reader uncertain about the protagonist's fate and whether resistance is even possible.

Building on this, Booth highlights the role of the reader in interpreting irony. While some instances are immediately clear, others demand active engagement, particularly in unstable irony, where "our interpretations will slip away from us even as they are made" (233). Adichie's irony operates at both levels, allowing her fiction to remain open to interpretation, with meaning shaped by the reader's perspective and experience.

This distinction is useful in analyzing Adichie's work, as her stories either explicitly critique societal structures or engage in implicit irony that remains open to multiple interpretations. Some of her narratives function as stable ironies, where the critique is clear, much like in Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. As Booth explains, a work like *A Modest Proposal* is an example where "we cannot really claim to have read [it] until we have discovered precisely where the implied author stands and performed the precise reconstruction asked of us" (233). However, in other cases, Adichie employs unstable irony, leaving readers uncertain about the precise stance of the text. In such moments, the irony resists closure, mirroring Booth's notion of irony that "will not yield to clear and final classification" (233). By blending both forms, Adichie complicates reader expectations, challenging singular narratives and reinforcing the layered complexity of postcolonial identity and power structures.

While Booth examines irony as a rhetorical and interpretive tool, Linda Hutcheon shifts the focus to its role in shaping discourse and power dynamics. In *Irony's Edge* (1994), she challenges the idea that irony has a single fixed meaning determined by the author. Instead, she argues that irony is shaped through interpretation within specific cultural and historical contexts. She states, "all irony happens intentionally, whether the attribution be made by the encoder or the decoder" (113), meaning that irony is not just something an author creates but something an audience actively constructs. This perspective is especially useful in understanding Adichie's work, where irony functions differently depending on the reader's background. A Nigerian reader may interpret certain critiques of gender or colonial legacies in a way that differs from an American audience, whose own cultural assumptions shape their understanding. Hutcheon explains that irony

requires interpreters to "make irony happen" (113), suggesting that meaning is always in flux. In Adichie's fiction, this dynamic is particularly evident in how her characters navigate identity, power, and belonging, making irony a key tool in her critique of both Nigerian and Western perspectives.

Hutcheon highlights irony's ability to challenge dominant narratives, emphasizing that it is not merely a rhetorical device but a mode that carries "emotion-charged value judgments" and is "implicated in questions of hierarchy and power (in terms of either maintenance or subversion)" (38). This makes irony particularly powerful in feminist discourse, where it exposes and critiques the mechanisms that have historically marginalized women's voices. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie's characters use irony as a tool to critique both Nigerian patriarchy and the limitations of Western feminism.

So far, Adichie's short stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck* have received significant scholarly attention. Critics have mostly approached them from feminist and postcolonial theoretical lenses, exploring themes and concepts such as gender, migration, and cultural identity. Using a feminist reformist lens, Christy Aisha Olorunfemi (2023) explores the struggles of Adichie's female characters against patriarchal structures, grappling with gender discrimination, financial dependence, and societal pressures, showing the ways they assert themselves and push back against limitations. Similarly, Emmanuel Ngwira (2017) analyzes the transnational journeys of African women migrants, emphasizing how they navigate the tension between their cultural roots and the expectations of their new environments, experiencing a sense of double alienation while struggling to balance tradition and adaptation, ultimately shaping their own identities. Svetlana Stefanova (2023) contributes to this discussion by analyzing how migrant women conceptualize home through physical and symbolic spaces in Adichie's work, employing the theories of wayfinding and imageability. Other scholars, such as Mohammed Senoussi (2021) and Ramesh Prasad Adhikary (2022), have examined how Adichie's short stories portray cultural hybridity, identity struggles, and the lasting influence of patriarchy and colonialism on Nigerian women.

While these studies provide valuable insights into feminism, migration, and identity, they do not focus on how irony functions as a structural and thematic tool in Adichie's narratives. Specifically, no study has examined irony in *The Thing Around Your Neck* through the intersection of Booth's stable/unstable irony and Hutcheon's discourse-based irony. This paper addresses this gap by demonstrating that irony

in Adichie's short stories is not merely a stylistic element but a deliberate tool of resistance and identity reformation.

3. Irony as Entrapment and Resistance in "The Thing Around Your Neck"

Adichie's "The Thing Around Your Neck," which gives its title to the entire collection, sets the thematic tone for other stories. The prevailing issue in an immigrant experience, that the story warns the readers of, is the clash between expectations and reality most immigrants eventually face. On top of that, the vulnerability of Akunna's experience is amplified through the fact that she is an African woman. The "thing around your neck" symbolizes the feeling of suffocation many immigrants experience, grappling with the need to adapt while feeling displaced. Ironically, instead of an ornament, it becomes a constricting burden on her identity and sense of belonging.

Akunna's journey to self-realization is imbued with irony, shaping both her external and internal struggles. Like many immigrants, she arrives in America believing that her life will improve as long as she works hard enough to succeed. Instead, she is confronted with the harsh realities of an exploitative capitalist system, leaving her feeling isolated and alienated. The irony in her experience begins as soon as she arrives in America. At first, Akunna is relieved to land in a familiar environment, living with her closest family. However, she soon realizes that her supposed safe haven is anything but, as her uncle sexually harasses her in the house's basement, justifying his actions with the phrase of America being all about "give-and-take" (Adichie 116). This seemingly benevolent expression masks a deeper irony, as it reflects a system where even familial bonds are reduced to transactions. The phrase also covertly implies an egalitarian dynamic, yet Akunna's experience proves the opposite: she is powerless, unprotected, and at the mercy of a relative who exploits his authority.

Booth's concept of stable irony applies here, as the uncle's statement is not meant to be taken at face value. As Booth explains, stable irony is "intended, deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read and understood with some precision by other human beings" (5). The uncle's words, though seemingly harmless, expose the hypocrisy and cruelty of those who claim to know the culture while exploiting the vulnerable, making this an instance of stable irony where the actual meaning is clear once the contradiction is recognized.

Akunna's subsequent struggle for survival in America amplifies the irony of her situation. Before immigrating, Akunna believed in the American Dream but soon finds herself on the edge of existence, barely

making ends meet as a waitress. The contrast between what Akunna hoped for and what she experiences exemplifies situational irony, as her anticipated path to success instead results in financial struggle and emotional isolation. Akunna's story highlights how irony can emerge from the disconnect between aspiration and reality within the narrative itself. She notes how customers often "left so much food on their plates and crumpled a few dollar bills down, as though it was an offering, expiation for the wasted food" (Adichie 118). Her silence makes the injustice of her situation even worse, reflecting the larger systems that push immigrants to the margins and make them feel unseen in American society.

Ngozi's use of second-person narration strengthens the irony in Akunna's story by placing the reader directly in her position, making them experience her growing disillusionment firsthand. Hutcheon notes that irony is inherently "axiological" or "evaluative" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980b: 77, qtd. in Hutcheon 38), meaning it does more than simply add depth to a narrative. It actively engages readers in interpreting and questioning the text. This makes their role essential in recognizing the gap between Akunna's expectations and the harsh reality she faces. The narrator's detached tone only amplifies this irony, underscoring how much Akunna suppresses her emotions. Just as she is silenced in an unfamiliar world, the irony embedded in the story ensures that her struggles are deeply felt, even when left unspoken.

Akunna's relationship with an American man adds another layer to this irony, exposing the performative nature of cross-cultural interactions. Though he seems open-minded and intrigued by her background, he sees her more as an exotic curiosity than as a person. He tells her about his travels to Africa and Asia, emphasizing how he never does "the silly tourist stuff" but wants to see "how real people lived, like in the shantytowns" (Adichie 120). The irony is sharp. His desire to witness "real" life in impoverished areas exposes his ignorance rather than his cultural awareness. Without ever asking Akunna about her own experiences, he projects his assumptions onto her culture, reducing her identity to a symbol of authenticity and struggle, rather than recognizing her as an individual with her own perspectives and history.

Booth's concept of unstable irony is particularly relevant here, as the boyfriend's words resist a single interpretation. His comment might seem like an attempt to express respect for African cultures, yet to Akunna and to the reader attuned to the underlying power dynamics, it reveals his ignorance and condescension. His romanticization of poverty reflects a privileged detachment from the struggles of the people he

claims to admire. Booth notes that in unstable irony, "what we do with a work, or what it does with us, will depend on our decision, conscious or unconscious, about whether we are asked by it to push through its confusions to some final point of clarity or to see through it to a possibly infinite series of further confusions" (241). This is precisely what happens in this moment: while the boyfriend believes he is showing appreciation for Akunna's background, he instead reduces her identity to a narrow and exoticized narrative, leaving the reader to struggle with the complexity of his words and their implications.

Akunna's silence makes this gap between perception and reality even more apparent. Instead of confronting her boyfriend for his ignorant assumptions, she remains quiet, allowing the irony to manifest through her refusal to engage. As Hutcheon notes, irony "involves the attribution of an evaluative, even judgmental attitude, and this is where the emotive (Meyers 1974: 173) or affective dimension also enters—much to the dismay of most critical discourse and most critics" (35). In Akunna's case, silence becomes both a tool of resistance and a reflection of powerlessness. Her quiet endurance forces the reader to recognize the imbalance in her relationship, where her boyfriend's superficial cultural awareness overshadows her lived experience. Rather than challenging his misguided perceptions directly, she lets them stand uncorrected, making the irony even sharper.

This silence, however, also marks the beginning of Akunna's eventual realization that she has a choice. While she initially arrives in America convinced that financial stability and opportunity will replace the difficulties of life in Nigeria, she instead finds herself performing survival: working long hours, enduring racism, and accepting an objectified existence in her relationship. The situational irony lies in the fact that she can only reject this performance after hitting rock bottom. It is her father's death that finally breaks the illusion, pushing her to accept that neither America nor her American boyfriend offers her a true sense of belonging. Her decision to leave, rather than continue attempting to assimilate, is not portrayed as a triumphant escape. However, for the first time, she actively chooses her own path instead of adhering to external expectations. Ironically, the very circumstances that were supposed to free her —migration, economic opportunity, and interracial romance —become the means through which she realizes their limitations.

This irony remains unstable in Booth's sense. Akunna's choice can be read as empowerment, but it is also an act of survival in response to circumstances that left her with no alternatives. Hutcheon's discursive irony is also at play, as Akunna's decision emerges from the conflicting

pressures imposed by American capitalist expectations and the Nigerian cultural assumption that the West is always "better." As Hutcheon writes, "Irony, therefore, is like all other communication acts in that it is always culture-specific (Kuiper 1984: 461), relying on the presence of a common memory shared by addresser and addressee (Lotman 1982: 81)" (95). In returning, she ironically reclaims her agency not through American individualism, but by rejecting the very system that was supposed to liberate her.

Her boyfriend believes himself to be culturally aware, yet his perspective is shaped by his own privileged detachment rather than any real understanding. Instead of exhausting herself by constantly correcting his overly romanticized and shallow views, Akunna chooses to remain silent, not challenging his misconceptions and, in doing so, making them even more apparent.

4. Performance, Power, and the Irony of Displacement in "Imitation"

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Imitation" explores the irony of identity displacement and performance, shaped by patriarchy and materialism, through its protagonist, Nkem. Living in American suburbia, Nkem performs the role of a wealthy Nigerian man's wife, while her husband, Obiora, plays the part of a powerful businessman in Lagos. The central irony of the story is that Nkem's life in America, seemingly fulfilling in its material wealth, is emotionally void. Through this, Adichie critiques the illusion of the American Dream, revealing that Nkem's marriage and status, as the title of the story suggests, are merely an imitation, shaped by societal expectations rather than her own choices.

Wayne Booth's concept of stable irony is particularly relevant to Adichie's critique of patriarchal marriage and capitalist success. Booth notes that irony requires readers to reject surface meanings and actively reconstruct the author's intended message, stating that irony "delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security certain things that are violated by the overt words of the discourse" (6). In "Imitation," Obiora's control over Nkem's life is not imposed directly but is sustained by a carefully constructed illusion of privilege. He dictates where she and their children live, presenting himself as a provider while maintaining a relationship with another woman. When Nkem proudly states, "We live in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia" (Adichie 24), she reinforces the illusion of success, outwardly embracing the image of an ideal life while privately grappling with a sense of displacement. The irony here is stable in Booth's sense, as it can be reconstructed by the

reader as a clear critique of how material success is often a facade masking personal emptiness.

The irony in Nkem's experience peaks when she realizes that Obiora's affair is becoming more serious. Her friend *Ijemamaka*, envious of her luxurious life, delivers the news with the nonchalant remark, "This is what happens when you marry a rich man" (Adichie 22), a statement deeply embedded in Nigerian patriarchal logic. Here, Adichie employs irony as a tool of critique, exposing the discursive and institutional mechanisms that have historically silenced women's voices. As Hutcheon argues, irony can "work to change how people interpret" dominant ideologies, offering a means of subverting entrenched power structures (30). Irony lies in the fact that the wealth and status that are meant to provide Nkem with security instead leave her emotionally powerless. Infidelity is not just tolerated but expected, seen as the inevitable price women must pay for a privileged life. Nkem, however, experiences an ironic realization: the home she still calls "hers" in Lagos has been occupied by another woman, symbolizing the depth of her displacement. The irony here is unstable, as Booth suggests, since it does not resolve into a clear and final meaning but rather leads to "a possibly infinite series of further confusions" (Booth 241). Nkem's "home" was never truly hers; it was always Obiora's, just as her life in America has been shaped by his decisions, not her own.

Her reaction to the betrayal is another layer of irony. Instead of directly confronting Obiora, she cuts her hair, a quiet act of defiance that is still shaped by his expectations. Obiora has always admired her long hair, insisting that "long hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife" (Adichie 40). Her decision to cut it seems rebellious, yet the irony is that she does so because she knows his mistress has short, curly hair. Even in rebellion, she imitates, her defiance shaped not by her own desires but by her relationship to him. This aligns with Hutcheon's argument that irony is not inherently subversive or liberating; it can reinforce dominant norms just as much as it can challenge them, depending on the context and the way it is received (Hutcheon 34). Nkem's act resists Obiora's control while simultaneously confirming its grip on her identity. She is not simply asserting herself but reacting to a system in which she has always been defined through her relationship to a man.

The stable irony of her marriage is further emphasized through Obiora's transactional love, which aligns with Booth's concept of stable irony as a covert yet deliberate contradiction between appearance and reality. Obiora's displays of wealth, including expensive gifts and a luxurious home, help sustain the illusion of a functional marriage. Even their children become symbols of his success, as he proudly boasts

about their American accents, calling them "Americanah" (Adichie 38), reducing their identity to mere proof of his financial ability to provide. This irony, as Booth suggests, is stable because it is intentionally created and finite in scope. Once the reader recognizes the contradiction, its meaning does not shift or require further reinterpretation. The material wealth that should signify security instead functions as a tool of control, reinforcing Adichie's critique of how patriarchal and capitalist systems converge. While Nkem and her children appear privileged, they are merely ornaments of Obiora's status. The material wealth that should signify security instead functions as a tool of control.

This moment exemplifies situational irony, as Nkem gains control over her own life only after experiencing complete disillusionment. Throughout the story, she remains passive, convinced that her life in America, seemingly free from the patriarchal constraints of Nigerian society, is a privilege. However, realizing that she has no control over her own home and that Obiora's mistress has taken her place forces her to confront the illusion she has been living. In the end, it is not America that sets her free but betrayal that pushes her to act. Even if returning to Nigeria does not guarantee empowerment, it is a decision she makes for herself, breaking the cycle of silent acceptance that has defined her life.

Nkem's decision, in Booth's terms, shifts between stable and unstable irony. As Booth explains, stable irony is "fixed, in the sense that once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions" (5). Nkem's realization is not ambiguous. Rather, it serves as a definitive critique of the life she has been leading. This clarity aligns with Booth's concept of stable irony, in which meaning is intentionally structured and resistant to multiple interpretations. However, her final act remains unresolved, resisting a single interpretation. In this, the irony is unstable. Her choice to return to Nigeria could mark an assertion of agency, but it could also signify yet another role dictated by social expectations. This reflects the fundamental instability of the irony in her decision as the narrative keeps the reader oscillating between possible interpretations without allowing full certainty. Hutcheon's concept of irony as discursive further complicates this, as Nkem's resistance is shaped not by a self-created identity, but by the same patriarchal and materialist structures that shaped her performance to begin with. As Hutcheon explains, irony "involves the particularities of time and place, of immediate social situation and of general culture" (86–87), meaning that it does not exist independently of its social and institutional context.

The broader unstable irony of "Imitation" extends beyond Nkem's personal journey, critiquing both Nigerian patriarchy and American capitalism, two systems that, despite appearing distinct, operate on the same logic of maintaining appearances over reality. Hutcheon describes irony as inherently relational, functioning "in the space between the said and the unsaid" (92), which is precisely the dynamic Adichie exposes. This instability aligns with Booth's observation that "the author insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed, refuses to declare himself, however subtly, for any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies" (239). In Nigeria, Obiora's power is cemented by his status as a "Big Man," allowing him to maintain multiple lives without consequence. In America, his success is affirmed by his ability to own a home in an elite suburb and send his children to private school. Nkem exists at the intersection of these two worlds, performing a role in each but truly belonging to neither. The irony of her situation is that even as she gains a clearer understanding of the structures shaping her life, this awareness does not necessarily grant her the power to break free from them.

Booth's discussion of irony's reliance on "very different demands... yielding very different and often incompatible rewards" (Booth 233) is particularly relevant here. The reader anticipates that this is Nkem's moment of liberation, yet the story leaves that expectation unresolved. As Booth explains, irony often resists closure, and in "Imitation", the irony lingers beyond the final lines, forcing the reader to question whether Nkem has achieved autonomy or remains trapped in a different iteration of the same performance.

Ultimately, Adichie uses irony in "Imitation" to reveal how unstable identity becomes when it is shaped by power and illusion. Nkem's story is not just about one woman's awakening; it is about the systems that determine who holds power and who is forced to perform. Her quiet submission, her small acts of resistance, and her final decision all reflect the contradictions of a life that is both privileged and deeply constrained. Like Booth's ironic narrators, Adichie resists offering a neat resolution, instead leaving the reader with the unsettling realization that Nkem's performance may never truly end.

5. Connecting the Stories: Irony as a Catalyst for Transformation

All the stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* are imbued with irony, shaping and transforming female identities in various ways. In "Jumping Monkey Hill," irony exposes the hypocrisy of the Western writing community, which ostensibly amplifies African voices, but in reality

dictates how these voices should sound (Adichie 95-115). In “A Private Experience,” irony unsettles cultural hierarchies, pushing the protagonist to confront her own assumptions about class and religion (Adichie 43-57). These moments of irony expose the power dynamics that shape identity, yet they remain outside forces acting upon the characters.

This analysis focused on “The Thing Around Your Neck” and “Imitation” because both stories examine how displacement-related irony shapes women’s lives on both a personal and structural level. Set in both America and Nigeria, they offer a comparative perspective on how women from different social strata experience irony and agency. Akunna is a young woman at the beginning of adulthood, confronting harsh realities as she tries to build a new life in the United States. Nkem, in contrast, is older and more established but still grapples with the constraints placed on her by gender and societal expectations. Their differences in age and position in society reveal the varied ways irony operates in Adichie’s narratives, illustrating how it influences women’s agency at different stages of life.

Irony connects the narratives of Akunna in “The Thing Around Your Neck” and Nkem in “Imitation”, exposing the contradictions within their identities and revealing how their agency is shaped by the oppressive systems they navigate. Both women experience profound displacement, as Akunna struggles with the false promise of the American Dream and Nkem lives within the illusion of marital privilege. However, while irony defines the conditions of their confinement, it also becomes a means of transformation, though in different ways.

At first glance, Akunna and Nkem seem to inhabit vastly different worlds. One struggles to make ends meet as a waitress in America, while the other enjoys financial security as the wife of a wealthy Nigerian businessman. Yet both find themselves confined to roles that leave them isolated and powerless. Akunna, expected to feel grateful for her new life in America, soon realizes that migration has not freed her from power structures but has simply placed her in a different kind of subjugation. Her uncle’s twisted “give-and-take” philosophy, which disguises coercion as generosity, reveals the transactional nature of the American Dream for immigrants. Meanwhile, Nkem, whose financial comfort should grant her a sense of security, comes to see that her life in America is merely a performance crafted to uphold her husband’s status. As a "Big Man’s wife," she may have stability, but she has no real control over her own life.

Irony, in both cases, acts as a mirror that exposes the contradictions between expectation and reality. For Akunna, it is most

striking in the gap between her aspirations and the harsh constraints placed upon her. She arrives in America believing it to be a land of limitless opportunity, only to find herself trapped in an exploitative system that renders her invisible and objectified. Even her romantic relationship, which at first seems to offer a sense of belonging, becomes yet another irony when her boyfriend reduces her to an exoticized version of authenticity rather than seeing her as a person. Her decision to leave is not a triumphant rejection of America but a quiet act of defiance, an ironic reversal of the freedom she once longed for.

Nkem's transformation unfolds in a similar way but is shaped by different contradictions. Unlike Akunna, her awakening is not driven by financial hardship but by emotional betrayal. The irony of her situation lies in the fact that, despite being placed on a pedestal as the perfect wife, she is ultimately disposable in her husband's eyes. Her response, cutting her hair, is both an act of defiance and a reminder of her entrapment. It is an attempt to reclaim control even as she remains under her husband's gaze. Her decision to return to Nigeria is equally ambiguous, balancing between empowerment and the possibility of stepping into yet another role dictated by societal expectations. By connecting these narratives, Adichie constructs a collection that resists definitive conclusions, instead compelling readers to engage with the complexities of female agency within patriarchal and capitalist structures. The irony in these stories does not merely expose systems of oppression but underscores the complex ways in which women negotiate and contest their constraints. Through silence, departure, defiance, or self-awareness, each character creates a form of resistance, however constrained or ambiguous it may be.

Therefore, irony in *The Thing Around Your Neck* is more than a literary device; it is a structural device that shapes the paths of Adichie's female protagonists. It exposes the constraints placed upon them while also creating space for resistance, even if it is subtle and uncertain. Adichie leaves her characters' struggles open-ended, especially in how they navigate agency within patriarchal and capitalist structures, highlighting how these systems continue to shape their lives.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzed Adichie's use of irony in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, focusing on "The Thing Around Your Neck" and "Imitation", through Booth's theories of stable and unstable irony and Hutcheon's discourse-based irony. The analysis demonstrated that irony serves both as a means of entrapment and as a subtle tool for resistance for its

female protagonists, shaping their negotiations of identity, agency, and power.

By examining how irony operates within patriarchal and capitalist constraints, this study has shown that Adichie effectively critiques the structures that limit women's autonomy while illustrating the complexities of their resistance. Rather than offering clear resolutions, irony in these stories exposes contradictions and forces characters into uneasy acts of self-determination. The findings confirm that irony in Adichie's work is not merely a literary device but a central mechanism for unsettling dominant narratives, revealing how systemic forces shape female experience and how women, even within constraint, carve out spaces for self-definition.

Ultimately, Adichie's use of irony in *The Thing Around Your Neck* highlights the complexities of empowerment, showing that resistance is not a clear-cut victory but an ongoing process. Through stable, unstable, and discursive irony, she challenges simplistic ideas of identity and agency, encouraging readers to engage with the complexities of power, survival, and self-determination.

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PREOBLIKOVANJE IDENTITETA KROZ IRONIJU U DJELU *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK* (2009) CHIMAMANDE NGOZI ADICHIE

Ovaj rad istražuje upotrebu ironije u zbirci priča The Thing Around Your Neck (2009) nigerijske spisateljice Chimamande Ngozi Adichie, s posebnim fokusom na priče "Ta stvar oko tvog vrata" i "Imitacija". Kroz teorijski okvir stabilne i nestabilne ironije Wayne Bootha i diskurzivne ironije Linde Hutcheon, analiza pokazuje kako Adichie koristi ironiju ne samo kao stilsku figuru, već i kao sredstvo kritike i otpora patrijarhalnim i kapitalističkim strukturama. Situaciona ironija u pričama razotkriva iluziju izbora koja stoji pred protagonistkinjama, dok ih istovremeno tjera na redefinisanje sopstvenog identiteta. Rad naglašava kako Adichie destabilizuje narative kolonijalne prošlosti i rodne potčinjenosti kroz suptilne ironične obrate, omogućavajući svojim junakinjama prostor za samodefinisanje, čak i u okvirima ograničene slobode.

U zaključku, ironija u Adichieinim pričama funkcioniše kao ključni element koji oblikuje dinamiku moći, identiteta i otpora, ostavljajući čitatelju da preispita ustaljene društvene narative.

Ključne riječi: ironija, postkolonijalni identitet, nigerijska književnost, kulturno raseljavanje, otpor kroz narativ