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The Short Stories of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's collection of short stories: The Thing around Your Neck has, unlike Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun, received very scanty critical attention. This article examines the major themes of the short stories and the author's crafting of the narratives as works of enduring technical sophistication and value. The article concludes that the Adichie has sufficiently touched on almost all the contemporary issues affecting Africa and Nigeria in particular. It also concludes that these short stories have collectively and individually attained world standards technically and can be read as a monumental contribution to the short story sub-genre of prose-fiction.

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fame is firmly tied to her two award winning novels namely, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. As it is common with writers of great novels, little is known of their productive efforts in other literary genres. This is due largely to the prominence the novel has enjoyed over and above other genres. Giving reasons for the enviable position of the novel above other literary types, Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu, and Ezechi Onyerionwu argue that,

...the novel genre, since making its entry into the world literary scene about two centuries ago, has always been viewed as the most intensive and demanding task for literary craftsmanship, especially owing to its volume... Secondly, no other form of literature captures the experience of a people in all their sociopolitical, historical, economic and cultural ramifications as comprehensively as the novel. (108)

This explains why Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Sembene Ousamane's *God's Bits of Wood*, Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Alex La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird*, collectively and individually are more well known than the prodigious output of these writers in the realm of the short story. Some of the novels mentioned above are sometimes extensions of these novelists' short stories as is the relationship between Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and "The Victor." It is due to this fact that *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* have overshadowed the collection of short stories by the same author titled *The Thing around Your Neck* from prominence despite the beauty, emotional power, craftsmanship and penetration which the short stories share with the novel in the same intensity.

This paper is therefore, an examination of the short stories of this world acclaimed novelist with a view to rekindling the interest of scholars in the criticism of the short story – a task which seems to have suffered considerable neglect. This is considered expedient because P.O. Iheakaram, an enthusiast of the short story has complained rather loudly that "There is, at the moment, dearth of criticism of the Nigerian short story by Nigerians. The situation is fundamentally attributable to the non- recognition of the short story as a form worthy of serious attention in our educational system" (280). In attempting this critical enterprise, attention is paid to how Adichie has

been able to follow the dictates of the early practitioners of the short story such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Guy De Maupassant and other notable writers of the genre whose works, collectively and individually, serve as the theoretical basis of the short story. In doing this, efforts are equally made to examine the themes of the short stories with a view to assessing their contemporaneity and depth of reflection of the human condition in general.

In a concluding remark about the author's background, the publishers of this collection of short stories stated rather causally that "she divides her time between United States and Nigeria." Causal as this remark appears, it is instructional for us, because it sets the tone, defines the nature, the themes, setting, and the narrative techniques in the short stories.

Textual Analysis of *the Thing around Your Neck*

In the stories under study, Ngozi Adichie can at once be ancient and modern dealing with African pre-colonial problems of slavery and insecurity and events as recent as the death of Obasanjo's wife in a Spanish Hospital or the appointment of Okonjo-Iwela as the minister in charge of the economy. Equally, in spatial terms, the stories range from the thick forest of Eastern Nigeria through the savannah region of Northern Nigeria to far flung places like Philadelphia, Maine, New Jersey and South Africa. Thematically, the stories touch on family relations, inheritance laws, racism, love, culture conflicts, youthful exuberance, religion, decaying moral values, military dictatorship, corruption, the Nigerian Civil war, the uncontrollable desire to live in America among Nigerians and the disastrous experiences of corporate prostitution. Several other lesser themes can be added to these, the result being that Adichie is panoramic in her handling of issues.

Diasporic Living

Lives of Africans in the Diaspora and the general problems of living of Diaspora Nigerians are very dear to Adichie's creative mind. This dearness is anchored in the fact that out of twelve stories in *The Thing around Your Neck*, six of these – "The Thing around Your Neck", "Imitation", "On Monday of Last Week", "The Shivering" and "The American Embassy" – touch on diasporic experiences. This fondness of the foreign experience of Nigerians is further demonstrated by the fact that "The Thing around Your Neck" assumes the title of the collection making it of great importance in relation to others.

“The Thing around Your Neck” is most typical of these stories that deal with the experience of Nigerians in America. It touches on the false and over-bloated expectations of Nigerians about to move to the United States. The general belief is that of comfort, ease, good houses, good food, plenty of dollars, employment and general economic and social security with additional feelings that excesses will be sent home to augment the conditions of relations at home. The short story opens,

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month you will have a big car. Soon, a big house...In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the things they wanted were minor – handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes. You said okay, no problem. (115)

On the contrary, you found out that your uncle who had put your name on the lottery list could no longer take care of you and you had to be on your own. In the process,

You ended up in Connecticut, in another little town... You walked into the restaurant ... and said you would work for two dollars less than the other waitresses...You could not afford to go to school, because now you paid rent for the tiny room with stained carpet... Sometimes you sat on a lumpy mattress of your twin bed and thought about home. (117)

Subsequently, want and loneliness set in. Poorly paid jobs, high apartment rates, and finally a desire to return home which is not tenable because of the cost of a ticket. Respite comes in by an arrival of an American boy friend whose liberal paternalistic relationship is able to pay bills and improve living conditions. Invariably, hunger and other forms of indignities stare her in the face and she is grateful when the American emerges on the scene: “You prayed for the first time in a long time and when he came up behind you and said hey, you said yes, you would go out with him even before he asked. You were scared he would not ask again” (121). Continuing with this pitiable plight, the narrator says: “You made up and made love and ran your hands through each other’s hair, his short and yellow like swinging tassels of growing corn, yours dark and bouncy like the filling of a pillow...you kissed his back...” (125). The relationship affords her the opportunity of writing

home and getting a reply that her father had died years back. Finally, she is able to go home with a promise to return.

This short story pays very little attention to character but is sufficiently powerful enough to illuminate the glittering socio-economic conditions people believe America offers. At the end, sexual and racial exploitation are suffered by immigrants and a return home remains the best option.

The beauty of this short story is that it is poignant, neatly tied, and simple; and has very few characters that are not even properly identified. The emphasis is on the situation, the effect and conclusion is clear enough. The opening, development and the suspense are clear evidence of Adichie's awareness of the demands of the genre.

"The Arrangers of Marriage" remains one of the most touching, sympathetic and sorrowful stories that this collection offers. It brings out the callousness of men in their relationship to women. It is a story that subtly expresses disgust towards attitudes of men and silently but clearly elucidates Adichie's feminist tendencies clad in a rather subtle tone. It is the story of an innocent young girl ordered to marry an American based doctor who has fraudulently married before. As the girl tells us, "I had imagined a smooth driveway snaking between cucumber-coloured lawns, a door leading into a hallway, walls with sedate paintings. A house of those of the white newlyweds as in the American films that NTA showed on Saturday nights... [But] the room was hot; old, musty smells hung heavy in the air" (167).

The very first impressions of the young girl reveal disappointment but as usual with Adichie's style, she does not revolt but repeatedly blames the arrangers of marriage. Indeed, the blame resembles a refrain in a church hymn and gives tremendous beauty, rhythm and melody to the story. She laments; "The arrangers of marriage only told you that doctors made a lot of money in America. They did not add that before doctors started to make a lot of money they had to do an internship and a residency program[me], which my new husband had not completed" (174). She adds: "Another thing the arrangers failed to mention – mouths that told the story of sleep that felt clammy like old chewing gum that smelled like the rubbish dumps at Ogbete market" (169). She further laments: "They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. No mention of offensive snoring, no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats" (168). Disappointments in this short story are two-fold: the insecurity, the callous

and sadistic machinations of the arrangers of marriage and the entire deceptive appearance and allusion of America.

The apish and highly pretentious nature of Ofodile's behaviour completes the pictures of liquidity and emptiness of the entire American concept. "You should say 'Hi' to people here, not 'You're welcome.' I'm not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave... The last name I use here is different, too... It's Bell... 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..." (172). This highly flamboyant and ostentatious use of language by black people residing in Europe or America reminds us of Professor Oguzor and Lakunle in Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and *The Lion and the Jewel* respectively. Like these two fictional characters, Ofodile turned Dave Bell is completely void, illusory and comical like his America and for what it stands. The central issue in these stories relates to the question of appearance and reality, what America appears to the ordinary Nigerian and the reality of existence in the States as experienced by those lured to live there. The compressed nature of the story, the seeming repetition, the lyricism, and the paucity of information, the fewness of characters, the almost poetic texture and the general aridity and austerity of the short story places it high on the rank of the short story anywhere.

In "Imitation" the story is not so much on the imaginary comfort of life in America but the loneliness, and insecurity of African wives living in America without their husbands. In situations such as this, the glamour which America is supposed to offer disappears and is replaced with despair, weariness and self-hatred. This is further heightened by unsolicited news from home concerning amorous lives of husbands left living in Africa. In this case Obiora, an international businessman buys a house in America where his wife and children live. Despite all the comfort available – a good house, good food, good furniture, the wife is incapable of continued stay in America and concludes: "We are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to stay in Lagos. We are moving back.... We can spend holidays here, together" (41). The reasons the wife advances are that she wants "to know when a new houseboy is hired" and that "the children need their father" (42). These reasons are, at best, tenuous. The real reasons remain the lack of warmth in the American life, the loneliness, and the lack of company and the general friendlessness of American existence.

The feminist qualities of the short story are not lost on the reader. We are all invited to sympathise with Nkem for her endurance, patience, calmness and courage in spite of evident provocation and at the same time scoff at Obiora for his insensitivity, thoughtlessness, sadism, callousness and insincerity in marital life. Once again, life as lived in Africa is compared with that of America and the differences are made clear for the reader.

“The Shivering” advances the issue of desolation of Africans living in America – and the uncertainty surrounding their lives. Chinedu, one of the characters in the story tells us: “I am out of status. My visa expired three years ago. This apartment belongs to a friend... I am going to get a deportation notice from Immigration anytime soon. Nobody at home knows my real situation. I haven’t been able to send them much since I lost my construction job” (163).

The precarious existence of Chinedu reported here is perfectly representative of the scores of Nigerians living in the United States. With the intervention of Ukamaka, one of the characters in the short story, we are further told a Catholic Reverend assures Chinedu, “You are not going to be deported, Chinedu. We will find a way. We will...” (165). Chinedu’s joy on hearing this positive assurance can only be imagined. This edgy, precipitous and perilous subsistence saps the energies of the inhabitants and makes them completely uncomfortable. Their lives continually hang in a balance and this leads to mental instability.

“On Monday Last Week” tells the story of the nasty and slavish jobs that immigrants are forced to do. Without proper residence papers, Tobeche like other Nigerians “was driving a taxi in Philadelphia, for a Nigerian man who cheated all his drivers because none of them had papers” (83). At the same time his newly arrived wife was doing the “common job wiping the buttocks of a stranger’s child” (78). Collectively and individually, the indignities serve as a yardstick for measuring the lives of Nigerians in Diaspora.

Chimamanda Adichie’s stories in *The Thing around Your Neck* are not limited to the foreign experience of Nigerians but touch on some other themes that have occupied the minds of African writers since Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

African History in *The Thing Around Your Neck*

“The Headstrong Historian” appropriately discusses the various phases of Igbo History from the pre-colonial through the colonial times. The clash of

cultures occasioned by the advent of Christianity and western education, the struggle for independence and disappointments that follow political freedom are also treated here. In between these themes, we are shown pre-colonial Igbo socio-political setting through the relationship of Nwamgba and the cousin of her husband. Three generations of Obierika and Nwamgba, Michael and Agnes and lastly Grace and Peter represent the various phases of African History stated above.

In summary “The Headstrong Historian” is a story that encapsulates the theme of clash of cultures, the excessive zeal of converts into Christianity, the pre-colonial history of the southern Igbo religion, the system of justice, creation, myth and legends. The salvaging conduct of Grace who returns from her Christianity to give her grandmother a feeling of humanity and strength is poignantly presented. Her role in the story reminds us of post independent revolutionary politician who saw a desire to return to African ways. In Literature, it was a period which was marked “Negritude”, a movement which sought to restore the dignity and beauty of blackness. That she divorces her Cambridge trained husband shows her total rejection of western ideas and an acceptance of what Nwamgba stands for. It is indeed a very ambitious story that in the words of Onukaogu and Onyerionwu [prompts] “our suspicion that it may be the base of another award-winning novel...” (213).

The Nigerian Civil War and Corruption in *The Thing Around Your Neck*

The Nigeria-Biafra Civil War is so dear to Adichie’s mind that she hardly leaves it out in any of her narratives. Apart from being the main subject of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* and its several mentions in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is also the subject of another story titled “Ghosts”. Unlike in the other instances mentioned above, the causes of the war, its conduct, the human suffering and deaths are not the subject matter but the aftermath of the crisis. According to the story,

...We hardly talked about the war. When we did, it was with an implacable vagueness, as if what mattered were not that we had crouched in muddy bunkers during air raids after which we buried corpses with bits of pink on their charred skin, not that we had eaten cassava peels and watched our children’s bellies swell from malnutrition, but that we had survived. (73)

As in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* this story reveals the difficulties of surviving the peace which appeared more burdensome than living through the war. With unpaid pensions covering over three years, importation and distribution of fake drugs, rising inflation and a high level of official corruption, life was several degrees better in the war than in peace time. Instances of official corruption as recorded in the story involve the Federal Ministers as well as Vice-Chancellors of universities: "The education minister has stolen the pension money...it was the vice chancellor who had deposited the money in high interest personal accounts" (58-9). Still on the vice chancellor, we are told that,

...Josephat was vice chancellor for six years and ran this university like his father's chicken coop. Money disappeared and then we would see new cars stamped with names of foreign foundations that did not exist. Some people went to court, but nothing came of that. He dictated who would be promoted and who would be stagnated. In short, the man acted like a solo university council. This present vice-chancellor is following him faithfully. I have not been paid my pension since I retired, you know. I am just coming from the Bursary now...." (69)

As if these instances of graft are not enough, we are taken to the classroom where we are told that, "Nobody is teaching. Nobody has fresh ideas. It is university politics, politics, politics, while students buy grades with money or their bodies" (68). The civil war with all its sufferings, deaths, is replaced with monumental greed, fraud, graft and unequalled corruption which has continued to rise steadily to its present unimaginable heights.

Ethno-Religious Crises

As if desirous of not leaving any contemporary issue in Nigeria out in her collection, Adichie descends with great humour and sarcasm on the ethno-religious violence that has taken centre stage in northern Nigeria in recent times. In the story entitled "A Private Experience", two Igbo girls are caught up in a crisis spot in Kano and the story records hypothetically that,

...it had all started at the Motor Park, when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men

who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book. (46)

The reason for this action recorded here is as humorous as it is nonsensical; as brutal as it is senseless; and as baseless as it is unjustified. It is even perpetrated by people who are unarguably lazy and indolent – as they sat around playing draughts all day – It is even coincidental that the driver is Igbo Christian and more coincidental, that the object driven over is the Holy Koran and the people around are Hausa Muslims. This means that the crisis is not planned, and not based on any serious religious disagreement such as doctrine or faith. Sentiments and other spurious issues supported by poverty, unemployment – playing draughts all day – ignorance and illiteracy are all too responsible for these sundry acts. As a good writer as Adichie is, she is merely suggestive of the causes of recurring instances of violence. She does not accuse anyone of illiteracy and ignorance but merely lays bare the insufficiency of the reasons for the unfortunate acts.

After the crisis, the story continues: “She will look at only one of the corpses, naked, stiff, facedown, and it will strike her that she cannot tell if the partially burned man is Igbo or Hausa, Christian or Muslim, from looking at the charred flesh. She will listen to BBC and hear the accounts of deaths and the riots – religious with undertones of ethnic tension” (53-4). We are further told that: “Later Chika will read in *The Guardian* “that reactionary Hausa-speaking Muslim in the North have a history of violence against non-Muslims,” and in the middle of her grief, she will stop to remember that she examined the nipples and experienced the gentleness of a woman who is Hausa and Muslim” (emphasis mine 55). The theory of hostility bandied out that Hausa Muslims and Igbo Christians stand dissolved through the interaction of Chika and the Muslim woman. It therefore, becomes a hate theory designed by politicians and ethnic jingoists to ensure permanent enmity between these groups. Festus Iyayi in his *Heroes* very cleverly debunks this theory during the civil war as he argues,

On this bridge, Ibo Soldiers lay dead in their numbers side by side with Yoruba soldiers and Hausa soldiers and Esan soldiers and their blood ran and flowed into a common pool and mixed. There was nothing like Ibo written on the blood as these men lay in death, nor anything like Hausa, Yoruba

or Edo. The blood of these men gushed out and mixed freely without the illusion of labels. In death they had achieved something they had been told was impossible in life. (196)

It is therefore, clear that this recurrent violence against non-Muslims in the North must be viewed outside the realms of religion and ethnicity and must be placed squarely where it belongs.

Cultism on University Campuses

In recent times, Nigerian university campuses have become citadels of cultism and other forms of untoward behaviour. University students harass, intimidate, threaten and terrorise others employing such dangerous weapons as guns, cutlasses, knives, daggers and even axes. In some instances, deaths occur and in others permanent injury results. This is what Chimamanda Adichie handles in “Cell One” – the first story in the collection. In the words of the narrator,

It was the season of cults on our serene Nsukka Campus. It was the time when signboards all over the university read, in bold letters, SAY NO TO CULTS. The Black Axe, the Buccaneers, and the Pirates were the best known. They may once have been benign fraternities, but they had evolved and were now called “cults”...Guns and tortured loyalties and axes had become common. Cult wars had become common: a boy would leer at a girlfriend of the Capone of the Black Axe and that boy ... would be stabbed in the thigh...and so his fellow Buccaneers would go to a beer parlour and shoot the nearest Black Axe boy in the shoulder...Girls stayed inside their hostels after lectures and lecturers quivered when a fly buzzed too loudly. (7-8)

Boys who engaged in these nefarious activities start by becoming thieves and miscreants in their own homes before attaining these levels at school. The case of Nnamabia authenticates this. Nnamabia has suddenly become wayward and a thief. His conduct in the house was gradually becoming exceedingly strange. In this short story, we are told that; “The second time our house was robbed, it was my brother Nnamabia who faked a break-in and stole my mother’s jewellery. It happened on Sunday. My parents had travelled to our hometown, Mbaise, to visit our grandparents...” (3). Later, it

was discovered that he had attempted to copy his father's car key and had often failed to attend catechism lessons which made it impossible for him to receive Holy Communion. Here, Nnambia resembles Jaja and Scobie in *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Heart of the Matter* respectively for their inability to receive Holy Communion at the appropriate time. Here again, the Catholic sensibilities exhibited in *Purple Hibiscus* are brought to confirm Adichie's deep Catholicism.

The main issues in "Cell One" are the problems surrounding public detention centres in Nigeria and the attitude of the Police towards detainees. Nnamabia, just like Jaja again, is mercilessly beaten when detained and there are wounds all over his body. He is traumatised, broken and reduced to a sub-human level. The old man who is arrested for the sins of his son is also used to symbolise this inhumanity. Added to all these is the corrupt, insensitive and heartless conduct of the police personnel. Detention centres in Nigeria operate against international practices which view incarceration as corrective rather than punitive institutions. As in earlier instances, these issues are as current as they are topical and are on the front-burner of Nigeria's socio-political and economic problems.

Military Dictatorship

The short story titled "The America Embassy" serves as a canvas on which the entire Nigerian scenario is painted. Set in an exclusive part of Lagos "with vine encrusted gates" the story narrates with enviable vitality the horrendous brutality that defines military-civilian relationship, the ever present evidences of poverty, harassment of journalists by the military authorities and Sani Abacha's excesses and debauchery in governance. In order to control the rowdy crowd of Nigerians waiting to be interviewed for American visas, the military is sometimes deployed to maintain orderliness and instead, the soldiers turn wild and met out corporal punishment as in this case reported by one of the characters:

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 soldiers' boot squash the black frames, the tinted lenses. (129)

It is rather ironic that brutality is happening in front of the American Embassy in the full view of Americans who cherish individual rights and freedom. As the protagonist observes: “Sometimes I wonder if the American embassy people look out of their window and enjoy watching the soldiers flogging people...” (131). This is perhaps an indictment of the callous and sadistic attitudes of the Americans who work at the embassy and by extension, America itself which lures Nigerians into their country to lower their wage bill and enhance productivity.

Abacha’s period of leadership which witnessed the most heinous instances of brutality and human rights abuses receives a mention in this story. In the heydays of this infamous regime, a journalist, the husband of the chief character had written 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...The soldiers had detained her husband for two weeks and broken the skin on his forehead.... (135)

In another instance, the soldiers had attempted to rape the woman after killing her young son on finding out the husband had escaped. Atrocities such as these were very frequent in this era of tyranny. These chilling instances of savagery went on hand in hand with sights of jobless but employable citizens roaming the streets begging for a livelihood that their country could avail them if things were properly run.

This short story stands out because it is told with an original technical force that is unique. There is an admixture of introspection, stream of consciousness, dialogue and authorial reportage that bounce into each other frequently. As usual there is very little on character development but the centrality of the theme emerges with vigour and profundity.

General Remarks on Technique

A reading of these dozen stories collectively and individually reveals a mastery of an art of the short story displayed by Chimamanda Adichie. There is a wholesome understanding of the demands of the genre. In most instances, the stories achieve the demands of unity and coherence. Ada

Azodo, a commentator on the art of the short story makes the following remarks:

the writer seizes the plot at the high point of emotion, when the story is most interesting to the reader or listener and does not relent until the final denouement. This condensation of a full story in a form that can be easily adapted in terms of time and space to the small interstices of busy everyday lives gives the short story a definitive edge over the novel. (3)

The observation to a large extent describes the short stories under study in this paper. In a particular case, the story titled “The Arrangers of Marriage” combines all the technique that the genre offers. There is poetry, narrative beauty, briskness, economy of words, irony, humour, inattention to character development, abruptness of opening and closing, singleness of effect, paucity of information regarding themes and finally, singleness of setting which collectively leads to quick comprehension and enjoyment of the narrative.

Conclusion

It must be argued in conclusion that in content, Chimamanda Adichie’s short stories have demonstrated a thorough knowledge of contemporary Nigerian landscape. She has been able to touch on those vexatious issues that scuttle growth and development in Nigeria, issues such as misplacement of priorities, religious extremism and sentimentality, military irresponsibility, slavish mentality leading to a desire to live abroad by all means, corruption in high and low places, harassment of journalists and the desire to stifle information flow, dictatorship, cultism in our campuses and the decay of our entire educational system and the consequent fall in standards. Our penal system and the quality of our security agents are also x-rayed.

African Literature, and indeed all literatures, do not attempt to proffer solutions to economic, social and political problems but merely expose them and allow society to correct itself by their presentation. Chimamanda Adichie cannot go outside her constituency, she has shown us where our problems are located and all we can do is trace where these problems are situated.

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