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BRUNO ARAÚJO

Equal, but not the same: examining difference in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
The Thing Around Your Neck

Versão Corrigida

São Paulo

2022

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Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Lingüísticos e Literários em Inglês do Departamento de Letras Modernas da Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, da Universidade de São Paulo, como parte dos requisitos para obtenção do título de Mestre em Literatura em Língua Inglesa.

Orientador: Profa. Dra. Laura Patricia Zuntini de Izarra

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Nos termos da legislação vigente, declaro **ESTAR CIENTE** do conteúdo deste **EXEMPLAR CORRIGIDO** elaborado em atenção às sugestões dos membros da comissão Julgadora na sessão de defesa do trabalho, manifestando-me **plenamente favorável** ao seu encaminhamento ao Sistema Janus e publicação no **Portal Digital de Teses da USP**.

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GREGOLDO, Arlindo Bruno Araújo. **Equal, but not the same:** examining difference in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Dissertação (Mestrado) apresentada à Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo para obtenção do título de Mestre em Literatura em Língua Inglesa.

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Dedico este trabalho ao Grego e à Zaide – sei que em suas estantes exibiriam uma impressão dessa escrita com o maior orgulho do mundo.

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I am still very much in awe of the importance of Adichie's work in my life as the years stroll by. It is hard to disguise just how much this Nigerian woman and public personality has meant for me, as well as difficult to disentangle myself from this genuine admiration in order to land at the more critical and pragmatic terrain of academic writing. This of course does not mean that I see Adichie, as a public figure, as unproblematic and absolved from any form of criticism. Gratitude is the overarching feeling, across the years.

And finally, as a Brasiliense expatriate in São Paulo, I would like to honour Mina Klabin Warchavchik and Gregori Warchavchik for the house-shaped outcry on Santa Cruz street, which I have walked by countless times during my stay in the city. There is a part of me that inescapably recognises myself in their architectural work of art, as well as another part which chooses to keep doing so.

*“We hear the sound of a beating drum
clearer from a distance.”*

Igbo Proverb, learnt from Chigozie Obioma.

RESUMO

O principal objetivo desta dissertação é dar seguimento a alguns debates no campo da literatura – particularmente sobre o tema da ‘diferença’, ainda que não de maneira exclusiva, visto que há uma série de temas e correntes teóricas que são trazidos à tona para introduzir, articular e ilustrar a problemática da “diferença” dentro do território do discurso sobre identidades – tais quais pós-colonialismo, diáspora, feminismo e racismo, entre outros. Esses temas são examinados de perto a fim de não apenas relevar suas minúcias interessantes, que frequentemente se perdem no calor de debates públicos, mas também para contestar suposições normalizadas sobre como nós percebemos esses temas e a diferença inerente aos mesmos. Tendo como ponto de partida o trabalho da autora nigeriana contemporânea Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, é possível articular conceitos que dizem respeito à diferença e a identidades, em consonância com a teoria da socióloga Ugandense-Britânica Avtar Brah, através da análise literária de contos selecionados da coleção *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Meu objetivo com esta dissertação é levantar questões e/ou perspectivas relevantes sobre identidade, trazendo à luz novas reflexões sobre o papel da diferença dentro do discurso identitário, assim como ajudar a estabelecer o corpo de conhecimento debaixo do guarda-chuva da teoria da diferença.

Palavras-chave: Diferença, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Diáspora, Identidade, Experiência.

ABSTRACT

The main goal of this dissertation is to start conversations – particularly about ‘difference’, though not exclusively, since there is a series of themes that are called upon to introduce, articulate and illustrate the problematic of “difference” within the territory of identity discourse – such as postcolonialism, diaspora, feminism, and racism, among others. These themes are examined up close in order not only to reveal some of their interesting minutiae, which get often overlooked in the heat of public debates, but also to challenge normalised assumptions on how we perceive these themes and ‘difference’ within them. I resort to the work of contemporary Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in order to articulate crucial points concerning difference and identity, as theorised by the Ugandan-British sociologist Avtar Brah, through the literary analysis of selected short stories from Adichie’s collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). My goal with this dissertation is to raise relevant issues and/or perspectives on identity, bringing into light new reflections on the role of difference when it comes to identity discourse, as well as helping to establish the body of knowledge under the umbrella of theory of difference.

Keywords: Difference, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Diaspora, Identity, Experience.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ECSU	Eastern Connecticut State University
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
NPR	National Public Radio
SWANA	Southwestern Asian and North African
TED	Technology, Education and Design

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Introduction

Chimamanda Adichie is a Nigerian writer and feminist whose work encompasses short stories, novels and essays. She was born in Enugu, Enugu State, in Nigeria, but grew up in the university town of Nsukka, and pursued her higher education in the United States. Her *alma mater* includes Eastern Connecticut State University (Bachelor of Arts) and Johns Hopkins University (Master of Arts). She began an undergraduate course on medicine and pharmacy at the University of Nigeria for a year and a half, but eventually left to the United States to study Communications and Political Science at Drexel University in Philadelphia, later transferring to ECSU. While growing up in Nigeria, Adichie recounts in many of her public speeches and interviews, she was not used to being identified by the colour of her skin, something that began to happen as soon as she arrived in the United States. As a black African in America, Adichie was suddenly confronted with what it meant to be a person of colour in the United States. Race, as she puts it, “as an idea” became something that she had to navigate and learn. “Race is such a strange construct, because you have to *learn* what it means to be black in America. So you have to *learn* that watermelon is supposed to be offensive”¹, she recounts in an interview to the National Public Radio (NPR) in the United States, in 2013. In this passage of the interview, Adichie is referring to the racist trope that African-Americans are excessively fond of watermelon, which is used to categorise Black people as messy, lazy and unclean. The trope gained great popularity in the United States during the Jim Crow era, but it dates back to the 1800s, having been observed in the accounts of westerners about their experience in the Middle East². In these narratives, the watermelon is described as “a poor Arab’s feast” (Doyle, 15), and is used to depict the local’s lack of “manners”, taste, and civility, in a noticeably contemptuous tone. The trope, already in the Western collective consciousness, gained force in the wake of the emancipation of enslaved

¹ “‘Americanah’ Author Explains ‘Learning’ To Be Black In The U.S.” June 27, 2013. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2013/06/27/195598496/americanah-author-explains-learning-to-be-black-in-the-u-s>

² One such account belongs to an anonymous British officer stationed in Rosetta, Egypt (allegedly Charles William Doyle), and can be found in France’s national library, François-Mitterrand Library, under the name “A non-military journal, or observations made in Egypt, by an officer upon the staff of the British army, describing the country, its inhabitants, their manners and customs”. The publication, from 1803, can be found at François-Mitterrand’s online catalogue (retrieved 5th June, 2022): <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1053506/f6.item>

African American people, a process started in 1865. Because newly free black people grew, ate, and sold watermelons, the fruit became a symbol of their freedom in the early post-emancipation period. However, as historian and Rice University alumni William Black argues, “southern whites, threatened by blacks’ newfound freedom, responded by making the fruit a symbol of black people’s perceived uncleanness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence.”³

Adichie’s statement alone already points to the issue of *difference* within the human experience: despite being a black woman (i.e., providing physical, visual and external-to-the-self cues to the other’s gaze), Adichie’s personal history, up until the point where she moved to the United States, did not include the form of the racism that takes place in the United States, and which is daily and relentlessly experienced by other, just like herself, black people. Which goes to say that despite the fact that Adichie indubitably identifies as a black woman, her personal (and particular) history did not intrinsically embody the same cultural references and experiences as other black women all over the world, much less so particularly the ones living in America. This does not go to say that such groups of people (i.e. Black Nigerian women and Black American women) and their respective experiences all of a sudden are polar opposites and there is no overlap in between, but rather it demonstrates how the assumption of sameness within an identity group is always bound to be flawed. Being a black young woman in America did not necessarily mean that Adichie was African-American herself, nor that she had the historic and cultural context to understand the racist trope involving watermelon and black people in the United States. This keen perception of difference is seen throughout Adichie’s body of work, but has received particular attention in *Americanah*, issued in 2013.

As has been mentioned above, Adichie’s novels have been awarded prestigious prizes, among which the prestigious Women’s Prize for Fiction (former Orange Prize for fiction) in the United Kingdom in 2007, for *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This was Adichie’s debut in the literary world as a prize-winning author, and a pivotal moment in her career. Despite her popularity in mainstream media (particularly in the United States) that Adichie gained with her work, Adichie is part of a generation of Nigerian writers who have had relevant work published in the early 2000s. Novelist, essayist and journalist Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani’s *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, originally published in 2009, won the 2010

³ BLACK, William R. “How Watermelons Became Black: Emancipation and the Origins of a Racist Trope”, *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 8 (March 2018), 64–86. An abridged version of the article have been published by the magazine *The Atlantic*, found at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529>

Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. Publishing at around the same time there was Teju Cole, Nigerian-American writer, and art historian, with his debut *Every Day Is For The Thief* (2007), released only a year after Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The latter had been preceded by Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), which won the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. Earlier in the decade, Helon Habila, born and raised Nigerian writer and poet, made rounds among prestigious publications and awards with his short-story collection *Prison Stories* (2000), having been awarded the Caine Prize for a short story from said collection. *Americanah*, which is arguably Adichie's most well-known work, was published a year after Teju Cole's *Open City* (2012), published at around the same time as Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2012), as well as *The Fishermen* (2012), Chigozie Obioma's debut novel depicting the story of four brothers in a small neighbourhood in Akure, a quiet Nigerian town, during the rule of Sani Abacha in the 1990s.

All of the works above share many of the themes, tensions and points of interest within the work produced by Adichie over the years. For example, if we take *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a piece of historical fiction that provides a refreshing and politicised view in a "forgotten past" – i.e. the Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, which spread its virulent and ruthless reputation all across the globe⁴ –, we can observe a similar function in novels such as Obioma's *The Fishermen* – which, in the author's own words, depicts a crucial moment in Nigerian history and "by so doing deconstructs and illuminates the ideological potholes that still impede the nation's progress even today."⁵ Another work that follows in the same direction is Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, a coming-of-age novel about Enitan, a girl going into womanhood in postcolonial Nigeria and England, particularly in the surrounding years of the Biafran War. Sefi Atta, in discussing the politics of writing as an African author in the United States, mentions how she refused, at an early stage in writing one of her novels, to "refer to a single tropical fruit, exotic plant, spice, evil spirit, proverb, bare-breasted woman or whatever is expected in an African story."⁶ This points out to the role of the writer in perceiving and responding to a political scenario surrounding the conception of any piece of writing, which is a posture clearly seen in Adichie's work.

⁴ In Brazil, there is a somewhat old expression to designate people that are very slim: "parece que fulano veio da Biafra" (lit. "it seems that so-and-so is from Biafra"), which is a cultural artefact that speaks volumes about the impact of the Nigerian civil conflict that took place in the 1960s.

⁵ LAPPIN, Elena. *Q&A With Chigozie Obioma*. Pushkin Press, November 2014.

⁶ AYNA, Ike. Sefi Atta: Something Good Comes to Nigerian literature. Naijanet.com, 2005. Retrieved via WebArchive.org, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120426045118/http://naijanet.com/news/source/2005/jan/10/1000.html>

Of course, the body of literature produced by Nigerian authors in the early 21st century is an object of literary critique, and much has been written on the topic under the premise of pinning down the main aspects of such a body of work. This academic line of research speaks of a “third-generation Nigerian novel”, which refers to Nigerian authors writing from the 90s onwards. In the words of Alowolo University’s professor Oluwole Coker, “the third generation writers are radiating elements of intertextuality which qualify them as “Achebe’s grandchildren”⁷. This is very much true of Adichie and others, who notably make references to Achebe’s work throughout their work – for instance, one of Adichie’s short stories, “The Headstrong Historian”, bears great plot similarities to Achebe’s debut novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) –, although this alone should hardly suffice to describe a whole body of literature. According to professor Christofer Okonkwo at University of Missouri-Columbia, a hallmark of said third-generation Nigerian literature is the retelling of Nigerian history through fiction, which holds true for example both for Adichie, whose *Half of a Yellow Sun* retells the story of the Biafran War, and Obioma, whose *The Fishermen* takes place in 1993, during a seminal moment in Nigeria's history: the annulled presidential elections in that year.

Other notorious commonalities that may be seen throughout some of the third-generation Nigerian novels are the imperative of social commitment that seems to structure some of the novels, the breaking down of the pressures of colonialism and religion, and the pursuit of gender empowerment as a larger aspect of the post-independence engagement. It is important, however, as argued by professor Hamish Dalley, from Daemen College in Amherst, New York, to recognise that the task of pinning down just exactly what a third-generation Nigerian literature is can be “very difficult (...), as it has multiple aspects.”⁸

In Brazil, the landscape of academic production concerning Adichie’s body of work has some interesting shapes. The first master’s dissertation published about the author’s work was in 2013, by Universidade Federal da Paraíba, a work of literary analysis conducted by Rafaella C. A. Teotônio that discusses modernity and female authorship in African Literature. Teotônio examines Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) in order to make a comparative analysis with Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane and her book *O Sétimo Juramento* (2001), bridging both works with transculturalism and the problematization of modernity.

⁷ “Theorising third-generation Nigerian novels”, a short essay by Oluwole Coker, Senior Lecturer, at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Available at <https://guardian.ng/art/theorising-third-generation-nigerian-novels/>

⁸ “The Idea of ‘Third Generation Nigerian Literature’: Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel” in *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter 2013), pp. 15-34 (20 pages). Published by Indiana University Press.

After Teotônio's work, Brazilian researchers in their respective universities have published 14 other pieces of academic work (either dissertations or theses) that included Adichie in their titles and/or keywords, up until the moment that the writing of this dissertation began. Taking a broader look at these, most of them are dedicated to at least one of Adichie's pieces of prose, and one is bound to conclude that the most discussed among Adichie's books is *Americanah*, analysed in 8 of the aforementioned publications⁹. This is followed by *Purple Hibiscus*, a central piece to 6 of the publications¹⁰, and *The Thing Around Your Neck*, discussed in 2 of them¹¹. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is studied in the literary field by Leticia F. de Moraes (2019) at the Universidade Estadual do Centro-Oeste, as well as by Fabrício H. M. Cassilhas (2016), in a Translation Studies dissertation at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

In regard to the themes articulated in these works, the most prominent one is feminist theory, the main subject of 6 of these works; followed by diaspora (showing up in 5 of these) and identity (3). Race, intersectionality, colonialism and postcolonial theory are also studied in some of these works, which is an interesting indication that difference, the theme of my dissertation, is present in the work of Adichie, although not addressed directly and in detail as I intend throughout this work. It is also interesting to note that Adichie's work has been studied alongside others, such as Phillippe Wamba, Paulina Chiziane, Julia Alvarez, Conceição Evaristo, Chinua Achebe, Toni Morrison, particularly in the field of comparative literature, to foster the transcontinental and multicultural debate within the literary field.

One highly respected Brazilian scholar on Adichie's work is professor Claudio Braga, who has been studying the author as early as of 2010, the year in which he first published an article discussing cultural identity and memory through one of the short stories that I analysed in this dissertation, 'The Headstrong Historian'. His course on Postcoloniality, Cultural Decolonization and Diaspora in Literature, at University of Brasília, structured around his latest academic publication¹², has given me a panoramic dimension on the work of Adichie and its importance within the contemporary debate of diaspora/s.

The issue of 'difference' is the main focus of this dissertation, and is the theme that gets scrutinised in the first chapter of this dissertation, in which I examine concepts that are

⁹ See ARAÚJO, 2017; COSWOK, 2017; FERREIRA JÚNIOR, 2019; FERREIRA, 2019; MELO, 2019; RAMOS, 2017; SÁ, 2019; and SOUZA, 2017.

¹⁰ See CAMPOS, 2018; CARVALHO, 2019; MÜLLER, 2017; NENEVÉ, 2018; TEOTÔNIO, 2013; and VENTURA, 2018)

¹¹ See MORAIS, 2017; and RAMOS, 2017.

¹² See *A literatura movente de Chimamanda Adichie: Pós-colonialidade, descolonização cultural e diáspora* (BRAGA, 2018).

crucially touched by it. It is in this chapter that I will expand on the concept of ‘culture’, as a collective experience shared through similar experiences; as well as exploring the concept of ‘identity’, taking it as an elusive, "changing core" that constitutes the perception of the self and serves as a category of identification between people. After investigating those concepts, I write about the role of difference within different cultures and identities; and I also dive into the four different ways in which difference can be articulated, as proposed by Avtar Brah in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora*, published in 1996: difference as experience, difference as social relation, difference as subjectivity, and difference as identity. It is also imperative to my research that I problematise experience, challenging the idea that it bears a pre-given and absolute meaning; and finally, I comment briefly on the concept inaugurated by Brah of the “diaspora space”, paying particular attention to the idea of “situatedness” when different identity categories come together in the diaspora space.

In the second chapter, devoted to literary analysis, I will be examining three short stories from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. These are ‘Imitation’, ‘The Headstrong Historian’, and the eponymous ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’. Adichie’s characters and plotlines are a fertile territory for theorising difference, drawing from Adichie’s keen perception of difference not only in terms of the heavily polarised identities that traditionally dispute political and sociological debates (i.e. gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.), but also in regard to the innumerable facets of human experience. As an example of the latter, I am going to demonstrate how the protagonist in ‘The Headstrong Historian’, an Igbo woman living towards the end of the 19th century in Nigeria, Nwamgba, is *different* from a close friend, Ayaju, because Ayaju is of slave descent; however, Ayaju is *also* different from others of slave heritage because she is well-travelled and experienced, something that grants her a societal status that is unique among her equals. In ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’, the parents of Akunna’s love interest are *different* from most of the condescending Americans she meets routinely because, unlike most white people she has talked to since meeting her boyfriend, they make Akunna feel at ease in her relationship. In ‘Imitation’, Nkem, a Nigerian woman living in the United States, is married to Obiora, a man who belongs to a selected non-official, identity group – which Adichie refers to, in the middle of her prose, as ‘The Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America To Have Their Babies league’ (26) – and this, on its turn, compels Nkem to comply with her own corresponding assigned identity group – the league of the wives of such men. This “league talk” could be an innocently humorous commentary on luxury capitalism, if it did not manifest exactly the mechanics that Brah highlights in her book which forges culture and

identity. The ‘league talk’ could be no more than a harmless remark, if the whole dynamic implied by it did not impact people’s lives to a significant extent: throughout the short story, we learn that despite recognising the “benefits” that couch her identity, Nkem longs for things to be different, to find for herself and for her family a space of difference within their “identity context”, for the sake of her own happiness and self-actualisation, without having to let go of her current assigned identity category.

The third chapter of the dissertation is devoted to looking in more detail into one aspect of Difference as Social Relation which is remarkably seen throughout all of the three short stories picked for literary analysis: the flawed assumption of homogeneity among identity groups. Nkem is the hallmark of this discussion: her own inner dilemma, exposed all throughout the short story, points towards the fact that there isn’t homogeneity between her and the other members of her identity group (the aforementioned “league”). However, on the other two short stories we have respectively characters that, looked at side by side, form a pair of heterogeneity when it comes to their shared identity: in ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ we are talking about Akunna and her Nigerian uncle, who lives in the United States; and in ‘The Headstrong Historian’, we are talking about Michael (born Anikwenwa), Nwamgba’s son who is educated in the Christian Missionary school and embraces furiously this westernised, imperialistic culture; and Afamefuna (born Grace), Michael’s daughter, who, despite benefiting from the cultural privilege of being a part of the Western Catholic culture, struggles to make sense of the whole process by which she and her family are privileged, and fights to understand and undo the damages caused by colonisation both to her grandmother and to herself.

By the end of this dissertation, I hope to have accomplished a solid argumentation using the theory of difference (as posed by professor Avtar Brah), which will serve the main purpose of adding a more pragmatic point of view to this body of theory and bringing more awareness about it inside academia, seeing as it is yet another productive pathway to provoke social criticism and, hopefully, some sort of social change in attitude when it comes to difference.

* * *

Before I dive into my work, I would like to spare a few words on why I chose to study Nigerian literature. I have majored in English, and I have been reading, discussing and writing about literature written in English since my first undergrad semester. During my stay in my *alma mater*, the general curriculum for the English program spanned literature written in English from the 14th century up until contemporary literature; however, it was not until about my third year of college that I read for the first time non-European literature. The strongest memory I have of that time is being startled after reading, for the first time in my life, the name of one of my mother's favourite dishes, in English: "a tropical fruit similar to a banana with green skin, or the plant that produces this fruit"¹³, and which we know is ripe and ready to be consumed only when its skin turns pitch dark instead of bright yellow. It took me 21 years of age and 3 years of reading literature written in English to chance upon the word 'plantain'; as well as to find out that there were actually specific words in English to describe and talk about the dry season which relentlessly marks the middle section of the year in my hometown, abounding in greys, yellows and golden shards – which does not look in any capacity like fall, nor winter, nor spring, nor summer; as well as realising that not every country in the world is regulated by well-defined four seasons (in fact those are very few, especially when visualised in absolute numbers¹⁴), seasons which interestingly enough I can aptly describe in English but have never witnessed with my very own eyes and experienced with my own cheekbones; not to mention how dumbfounded I got as I read for the first time about the lives of characters who, instead of being marvelled around what they seemed to consider exotic artefacts, would actually be at complete ease as they consumed fruits and foods that I recognised and had grown up familiar with, for they grew abundantly on the trees in my neighbourhood, like mangoes and jackfruit. In a world where English is considered the *lingua franca*, the language in which most academic knowledge is published, it should be intriguing, if not disconcerting, to realise that some words are being less used than others, particularly within the literary field. What does it say about my education in English literature, the fact that I could promptly devour prose mentioning peonies, alders and

¹³ Dictionary entry for the word 'plantain'. Retrieved from the Cambridge Dictionary Online at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/plantain>. Last access 18th August 2020.

¹⁴ As per Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_countries_and_territories, 29th August 2020), there are about 195 countries in the world; out of those, only two fifths (77) are territorial entities where English is an official language (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_territorial_entities_where_English_is_an_official_language, idem); out of which I could only count 6 (less than 10%) which belong to the Temperate Zone (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temperate_climate, idem) in which there are the well-known 4 well-defined seasons.

birches¹⁵ – plants that are exclusively present in temperate and subtropical climates (which does not occur in Brazilian territory) –, but would fail to recognise words such as yams and palm oil – local ingredients that I have plenty of times consumed and enjoyed in my own country?

It was also around that same time that I read a passage from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, telling about “[t]he story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself *would make an interesting reading*. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate.” (188).¹⁶ Achebe's striking use of metalanguage at the end of his debut and most popular novel¹⁷ – or even just in general his and others' endeavour to tell stories that got smothered in the haze of the formation of the new Nation States in the (never actualised) wake of colonialism – opened my eyes to the significance of the experiences that I have just described, so that, in a way, the territorial and cultural reclaiming of literature written in English by Nigerian authors is *also* my reclaiming of my local, Brazilian culture, in a language that is not my mother tongue but that encompasses a significant part of my life, in a country greatly impacted by American cultural colonialism.

There is, it seems, yet another burning question surrounding the motives behind this dissertation: why study Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie instead of Achebe? In my academic trajectory, I became, as many of us did, completely awestruck upon watching Adichie's TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story”¹⁸. The simplicity and the power embedded in the well-known “ideas worth spreading (under 20 minutes)” format in this public speech was beyond inspiring to me. Here was a contemporary of mine, someone with an outstanding ability to translate what I consider to be critical ideas into straightforward storytelling. For instance, her account of her relationship with Fide's story, or the incident with her American roommate and a Mariah Carey tape, both are used to illustrate in an ordinary and anecdotal way the damaging effects of one-sided stories and introduce the major issue of the poor representation of Sub-saharan African culture in the West, loosely initiated in the 16th century with the writing of John Lok. Adichie describes this in her talk as “a tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the

¹⁵ “And there stand all around the alders, and birches, and oaks, and maples full of glee and sap, holding in their buds until the waters subside.” THOREAU, Henry D. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

¹⁶ ACHEBE, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Knopf. 1985.

¹⁷ As stated in the book publisher Penguin Random House's website, access 29th August 2020. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/565351/things-fall-apart-by-chinua-achebe/9780385474542/>

¹⁸ Available at https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story, last access 30th August 2020.

words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are ‘half devil, half child’.” It has been about 10 years since I watched this talk for the first time and I still find myself profoundly stirred by her speech. But that is not the only material outputted by Adichie that I have come in contact with, naturally. The first book of hers that I read was *Half of a Yellow Sun* (published in 2006 by Knopf/Anchor), and then I went back to the previously published one, *Purple Hibiscus* (published in 2003 by Algonquin Books). After reading the story of Kambili, I went on to read the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009, Knopf); then *Americanah* was issued (2013, Knopf) and finally *Dear Ijeawele* (2017, Knopf) was her latest release to date. At each new book of hers that I finished reading, I would find myself delighted at seeing how each time she would expand on issues addressed before (such as the misrepresentation of African governments after the Independence wave in the continent, or the racial issue embodied in African-American hairs in the US, particularly with her name-dropping of Michelle Obama in interviews during the era of *Americanah*), introducing new debates, or touching upon thoughts and experiences that it had never occurred to me others carried in their heads too. Fortunately, I was born in a day and age in which the state of technology allows me to have access to other types of intellectual output delivered by Adichie in her trajectory as a public figure. There are endless interviews and talks and commencement addresses up online¹⁹, which provide rich and more detailed insight into many of the subjects that surface in Adichie’s prose. Adichie is constantly making a strong stance on human rights, enabling and enfranchising subaltern voices, which have been silenced so far by many cultural, historical and political devices. Therefore, I believe her voice is of extreme relevance to debates around justice and equality. Besides that, I am very much interested in – considering and acknowledging the sexist heritage that is still in the process of being dismantled in this day and age – furthering the voice of a contemporary female Nigerian author.

Another instigating question I would like to address is why I have chosen to work with Adichie’s short story collection rather than one of her novels, particularly her latest publication “Americanah” (2013), which fared relatively well in terms of sales (finding its

¹⁹ Examples of which follow: Commencement Address at Kalamazoo College, 2009 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsJoPEo142Q>); We Should All Be Feminists (which later became a published piece), 2013 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc); Chimamanda on Raising a Child to be Feminist, 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czogWQ34X1Y>); Beauty does not solve any problem, 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UITxHbMdfs&t>); Between the Lines: Chimamanda N. A. with Zadie Smith, 2014. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkeCun9aljY>); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'Hair is political' on Channel 4 BBC, 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ck2o34DS64>); The Right To Tell Your Own Story, 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNEubO-Jmx8>); among countless others. All accessed on 30th August 2020.

place among widely popular book lists, such as America's National Public Radio's²⁰ and The New York Times²¹), and which later in the year gained brutal traction after American singer, songwriter, record producer, dancer, actress and filmmaker Beyoncé Knowles-Carter signalled in a rather curious way her support of Adichie, by sampling Adichie's TED Talk "We should all be feminists" on the song "***Flawless".²² So by the time I started directing my research towards Adichie, *Americanah* was not only her most recent book, but also her most recognised piece. It may have seemed like an old and "untrendy" choice for some, that I chose to study a book that not many people knew about. But I would like to suggest that, unlike some may believe, choosing a literary corpus is not necessarily supposed to be a fashionable and snazzy decision. I am personally interested in the format of short stories for fictional prose, as I partake of the idea that the short story format imposes a paradox in its very nature: it is a cutout, "a fragment of reality, with well-established boundaries, but in a way so that this fragment acts as an explosion that opens completely a much wider reality, with a dynamic view that spiritually transcends the area captured by the camera's field of vision."²³ This tension that is intrinsic to the short story format has been thoroughly interesting for me throughout my academic formation.

It is also interesting at this point to give a little thought to why I chose to study difference. Difference, in time, is the subject of the last advice that Chimamanda gives to her friend in her half-letter, half-manifest called *Dear Ijeawele*²⁴) in light of her friend's announcement of being pregnant with a baby girl:

Teach her about difference. Make difference ordinary. Make difference normal. Teach her not to attach value to difference. And the reason for this is not to be fair or to be nice but merely to be human and practical. Because difference is the reality of our world. And by teaching her about difference, you are equipping her to survive in a diverse world. (29)

²⁰ As highlighted in their website, available at <https://www.npr.org/books/titles/181678037/americanah>. Last access: 30th August 2020.

²¹The New Yorker: "The 10 Best Books of 2013": <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/books/review/the-10-best-books-of-2013.html/>. Last access: 30th August 2020.

²² Link to the article by The Atlantic discussing the impact of Beyoncé's subtle and controversial name-dropping of Adichie in her 2013 single "***Flawless": <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/12/when-beyonc-samples-your-ted-talk-this-is-what-happens-to-your-book/282610/> Last access: 30th August 2020.

²³ CORTÁZAR, Julio. *Valise de Cronópio*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2006, p. 151. My translation.

²⁴ *Dear Ijeawele* was born from a Facebook post published on Adichie's public Facebook feed on 12th October 2016. From Adichie's official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/chimamandaadichie/posts/a-new-piece-from-chimamandadear-ijeawele-or-a-feminist-manifesto-in-fifteen-sugg/10154412708460944/> Last access: 30th August 2020.

A huge part of my research begins because of the verb “to contest”. I have witnessed people contesting other people’s identities based on differences that are found either across various identity groups or even within one such group. I do understand the mechanisms by which that happens, now – significantly better than what I used to before I stirred my research in this direction; however, I still struggle to find the use of that. And it is fair to say that I found in Adichie’s short stories a way to start talking about all of that.

There is an interesting question, posed by Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora*, that caught my attention from the very first time I came in contact with her work. In describing her experience with emigrating to the United Kingdom, she tells us that it took her a while to understand just exactly “[h]ow was I to ‘place’ myself in Britain”. The verb ‘to place’ here, of course, is not being used in the material sense, but in a half political, half ontological one: what exactly is the identity through which she would be perceived in her new home country? How exactly would people react to and deal with that identity? Is it even possible to speak of a single identity at stake in her geographical relocation? What are the boundaries and constraints within which that identity is built and legitimised, and what lies outside of it? Does the lived experience of Brah up until that point in her trajectory even fit within these newly established constraints? And what is more, I am also interested in inquiring how frequently does that question of “how to ‘place’ oneself” lurk in one’s mind when it comes to many different identity categories, such as gender, race, sexuality, etc. It might not be difficult to observe how people in many different places and contexts seem to be looking to ‘place’ themselves, therefore symbolically staking out an identity territory for themselves. How come?, is a question that has puzzled me for a while, and is a question I hope to begin to answer with my dissertation.

In the introduction to her book, Brah also talks about the tension of ‘being’. In a biographical and anecdotal account, she gives abounding personal examples of how the pre-given, material reality of her existence and experiences seems to be automatically disregarded, disconsidered and obliterated by people she meets in many different situations. In an interesting provocation, she recounts incidents in which her physical appearance spoke for her lived experience, and how there was a notorious mismatch between what people assumed based on her looks, and what she had actually lived and recognised as herself. For example, her being recognised as *not* Ugandan while living in the United States, because of her South Asian physical features, despite her childhood years having been spent in Uganda. Such incidents, in Brah’s own words, expose “the contradictions embodied in the production

of identity.” (9) This provides a crucial corollary for my research: identity and difference are closely tied together, and must therefore be examined in the course of this dissertation.

All of these issues raised in this introduction and by this dissertation depart from and are nurtured by a very personal drive: what sustains me in the pursuit of dialogues within the walls of academia is in fact the personal extent of issues and debates that I come across in my day to day. I depart from the observation that academic production exerts an influence in life outside the walls of academia, and this type of dynamic fascinates me. Maybe this is yet another justification for having chosen to study through/with the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: because she speaks in a language that is common, and it is this everyday language that provides a counterpoint to the hermetic language of academia and mobilises the lives of people outside the walls of academia, *in conjunction* with academic labour.

Chapter 1 – Discussing the Theory of Difference

These projects – feminism, anti-racism, socialist envisioning of democratic politics – have had a critical bearing on the intellectual and political configurations of our times. (...) Participation in these projects taught me the importance of understanding the intersections between ‘race’, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and so on, precisely because these relationships were rarely addressed together. To be simultaneously concerned about them was to *lay oneself open to the charge of being ‘divisive’, or ‘diluting the struggle’*.

Cartographies of Diaspora, page 10.

To begin with, here are a few preliminary considerations on what led me to work with Avtar Brah’s 1996 book “Cartographies of Diaspora”²⁵. I have chosen to work with this book in particular because through the discussion of categories such as culture, experience, and difference (among others) the book provides interesting insights into the nature of “identity”: Brah introduces the debate with an anecdotal piece telling of the time when she applied for a scholarship to study in the USA. On the occasion, the representatives of the many American universities that made the panel to interview candidates applying for grants seemed puzzled and unable to acknowledge or even recognise the many different identity “markers” inscribed in Brah’s “looks” (sic page 3). In failing to recognise these, Brah saw herself stranded between questions and answers that did not accurately represent herself: her life experiences, the history of her family, the history of countless South Asian families with similar histories, and the major historical context of colonialism which brought about much of the factors that boiled down to affect her personal life on the day of that panel.

It should not be difficult on the one hand to account for this particular chronicle in terms of the result of the panellists’ inability to come to grips with the *intersection of multiple identities* (using intersectionality as a framework first proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in

²⁵ BRAH, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: contesting identities*. London: Routledge, 1996.

1991²⁶); however, in addition to this observation, what can be said of the ways in which multiple identities are positioned in relation to one another? What is the role and/or the place destined for different identities? What happens to difference when it is experienced *within* the same pre-established identitary group/category? What is at stake when people do not assume Brah is Ugandan because she does not “look” Ugandan?

At a first glance, it seems that we are talking about the obliteration of her past, lived and material experience, which sounds as absurd as saying that the sky is green, the grass is blue, and this paragraph right here has never been written *at all*. That would be, to say the least, very disconcerting. Therefore, if Brah’s formative years in her Ugandan hometown, Jinja, cannot simply be disposed of, for the sake of perceiving and manifesting Brah’s individual, unique identity, then it seems unwise – or at least in need of investigation – to forgo of other sorts of experiences that *mark difference* between subjects that seem (from an external point of view) to belong to the same identity category (and let us not forget the political identification of these subjects with said identity, which is equally crucial in the realm of identity politics).

In light of Brah’s account and the many issues that arise from it and which she discusses in detail, here I attempt to articulate the concepts of difference and diaspora (as a relational category, as is discussed further on) in the course of my dissertation. Many of these issues find their way in the prose of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and it is my intent to expose these passages and mobilise the body of theory that I explain below. In order to do so, I will be providing literary excerpts that form a solid basis for the theory discussed in this chapter with examples from the three short stories that have been chosen to be analysed in Chapter 2. Those are ‘Imitation’, ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ and ‘The Headstrong Historian’.

‘Imitation’ tells the story of Nkem, a Nigerian woman living in the United States, who is married to Obiora, a wealthy and influential Nigerian businessman. The plotline in ‘Imitation’ revolves around Nkem’s internal conflict as she acknowledges her belonging to one particular identitary group, from which a certain set of behaviours is expected, some of which she has trouble corresponding to. The short story paints the picture of her relationship and history with her husband, as Nkem weighs the pros and cons of her situation, until she is prompted to take a stance.

²⁶ CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*. Stanford Law Review, no. 6, Jul., 1991. pp 1171-1445.

‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ is a short story about a young, Nigerian woman, Akunna, who won the American visa lottery and immediately relocates to Maine, in the United States, where her “uncle” (who is not really a relative, but a friend of one of her family member’s) lives. Upon arriving, Akunna is confronted with her own prejudices about Americans, as she navigates her newly granted status as an immigrant having to make a living barely earning minimum wage.

Finally, ‘The Headstrong Historian’ tells the story of an Igbo’s family lineage throughout the decades, capturing right the moment when the British Anglicans arrived in southern Nigeria. As the power relations shift and morph in the village where Nwamgba was born, she finds herself in the middle of a generational family quarrel, and the only way to claim her right to her property and stand her ground is to meddle with the “harmless-looking, the colour of albinos, with frail and slender limbs” white men who came to live in Nigeria.

In the next section, I will discuss the concepts of culture and identity, paying particular attention to the way in which culture tends to be portrayed as a unitary, absolute concept, flattening the idea of identity in order to create a monolith. As is exposed by Brah, this levelling of different identities can cause unproductive noise in the identity discourse.

The Intersection Between Culture and Identity

Brah states that culture is the amalgamation of a group’s “history”, meaning their shared experience as social beings. She also states that the “group histories of different sections of society differ in important ways” (18), and to illustrate the latter, Brah brings up the case of the South Asian population living in Uganda until Idi Amin’s expulsion of this population from Ugandan territory, leading them to immigrate to Britain. Inside this group, and despite the fact that these people were all coming from the same political background of exile, the class situation of these people prior to and after the move to a new country etches people’s lived experiences in different ways. Therefore, if culture is formed based on experience, even among South Asians deported from Uganda in 1972 who settled in Britain, it is axiomatic that there are different cultures inside the same political group – which is generally and vaguely referred to as “immigrant South Asians”.

To further elucidate the problematic of “culture” in the singular, Brah offers the example of the “Second-generation” or “Asian-British” sort of identity “problem”: she explains how there is a tendency of people to talk about the “culture clash” that permeates the

experience of young people of Asian descent brought up and growing up in Britain. This seems to be a mistaken assumption for many reasons: first and foremost, speaking of a clash between “two cultures” implies that there is one single “British” culture and another single “Asian” culture, which is an assumption that takes for granted the difference of experience within these internally heterogeneous groups; and if different parts of the same heterogeneous group has had different experiences, we are bound to conclude that there exist different cultures within any given “one” culture. Secondly, “the emphasis on ‘culture clash’ disavows the possibility of cultural interaction and fusion. There is no *a priori* reason to suppose that cultural encounters will invariably entail conflict.” (40-41) that goes to say that if we are to analyse any sort of conflict that may arise between cultures (in general, not only in this particular case) we are likely to be met with the “power relations underpinning cultural hierarchies” (41), rather than the myth of irreconcilable cultural differences which is generally accepted without further investigation. And in the third place, there seems to be lodged in such a statement the assumption that one culture completely overrides the other, negating the traffic between cultures which has been happening for centuries all over the globe – and in Brah’s own words, “[t]he point is that intercultural travel across the globe is an ancient phenomenon, and Britain is constituted out of these multifarious influences.” (41)

In terms of identity, the most direct contribution of Brah on the topic is that “identity is singularly elusive” (20), which recognises the generally accepted statement that human beings are in constant change, despite recognising in themselves an unshifting core below all these changes; and that identity is both “subjective and social, constituted in and through culture” (21), as well as dependent upon the external gaze towards someone (as seen in the biographical accounts that Brah enriches her text with).

Brah also adds to the argument some of the thoughts of psychologist and psychiatrist Erik H. Erikson on identity: the fact that identity is for the most part a subconscious process – meaning that there is no actual control one can have over their identity – and that it is usually made conscious through painful and/or elating experiences; and that “identity is never ‘established’ as an ‘achievement’ in the sense of a personality armour, or of anything static and unchangeable” (ERIKSON apud BRAH, 19).

While Avtar Brah’s account of identity is very on point for the implications of this very concept throughout her work, it still is quite brief; therefore, I would like to expand on this topic by discussing the concept of identity as presented by Stuart Hall, in his book *The question of cultural identity* (in *Modernity and its failures*, HALL et al.).

To begin with, remaining on a very general level for a moment, and regardless of the epistemological premises involved, the most basic aspect of ‘identity’ is that it provides the individual with a sense of safety. Identity, as one or more shared aspects of one’s life, provides the individual with a stable anchorage within society. Granted that identity is a social phenomenon, that exists in the genesis of the interaction between multiple people, having a common framework for identifying the self and the other entails previsibility, which on its own begets a sense of security. If we accept this statement as is, then it is an interesting exercise of logic to have a look at one of its logical conclusions: if identity entails safety and previsibility, then it is the fear of *imprevisibility* and danger which entails identity, too. This logical exercise is bound to surface here and there throughout this dissertation, as I will be speaking at length of difference – the very element that tensions, tips over this sense of security and stability.

According to Stuart Hall, the notion of identity has some historicity to it, expressed in three different conceptions: those of the (a) Enlightenment subject, those of the (b) sociological subject, and those of the (c) postmodern subject. The Enlightenment subject would take the individual as something totally unified and rational: the individual’s identity consists of an inner nucleus, to which many events and circumstances will arise in a lifetime; however, the core of a person will remain untouched, unchanged all throughout one’s life.

For the sociological subject, this inner nucleus is neither autonomous nor self-sufficient. Identity relies on someone’s relationship to “others who are important to one”, who on their turn mediates values, symbols and meaning unto the self. It is forged on the continuous dialogue between the self and the exterior cultural world. In this regard, identity can be seen as an intermediate layer between the inner self and the outside world, a layer that “stitches” the individual into society, and the outcome is the aforementioned stability and sense of security: “It stabilises both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable.” (276) Therefore, the process of “identification” is about projecting oneself on a given identity (usually externally attributed), which necessarily is in accordance with what culture expects from it. In a lifelong timeline, identity is made of two parts: the inner self, which is understood to be unchanging, and the “layer” to which the self projects itself, a layer that is ever changing according to what culture demands from a particular identity.

When it comes to the conceptions of the postmodern subject, identity is not a monolith anymore; it becomes a matter of multiple, sometimes dissonant identities, which, according to Hall, may sometimes be mutually contradictory and unresolved. In this regard,

the individual does not possess one single, fixed and permanent identity. Rather, the subject is expected to come to terms with an identity (that is multiple in itself) that is constantly altered by the ways in which people are represented or interpellated by the cultural systems surrounding them.

The reason for this fragmentation is, as pointed out by Hall, modernity and modern societies which are in constant, fast and permanent change. This relentless change would be the primary difference between traditional and modern societies. Discontinuity and dislocation, as discussed respectively by Anthony Giddens and Ernest Laclau, would promote the de-centeredness that dismantles identity as a unitary category. However, Laclau particularly does not seem to see a problem with this fragmentation: as Hall points out, to Laclau late-modern societies are “characterised by ‘difference’; they are cut through by different social divisions and social antagonisms which produce a variety of different ‘subject positions’ (i.e. identities) for individuals.” (279) Here difference surfaces as the default state between individuals, a state that holds society together because society’s “different elements and identities can, under certain circumstances, be articulated together” – an articulation that is always partial.

In short, this fragmentation, or pluralization of identities, promoted by a post-modern state of things, entails what Hall calls the “identity game”. To discuss this concept, Hall provides us with an example in which multiple identities have been gambled into a desired outcome. Let us look at this example briefly, in order to articulate some elements of difference through it.

The Identity Game

Hall evokes an event in recent North American history in order to lay down the complexity and contradictions of the concept of identity. In 1991, North American president G. W. Bush nominated Clarence Thomas, then federal judge to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, to the role of associate justice of the United States’ Supreme Court. Thomas then would happen to be the second African-American man to serve on the Court, following right after and filling in at the wake of the retirement of Thurgood Marshall, a former lawyer and civil rights activist, with a career dedicated to the North American political system always aligned with democratic causes, notably in the

Brown v. Board of Education case²⁷. Thomas, on the other hand, has relentlessly stood on the more right wing of the North American political system, expressing a range of deliberately conservative views on issues such as equal protection and affirmative actions. Thomas' nomination, according to experts and as suggested by Hall, was an interesting attempt by G. W. Bush at restoring the conservative political majority in the Supreme Court.

The hearing that followed Thomas' nomination was one of the longest processes for the confirmation of a Supreme Court justice in North American history, mostly due to the many sexual harassment allegations posed against Thomas by former coworkers. Among those, the only sexual harassment victim to follow through to testimony by the Senate Judiciary Committee was Anita Hill, a law professor at the University of Oklahoma, who had previously worked under Thomas at the United States Department of Education, as well as at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Washington D.C. Hill's allegation, which initially were investigated by the FBI and deemed by the committee's chairman as inconsequential in regard to the scheduled vote on Thomas' nomination, leaked to the public eye through an NPR correspondent, which ended up causing an uproar among members of the senate, as well as activist groups across the United States. In turn, there was a lot of pressure on the senate to open a second hearing for Thomas, in which the sexual harassment allegations would be discussed, including Anita Hill's testimony along with that of other women who had worked in close proximity with Thomas along his career. As history has it, the second hearing went towards dismissing Hill's charges and, without further objection, led to the confirmation of Thomas as the 95th associate justice of the North American Supreme Court.

As Hall argues, the former U.S. president G. W. Bush, in his attempt to further the presence of his own right-wing political beliefs in the Supreme Court, made a clever 'move' (adding to the metaphor of identity being a game that is played at the discretion of the participants) in nominating Thomas, because Thomas lies at the crossroad of multiple identity markers, a fact which could potentially cushion his conservative affiliation. Consequently, when examining both public opinion and the motives of the 100 senators which took part in the vote, Hall identified at least three different scenarios that could play in favour of Thomas: a) black men would support Thomas based off his ethnicity; b) black women would show

²⁷ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case, and hallmark of the success of the Civil Rights Movement in the history of the United States, in which the justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. See <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/brown-v-board-of-education-of-topeka>, last access on 20th November 2022.

support, for the sake of racial diversity in the court; c) white conservative women would support him for his conservatism and anti-feminism. In other words, had Clarence Thomas been a white conservative man, the polarisation of opinions would not have favoured his confirmation, as much less would the Democratic-controlled Senate in 1991.

Having a look at this event in North American politics, Hall draws a few conclusions in the realm of identity theory. First, that identities are contradictory among themselves. Second, no singular identity – for instance, class identity – is able to align all other identities, as a kind of ‘master key’. Another conclusion is that no single identity will ever be able to define people’s interests and political affiliation. It also seems to worry that, in his own words, the world is increasingly getting the more sliced between different political identities, that do not mutually coordinate; and that the process of identification “has become politicised” (280) – one such phenomenon that Avtar Brah seems to provide a better framework to be understood, but more on this topic will be covered on the section discussing the four types of difference ahead.

I would like to call attention to the first conclusion – that identities are contradictory among themselves. I would like to investigate what there is of ‘contradictory’ between multiple identities. In examining the event of Clarence Thomas’ nomination, maybe Hall is pointing out to the inexplicable ‘contradiction’ of the black woman who expresses support towards Clarence Thomas. In Hall’s view, it seems that there is a contradiction in the fact that a black woman will endorse an alleged male harasser. This ‘prediction’ seems to be based on the shallow assumption that a black person will blindly and uncritically support another black person, for the sheer fact of blackness. While that is certainly an option, I would not like to see it portrayed as the only logical conclusion to this dilemma. I would like to believe, particularly based on much academic research, that when somebody supports a black person, it has to do more with the recognition of historic, structural racism than with a person’s skin colour. And it is rather plausible to believe there are many ways of recognizing historic and structural racism other than by excusing sexual harassment.

It is also interesting to investigate what ‘contradiction’ would entail being a woman while being a black person. What in being a woman inherently contradicts a person’s black identity? Is it not possible to be a woman and rally against racism? Is it not possible being a black person and demanding gender equality?²⁸ Would it be the case that being black

²⁸ Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Alice Walker are female black intellectuals who challenge the myth that there is inherent conflict between feminism (a term that begs critical investigation) and being an active part of the anti-racism movement. See for instance “The Master’s Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (LORDE, 1979), “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (LORDE, 1980), “Feminism Is

imperatively means being misogynistic? Does being a woman forcefully mean being racist? If that were the case, then I can understand the tension in putting these two identities together. However, as that does not seem to be the case, it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that there is nothing inherently conflicting between different identities, at least not as a pre-given fact. What is conflicting in my view is claiming support to the feminist cause and dismissing the gravity of a charge of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, if we understand feminism and racism as a stance of social criticism, informed by a historical perspective and keen observation of social facts, being a feminist or anti-racist has nothing, in and of itself (i.e., via the idea of essentialization), to do with the identity condition of womanhood nor of blackness.

There is another implication in presuming ‘contradiction’ in a black woman supporting Clarence Thomas, that is the assumption that every black woman is the same – thinks in the same way, shares the same opinions, has the same reasons for supporting or opposing people, etc. Turning black people, or any sort of permutation of identity groups for that matter, into a predictable monolith is far from realistic, as is relentlessly argued along this dissertation. If we admit multiplicity and complexity within identity groups, then there is no conflict in the fact that some black women supported the nomination of Thomas whereas some black women did not, for whatever reason they had, none of it necessarily having to do either with their blackness nor with their being women. In fact, we would have to rule out of the equation both blackness and womanhood (as problematic as these terms can be) in order to investigate the reasons behind support/opposition of Clarence Thomas.

What the “identity game” points out to is the gargantuan difficulty still present in many spaces within society to state directly the sexism in people’s behaviour. In this sense, whenever we are confronted with an event such as Mr. Thomas’ nomination, the issue at hand in this scenario becomes the ‘absurd’ of a fragmented sense of identity, made of multiple conflicting/fighting identities, *instead* of the structural leniency with sexual harassment massively put forth by the societal dismissive attitude towards gender relations, failing to acknowledge the gravity of sexual harassment and the power imbalance among genders.

In her publication ‘Dear Ijeawele’, Adichie speaks out on the fallacy that feminism is only legitimate if women behave perfectly to the point of sainthood – the fallacy that the minute a woman makes a mistake, or acts in a condemnable way (in terms of common sense, e.g. by committing felony or any offense punishable by law), it automatically negates the

for Everybody: Passionate Politics” (hooks, 2000), and “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose” (WALKER, 1983).

validity or need for the feminist cause. In fact, she argues, feminism is necessary even in a world with some women who happen to be racist, transphobic, ableist, homophobic, misogynist, and who are not seeking to revisit such behaviour. Feminism – and any social struggle for that matter – is not about the moral conduct of individuals; rather, it is about the position a group is placed at within social structure. If a person is barred from participating in any given activity (particularly the ones involved in safety and prosperity) because they belong to a particular group (based off race, gender, sexuality, ability, age, religion, etc.), it classes as discrimination by definition, and common sense would have it as detrimental to society.

In conclusion, coming home after such investigation of the term, identity is context-specific and multi-faceted (Brah, 46). One such example is South Asians living in Britain who gather to recreate cultural/religious events that they used to attend before diaspora. Even in being able to successfully organise and attend those, the meaning attached to these events being held in British territory is hardly the same as holding those events for instance in their homeland.

In the next section, we will have a look at a framework for analysing difference proposed by Brah, while illustrating some of the theory with the main characters and plotlines of each of the selected stories for literary analysis. This framework provides us with the opportunity to look at the discourse surrounding identities from a new perspective, zooming into the event of difference and reflecting about the many possible attitudes in response to it.

The many roles of difference

The fact that no culture nor identity is a monolith leads to a closer examination of the concepts of difference, diversity and differentiation. Brah exemplifies these concepts in chapter 5, by expanding on two cases: the word ‘black’ as deployed by social movements across Britain from the 60s onwards, and by the Black Power movement in the United States; and the debates around the feminist movement in the 80s to 90s, particularly in Brah’s own experience in the International Women’s Conference in Nairobi in 1985.

In regard to the first case, Brah talks about the controversy surrounding the word ‘black’ while referring to people of African-Caribbean and South Asian descent in Britain in terms of policy-making. Providing some context to the term ‘black’, Brah mentions the Black Power movement in the United States in the 60s, in which some people would argue that

‘black’ is a word referred to people of sub-Saharan African descent, and it should be used to raise awareness of the political history closely related to the African diaspora among black Americans. Following this line of thought, if we are to draw a parallel between the Black Power movement and the situation of diaspora into Britain, the concept of being ‘black’ can only apply to people of South Asian descent *strictly* in a political sense, since it does not encompass the specific cultures hailing from South Asia. Brah’s first intervention to this rationale is her own experience with South Asians in describing their diasporic condition in British territory. She states, “[i]n my own research I have found that South Asians will frequently describe themselves as ‘kale’ (black) when discussing issues of racism.” (99) In this sense, the same word is appropriate to describe similar, yet clearly different, social realities, and it seems harmful to exclude the experience of some people, prioritising the experience of a particular subset of people within the same group, since both realities are equally valid and urgent to be addressed.

The second intervention in this kind of rationale can be done through the history of the term ‘black’: in the postcolonial landscape that came about in the 15th century, it had been used originally as a ‘vessel’ of colonial supremacy. The ‘non-whiteness’ of South Asian and African-Caribbean people was used as a code for “a relationship of domination and subordination between the coloniser and the colonised” (96). Through such a vessel operates a “common racism structured around colour/phenotype/culture as signifiers of superiority and inferiority in post-colonial Britain. This means that African-Caribbean, South Asian and white groups are relationally positioned within these structures of representation.” (105). The point here is to observe the way in which many vastly different (yet not by any means ‘irreconcilable’) cultures are melded together in one big indistinguishable mass with the usage of the very same word as analysed before.

On a related note, regarding the usage of the word ‘kale’ in Brah’s research, she underlines how frequently ‘kale’ is not the only identity operator that people refer to when articulating their life experiences: “since the whole social being of South Asian and African-Caribbean peoples is not constituted only by the experience of racism, they have many other identifications based on, for example, religion, language and political affiliation.” (99) Adding salt to injury, there is yet another dimension to the usage of the word ‘black’, which is that of local policy-makers who make usage of the word ‘black’ “as a basis for formulating policies for the allocation of resources”, which is as imposing and urgent to be examined as the ongoing debate within the social movements mentioned above.

All of that goes to say that the word ‘black’ has been deployed in a violent manner – by reinforcing the logic of colonisation towards non-white peoples – as well as been reclaimed in an act of resistance – by either people of South Asian and Sub-saharan descent – and it bears internal noise and/or contradiction, which hopefully gets to be accounted for in the terms of *difference* as discussed further down the dissertation. Language, as most literature scholars already know, is relevant to cleave and acknowledge fundamental differences, and can undoubtedly be used to either reclaim or disavow different experiences in the social/material arena.

Still on the issue of the internal noise/contradiction of words, Brah reports her experience at the 1985 Women’s Conference as an allegory for difference: despite the at first glance “obvious” fact that ten thousand women gathered in Nairobi to “address questions of our ‘universal’ subordination as a ‘second sex’” (102), the nature of the debates, claims and appeals that took place in the conference was unmistakably heterogeneous: not only being a woman did not warrant the same perspective on any given issue (“For some women, racism was an autonomous structure of oppression and had to be tackled as such; for others it was inextricably connected with class and other axes of social division”, p. 107), but the list of topics in need of being addressed and discussed was very much plural (e.g., the problem of male violence against women and children, the unequal sexual division of labour in the household, questions of dowry and forced marriages, clitoridectomy, heterosexism and the suppression of lesbian sexualities: all these were issues demanding immediate attention)(Brah, 102). An important take-away in terms of difference and identity that Brah drew out of her experience that seems to summarise these issues remains this one: “It is now axiomatic in feminist theory and practise that ‘woman’ is not a unitary category” (102).

A very interesting point made by Brah is the way in which many types of differences can be used in less than fruitful and productive ways by misguided intentions: she tells us of how instead of recognising the many specificities of different conditions and contexts among women, particularly giving attention to the interconnections of one form of oppression to other forms of oppression, some people seem to begin a movement of differentiating “these specificities into hierarchies of oppression. The mere act of naming oneself as a member of an oppressed group was assumed to vest one with moral authority.” (107) In that sense, the belonging to multiple marginalised demographics (in terms of gender, race, caste, sexuality, class, etc.) would provide people with “authority” over others, instead of helping to lay out the “patterns of articulation” (107) of different oppressions and how they interrelate. Last but not least, what is aggravating about such a posture is the fact that “assertions about

authenticity of personal experience could be presented as if they were an unproblematic guide to an understanding of processes of subordination and domination. Declarations concerning self-righteous political correctness sometimes came to substitute for careful political analysis (Ardill and O’Sullivan 1986; Adams 1989)." (107) This “unproblematic guide” to the actual understanding of different experiences is further elaborated on chapter 4 – “Questions of ‘difference’ and global feminism” (84).

By this point, the urge to examine difference as an analytical category seems notorious with such evidence. In the words of Brah, "The key issue, then, is not about ‘difference’ per se, but concerns the question of who defines difference, how different categories of women are represented within the discourses of ‘difference’, and whether ‘difference’ differentiates laterally or hierarchically." (114). She calls for greater analytical clarity in thinking difference, and elaborates on four axes that can be used to think difference (as much as difference can help delineate these axes): difference as experience, difference as social relation, difference as subjectivity, and difference as identity.

Difference as Experience

There is a very strong statement behind the idea of difference as experience: people’s lived experience does not reflect a pre-given reality, but rather is itself a tool for constructing cultural meaning. This is said in the sense that the fact that women are being paid lower wages in the workplace, as compared to their male counterparts, does not reflect a pre-given reality – i.e., that women by nature do not need higher wages, or that women should not be economically independent, or that women are incapable of performing as good as men at their jobs and therefore should be paid less for a poorer performance. Rather, it means that the phenomenon (an observable piece of collective experience) of wage inequality in the workplace *can* be used to create many different types of cultural narratives, including the kind of debilitating discourse towards women that underlines wage inequality as a corroboration of women’s lack of potential or capacity. In a nutshell, our lived experience does not reflect reality, but may be used to construct reality. In the words of Brah, “[this is why there is] the need to re-emphasise a notion of experience not as an unmediated guide to truth, but as a practice of making sense, both symbolically and narratively.” (115).

Here, the protagonist of the short story ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ serves as an example of how lived experience does not reflect the reality of a whole identity group. Akunna’s trajectory in the United States has led her to meet many people who, upon learning that she was from Africa, proceeded to act in a condescending way, telling her about how

they had helped Africa by donating “money to fight AIDS in Botswana.” (119) This behaviour departs from what Adichie often denounces as the patronising way in which Africa is portrayed in media and in society in general. It would be, therefore, understandable for Akunna to assume that every American has a sense of superiority towards Africanness, which becomes obvious once they realise she is from an African country. However, in the course of the short story, Akunna is confronted about this assumption by the presence of her romantic interest.

The idea that experience on its own does not reflect an unquestionable truth calls into question the nature of the alleged ‘contradictions’ that are pointed out in the ‘identity game’ mentioned by Hall, or, for example, in the transphobic discourse of a feminist-identifying cisgender woman. If experience is taken as an unmediated guide to truth, then the political support (or lack thereof) towards Clarence Thomas’ nomination provided by people belonging to one identitary group would indeed be predictable, and any incidence of somebody straying from the ‘script’ would indeed configure a contradiction. By the same token, if a cisgender woman is incurring in transphobic discourse from the allegedly advantage point of her “unquestionable” experience, therefore we would find in Feminism as a whole a justification for transphobia based off experience.

At this point, it is useful as well to point out that, as explained above in the discussion of identity via Stuart Hall, people are inscribed in cultural systems of value and meaning from the day they are born, as well as have a part in ascribing meaning to said system. This would presumably mean that “the way a person perceives or conceives an event would vary” (BRAH, 116) according to how they are culturally constructed, as well as to their unique sense of self. Therefore, even two siblings who have had very similar upbringing would not necessarily share the same interpretation of the shared events both have been through. Which goes to say that, even if black people of African-Caribbean as well as of South Asian descent are both derisively called black, both groups experience racism in different ways, and both experiences should not be conflated nor questioned, none being more legitimate than the other.

In Adichie’s collection, despite the presence of difference as experience in many of her short stories, the one which will better illustrate this concept is ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’.

Difference as Social Relation

The premise of difference as social relation is that difference itself is organised through systematic relations. “System” here implies a logic of nodes and connections, which may often be infused with hierarchies and power dynamics. In this sense, difference is a device for underscoring, outlining systems, making evident the relatedness between different nodes of a system. It is possible to say that difference and sameness are intrinsically tied together – one does not exist without the other. As an example, the concept of a “working class” bears within both the idea that ‘working’ is but one step within a class structure, and there is the ‘working’ side of this structure as well as the ‘non-working’; on its turn, to speak of “one step” within a class structure implies there is indeed a multi-step structure in place in our society; and the fact that we live in a society brings about the idea that there are systems of signification and representation which construct class as a cultural category. Such is the revelatory potency of difference, whenever it is brought to light.

One example of this process is when Akunna meets her in-laws for the first time. She becomes instantly aware that they were different from most people she had met since started dating her boyfriend, because of how they treated her relationship: “they almost made [Akunna] think it was all normal.” (125) Her realising that there was a crucial difference between her in-laws and the rest of the people she had met thus far reveals an essential difference: there are people who exotify her relationship, or try too hard to sound like they do not see a problem with it; and there are the ones who simply stay at ease.

It is important to point out that while the idea of difference as an indication of a prevailing system does make room for the historicity and genealogy of such systems (for instance, the acknowledgement of the material conditions that establish a class system in Western society), the particularity of everyday experience (and, as discussed above, the interpretation of one’s own experience through one’s own and unique sense of self) should not be downplayed. For example, when the experience of Nigerian women in Great Britain is examined, through the framework of difference as social relation it is possible to conduct the discussion on the grounds of a gendered postcoloniality in Great Britain – that is, there is a gender system operating in this society, in which women are generally held in a subaltern position; and this society is impacted by the historical fact of colonialism, which influenced directly the lives of the colonised people, but also established cultural benchmarks for the way that the people from the so called “empire” see and interact with the people hailing from the colonies. Much can be revealed by the examination of the cultural systems at play in the evocation of such identity markers; however, it is very much not possible to “specify, *in advance*, the particularity of individual women’s lives or how they interpret and define this

experience.” (118, my emphasis) The danger of conflating both stances is the danger of failing to grasp what is being made of difference when it is evoked. Is it acting as a means of affirming diversity or a mechanism for exclusionary and discriminatory practices? Do discourses of difference legitimise progressive or oppressive state policies and practices? In what ways are different categories of women represented in such discourses?

Difference as Subjectivity

Having comprised the observable as well as the structural dimension of difference, there is the need to account for the inner dimension of difference, that is, the way in which difference manifests in one’s subjectivity. To speak of difference as subjectivity is to acknowledge that human beings have an inner world – one that is described by psychoanalysis and psychology, that is made of desires, fantasies, etc. – which is not always aligned with the exterior, perceptible self. In this sense, subjectivity is the locus where we, humans, make sense of our relationship to the world. Prior to self-expression – declaring one’s allegiance to a political orientation, or expressing discontent at an uncomfortable joke in a social setting – there is the unique, inscrutable way in which one perceives the events around oneself, and this is the place of subjectivity.

A good example of how subjectivity plays a decisive role in how people enact their identities is Nwamgba herself, the protagonist in ‘The Headstrong Historian’. From the beginning we learn that Nwamgba does not meet the expectations of being a woman in the culture she is in. Her father “found her exhausting, this sharp-tongued, headstrong daughter who had once wrestled her brother to the ground” (199), going as far as telling people to not let the news spread that Nwamgba had done that. So even being a part of a community in which there are certain behaviours expected from her, Nwamgba’s subjectivity played a part in how she exists within this identity (being a woman).

It should come as no surprise that the self is always becoming, for it is always experiencing and responding to the surrounding world. In this sense, identity, as is discussed next, is the negotiation of the self and the perception of the outside world (the other’s gaze), a process that is subject to the very instability and fluctuation that are intrinsic to this intense process of experience-response. It is not uncommon, as Brah argues, that individuals are subject to discovering and adhering to new identities, for it is only natural that subjectivity is in a constant process of becoming.

Out of the short stories that are analysed in the next chapter, the one representing difference as subjectivity will be ‘Imitation’, in which the protagonist’s subjectivity is the main ingredient responsible for building up climax in the story.

Difference as Identity

The fourth dimension of difference is identity, the intermediate layer between the self and the world. Identities can be understood as the very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction and instability of subjectivity “is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core – a continually changing core but the sense of a core nonetheless – that at any given moment is enunciated as the ‘I.’” (BRAH, 123) Therefore, identities are always an *ad hoc* negotiation, an expression of the self in a particular moment in space and time. When confronted with difference, identities become a social construct – they carry power by proxy, only existing because they are given authority by the self, being recognised by the other. When the self declares an identity, there is an effort or strategy to become part of something bigger than the self – a group, an institution, a movement –, since many selves are mutually investing meaning to shared experiences around a differential axis. The second-wave feminist slogan in the late 1960s, “the personal is political”, is such an example of multiple individual experiences converging around a differential axis (gender) providing space for self-articulation and political organisation. Despite Difference as Identity being the fourth pillar of difference within the framework posited by professor Brah, the short stories selected for analysis do not illustrate or help to articulate this concept significantly, which opens up a way for future research. Difference, when witnessed in whatever context and played roles, reveals that identities are inscribed through experiences culturally constructed in social relations, by the many unique selves experiencing the same event. Observing and theorising difference is a means of revealing the dimensions imbued in heterogeneity.

One of feminism’s most powerful insights, according to Brah, is that “experience does not transparently reflect a pre-given reality, but rather is itself a cultural construction.” (115) In other words, the lived experiences that people go through in life are to a great extent historically and culturally designed: the lived experience of being put in charge of housework; of being shunned away from ‘masculine’ sports; of being discredited as ‘too emotional’; of being told you are biologically *weaker* as compared to men; of being solely put in charge of child care; of being excluded from political centers; of being historically subjected to economic dependency; all of these *lived* experiences of countless women do not represent a pre-given reality; an a priori reality; nor a spontaneous universal law. Rather, one

could say (and many of us have been pointing this out) that there have been designs put underway to shape a particular group's experience in a certain way. On a parallel note, it is also greatly needed to emphasise experience not as an “unmediated guide to truth” but as the practice of making sense of; the practice of understanding and attaching meaning to what has been witnessed and experienced; and, as Brah puts it sharply, as “a struggle over material conditions and meaning.” (115)

Another central point is that we must take experience as the *locus* of formation of the subject. This premise goes against the idea of “an already fully constituted ‘experiencing subject’ to whom ‘experiences happen’” (115) which, if that were the case, would confirm pre-given universals, rules, etc. On the contrary, as Jane Scott argues, “experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation” (SCOTT [1992] *apud* BRAH, 115). In other words, the “claim” that a given experience (for instance, the statistically verifiable extremely low rate of black people in decision-making position in businesses and corporations) directly means something as this “unproblematic guide to truth” (i.e., that black people are not capable nor qualified enough to be in such positions of power) is already in itself an interpretation of said experience; an interpretation that raises its head, looks around and searches for who might interpret it along the same lines, and who might differ.

It may perhaps be useful to stop and observe some of the questions raised after Brah’s work at this point. How are we to deal with the racism of a feminist, the homophobia of someone subjected to racism, or indeed the racism of one racialised group towards another racialised group, each “presumably speaking from the vantage point of their experience, if all experience transparently reflected a given truth” (116)? Are we to take it that feminism is a racist institution because of racist feminists? Are we to take it that there is no space for LGBTQIA+ people in black and brown communities across the globe? Are we to conclude that South Asians and black people of Sub-saharan African descent coexist in an either/or state in the sense that either one of the two groups suffers with racism while the other absolutely does not?

The notion that experience is not an a priori facilitator of reality and must be construed is usually lacking in general, “commonsensical” discussions about difference and experience between people. At the same time, as is pointed out by Brah, the 21st century brings with it the need to further elaborate on the idea of diaspora and borders, as is discussed below.

Thinking through Diaspora

According to Brah, the increase of migration over the 20th century has produced a volume of people who do not fall into the traditional definition of diaspora bodies. Many different movements and economic changes have taken place throughout the 20th century, challenging our previous notion of what diaspora looked like. The volume of migration to the United States, to Western Europe and Australia has increased, as well as the migration within countries of the geographical 'South'. The accelerated insertion of women in the workforce, as they become relevant agents in the accumulation of capital, as well as the advancement of politics of identity in the last couple of decades, all have contributed to a shift in the perception of what diaspora and migration really mean. The language of borders and diaspora acquired more importance with the increase of migration over the course of the 20th century. As such, the concept of diaspora needs to be reexamined, considering borders, language and culture. However, as Brah states (in 1996), not many efforts had been made to theorise these two.

This is partly because, as James Clifford (1994) rightly observes, it is not easy to avoid the slippage between diaspora as a theoretical concept, diasporic 'discourses', and distinct historical 'experiences' of diaspora. They seem to invite a kind of 'theorising', Clifford continues, that is always embedded in particular maps and histories. Yet, perhaps this embeddedness is precisely why it becomes necessary to mark out the conceptual terrain that these words construct and traverse if they are to serve as theoretical tools. (176)

In that regard, Brah argues towards the need of delineating "specific features which may serve to distinguish diaspora as a theoretical concept from the historical 'experiences' of diaspora." (176) Here, the word 'experience' is the central point for the new critique posited by Brah.

To start with, the concept of diaspora can in itself offer a critique of discourses of fixed origin, "because not all diasporas sustain an ideology of 'return'." (177) Moreover, there is a difference between homing desire and a desire for a 'homeland'; this distinction is important to dismantle the romanticised view on diaspora, which preaches that every diasporic body longs to return to a homeland, which might not even exist given the fact that many times what remains of the homeland for a diasporic body is the mere memory of how a place used to look and feel like back in the day.

Another concept that needs to be reexamined is the concept of ‘border’, which, as Brah argues, is necessarily inscribed in the concept of diaspora. However, far from being an essentialist category, ‘border’ is a political construct, constantly under dispute and under re-definition according to the context in which it is evoked. And of course, alongside ‘diaspora’ and ‘border’, both of these concepts “together reference the theme of location.” (177). In order to make a point, Brah evokes Angela Davis’ autobiography and Minnie Bruce Pratt’s essay, arguing that both these accounts do an “intricate unravelling of those manifold operations of power which have the effect of naturalising identities, and the different costs involved in maintaining or relinquishing lived certainties attendant upon such identities.” (177). Both Davis and Pratt grew up in Alabama and share their accounts on the political climate during the Civil Rights movement in the 50s-60s. However, despite sharing the same *location*, the two different accounts reveal fundamental differences in the way that a black woman and a white woman have related to and acted within the political struggle of that time. Difference surfaces here once again in demonstrating how the same geographical and psychic spaces can articulate simultaneously different stories and have different meanings, both contextually and relationally.

It is looking at these differences, and observing how they intertwine, that Brah founds the concept of the *diaspora space*, which is a conceptual framework for historicised analyses of diasporic *movements*, such as “contemporary trans/national movements of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital” (178). In the wake of all the accounts of difference and relationality presented by Brah, and having in mind the relation between these differences, her own definition of the diaspora space is as follows: “Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes.” (178)

Departing from a considerably vague definition of ‘diaspora’ by Webster’s Dictionary, Brah begins to scrutinise the meaning of the term, rejecting the immediate association that is made with the Jewish Diaspora, which is generally unduly taken as a framework of the typical/ideal model of diaspora. According to Brah, it is important to recognise from the get-go that diaspora is not the same as merely being in motion/movement. There is an intriguing paradox in the act of diaspora: it is the act of starting movement *in order to* settle down, therefore eventually ceasing movement – as in “putting roots elsewhere” (179). However, still this brief definition does not fully encompass the full extent of diasporas: it is indispensable to historicise diasporic journeys if they are to serve any analytical use – as is vehemently pointed out throughout the chapter, “it is axiomatic that

each empirical diaspora must be analysed in its historical specificity.” (180) Therefore, questions about *who travels, when, how, and under what circumstances* must be answered when defining different diasporas. On top of that, it is in this process that we manage to observe differences between multiple diasporic formations, such as the Sub-Saharan, African-Caribbean, North African, South Asian, Irish and Jewish diasporas. In this regard, Brah poses a rather long list of possible scenarios for different diasporas, which not only helps establish the terms of the diasporic movement, but also sheds light onto the myriad scenarios that mark differences within diasporic discourse.

Moreover, as important as identifying the scenarios which so to speak "initiated" diasporic movements, it is necessary to investigate/disclose the circumstances of arrival and settling down, paying particular attention to the way in which different groups have been *situated* within the “social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality, or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates” (179). This ‘situatedness’ (179) is central to realise how different groups are relationally positioned in a given context, and it is through recognising how different diasporic groups are positioned in relation to each other that we become able to “begin to deconstruct the regimes of power which operate to differentiate one group from another” (179-180).

In other words, observing the way in which a group of people migrate to a certain location, and paying attention to the way in which this group is treated among the locals – which is comprised not only by natives but also by other diasporic groups who previously settled down in said location – provides us with insights about the still much needed analysis of difference among identity groups. It is more than due that we question whether or not some of the groups within the diaspora space are treated as subaltern in relation to others, and whether this type of different treatment is aligned with the general purpose of reclaiming people’s dignities and providing them with equal rights – a goal that is deeply entwined with social movements such as feminism and the anti-racism movement.

* * *

Bearing in mind the impacts of the concepts elaborated throughout Chapter 1, in the next chapter we will be discussing in more detail this body of theory, through characters, plotlines and excerpts from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s prose, taking advantage of her

writing and relying on her short stories as points of reference for articulating and mobilising the body of theory discussed so far. As explained above, three of her short stories will be scrutinised for hints of the theory of difference.

Chapter 2 – A closer look at difference through literary analysis

You knew you had become comfortable when you told him that you watched Jeopardy on the restaurant TV and that you rooted for the following, *in this order*: women of color, black men, and white women, before, finally, white men—which meant you never rooted for white men.

‘The Thing Around Your Neck’, pages 121-122.

In this chapter, I will be conducting literary analysis on three short stories inside the collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Those are ‘Imitation’, ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ and ‘The Headstrong Historian’. In these pieces of literary analysis, I will also articulate three types of difference as described by Brah: Difference as Subjectivity, Difference as Experience, and Difference as Social Relations, respectively. The first short story focuses on Nkem and her inner dilemma around her husband’s unfaithful conduct and her ideals of family; the second short story accompanies Akunna, a young Nigerian who went to live in the United States and seems to be stranded between both the prejudices of people around her, and her own prejudices towards those people; and the third story focuses on Nwamgba, a women with a strong character which goes against the grain of what her society expects of her, while still maintaining a strong spiritual connection to her husband and her granddaughter throughout the waves of colonialism in Southern Nigeria. The first story that opens this chapter is ‘Imitation’, as seen below.

‘Imitation’ and The Latent Cry for Subjectivity

‘Imitation’ provides an interesting allegory for the issue of difference within any given identity. The protagonist of this short story, Nkem, is a Nigerian immigrant in the United States whose husband Obiora features among Nigeria's fifty most influential businessmen. The couple moved to the United States in the early years of their marriage, in order to very explicitly have their first child in the United States. They rented a house in a "lovely suburb near Philadelphia" (24); which later on went on sale and was acquired by

Obiora so that the family could definitely settle down in the United States. However, Obiora, as an important figure in his industry, has always travelled back and forth to Nigeria in order to tend to his business. At first his travels were short and far in between, but as time passed, he started having to spend more time and on more occasions throughout the year in Nigeria, so that at some point his stays in American territory would last only “two months in the summer and three weeks in December” (41), while he would spend the rest of the year in Nigeria. This situation baffled Nkem because she never saw it coming, not to mention that the couple had never had plans involving a family life in the United States. On top of that, a couple of years after settling down in the United States, Nkem became pregnant with her second child, so that Obiora’s absence through most of the year meant that Nkem was left alone with the kids and Amaechi, the Nigerian twenty-something woman who was brought across the ocean to work as live-in domestic help. The first scene in the story is a telephone conversation between Nkem and a friend, Ijemamaka, who is Nigerian as well and lives with her husband and kids in New Jersey. She had recently gotten back from a trip to Nigeria and has just reported to Nkem that there is a young girl living in Nkem’s house back in Lagos. Despite conceding that men have “their ways” (22), Ijemamaka seems to have a problem with the fact that Obiora allowed her to live in the house and drive his Mazda, meaning that he did not bother to hide his infidelity from view. However, she concludes, “This is what happens when you marry a rich man.” (22).

Nkem finds herself in a huge dilemma throughout the short story: she is upset about Obiora’s infidelity, as well baffled by the short amount of time that he actually spends with her and with their children, which end up having a “telephone voice” (26) for a father throughout most of the year. She reckons it is time to finally move back to Nigeria, as had always been her intention. On the other hand, a very sensitive detail of her relationship with Obiora is how she always “let him speak for the both of them” (41), never taking a stand on anything. He has always been the only decision-maker in the relationship as Nkem deferred to every single resolution of his.

The name of the short story is ‘Imitation’ because Obiora fosters a hobby of collecting “authentic” African tribal masks from the past centuries. Here, ‘authentic’ goes between quotation marks because the characters in the short story are aware of and joke with the flawed nature of the idea of authenticity – it is clear to them and to the narrator from the onset that most of the masks are mere imitations of lost relics from the past, which are so ridiculously exorbitant and rare to find nowadays that it is not worth the pursuit. The masks mentioned in the story are not supposed to be worn, but rather are decorative elements that

are used in the presence of kings during important ceremonies, bearing the symbolic power of royalty in themselves. Obiora explains that the masks he usually collects used to be highly-esteemed cultural artifacts to the peoples they belonged to, saying that “most of them are made to remember or honor the kings” (39) and that only very few, selected people could be “custodians of the mask, the same people who were responsible for bringing the fresh human heads used in burying the kings.” (23) Nkem, however, sees these masks as tokens of unhappiness: she wonders whether any of the few chosen guardians of the masks would rather not be involved in the gruesome murder of strangers in order to conduct a cultural rite that only them, by virtue of fate, had been assigned the task of carrying out.

‘Imitation’ is also an interesting short story because the major themes of mimicry and falsification do constantly tension the limits of identity. It is possible to observe the way in which some identity categories are built throughout the story, and how some of them are questioned by the very personal trajectory of the characters in it, therefore placing these characters in a fraught position of being accused of fraud. As will be explained ahead, Obiora provides a curious counterweight against this threat of falsehood by making use of the concept of difference, and Nkem’s personal dilemma – whether or not she is going to go back to Nigeria, which requires her to confront Obiora about his conduct thus far – is the cornerstone of the climax in this short story, and is heavily influenced by the whole tension between falsehood and authenticity evoked throughout the story.

In terms of identity, Nkem’s nationality is marked many times with the deliberate declaration that she is from Lagos, Nigeria, and we also have a glimpse at Nkem’s memories from the time in her life when she lived there, especially the period before being married to Obiora. She is also a Nigerian woman who immigrated to the United States, and so her foreignness, the fact that she is an outsider to the American culture, is marked in the short story too: to her neighbours, she had an accent that made her look vulnerable and helpless. She is a Nigerian foreigner who lives “in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia” (24), in a “brown house in suburban Philadelphia with sprinklers that make perfect water arcs in the summer” (34). In her standard suburban life, she drives a car, has a personal mobile phone, needs a maintenance person, owns a leather sofa, and lives in a “great house, ma’am” (26) as a delivery man from Ethan Interiors once said while doing a menial job around the house. Her children go to school and “sit side by side with white children whose parents owned mansions on lonely hills”. (27) Her neighbours on Cherrywood Lane are “all white, pale-haired and lean” (24), and their children sniff at food fallen to the ground calling it spoiled.

Obiora, as well as corresponding to Amaechi's and Ijemamaka's expectations of what "men are like" (22, 34), is one of Nigeria's Fifty Most Influential Men. He is also part of the Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America To Have Their Babies league (26), and of the Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America league. As pointed out before in the body of this text, these could be meaningless monikers if they did not bear very real consequences in these people's lives. In the words of Ijemamaka, it seems that being a rich man implies that they will be unfaithful and move their young girlfriends into their homes, away from where their family are located. And with those two titles come the corresponding titles for Nkem: she is not only the aforementioned typical suburban wife, but also part of the Women of Rich Men Sent To America To Have Her Babies league, and interestingly enough, as is markedly pointed out throughout the short story, one of the duties of the women who belong to that league seems to be complete deference.

Nkem's inner desires at the light of the infidelity news get in complete clash with the expectations for her identity position, and so she begins to question her belongingness to such identity categories, which suggests falseness and invalidity on her part – the story's atmosphere is fraught with the threat of falsification. The atmosphere is aggravated by other musings inserted throughout the prose: we learn that, in contrast to her children growing up in the United States, Nkem grew up being told that if morsels of food fell to the floor, "you snatched the food up, whatever it was, and ate it" (25). We also learn that her home had never had "real sofas" (31) until she was a young adult, that her parents worked at a parched farm and that her siblings "hawked loaves of bread at the motor park" (31). We learn that she was the *ada*, yet another identity marker, meaning that she was the first daughter and expected to help fend for her family, and then we learn that her background of great poverty, and the fact that she "still mixed up her English tenses" (31), grant her the moniker of 'Bush Girl' (31). What is more, she was a Bush Girl who did not enjoy the taste of wine (even though she brought herself to, since Obiora suggested that she get used to it), and was "nothing like the wives of his friends, the kind of women who went abroad and bumped into each other while shopping at Harrods" (32). At this point, we may be convinced that Nkem was uprooted from her natural environment and placed into a new territory that she was never meant to occupy, so that her past background suggests that she was not cut for the job of belonging to so many different leagues. But why wouldn't this new territory, to which she did not belong early in her life, become her new, rightful habitat? After all, Obiora did choose to propose to her, and to have "her siblings enrolled in school" (32) and to introduce her to his friends at the boat club, and therefore make her his wife.

Interestingly enough, following this thread and shifting the focus to Obiora, it is he who faces with a very level head the hostility in his neighbours' suspicion about the validity of his marriage to Nkem. When Nkem tells him that the neighbours had been curious about their marriage, asking why Obiora spent so much time away, he brushes it off by saying that “*oyinbo*²⁹ people were like that, if you did something in a different way, they would think you were abnormal, as though their way was the only possible way” (24). His remark demonstrates that he is keenly aware of the effects of difference, in the words of Brah, in commonsensical scenarios and debates, i.e., the way in which difference is generally misconstrued and mistrusted in society as a whole. Which, to be plain specific, does not exempt the character from misconstruing difference in any other given context, but rather is a useful general observation coming from a literary character that resonates a lot with Brah’s theorisation of difference, as discussed above.

This brings us to the last scene in the short story that is of interest to our investigation. One of Nkem’s musings, as she is still trying to locate her frustration and anger and make her decision about the news she has just learnt, is a memory of a conversation she once had with another Nigerian woman, whom she had just met “at a wedding in Delaware” (28) who, while complaining about her husband, had used the phrase ‘our men’, “familiarly, as though Nkem’s husband and hers were somehow related to each other.” (28) What this woman does is corroborate the idea that there is an established identity group to which Obiora belongs, and that is shared between him and the woman’s husband. What this excerpt illustrates is also the role of the other in recognising and attributing an identity to the self, regardless of potential differences, without asking for permission, without requiring confirmation from the self or caring about personal, unique, material experience. Further in the conversation, Nkem, who seems to dislike the familiarity with which that strange woman speaks, accidentally asks a question that does not seem to please the woman at all: “Nkem had asked the woman if she planned to move back [to Nigeria] and the woman turned, her eyes round, *as though Nkem had just betrayed her*” (28, my emphasis). Betrayal, here, corroborates the idea that this woman believes that she and Nkem belong to the same identity group, therefore she would expect some sort of alliance and alignment between them, which Nkem fails to deliver. This woman’s reaction is greatly significant in the major context of imitation in the story: Nkem does not seem to fit in well with women in the coveted league she ended up belonging to, and therefore it seems that this *faux-pas* question,

²⁹ As per Wikipedia: “Oyinbo is a Nigerian word used to refer to caucasians” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oyinbo>. Last access: 13th November, 2022.

which is promptly rebuked by her Nigerian colleague, works against Nkem's legitimacy to occupy the place she currently occupies.

This whole scene comes to illustrate Brah's point about how the other's assumptions and perception of the self seem to bear some sort of authority into defining the self's identity. There is a point to be made here about how the self gets sucked into identity categories regardless of lived experiences and intimate desires and inclinations, as though belonging to an identity category means something *a priori* and *per se*, while operating under the assumption that identities are monoliths and that they have no room for difference within. However, the point being made through Adichie's prose, is how Nkem's awkward question clearly shows that she, in her position as Wife of One of Nigeria's Fifty Most Influential Men, is a human being with different experiences, drives, desires and wishes than the other Nigerian Woman of a Rich Men Sent To America To Have His Babies she met at the wedding in Delaware, and others she could meet with belonging to that same identity group. In this sense, how could they be the same, and how could that woman's attitude and reaction be justified in any capacity? Having this in mind, the issue of falsehood seems to solve itself: the fraught atmosphere of impostorship that Nkem experiences throughout the short story is not a matter of being an imitation of a 'real' identity, but rather is an outcry, in favour of coexisting, inside this very identity, in a different way than others or than what is expected of that group.

The tribal brass masks hung on walls in 'Imitation' stand as an allegory for the struggles of identity belongingness: in fact, they are not used to cover faces, nor does it matter whether they are originals or not. They are a symbol of the duties and constraints that seem to be embedded in any sort of identity category that does not open room for difference within itself. Nkem's constant contemplation of these masks at a climactic moment in her marriage and her life – the moment she decides for the first time to take a stance against Obiora's will – and the ensuing enigmatic closing sentence of the short story³⁰ tension this pre-given, essentialised status of identity by hinting at the possibility of a different version of it. By challenging the pre-given assumptions concerning an identity that seems pre-established, Nkem finds room to regain control over her life and her innermost longing of being closer to Obiora, resulting in her self-actualisation.

Hopefully, Nkem's dilemma serves to remind us that beneath the many social expectations which are usually placed upon people's shoulders, there is always the filter of

³⁰ "There is nothing left to talk about, Nkem knows; it is done." (41)

subjectivity which guides the way and is a strong reference for helping people navigate their life choices. We are now going to accompany a Nigerian young woman as she moves to the United States and learns many things about the American people, at the same time as she is struggling with the way she is perceived in the greater picture of American society.

The Challenge of Handling Lived Experience in ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’

This short story, which lends its title to the collection, is written through the voice of the narrator talking to a second-person pronoun “you” – who we learn in the middle of the story is called Akunna. Akunna is a young Nigerian woman who moves to the U.S. after lucking out and winning the Nigerian Visa Lottery³¹. Her name had been put in the lottery by an uncle living in “a small white town in Maine” (115), who promptly offers to house Akunna until she gets on her feet and is able to afford her own living in America. The short story is fast-paced and spans about six months, and right at its beginning we witness a turn of events that leads Akunna to relocate from Maine to Connecticut, losing touch with her previous Nigerian-American hosts. Akunna then needs to find herself a job in order to make ends meet, as well as to support her family back in Nigeria. Throughout the short story, we learn the extent of Akunna’s class circumstance, hailing from an extremely poor and hardworking background, so that her connection with her family back in Nigeria, despite being kept short and wordless throughout the story, is a crucial marker of Akunna’s situation. Akunna finds a job at a local diner where she is paid “under the table” because the diner’s owner, Juán – despite believing firmly that immigrants are hard-workers – does not wish to pay the due taxes related to formal hiring. Despite her willingness to pursue higher education in the United States, Akunna finds herself unable to afford state education (since the credits are too expensive) while her new city in Connecticut does not have a community college (where there would still be a tuition fee, although significantly less costly). However, that does not stop Akunna from going after her own education by visiting public libraries and looking up online syllabi from schools, and reading some of the books she finds in them. In a

³¹ The Diversity Visa Lottery, also known as the “Green Card Lottery”, is an initiative established by the Immigration Act of 1990 in the United States, administered by the Department of State, which awards the winners with a United States Permanent Resident Card. According to Wikipedia, “It makes available 55,000 immigrant visas annually and aims to diversify the immigrant population in the United States, by selecting applicants from countries with low numbers of immigrants in the previous five years.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diversity_Immigrant_Visa Last Access: 1st Sept 2020. See also: <https://br.usembassy.gov/visas/diversity-visa-lottery/>.

turn of events, on an ordinary night at the diner, Akunna goes to wait on one of her tables and meets “him”. This nameless character is notoriously different from Akunna’s usual customers, and this perceived difference bonds the connection between the two. “He” quickly turns into a romantic interest for Akunna, and from the moment he is introduced into the plot, the story takes us through the ups and downs of their blooming relationship, some of which are interestingly based around the difference between the two of them.

‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ is a short story full of shallow and strawman-like characters and their surrounding context, which provides a good opportunity to analyse the concept of Difference as Experience. For example, as Akunna is in the process of moving to the United States, she has impressions of the American people that are corroborated by the people around her:

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. But don’t buy a gun like those Americans. (115)

This perception may come not only from Nigerian expats who went to live in the US, but also from the pervasive presence of American culture in Nigeria (as is evident from what Adichie speaks in many of her talks). And because this narrative is often perceived by people, within their social circles and in the media they consume – that is, people’s actual lived experience encompasses and reinforces this narrative –, it may lead to an askew perception of Americans in general – that all of them own big cars and big houses. In the short story, this assumption is so strong that, after having lived enough in the US to understand the dimension of her short-sightedness, Akunna feels the urge to report back to her family that this assumption could not be further from the truth:

In later weeks, though, you wanted to write because you had stories to tell. (...) You wanted to write that rich Americans were thin and poor Americans were fat and that many did not have a big house and car; you still were not sure about the guns, though, because they might have them inside their pockets. (118-119)

Again, to use Brah’s words, if we were to take the lived experience of people as an unmediated guide to truth, “americanness” would be defined by owning a big car, a big house, and guns. However, as the short story unfolds, experiencing difference first-hand in her stay in the US brought nuance to Akunna’s previous impression of Americans; and witnessing difference in her own, lived experience in the United States is what gave her a

more comprehensive idea of what Americans are like, demonstrating how lived experience may not always be completely representative of reality, particularly when it is limited and fails to encompass diversity and nuanced perspectives.

By the same token, Akunna (as a black Nigerian immigrant woman in American territory) is confronted with stereotypes about herself as she interacts with locals. At the community college she was briefly enrolled at in Maine, “They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you’d seen a car before you came to America.” (116) Her uncle had to face neighbours spreading rumours about him and his family, saying, “a few months after he moved into his house, that the squirrels had started to disappear. They had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals.” (116) Now, unlike Akunna, who (in an extremely unique position) got the chance to travel abroad to live in a new country, these people with such narrow views might as well never have set foot outside of their own country – meaning that they are drawing their assumptions not from lived experience *per se*, but from narratives and accounts they have had access to throughout their lives. Sadly, it is not rare to come across narratives in the West depicting Africa as

a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. (ADICHIE, The Danger of a Single Story. TED Talk, 2009)

It is so much so that some people take as the truth that “Africans” (despite the immense size of Africa and the many countries, biomes and cultures inside of it) do not have cars and houses. And while many people might in fact not have cars nor houses in Africa, this observable phenomenon in itself also does not represent the whole picture about Africa, or Nigeria, or Akunna.

Living in the United States, Akunna had so often experienced being seen through the lenses of stereotypes, interacting with people without the smallest clue of what Africa is like or what her life experience was as an African woman, that Akunna herself grew used to expecting Americans, all of them, to be notoriously ignorant and condescending about this part of her identity. For example, in the following passage it is possible to see how Akunna was met with assumptions that are far from plausible:

Many people at the restaurant asked when you had come from Jamaica, because they thought that every black person with a foreign accent was Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African told you that they loved elephants and wanted to go on a safari. (119)

Despite the Nigerian accent having very little similarities to the Jamaican accent (mainly due to the history of colonisation and American cultural imperialism in Jamaica, which is very different from the Nigerian context), the mere fact of Akunna's skin colour being black and her accent being perceived as foreign, is enough for Americans to assume that she was Jamaican. However, even if the person rightfully guessed Akunna's continent of origin, it would still be common that people approached conversation, expecting reciprocation from her, by talking about a kind of experience that could not be further from what Akunna had experienced as someone coming from the capital of Nigeria, Lagos. Although not a particularly popular route for safaris, Nigeria's biodiversity does include some kinds of savannahs, which are habitat to most of the species included in the 'big five' category. The elephant is one of namely 'the big five' (the others being the leopard, the lion, the rhino and the African buffalo), animals that are heavily associated with and particularly relevant to the safari market, which is popular mostly in Eastern and Southern Africa (including countries like Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe). The catch here, however, is that Lagos, Nigeria's capital in the south of the country, is not located in the savannah, which lies more towards the north, meaning that a person living in Lagos might have never actually been anywhere near a safari nor seen an elephant.³²

This is where the short story gets interesting, particularly from the perspective of Difference as Experience: so far, the gameboard is laid out with two parties working as polar opposites, Americans and Akunna, which only get to see a stereotypical version of each other, in a helpless state of mutual incomprehension. Akunna is tired of observing Americans misconstruing her identity, and in response to this, she begins to expect nothing less than ignorance from them. This is where "he" comes into the scene to shake up Akunna's resoluteness and challenge the dynamics of this strained cultural relationship, in which stereotypes are hurled between the parts, based off what each part identifies as their personal, lived (and to a certain extent undisputable) experience, in a way to cope with difference.

Confronting Akunna's perception of Americans so far, the night they had met at the diner he had asked Akunna

what African country you were from, you said Nigeria and expected him to say that he had donated money to fight AIDS in Botswana. But he asked if you were Yoruba or Igbo, because you didn't have a Fulani face. You were surprised (...). (119)

³² It is the equivalent of assuming that a Brazilian person lives by the beach, or has been to the Amazon rainforest, just by virtue of being Brazilian, disregarding the immense size of Brazil and the absurdity of such an assumption.

Contrary to Akunna's experience so far, "he" did not incur in the generalised oblivion to anything related to Africa or Nigeria; in fact, he showed some extent of knowledge that had very accurate cultural nuance for the Nigerian context, something that Akunna had rarely been met with. Also in this passage, the usage of the word 'surprised' is not trivial. In the plain and straightforward prose of Adichie, the atmosphere of listless despondency shrouding Akunna and her American endeavour is already in place at this point in the story. Our protagonist has gone through so many antagonising experiences – her time at the community college in Maine, the situation with her 'uncle'³³, the precarious working conditions to which she subjected herself, that were the only way she could secure a job and make a meagre living – that the 'hope' that things might change, or be less hostile towards her in that foreign land, is understatedly lost. And that is exactly why meeting "him" is such a radical change in the direction or expected outcome of the plot in the short story.

"He" was different, too, in that he did not seem to fall into the trap of having a paternalistic view of her as an African woman:

He asked your name and said Akunna was pretty. He did not ask what it meant, fortunately, because you were sick of how people said, 'Father's Wealth? You mean, like, your father will actually sell you to a husband?' (120)

A very common trace of the Western paternalism towards Africa is lumping together cultural practices deemed inferior and/or unacceptable (such as selling one's daughter to marriage) and assuming that anyone coming from Africa would approve of and engage in such practices, which to a certain extent is rooted both in ignorance and prejudice. "He", the soon-to-be romantic interest of Akunna, did not display this kind of exotifying assumption, therefore challenging a preconceived idea that all Americans are completely oblivious to anything related to African culture. As a matter of fact, as the story unfolds we learn that he had travelled to places like India, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania, and read literary works by Okot p'Bitek and Amos Tutuola. Therefore, his response to Akunna's Africanness did not come from a place of ignorance, but rather of recognition and experience.

Another way in which "he" disturbs Akunna's acquired assumptions throughout her stay in America is how he actually does not act in a patronising way about his knowledge of

³³ It's important to mention that Akunna wasn't related to her 'uncle' by blood, since he was the brother of her father's sister's husband. This man displayed a psychologically manipulative behaviour in the way he introduced Akunna to her new life in the United States, culminating in the aforementioned 'situation': he made sexual advances to Akunna, and attempted to manipulate her by saying that he could "do many things" (116) for her if she complied with his advance.

Nigeria and African culture in general. At some point in the short story *Akunna* reflects privately how “white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same—condescending” (120), and upon getting to know more about “him”, she comes to realise that

he didn't shake his head in the superior way that Professor Cobblepick back in the Maine community college did during a class discussion on decolonization in Africa. He didn't have that expression of Professor Cobblepick's, that expression of a person who thought himself better than the people he knew about. (120)

As it becomes clear, ignorance alone is not the only hassle that *Akunna* runs into while in America. A major issue that shows itself when debating theory of difference is the lasting harm of otherisation – that is, treating a person or group of people, who are different and therefore less than the self. While ignorance and lack of a diverse set of experiences can contribute to this type of harmful behaviour, as Adichie points out in her prose, knowledge itself – the accumulation of information on a certain topic or culture – is not necessarily able to prevent the negative consequences of otherisation either.

Coming back to the point of Difference as Experience, it serves to dismantle the assumption that any given experience could speak for and define a person's identity, cultural practices or perception of the events they have witnessed throughout life. It is possible to observe how *Akunna's* story provides many points of reflection, in which the experience of a person or a group of people would lead them to make assumptions about somebody else – whether we are looking at *Akunna*, Americans or “he” – and in fact those assumptions can and need to be challenged and re-examined. Looking from the perspective of this kind of difference, it is possible establish a timeline of assumptions being brought to light, only to be confronted later: we start at *Akunna's* household in Lagos, where her relatives and friends express their assumptions about Americans; then we are met with assumptions about African people from the neighbours in Maine and the people at the community college; then we get a glimpse at how *Akunna* is treated by customers at the diner; then we watch as *Akunna* slowly starts to get a more nuanced view of Americans, at the same time as she responds to the stereotypes thrown her way by developing new assumptions about Americans; until she meets “him”, someone who frustrates most of such assumptions, far from representing the perfect romantic interest, but rather bringing light into the trail of assumptions established thus far. The message that lingers from this timeline is that using one's experience to determine the identity of the other is not exclusive to anyone in particular.

In the next session, we will be analysing the short story ‘The Headstrong Historian’, observing in particular two characters: Nwamgba and Grace. The concept of Difference as Social Relations is applied to disclose social systems in place in Nwamgba’s community, which play a huge part in how she and the people around her behave and make decisions for themselves. Besides that, the waves of colonisation which come as a game-changer for the current state of things help to delineate how her son, Anikwenwa, will portray himself to his own community, and what kind of decisions he will make, creating an abyss between his mother and him. Other characters are also used to analyse Difference as Social Relations, but Ayaju – who is a great friend of Nwamgba’s – also help to illustrate efficiently the concepts behind this kind of difference.

Revealing and Revealed Social Relations in ‘The Headstrong Historian’

‘The Headstrong Historian’ is a story about a family lineage in a village in Southern Nigeria, going through waves of colonisation across the decades. It follows particularly the story of Nwamgba, an Igbo woman who experiences a deep connection with her partner, Obierika, a wealthy and well-positioned Igbo man. The couple struggles with fertility throughout the years, as they try to have their first child to carry on their lineage and wealth in the village where they live. Shortly after their first child is born, Nwamgba’s life turns into a tragedy as Obierika passes away, and his cousins, who had grown up with Obierika but had never been as hardworking or successful as him, begin usurping his goods (yams, goats, and even a part of his land) and titles. Nwamgba finds herself unable to stop them, either physically or by means of the justice system at work in her village – the Elder’s council. Because Obierika was an only child himself, his cousins were the closest to brothers that he had. Therefore, as Nwamgba herself could not by right inherit and manage what he left behind, his cousins alienated the inheritance from Nwamgba and left her a poor widow with a child to raise. She tried to take the case to the elders in the village, but to no avail since they sided with the cousins. At the same time as this family quarrel was going on, the Catholic and Anglican missionaries had been arriving to that part of the land, enforcing their own laws and religion, and ruling over the natives, simply because, as poignantly put by Ayaju (a friend of Nwamgba’s), they possessed better guns. Watching this shift in paradigms unfold, Nwamgba realised that she might get a chance to revert her situation and find justice for her family if only her son, Anikwenwa, spoke the language of the white people, and took their case to the

white people's courts. Thus began the process of cultural assimilation of this young, Igbo boy, who slowly but firmly began to develop a relationship of disdain for his non-Catholic, non-Western natal culture.

As Anikwenwa (who was baptised as Michael and soon enough refused to use his Igbo birth name) grew older and blended into the Catholic religion and Western culture, he was able to revert the family feud by claiming the real state of his family through court, as well as taking back the ivory tusk belonging to his father, which granted the family a higher social status in the village, and had been stolen by the cousins. Over the following years, however, Nwamgba lived the tragedy of seeing justice served for her case, at the cost of becoming completely disconnected from her son, on a deeply intimate and cultural level, and spent her life longing to see her husband's spirit returned to earth once again. Michael, who married and lived his life under the tenets of the Catholic church, had two children, the second one being a girl named Grace, who Nwamgba named in Igbo as Afamefunu. Grace, who enjoyed her Igbo heritage even while inserted in a postcolonial, westernised and Catholic culture, went to live a life of discovering the bitter contradictions in trying to reconcile her Igbo heritage with a Western culture that shunned it ruthlessly, realising the extent of the damage of colonisation on her very own lineage, and working towards undoing some of the harms of colonisation through her work as a historian.

In this short story, Difference as Social Relations can be used as a paradigm to understand some more of the context the characters are inserted into, as well as reflecting on the nature of difference and the response that it gets from people.

Nwamgba, being the protagonist of the short story, is someone described from the beginning as 'headstrong':

Her father found her exhausting, this sharp-tongued, headstrong daughter who had once wrestled her brother to the ground. (After which her father had warned everybody not to let the news leave the compound that the girl had thrown a boy.) (199)

From the get-go, we learn from the juxtaposition between Nwamgba and her brother that she subverts what is expected from the role of a woman within her culture. It is very expressive that her father even asked the news not to be spread outside of their family compound, which brings to light the effects of this subversion: it is possible that other people in the village knowing what Nwamgba did could be dangerous or even harmful for her or for her family. On the same note, her father's reaction in itself reveals that, in that community, there are set expectations for both genders. The fact that Nwamgba behaves in a way

understood as ‘different’ from the usual, is accompanied by a thin layer of judgement as well: the word ‘headstrong’ is generally used to imply that someone is acting in a way contrary to what others around would advise, without giving ears to common sense. It might be a selfish or simply reckless act, but ‘headstrong’ is used to denote some degree of disagreement or disapproval. The same goes to ‘sharp-tongued’. In this sense, it is possible to infer that Nwamgba’s difference and subversion of gender roles is looked down upon.

Nwamgba’s difference from the norm, that is, from what is expected of her role as a woman, is also used by Obierika’s cousins to justify their usurpation of her lands. When the case is brought to the elders, the cousins justify their appropriation of the land based on the fact that Nwamgba was not apt to take care of the land, since she displayed such deviant behaviour: she had “emasculated” (206) her husband while he was alive, and now that he was dead and her body was still able to bear children and form a family, she refused to entertain suitors, which could be expected of any woman in the same physical condition as Nwamgba – after all, “her breasts were still round” (206). The elders sided with the cousins, at Nwamgba’s expense, based on the idea that a certain type of behaviour is expected from women in the roles established by society and their relations, and deviance from said role – therefore, Nwamgba’s difference as contrasted to said role – is not by any means cherished, to say the least.

Another social relation established in that community, revealed through the observed difference from the norm, is unveiled through the character of Ayaju, who is Nwamgba’s longtime friend, and who performs a central role in the development of the story’s plot. Ayaju is a woman of slave descent. Her father’s people had lost a war to Nwamgba’s people and thus there began a relationship of slavery between these two peoples. This newly formed relationship reflected directly on people’s lives, particularly on the societal status anyone hailing from Ayaju’s village could reach: they could not take titles and engage decisively in the political life of the village. However, Ayaju was distinctly different from any other women of slave descent, not only in the eyes of Nwamgba but of the whole community:

Ayaju’s long-limbed, quick-moving body spoke of her many trading journeys; she had traveled even beyond Onicha. It was she who had first brought tales of the strange customs of the Igala and Edo traders, she who first told of the white-skinned men who arrived in Onicha with mirrors and fabrics and the biggest guns the people of those parts had ever seen. This cosmopolitanism earned her respect, and she was the only person of slave descent who talked loudly at the Women’s Council, the only person who had answers for everything. (201)

Here, the fact that she was the ‘only person of slave descent’ who did all those things reveal a social system in which people of slave descent are not expected to be as well-travelled and eloquent as Ayaju. She was, in fact, recognized as a knowledgeable, opinionated woman, *despite* her slave descent, and these qualities made her an exception among her community. This type of recognition, however, does not afford her an escape from the social system she is inserted into. Even with such recognition, Ayaju did not have the luxury of choosing a good husband for herself, one she liked and related to in the same way Nwamgba related to Obierika:

Ayaju did not care for her husband, Okenwa, who she said resembled and smelled like a rat, but her marriage prospects had been limited; no man from a freeborn family would have come for her hand. (201)

Ayaju, much like Nwamgba, also took an interest in the cultural shift happening in their village with the coming of the white people; however, her reason was somewhat distinct from Nwamgba’s:

Some white men were visiting different clans, asking parents to send their children to school, and she had decided to send Azuka [to the white people’s school], the son who was laziest on the farm, because although she was respected and wealthy, she was still of slave descent, her sons still barred from taking titles. (204).

Another aspect of social systems that gets revealed through difference in the short story is the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality, expressed in the assignment of ‘normality’ from the protagonist’s point of view towards some of the characters that appear throughout the story. If we take ‘The Headstrong Historian’ as a literary piece purporting to be critical of the many issues emerging from the postcolonial paradigm, the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality also becomes a narrative device serving as a commentary on the role of sameness (us) and difference (them) in creating and telling stories. Throughout the short story, which is told in third person from the point of view of Nwamgba, the times when white people appear in the story and they happen to be accompanied by locals, who speak Igbo, dress in a way that is personally recognisable to Nwamgba, and who are always referred to with the word ‘normal’.

For example, in one of the stories that Ayaju brought back to the village, illustrating the inevitable settling of white people in those parts of the land, she tells that, at Onicha, white people had been allowed into the trading station. At some point they started requiring sellers and buyers to register their fingerprints, in an effort to incorporate the commerce with the colonies within the settler’s trading system. However,

When the elders of Agueke, a clan of Onicha, refused to place their thumbs on a paper, the white men came at night with their normal-men helpers and razed the village. There was nothing left. Nwamgba did not understand. (204)

In another passage, the first time that white people visited Nwamgba's clan, she dropped everything she was doing to go see them and was disappointed by the sight. She had been hearing stories about white people and their deeds around those lands, and a part of her deeply connected the presence of white people to some kind of undoing of the injustice she had suffered. However, she was not impressed by the visit on that day:

She was at first disappointed by the ordinariness of the two white men; they were harmless-looking, the color of albinos, with frail and slender limbs. Their companions were normal men, but there was something foreign about them, too, and only one spoke a strangely accented Igbo. (205)

Interestingly enough, "normal" is a word that carries within itself the very conception of "different". Being antonyms, one word has no meaning whatsoever without the other. Let us examine this word in the context of this short story.

In general, it is possible to state that 'normal' acts as a portmanteau word. When it is employed, the qualities of that which compose normality are usually implied, because they do not need to be made explicit. And because 'normal' is used in place of more descriptive and precise words, with little extrapolation it is possible to assume that 'normal' means, by extension, 'that which does not require description'. Now, in the context of postcolonialism, particularly from the point of view Western culture, it is easily tangible to conceive of the image of the coloniser who went abroad to find new land in which to settle and reporting back to the mainland. In this dynamic, the act of describing is a political one, in the sense that there is always the subject which needs description, in contrast to the one which exists spontaneously as common knowledge (in the relationship between the describer and the audience). The self (understood as either the individual and the culture from which this individual comes) is always a point of reference to attribute meaning to 'normal'. And the object of description is usually the 'other' – whether it is the other's language, customs, appearance, etc. –, evoking as said before the 'us versus them' dynamics.

By using the word 'normal' to describe the men in the passages above, the author is not only indirectly establishing a relation of difference (therefore, revealing yet another social relation) between these men and the white men they had been accompanying, but also subtly operating a symbolic shift of power, considering the traditional Western narrative about the colonised world: in this short story, 'normal' is being defined by the side that is always

defined, is always attributed in the imperialistic narrative. The usage of this word in the context of this short story is an underlying observation about the meaning of the word 'normal'. Ultimately, its meaning seems to be something along the lines of "I get to define normality, since I am the owner of the story being told".

It is interesting too, when it comes down to 'The Headstrong Historian', to observe the literary, intertextual parallels with Achebe's debut (and probably most well-known) novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Just like in Achebe's novel, Adichie's 'The Headstrong Historian' describes the tribal life in Southern Nigeria before and during the advent of the Catholic missions in that part of the country, and how that people heterogeneously responded to that new world. 'The Headstrong Historian' also etches parallels with Achebe's novel through the character of Obierika – a name mentioned in *Things Fall Apart* as belonging to Okonkwo (the protagonist)'s close friend. Another parallel is how, as Nwamgba and Obierika struggle to keep a pregnancy, Nwamgba suggests that Obierika should go and look for the Okonkwo family, to see if their daughter would agree to be the surrogate mother to their first-born.

These plot developments may help to establish the expectation that 'The Headstrong Historian' will have a strong resemblance to Achebe's novel – that is, that the advent of the Catholic and Protestant missions will also cause the demise of tribal Nigerian culture, producing a tragic and irreconcilable clash between elders and the youth. And on the one hand, Adichie's short story does meet this expectation, through the figure of Anikwenwa, who gets christened as Michael and soon enough does not desire to have anything to do with his original tribal culture. Another parallel with Achebe is when Nwamgba realises that after the white people arrived in her region, even "gods had changed and no longer asked for palm wine but for gin" (214), a phenomenon of the changing of times that is also observed in *Things Fall Apart*.

However, at the same time, there are notorious differences between the two stories. For example, the portrayal of female characters in Achebe is always made through characters who are either voiceless or submissive towards men, whereas Adichie's female characters are mostly portrayed as strong, witty, well-opinionated and sometimes even subversive of gender expectations – like Nwamgba herself, Ayaju, and some of the women who are part of the Women's Council in the village. Grace, unlike those around herself, becomes perplexed at the way in which tribal culture is depicted in books – one such book being "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria", written by a white settler in South Nigeria who ultimately causes Okwonko to commit suicide. In the course of her life, Grace works towards dismantling the idea that Nigerian and African history are meaningless subjects, less

important than Eurocentric syllabi and courses, and rejects the cultural *ultimatum* of the superiority of the coloniser's culture towards that of the colonised people, in a symbolic and political gesture of changing her name from Grace to Afamefuna.

If on the one hand *Things Fall Apart* ends on a grim note, depicting the tragedy of Okonkwo's inability to adapt to the new world order that inevitably reached his reality, on the other hand 'The Headstrong Historian' gazes towards the future with confidence and hopefulness. Adichie, both recognises Nigeria's devastating past, all the while envisioning new times of hope and empowerment for the disenfranchised groups of society, notably (but not exclusively by any means) women.

* * *

The bulk of the theoretical framework that I have intended to use for my literary analysis is what has been articulated in Chapter 2. However, as far as Adichie's prose goes, there is still one interesting concept that is greatly represented in her short stories, which is worth examining in this dissertation. The next chapter, then, is dedicated to the discussion of the false assumption of homogeneity within identity groups. By juxtaposing some of the characters in the short stories, it is possible to argue how their political allegiances and behaviour are diametrically opposed to their assigned pair, dismantling the idea that identity belonging entails sameness.

Chapter 3 – The Flawed Assumption of Homogeneity

He spoke about their god, who had come to the world to die, and who had a son but no wife, and who was three but also one. Many of the people around Nwamgba laughed loudly. Some walked away, because they had imagined that the white man was full of wisdom. *Others stayed and offered cool bowls of water.*

‘The Headstrong Historian’, page 205.

Finally, to round off the debate and investigation of difference, through the lens of Avtar Brah and with the help of Adichie’s short stories, there is still one aspect of difference that remains to be accounted for: the assumption of homogeneity among identity groups. As we have seen so far with ‘Imitation’, ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ and ‘The Headstrong Historian’, the presence of difference and the variety of responses it gets in different contexts and scenarios can be subject to scrutiny and lead us to important insight about our attitude towards difference.

Difference as Subjectivity allows for a more individually layered perception of a person, regardless of the identity group one belongs to, as exemplified by Nkem in ‘Imitation’. Difference as Experience points out how lived experience is not the be-all and end-all to define what members of an identity group can and cannot be or do, as seen through the journey of Akunna in the United States. And finally, Difference as Social Relations teaches us how difference reveals, as a result of its own existence, the many different social systems at play in any given community/society.

However, as has been mentioned in Chapter 1, Difference as Social Relation has yet another interesting aspect to it: as much as the role of Difference as Social Relation is to identify various social systems in any given circumstance, as Brah argues, it is not possible to “specify, *in advance*, the particularity of individual women’s lives or how they interpret and define this experience.” (118, my emphasis) Which goes to say that the idea of homogeneity within any identity group is generally precarious, if not fated to failure.

As discussed by Hall, in the event of Clarence Thomas’ nomination in 1991, it was very hard to find consensus among the different identity groups which came to the forefront

of the discussion in light of his confirmation – that is, black women, liberal black men, and liberal white women. For example, if on the one hand some black women might have cherished the nomination of a black justice, on the other hand some of them might have been horrified at the sexual harassment allegations brought to light by Anita Hill and other women.

Moving away from the side of the debate discussing how such groups have been ‘forced’ to pick between which political view they would like to support (whether anti-racism, feminism or liberalism), what is of interest for theory of difference is the dismantling of the assumption of homogeneity between these groups – which goes to say it is virtually impossible to define in advance how each individual will ‘resolve’ this political alignment conundrum for themselves.

In the selection of short stories made for this dissertation, all of the short stories provide examples through some of the character dynamics to illustrate this issue, in particular the last two short stories. In ‘Imitation’, Nkem is the epitome of dissidence from a hegemonic expectation towards an identity group. In ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’, Akunna and her uncle are both Nigerian immigrants in the U.S., but their stances are noticeably different when it comes to their perception of America. The other two characters to illustrate the internal heterogeneity inside identity groups are Michael (Anikwenwa) and Afamefuna (Grace) in ‘The Headstrong Historian’. Both of them share the experience of being inserted in a Catholic religious Westernised culture in Nigeria, but as we will see below, they also differ in regard to their attitude towards the culturally hybrid space they inhabit in a postcolonial Nigeria. We begin with a commentary on Nkem, who stands alone as a kind of resistance against the homogenising forces of her identity group.

The epitome of heterogeneity: Nkem, the authentic Wife of a Rich Nigerian Man

As seen in Nkem’s trajectory, her final decision of in fact confronting Obiora about their stay in the United States goes against the grain from what is expected of her as the wife of a rich man – which is never making a stance, much less so if it goes against what has been established by her husband. In ‘Imitation’, the intensification of Nkem’s internal conflict through the tension between legitimacy and deceptiveness is what enhances the relevance of her decision for communicating her own desire. Despite the fact that there is a structure in place which is not friendly towards Nkem’s autonomy, the protagonist chooses to stand for herself and stay honest to her own sense of integrity, asking her husband to go back to

Nigeria. The fact that Nkem didn't quite come to grips with what she had been given, struggling both with her anger about her husband's infidelity and her sense of what a family should be like (as exemplified by her wanting her husband closer to her and regretting her kids having a telephone voice for a father) demonstrates how people's own subjectivity get in the way of the master, hegemonic narratives established for certain identities and roles within society.

Particularly when it comes to homogeneity, the incident at the wedding in Delaware is very indicative of the operations of the assumption of homogeneity within an identity group: as Nkem is talking to this unknown woman, who also happens to be married to a rich Nigerian man, the woman uses words of 'familiarity', as though to recognise that both she and Nkem are a part of the same team – the "Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America To Have Their Babies league". With this behaviour, the woman at the wedding seems to admit her own expectation for homogeneity between her and Nkem. This is likely why, once Nkem asks her if she had any intention of moving back to Nigeria, the woman's reaction resembled an indignation based on betrayal: her certainty that there would be a homogenous decision-making between the two of them had been broken.

One interesting theme in 'Imitation' is the very idea of deceptiveness: Nkem struggles with the idea of 'authenticity', as though she was forced at all times to pick a side: either she would be loyal towards her own sense of self, her feelings and desires; or she would be loyal towards the behaviours and opinions expected of someone playing the same role as her, as a wife of a rich man. The double bind here is that either she conforms to what expected of her – that is, staying in America and not confronting her husband about the situation back in Nigeria –, betraying her innermost desire of having a functional, loving family, and remaining as an authentic member of her identity group; or she expresses her desire of moving back to Nigeria, and puts at risk her position as the wife of the 'big man' who lives across continents, therefore being deemed an "imitation" of what she was supposed to be.

Handling this type of disidentification from the expectations for the role one has in society might not always be easy, especially because the assumption of homogeneity seems to be a strong operating force within society. In the next section, I discuss in more detail how homogeneity is challenged in the juxtaposition of Akunna and her uncle in America, beginning with an analysis of their condition as immigrants in the American territory.

The ‘Immigrantness’ of Akunna and her uncle

Having been in the United States for much longer than Akunna, her uncle has had experiences which he even shared with her in order to paint a picture and help her to get her head around living in the US as an African immigrant. He tells her of his adversities and hustles he has to face in this position – for example, how his family was accused of eating squirrels, or how “his wife had to drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair” (116). Akunna’s uncle even describes what is a glaring case of tokenism in the workplace, since “the company he worked for had offered him a few thousand more than the average salary plus stock options because they were desperately trying to look diverse. They included a photo of him in every brochure, even those that had nothing to do with his unit.” (115-116). However, his overall attitude towards this situation he finds himself in is of general resignation:

“He laughed and said the job was good, was worth living in an all-white town even though his wife had to drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair. The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too.” (116)

This type of mindset³⁴ displays a sort of resignation towards the strained relationship that America nurtures with black, Nigerian immigrants as shown in the short story, a kind of indifference that Akunna herself does not seem to be able to feel. Unlike her uncle, Akunna has a deep desire to be vocal about the things she witnesses in America, particularly the cultural differences which somehow made her upset: at a later stage in her stay in America, even though she could not afford presents for her family members and friends – which led her to never write letters to them, she felt the need to communicate the things that dissatisfied her: “you wanted to write because you had stories to tell.” (118) Many of these stories reflect her discontent or disappointment at the things she witnesses in America, like people’s general openness, food waste, and child rearing.

By the same token, Akunna’s outspokenness is a noticeable trait in the way that she responds to the events surrounding her, particularly if the event at stake is related to marginalised identities, including the ones she identifies with. For example, there is a passage in the short story in which she goes out to have dinner with her boyfriend at a place they are used to visiting. Despite their being regulars at Chang’s diner, and them having exchanged

³⁴ It is important to bring up again the fact that Akunna’s uncle was a manipulator, so it is sensible to assume that his statement about America being give-and-take, despite reflecting his life choices (and his unbothered attitude towards being used as a token in the workplace), also bore a layer of manipulation, given Akunna’s situation as a recently arrived immigrant in the country, in order to exploit her sexually.

intimate gestures of affection in the restaurant countless times, on this particular day the waiter makes a remark implying that Akunna and her boyfriend were not in a committed relationship. The remark really did Akunna's head in, to the point where she felt physically ill, and later on brought it up to her boyfriend's attention, only to be met with a laconic absence of understanding and empathy on his part.

You lost your appetite, the region deep in your chest felt clogged. (...) Later you told him why you were upset, that even though you went to Chang's so often together, even though you had kissed just before the menus came, the Chinese man had assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and he had smiled and said nothing. (123-124)

To Akunna, that waiter's comment represented a glaring case of racism, in which the scene of a white man seen exchanging affection with a black woman could not possibly be taken as anything but a strictly casual relationship. And moving beyond the fact itself, what is of interest to the theory of difference is how she responds to it: Akunna's particular reaction to witnessing a case of racism is being vocal about her discomfort. Her attitude stands in direct contrast to her uncle's aforementioned quiet resignation towards the exploitation or mishandling of his own identity. This contrast is a great example of Difference as Social Relation, and also exemplifies perfectly the assumption of homogeneity among people of the same identitary group.

Another way in which Akunna's reaction can be analysed as particular and individual to herself, in spite of the social system being revealed through the difference between her and her boyfriend, is how class plays out between the two of them. Throughout their relationship, Akunna identifies a couple of ways in which they differ greatly, mostly due to their class condition. For instance, she notices how he buys her presents which are usually only decorative, and not functional, something that comes across to her as reckless (124). He has access to his grandfather's trust fund (124), while Akunna is most likely the primary breadwinner to her family back in Lagos (126). While Akunna is figuring out how to afford both her rent and a ticket to visit her family back in Nigeria, he could easily afford both their round-trip tickets to visit the country (127). It seems, as the story progresses, that while Akunna is keenly aware and critical of the many consequences of the class system inside of which she and her boyfriend are located, she also seems to struggle to get her points across without irony (124) or resentment.

The issue of assumed homogeneity can also be seen in the way in which different groups of people reacted to Akunna's relationship: while interacting with people or even walking down the streets, Akunna could perceive people's reactions to the fact that they were

an interracial couple. However, there did not seem to be any form of consensus in Akunna's observations: while some black women who saw them would adopt a condescending attitude, displaying pity while assuming that because Akunna dated a white partner, she was full of self-loathing; other black women displayed solidarity, probably through identification with Akunna (as a black woman in an interracial couple) or as a response to the self-righteousness of the previously mentioned group of black women. Some of the black men shook their heads at the sight of them, while others, in the words of the narrator, "tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too-obvious hi to him" (125). As to white men and women, some "muttered and glared at him" (125), while others would exclaim "'What a good-looking pair' too brightly, too loudly, as though to prove their own open-mindedness to themselves." (125).

Another way in which the assumption of homogeneity is challenged can be seen in the figure of her boyfriend's parents, presented as educated, wealthy, white Americans. While pursuing her higher education in a college in Maine, Akunna is met with arrogance and condescension from a professor discussing decolonization in Africa. This particular type of behaviour, in the context of the short story, is framed by his position of power as a scholar involved in research and teaching, belonging to an institution (the academia) responsible for investigating and producing knowledge. This knowledge is, to a certain extent, available more readily to people who get access to academia, and this is where Akunna's in-laws come into the scene: "But his parents were different; they almost made you think it was all normal." (125) From the fact that Akunna and her boyfriend were in an interracial couple, to the fact that Akunna was a Nigerian immigrant in America, to her pursuit of higher education and the books she has read. Having dinner with them was not an alienating experience for Akunna, to the extent that she "looked at them and felt grateful that they did not examine you like an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk." (126)

Now that we have looked in more detail into the assumption of homogeneity through the character of Akunna and her uncle, as well as through her boyfriend and the staff member at Chang's, and through boyfriend's parents and other members of society Akunna met during her stay in the United States, we can have another insightful discussion about this concept in analysing two characters from 'The Headstrong Historian': Michael and Afamefuna, father and daughter, who are both inscribed in the postcolonial, Christian space brought about by the process of colonisation.

The postcolonial “Nigerianness” of Michael and Afamefuna

The other characters that embody the dilemma of assumed homogeneity are Michael and Afamefuna, from ‘The Headstrong Historian’. They are both Igbo people living in a post-colonial Nigeria, in which a Western, Christian culture is taking over the traditional customs and slowly seeping into every crevice of the cultural and political life in the villages in the country. This cultural clash is not by any means balanced or just, as exemplified by Ayaju’s sharp remark when explaining to Nwamgba:

The clan next to Nwamgba’s, for example, held its courts only during the new yam festival, so that people’s rancour grew while they awaited justice. A stupid system, Nwamgba thought, but surely everyone had one. Ayaju laughed and told Nwamgba again that people ruled others when they had better guns. (205)

What is more, when inquiring about the type of weapons used by these white men to dominate the locals, Nwamgba learnt in practice how powerless their own weapons were when compared to them. “What sort of guns did these white men have? Ayaju laughed and said their guns were nothing like the rusty thing her own husband owned.” (204) Later in the story, we learn that Ayaju’s own personal history was subjected to this same logic: she told Nwamgba that she wished her son, Azuka, learnt the ways of the white people for a very specific reason.

She wanted Azuka to learn the ways of these foreigners, since people ruled over others not because they were better people but because they had better guns; after all, her own father would not have been brought as a slave if his clan had been as well armed as Nwamgba’s clan. (204)

From these excerpts, it is possible to realise that the exchange between both cultures and worldviews was far from succeeding at establishing mutual common grounds. In fact, the physical potency involved in the belligerent technology that the European settlers brought to the African continent made its forceful way towards the then-operating judicial, economical and social systems, either altering it as required by the settlers’ needs, or with the everlasting presence of the threat of violence.

In this context, it is not at all surprising to come to realise that the Western, European, and, in this context, Catholic values that were brought into Nwamgba’s village began to be treated as superior to the traditional, local costumes and values. This process is seen clearly through the figure of Anikwenwa/Michael, who starts off as a regular boy

growing up in his village, following all of the age-appropriate traditional costumes, but later in his childhood gets enmeshed in the process of colonisation in Southern Nigeria.

From the beginning of his life, in the wake of his father's vile (and, as his mother assumed, planned out) death, it was very important for Anikwenwa to be aware of his environment and circumstance, the family heirloom he was entitled to, and the whole cultural context surrounding his heritage. That is why Nwamgba

took Anikwenwa on long walks, telling him that the land from that palm tree to that plantain tree was theirs, that his grandfather had passed it on to his father. She told him the same things over and over, even though he looked bored and bewildered, and she did not let him go and play at moonlight unless she was watching. (203-204)

She would not let him play by himself in order to prevent anything bad happening to him, which would affect the whole family's destiny, since he was the only male heir capable of reclaiming the lands to his family. Not only that, but Anikwenwa was a child growing up within a cultural system that had nothing to do with the ways of the Western settlers. Nwamgba at first was reluctant about the idea that "her only son, her single eye, should be given to the white men, never mind how superior their guns might be." (206) However, eventually, through a series of events, it became obvious to her how taking her son to the missionary schools, in order to learn English, was her best chance to see justice made. And this is where things begin to change for Anikwenwa.

The first formal contact that Nwamgba and Anikwenwa had with this recently arrived culture laid out very clearly the terms of this new relationship: Anikwenwa would have to be baptised as Michael, a Christian name, since his own name in Igbo was considered a "heathen name" (208). Father Shanahan, who took Michael, worked for the Holy Ghost Congregation, "whose special vocation was the redemption of black heathens." (209). Of course, the words 'heathen' and 'redemption' have very problematic implications, mainly based around the idea of the superiority of the Christian religion, which governs not only the cosmogony and faith of its followers, but also their customs and cultural, material practices. The framing of anything outside Christianity as 'heathen' and in need of salvation bears the underlying belief that there is something wrong with the cultures and cultural practices lying outside of it, which, in its turn, feeds into an overall sense of disdain towards the non-Christian practices. This disdain, aligned with cultural and political practices, is at the core of what can be understood in this dissertation as "colonial violence", as will be mentioned later in this analysis.

At first, Michael struggled with some aspects of this new culture he was required to assimilate into: one such aspect being the fact that he, as a newly converted Christian, had to wear clothes, as requested by Father Shanahan. “He gave the boy a singlet and a pair of shorts, because the people of the living God did not walk around naked” (209) – which as it happens is a great example of how religious belief turns into cultural praxis. To Michael, it was not exactly comfortable complying with this and other aspects of his new condition: “He disliked the shorts and shirt that made him sweat, the fabric that was itchy around his armpits. He disliked, too, being in the same class as old men and missing out on wrestling contests.” (210)

However, Michael’s attitude towards school slowly started to change, it seems, as he realised that being a part of this new culture had very desirable perks to him. After his enrollment to the missionary school, Nwamgba “began to notice the admiring glances his clothes brought in the clan” (210). Once while in a confrontation with one of the village boys, Michael “said something in English, something sharp-sounding, which shut them up” (210), filling Nwamgba with pride, and also pleasing him with the effect speaking English had on his Igbo peers. His growing assimilation into the Christian/Catholic world earned him such respect to the extent that his attempt to reclaim his father’s ivory tusk back from his father’s cousins went very smoothly: he only had to request it once, and they promptly gave it back to Michael.

However, as mentioned above, this assimilation did not take place on symmetrical grounds: along with the ability to speak English came a series of habits and changes of behaviour which embodied the aforementioned disdain for the ‘uncivilised’ Igbo culture Michael originally came from. First and foremost, the most noticeable change was that now Michael seemed to perceive and be bothered by his mother’s nakedness, something which had never been a problem earlier.

He told her to tie her wrapper around her chest instead of her waist, because her nakedness was sinful. She looked at him, amused by his earnestness, but worried nonetheless, and asked why he had only just begun to notice her nakedness. (210)

The reason for Nwamgba to cover up was tightly connected to the Catholic religion and its morality: the naked body was sinful, therefore wrong. The same applied to the food Nwamgba cooked, which Michael started refusing to eat since Nwamgba offered it to the Gods before eating, and to the Christian believer there can exist no gods other than the Holy Father.

Nwamgba might have been frustrated to realise that Michael's relationship to the missionary school went way beyond the learning of English, when it was time for a traditional and mandatory Igbo ceremony, for boys of the same age as Michael, and he refused to participate, since it was "a custom that Father Shanahan had said would have to stop" (210-211). Michael started referring to these customs and traditions as "devilish" (211), and with time grew completely intolerant of them.

Later in the short story, after Michael had moved to the capital to become a teacher, he came back to tell his mother that he had picked a wife to marry, in a completely different way than was expected of someone from their clan. Instead of consulting with the clan about the bride's family, he accepted an arranged marriage through church, and when Nwamgba asked him if he would follow at least one of the clan's marriage rites,

He shook his head furiously and told her that the confession made by a woman before marriage, in which she, surrounded by female relatives, swore that no man had touched her since her husband had declared his interest, was *sinful*, because Christian wives should not have been touched at all. (212, my emphasis)

Later on, when Michael's wife, Agnes, was struggling with pregnancy, Nwamgba wanted her to consult an oracle, in order to get rid of the family misfortune which stopped her from being able to carry a pregnancy until the end, but Michael was adamant about not allowing Agnes to engage in such rituals. Nwamgba felt "ashamed of her son, irritated with his wife, upset by their rarefied life in which they treated non-Christians as if they had smallpox" (213).

Seeing the bittersweet results of her decision to enrol Michael to the missionary school – a decision she made aligned with the overall goal of pursuing justice for her lineage –, and finding herself in such a disheartening scenario, Nwamgba wondered if she had meddled with her son's *chi*, as she patiently awaited to see her husband reincarnated in her grandson. Michael and Agnes' firstborn, Peter (whom Nwamgba named Nnamdi), did not bring ease to Nwamgba's spirit, for "try as she might, she did not feel the spirit of her magnificent husband Obierika" (214) in the baby. It was only some time later, in Agnes' second pregnancy, that Nwamgba was sure that Obierika's spirit had returned to earth, in the image of Grace, whom Nwamgba named Afamefuna.

From a very early age, Afamefuna was very passionate about her grandmother's poetry, stories and crafts (214-215), eager to be a part of her culture even if curbed in by her father's Christian and westernised beliefs and customs. Because her father was a

well-established catechist at the mission in Onicha, the girl had spent the first years of her childhood in her grandmother's village, but as soon as she reached secondary school, she was sent back to Onicha to attend a boarding school.

Afamefuna, a girl living in a postcolonial Nigeria, with the underlying imperialistic cultural violence devaluing anything related to her ethnic origins, completely immersed in the dominant Christian education system and subsequently workforce, benefited from the same statutory privilege as her father Michael, who reinforced these imperialistic values in the bosom of his own family. However, despite growing up within the constraints of this imperialistic education and worldview, Afamefuna, unlike her father, nurtured a relentless curiosity and familiarity about the culture of her grandmother and her clan.

After reaching a certain degree of consciousness, this recognition of familiarity towards anything related to her roots clashed with the values she was being taught growing up and observed around her later as an adult. The colonial violence (as previously defined) worked its way into the smallest of details in the postcolonial reality: for instance, while in high school one of the textbooks she was required to read was entitled "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria" (215), demonstrating the uneven grounds upon which colonialism imposed itself into local cultures. As a highschooler, Afamefuna would

read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself until her teacher, Sister Maureen, told her she could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry. (216)

Afamefuna would examine her own past and revisit the meaning of some of her experiences, such as the celebration of Empire Day and the chanting of a hymn saying "God bless our Gracious King. Send him victorious, happy and glorious. Long to reign over us" (217), which illustrated precisely the type of subservient relationship towards the settlers as her father had so eagerly embraced throughout his life. Afamefuna would reflect on how she "had puzzled over words like 'wallpaper' and 'dandelions' in her textbooks, unable to picture those things", or "had struggled with arithmetic problems that had to do with mixtures, because what was coffee and what was chicory and why did they have to be mixed?" (217), demonstrating the undeniable eurocentrism in the education she had access to, which failed to encompass and take into consideration her own lived experience as a Nigerian person living in Onicha.

Afamefuna changed her own major from Chemistry to History after a revelatory experience, in which a scholar at her university,

a distinguished expert on the history of the British Empire, had resigned in disgust when the West African Examinations Council began talking of adding African history to the curriculum, because he was appalled that African history would even be considered a subject. (216)

She went on to write books about the process of colonisation and the effects of colonial violence in autochthonous communities in Nigeria, even when close acquaintances admonished her for having an interest in what they called “primitive cultures” (217), as opposed to worthwhile topics such as African Alliances in the American-Soviet Tension. Finally, Afamefuna went to the courthouse in Lagos in order to get her name changed from Grace to Afamefuna, in a symbolic gesture of reclaiming her cultural heritage and undoing the colonial violence her family had been subjected to throughout the years.

Given the whole context around their lives and decisions they have made throughout the years, the juxtaposition of Michael and Afamefuna corroborates the idea that the assumption of homogeneity among members of the same identitary category is bound to be flawed. Despite their position of privilege within the context of postcolonial Nigeria, both agents display an almost diametrically opposed attitude towards the scenario and the issues at stake.

* * *

At this point, I have discussed all of the concepts stemming from the theory of difference which can be seen in Adichie’s short stories. It is time for a wrap-up of all of said concepts, following the concluding section in this dissertation.

Conclusion

In the course of my academic work, many relevant issues and perspectives on identity have been raised, bringing into light new reflections and points of view through the lens of difference. My intention is to open up this side of the debate, and contribute to the body of theory that examines difference and inquires what is the place of difference within society and the debates surrounding identities and their myriad aspects. Throughout my dissertation, I have discussed many ideas, and I'd like to outline a few of the most important takeaways that are the backbone of my line of argumentation.

Culture can be an elusive concept. Speaking of one 'culture', in the singular – whether it is British culture or Nigerian culture, or pop culture or youth culture –, is faulty and bound to failure. Culture is woven through the intertwining of so many paradigms – gender, race, economic class, sexuality, level of ability or disability, age, religion, etc – that it is very unlikely that there is one single form/version of a 'culture' that encompasses all the diverse experiences of alleged members of said culture.

Through Brah, Erikson and Hall, we have seen that identity probably works in a spectrum: we have the innermost perception of the self, in which desires, ideology and subjectivity is forged, and we have the outermost layer, which tends to be connected with public life and has what can be considered a more political aspect to it. What seems to be recurrent in the discourse about identity is that it is made of an unshifting core, which navigates many different more 'superficial' identities along one's life.

Looking through a more political lens, from Hall we learn that people are not made of one single identity; rather, many aspects of our lives can become tied into different identities, and part of living has to do with making choices which might not align every aspect of ourselves. According to Hall, no single identity is able to align every other identity we are made of, as a master key of sorts; therefore, making choices and bargaining is literally an everyday chore. This type of "strategic identity negotiation"³⁵ ultimately seems to be inevitable. Therefore, it is more realistic to expect people to be relentless and ceaselessly

³⁵ This idea most definitely bears some similarities with Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism", a phenomenon by which minority groups, nationalities, or ethnic groups mobilise on the basis of shared gendered, cultural, or political identity, in order to represent themselves in the face of legal institutions.

prioritising one or another aspect of their identity condition, instead of expecting people to be predictable monoliths.

As seen in Chapter 1, through the usage of the words 'black' and 'woman', Brah posits a reflection about language and its influence in the human experience. The mere usage of a certain word to describe identities with very different experiences can be disputed and be a territory for delegitimation. The role of language in defining the self and the other cannot be underestimated, because it is very much language that shapes ideas and gives them life into the material world. The linguistic 'noise' arising from two different groups (in this case, Black Americans and SWANA people) using the same word to self-proclaim their identities should be a reminder for us to remain curious and cautious towards axiomatic, ulterior definitions of identities.

Difference, as slippery of a concept as it might be, can be examined within a framework proposed by Avtar Brah. Of course this is not the only way of analysing difference, but it is a really good starting point to address the way in which difference is perceived and dealt with in society. Brah's framework is made of four different axes of analysis.

The first one is Difference as Experience, which challenges the idea that lived experience is an impartial guide to the truth. The goal of Difference as Experience is to shed some light into the fact that forming judgement or even justifying one's prejudices towards an identity group is not all of a sudden automatically justified because of one instance of lived experience. This point is seen in 'The Thing Around Your Neck', through the assumptions of Akunna's peers in Nigeria of what Americans are like, and vice-versa.

The next axis of analysis is Difference as Social Relation brings into question the idea that every person belonging to an identity group, and because they are a part of said group, will position themselves politically in the same way as others – clear example of which being Michael and Afamefuna, from 'The Headstrong Historian'. As a matter of fact, as is discussed in Chapter 3, the assumption of homogeneity is bound to be flawed, because people's inner life and their desires are far bigger than one single piece of a political identity they may feel a part of.

Following Difference as Social Relation, we have Difference as Subjectivity, which provides us with insight about perhaps a more obvious form of difference, which is idiosyncrasy. It is possible that the idea of an idiosyncratic personality is not all too unfamiliar to most people, but Brah goes one step beyond idiosyncrasy and tells us of the conflict between the self and the external gaze: the mismatch between the other's assumption

and one's own subjectivity, as seen through the character of Nkem in 'Imitation'. Difference as Subjectivity discusses the effects of being held against expectations that seem justified based on the external gaze, which is the exact logic behind the scholarship grant incident in Brah's self-reported account of her teenage years, becoming a pivotal moment in her personal trajectory which inspires her curiosity towards the issue of difference.

And lastly, Difference as Identity, which brings the focus of the debate to the way in which identities are constantly being defined and redefined collectively. This axis has not been discussed in much detail in this dissertation, but I certainly hope to be able to expand on it throughout my academic journey exploring other texts by Adichie.

On the one hand, it may come off as a bit striking to focus on an abstract (and, one might even argue, all too broad) concept such as 'difference': in fact, until a lot of the discussion has gone down, it all may seem too vague for the unfamiliar eye to come across an analysis of difference within a work of literary analysis. However, following the footsteps of professor Brah, this work aims to contribute to mature and develop the body of theory concerned with difference, which is still approached in a broad, non-specific way in literary criticism. Rather than seizing the protagonism of specific identity-based criticism (such as feminism, anti-racism, etc.), this body of theory aims to provide support and yet another line of argumentation that adds onto the philosophical and ethical discussion of identity discourse. Difference, as it seems to me, is the bedrock of said discourse, whether it is deployed to set boundaries, describe specificities, create a sense of belonging, or segregate people.

After all, as vague and complex and intricate and wily as it might be, difference seems to be lurking around at every moment, every day, in the human experience of being alive and part of a society. To provide such an example, the other day at a consulting firm in Brazil, on the occasion of the celebration of the Brazilian Northeastern culture and people on an online meeting, someone was trying to explain why in some places and for some people there seems to be a layer of rejection towards Northeasterners (especially in Southern and Southwestern Brazil), saying something along the lines of "it's not ill-intent, it's just that... difference always begets a reaction." It might be true. Difference might always be bound to produce a reaction. I believe firmly, though, that it is very possible to investigate what kind of reaction this is – is it always the same reaction? Must it be the same, at all times and in every context? Should it always be a reaction shrouded by estrangement and distrust? Why not curiosity, excitement or even admiration?

Essentially, a reaction is a response to a trigger, which is a kind of stimulus to the human brain. And, as I have been observing throughout the years, between *stimulus* and *response*, there is a lot of room for reflecting and rewiring.

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