

The Thing Around Your Neck Study Guide

The Thing Around Your Neck by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Plot Summary

The stories included in the collection “The Thing Around Your Neck” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie deal with a variety of issues faced by Nigerians and Nigerian-Americans. A good deal of the stories deal with the clash in cultures between the lifestyle of Nigerians living in Nigeria and those living in America. Another theme dealt with in several of the stories is the idea that life in America turned out to be a disappointment for some Nigerians who went there looking for a better life. Other ideas addressed in the stories include relationships, children and women.

In the story “Cell One”, a pampered son learned a lesson when he was sent to jail as a murder suspect and saw an innocent old man abused there. In the story “Imitation”, a wife and mother gives up the advantages of living in America in an attempt to keep her husband from having a live-in girlfriend in Nigeria. “A Private Experience” tells the story of a Christian woman and a Muslim woman who take refuge together during a riot between Christians and Muslims. A professor reminisced on his life after he saw a former colleague he believed was dead in the story “Ghosts.” Although he admitted his experiences to no one, the professor also believed he was being visited by the ghost of his late wife.

“On Monday of Last Week” is the story of a woman deeply dissatisfied by her new life in America. “Jumping Monkey Hill” tells about the reality of racial and sexual bias in Africa. “The Thing Around Your Neck” highlights the differences between the perception of America by Africans as a land of opportunity and riches, and the reality of life in America. In the story “The American Embassy” a woman abandoned her attempt to be granted asylum because she felt the woman interviewing her did not understand her or her problems. A woman and a gay man from Nigeria living in America form a friendship when they came together to pray after a plane crash in their country in the story “The Shivering.” Together, they explored faith and their former unhealthy relationships.

In the story “The Arrangers of Marriage” a woman struggled to adjust to life in America and her new husband who wanted to assimilate completely with American culture. A family was devastated when the oldest born son died when he fell from a tree in the story “Tomorrow is Too Far.” In “The Headstrong Historian” the daughter of a Nigerian converted Christianity delved into her family’s history to the delight of her grandmother.



Cell One

Summary

In the story "Cell One" the narrator recounts how her family's house was first robbed by Osita, a neighbor. The second time it was robbed it was done by her brother who broke into the house while his parents were away visiting their hometown of Mbaise. The narrator and Nnamabia had gone to church alone that Sunday. Nnamabia had left church at the beginning of the service and didn't return to church until almost the end of services. When they arrived home it was Nnamabia who discovered the "robbery". The only thing missing was their mother's collection of jewelry. The narrator knew her brother was responsible. Their father knew as well. When the father pointed out the window louvers had been removed from the inside, Nnamabia pretended to be hurt. He left and was gone for two weeks. When he finally did return he apologized saying he'd pawned the jewelry. All the money he'd gotten for it was gone. As a punishment, Nnamabia was made by his father to write a report about the theft.

The narrator reasoned that her brother hadn't stolen the jewelry to intentionally hurt his mother. He'd done it because other college students his age were doing similar things. The boys who stole were the popular ones. The people of the community pretended not to know who was stealing their things. The narrator tells how handsome her brother was. He looked like his mother. His mother had always babied him and made sure to get him out of any trouble he got himself into.

Three years later Nnamabia was arrested and locked up in the police station. He was accused of being a member of a cult. Nnamabia had laughed at the policemen's attempts to fight the cults. He was amused because the members of the cults, or gangs, had better guns than the police did. When the narrator asked Nnamabia if he belonged to a cult during their first visit to him at the police station he said that he didn't. She and her father both believed him.

Three people had been shot in the incident of which Nnamabia was accused of being a part of. Nnamabia did not come home that night. The next morning a security officer came to tell his family he had been arrested. At the Enugu Police Station Nnamabia's family was allowed to see him only after they bribed the police with money and food. The narrator noticed Nnamabia was still bright and told about his prison experience as if it were entertainment. Her father believed the experience had shaken Nnamabia and suggested the boy should have been locked up after he broke into their house.

Nnamabia had two shocks that seemed to change his view of jail. The first was when a member of the Buccaneer cult cried after a police guard hit him in the head. The second was when officers brought a dead man out of Cell One. Cell One was a place the inmates were threatened with if they misbehaved.



When they went to visit Nnamabia that first week the narrator noticed how her parents were more respectful of the police who worked the checkpoints. When the narrator told her parents the second week they could not afford to go and see Nnamabia every day they looked at her as if she were crazy. Her parents moved to go without her. She went out and used a rock to break the windshield of the car. She was surprised her parents didn't go to see Nnamabia anyway that day. When they did go the following day they said nothing to the narrator about the broken windshield.

At the station Nnamabia didn't say anything about the missed visit but seemed to be upset about something. An old man whose son was wanted for armed robbery had been arrested and put in Nnamabia's cell. He was poor and could not afford money for bath water. When he tried to bathe in the detergent water the guards used to clean the cell they laughed at him and made him walk around the prison shouting insults at him. Because her brother seemed moved by the man's plight, the narrator felt a tenderness for him she couldn't explain.

It was finally arranged that Nnamabia was to be released. A member of the cult informed the police that Nnamabia was not a member of a cult. At the police station they learned Nnamabia had been transferred to another station. The narrator and her parents feared something had happened to Nnamabia that the officers were trying to cover up. One of the officers told them Nnamabia had misbehaved and been sent to Cell One. Once they arrived at the place to which Nnamabia had been taken, a building that looked abandoned, they were surprised when he walked out.

It was not until they had gotten home that Nnamabia told his family he'd been punished because he stood up for the old man. He'd continued to yell at the police even after they threatened to take him to Cell One. He never told his family what had happened to him in Cell One but the narrator realized her brother had changed because he did not make a drama of his experience as he would have once done.

Analysis

This first short story in this collection by Adichie is a coming of age story for Nnamabia. It is told through the point of view of Nnamabia's younger sister. The sister is never given a name, perhaps to put distance between her and the reader and allow the story to focus on Nnamabia. Nnamabia grows up through his experience in prison when he sees how unfair the police officers are to a man who is elderly and sick. To make matters worse, the man has done nothing wrong, it is his son who has committed robbery, but because his son cannot be found, the police arrest the father. Even though it means he will be taken to Cell One, a place of punishment in the jail about which Nnamabia has nightmares, Nnamabia continues to shout at the police, telling them they are treating the man unfairly. After he is released from jail, Nnamabia's sister notices that her brother has lost some of his tendency to dramatize the things that happened to him. Even though he could probably have told his family a good story about his treatment in jail, he chooses to tell them nothing. It is at this point the narrator believes her brother has truly had a life changing experience.



One of the themes in this collection of short stories involves children and the way children are treated by their parents. In this story the narrator shares that her brother is attractive. Her mother takes care to see that he does not suffer punishments from any trouble into which he gets himself. She would lie for him and even give him money to pay his debts for things he has broken. When Nnamabia fakes a robbery so he can steal his mother's jewelry and pawn it, he is never really punished even when he confesses to the crime. His father makes him write a report about what he has done, but the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. After Nnamabia is arrested and accused of being a member of a cult, or gang, his father says he should have had the boy locked up after he had stolen the jewelry. He believes Nnamabia's jail experience has changed him, even on the first day they go to visit Nnamabia. His sister, however, doesn't see any evidence of change in her brother.

Another theme in these short stories involves relationships between the characters. The significant relationship in this story is that between the narrator and Nnamabia. The narrator, a girl, has always felt she has lived in her brother's shadow. He is more attractive than she. Even strangers point out how attractive Nnamabia is compared to his darker-skinned sister. To make matters worse, Nnamabia's parents believe that Nnamabia can do no wrong. The narrator seems to be the only character able to be honest about her brother and his wrong doing. She knows from the time she walks into their house after the "robbery" that it is Nnamabia who has done it. After Nnamabia's time in jail the narrator finally senses a change in her brother. She notices he does not dramatize the story of his act of standing up for the elderly man and thinks that perhaps her brother has finally begun to grow up.

One thing the reader will want to pay attention to is the differing points of view and tenses used when writing each of the stories in this collection. While some collections of short stories by the same author have a feeling of repetitiveness because the point of view and tense are often very similar, these stories are written in a variety of styles so that each story is fresh. "Cell One" for example is written from the first person point of view of Nnamabia's sister. The sister gives her view of her brother's actions as well as her opinions of the mistakes her parents had made in raising him.

One important symbol of note is the jewelry that Nnamabia steals from his parents. The theft of the jewelry is a personal attack because it is his mother's pride and joy. She'd spent years collecting her jewelry. To have her own son steal it and pawn it for less than it was worth is a figurative slap in the face.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Adichie does not name the narrator in this story?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Nnamabia is a member of a cult and responsible for the crime for which he is arrested?



Discussion Question 3

Do you think Nnamabia has truly changed from his jail experience? If so, how? If not, why not?

Vocabulary

caftan, piqued, louvers, violate, gaunt, serene, lithe, catechism, vague, remorse, benign, refectory, hostel, reputed, waylaid, insular, anonymous, amendable, lavishly, histrionic, illiterate, malaise, preening, subdued, irrelevant, acerbic, inordinately, insolence, demeanor, sadist, audacity



Imitation

Summary

In the short story "Imitation" Nkem stares at a Benin mask as her friend tells her that her husband has a girlfriend. The friend tells Nkem that the woman has even moved into Nkem's house back in Lagos. After Nkem hangs up from her phone call she thinks about the mask at which she has been staring. These masks were once used to protect the king from evil. She imagines the men who were in charge of keeping the masks had wished they could be protected from evil and that they had some say in their lives.

Nkem had been pregnant when she first came to America with Obiora. She enjoyed the way the American neighbors offered to help her. When Obiora went back to Nigeria the neighbors questioned why he was gone, wanting to know if something was wrong. When she'd first come to America, Nkem had been proud to be among the women who had married a man rich enough to live in America. It had just happened that she had stayed in America with their children while Obiora went back to Nigeria alone. At first Obiora had visited every month, then he began coming only in the summer.

Nkem runs her hand through her hair thinking of how she planned to get it fixed the way Obiora liked it. She'd also planned to get a wax in preparation for his return. She walks around her house thinking how she used to walk through the house in Lagos when she was there for Christmas. She would look for signs that Obiora was having an affair.

Upstairs in the bathroom she looks at her face in the mirror. Obiora always told her she had mermaid eyes. He thought mermaids were the most beautiful creatures. She picks up the scissors and begins cutting her hair close to her scalp. She remembers another woman whose husband lived in Nigeria while she lived in America telling her their husbands would not move to America because men of power weren't recognized in America the way they were in Nigeria. When Nkem asked the woman if she planned to move back to Nigeria the woman told her that would be impossible because she and her children had grown accustomed to living in America. Nkem calls Amaechi, her house girl, to clean up her hair. Nkem snaps at the girl when she asks what had happened. Nkem later apologizes.

Nkem thinks of the men she dated before Obiora. Even though one had paid her father's medical bills and another had fixed the roof of her parents' house she felt she'd never been able to fulfill the duties of the first daughter. None of the men proposed to her because even though she was beautiful, she was a bush girl. When she met Obiora and he asked her to marry him, she thought the question was unnecessary.

As Nkem watches Amaechi cook that night Nkem tells her that Obiora has a girlfriend. Amaechi suggests that Nkem and Obiora will talk about the situation and that Obiora will make the girlfriend move out. Amaechi confirms Nkem's suspicions that Obiora has



always had girlfriends. Later that evening Nkem calls her home in Nigeria and questions the man who answers if anyone besides him and the other servants are at home.

Nkem has not had her wax as she goes to pick Obiora up from the airport. Later she examines the original Ife bronze head that Obiora brought her. He asks why she cut her hair saying he loved it long. He asks her to shower with him. She pretends not to have heard him. She joins him when he asks again. In the shower she tells him they will have to find a school in Lagos for the children. He stares at her and she tells him they will be moving back to Lagos at the end of the school year. Obiora says they will talk about it but Nkem knows it is what will happen.

Analysis

This short story is told from the third person point of view with a focus on Nkem. The bulk of the story is told in the present tense but the author does use the past tense in telling the story of how Nkem came to be in America while her husband spent most of his time in Nigeria. Significant in the story is the imitation Benin mask at which Nkem is looking when her friend calls to tell her that her husband is cheating on her. This mask is a symbol of Nkem's marriage. She feels her marriage is an imitation but she wants a real one. Notice that the author closes Nkem and Obiora's story after Nkem tells her husband she plans to move back to Nigeria with him. The reader is left to draw his own conclusion as to how their marriage works out and if Nkem does go through with her plan.

One of the themes addressed by many of the short stories in this collection is that of the strength of a woman. Several of the stories, including this one, feature a strong woman as the main character. In this story Nkem chooses not to put up with her husband having a live-in girlfriend at their house in Lagos. She takes charge of the situation and tells her husband that she and the children will be moving back to Lagos to live with him. She suspects he married her because she did not speak up against him before this point. He cannot hide his shock when she presents him with her decision.

Another theme that resonates in many of the stories is the differences in the American culture and the African culture. Although Nkem grows up very poor and does not have good prospects for marriage because she is considered a bush girl, she feels lucky because Obiora chooses to marry her. Her marriage puts her into the league of African women whose husbands are rich enough that they can afford to send their wives and children to live in America. Nkem wants the American lifestyle for her children. She doesn't want them to have to gobble up any food they can find because they are hungry. She wants them to go to good schools and have advantages she did not have. Even so, Nkem cannot imagine staying in America after she learns her husband has another woman living in their house in Lagos. Nkem has no problem moving back to Africa to keep her husband from living with another woman. She is not like another African woman who knows her husband is having an affair but will not move back to Africa because she has become used to the lifestyle in America and doesn't want to leave it. Notice also this same woman points out another difference in the cultures in



American and Africa; as she is explaining to Nkem why “big men” as they call the influential men they have married, don’t want to live in America full time she notes that they don’t get the same level of respect in America that they do in Africa.

Notice also in this story the comments made about immigration; the difficulties Nigerians go through to get their green cards and the accomplishment they feel when they finally earn citizenship. Notice Nkem indicates she feels relief when she finally gets her green card. She no longer has to get a visa each time she needs to go back to Africa and no longer has to answer the questions asked her at the American embassy. The card proves to Nkem that she finally really belongs in America.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences between life in Africa and life in America as presented in this story.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the African art described in this story. What does the art represent? Why does it make a difference if it is real or an imitation?

Discussion Question 3

If you were Nkem how do you think you might handle the situation with Obiora? Could you give up the luxuries of living in America to possibly save your marriage?

Vocabulary

curator, abundance, pungent, egalitarianism, translucent, fibrous, improvised, edible, cajoling, condescending, cadence, pidgin, quaint, incisions, blatant, pliable, deferred



A Private Experience

Summary

In the story “A Private Experience” Chika and another woman climb into an abandoned store to take refuge during a riot. The woman had called out to Chika as she tried to run away, directing her to the empty store where they could hide. Before Chika can thank the woman she tells Chika she lost her necklace while she was running. Chika also dropped the oranges she was buying as well as her expensive handbag. Chika can tell the woman is a Muslim, a scarf around her neck was probably once covering her hair and ears. Chika wonders if the woman realizes she is a Christian. Chika later learned that as they hid together the Muslims in the marketplace were killing Christians. The closest Chika had ever come to being in a riot was a campus rally that her sister helped organize.

Chika and her sister, Nnedi, had been in the marketplace when they heard shouts that a man had been killed and trouble was coming. As the other people began to run Chika ran as well until she met the woman. While sitting in the store Chika thinks about how she was separated from her sister. How she'd run among people whom she was not sure if they were enemies or friends. How she'd worried about the crying children who had been separated from their parents.

Chika will learn the riot started when a Christian happened to run over a copy of the Holy Koran with his truck. Nearby Muslims had pulled him out of the truck and cut off his head. They'd taken the head to the marketplace. In the present, the woman takes off her wrapper and invites Chika to sit with her. Chika tells the woman she doesn't know where her sister is. The woman says she has gone to a safe place. Later, however, even though Chika checks the hospital mortuaries and obituaries for information about her sister she will not be able to find anything.

In the present, Chika tells the woman she and her sister were visiting their aunty on vacation from school. It was the first time they had even come to Kano. Chika is in disbelief. She can't believe she has been caught up in a riot. The woman tells her the riots are works of evil. When she learns Chika is in medical school, the woman tells her that her nipples are burning. Chika suggests the woman, who has a one-year-old baby, use cocoa butter on her nipples to heal the cracks. The woman tells her she's had five children but this is the first baby that has caused the cracking.

The woman tells Chika her oldest daughter, Halima, is missing. She cries, a quiet private sort of crying. Chika will later wish she and her sister, as well as the woman's daughter had not gone to the market that day. The woman prays to Allah for the safety of Nnedi and Halima. Chika looks away from the woman because she feels she is invading a private experience. Chika wishes she believed in a God to whom she could pray.



After they have been hiding in the store for three hours Chika tells the woman she needs to go. She wants to try to find Nnedi but the woman tells her it is not safe. Chika climbs out of the store's window. In the street, she sees a burned body. The heat from the freshly burned body makes her run back to the store. The woman uses her scarf to clean and bandage a cut on Chika got on her leg while running back to the store. As they sit side-by-side they hear chanting coming from the marketplace.

Chika doesn't sleep that night. In the dawn, the woman gets up and opens the window. She crawls out and talks to someone. When she returns she tells Chika the danger is passed. Before the woman leaves, Chika asks if she can keep her scarf. The woman nods and hands the scarf to Chika before she leaves.

Analysis

This beautiful short story describes the way women can reach out to each other despite cultural and religious boundaries. Two very different women take refuge in an abandoned store during a riot in Kano. One is a Christian, of a privileged background, who is unfamiliar with riots and fighting. The other a poor Muslim who lives day-to-day with the fear and violence associated with fighting between Muslims and Christians. Even though she comes from a wealthy family and is studying at the university the material possessions belonging to Chika seem to fade in their grandeur next to the big heart of the Muslim woman. The Muslim woman shares with Chika all that she has as they wait out the riots together. The fact that she was the one who directed Chika to a safe place is ironic because the riot going on around them is between the Muslims and Christians. The picture of these two women taking refuge together, sharing their stories of missing loved ones, is a direct contrast to the fighting going on between the Muslims and Christians just yards away from them.

A common theme in these short stories is the clash between cultures. The cultures that clash in this story are the Muslims and the Christians. A Christian is killed by Muslims after he ran over a copy of the Koran with his truck. The story does not indicate if the desecration was intentional or accidental but it was this act that started the fighting between Christians and Muslims. The violence that follows far outweighs the initiating factor. Another clash in cultures is that between Chika and the Muslim woman. Chika at first seems to look down on the poor woman who has only meager tangible possessions. She doubts the woman understands Chika's lifestyle and believes that she is simple in her intelligence. Despite their differences the women form a sort of friendship as they hide out together.

Another common theme that is found in this short story is that of a strong woman as one of the dominant characters. The strong woman in this particular story is the Muslim woman. Although she is not as rich or as smart of Chika, she possesses an inner strength and faith that far surpasses any Earthly riches. Chika recognizes right away the woman is poor. She wears a gaudy head scarf and a worn wrapper. She complains of losing a necklace which Chika suspects was only plastic beads, not like the expensive purse she dropped as she was running. It is the Muslim woman who reached out to



Chika pulling her into a safe place to hide. While they are waiting, the Muslim woman spreads her wrapper on the dirty floor and invites Chika to sit on it with her. After Chika cut her leg, the woman washed it for her and bandaged it with her head scarf. She prays to Allah not only for protection for her own daughter but also for Chika's sister. Notice how Chika gets the feeling that she is encroaching on the woman's privacy both when the woman cries because her daughter is missing but also when she prays. The moments seem so private to Chika that she feels she must look away. Her crying is not like that of the other women that Chika knows. Instead of crying in a loud way to indicate she wants comfort in her pain, the woman cries quietly, demonstrating her own private pain.

Like many of the other stories in this collection the author experiments with tense in this story. It is told in the present tense and future tense. The bulk of the story — the time that Chika and the Muslim woman spend hiding in the abandoned store — is told in the present tense while the author relies on the future tense to convey to the reader important information Chika, from whose point of view the story is told, could not have known any other way. For instance, "Later she will see the hulks of burned cars" and "She will find out it had all started at the motor park" (p. 45) are both phrases the author uses to let the reader know what the city looks like outside the store where the women are hiding and what started the riots. In this way the author lets the reader know what has happened in the city but doesn't make the riot the focus of the story.

The author uses a variety of literary devices throughout the course of the story. Similes are found throughout the text. The air on the riot filled streets is described as smelling "like the kind of sky-colored smoke that wafts around during Christmas." (p. 45) Similarly the cars burned in the riot are described as "dotting the city like picnic bonfires." (p. 45) In this same sentence the author personifies these cars, calling them "silent witnesses" to the riot.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Chika and the Muslim woman who take refuge in the store. How are they similar? How are they different? What are the similarities and differences in their situations?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think that the Muslim woman in the story is never given a name? What does this signify?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the scarf to Chika? Why does she want to keep it?

Vocabulary

garish, infidel, ashen, sheaths, legitimize, surreal, averts, affectation, omniscient, repose, raucous, ghoulish



Ghosts

Summary

In the short story "Ghosts" Professor James Nwoye was shocked when he saw Ikenna Okoro, a man he had thought was dead. He had gone to the university Bursary to ask about his pension which he learned had not yet come in. He chatted with a man named Vincent who had given a eulogy for the professor's wife Ebere when she died. He bought some bananas for some men who were begging, but thought to himself that the men really needed moisturizer. His wife had kidded him about not using enough moisturizer especially during the dry seasons. He remembered her habit of applying Nivea to his skin after his morning bath.

He was walking toward his car when he saw Ikenna Okoro. Even though the men had not been good friends, they shook hands and then hugged. Ikenna had defied the rules when the vice chancellor said all lecturers had to wear ties to class. He'd also spoken out for better conditions for nonacademic staff. The professor asked Ikenna, surprised, if he was still alive. He believed Ikenna had died July 6, 1967 when federal soldiers advanced on Nsukka bombing it. He and his wife had seen Ikenna driving back to campus. Even though the professor told Ikenna he couldn't go back, Ikenna had said he had to get some manuscripts. The professor later learned that Nsukka had fallen and the campus was occupied. Two professors had been killed. When the professor heard one of those killed had argued with the soldiers before he was killed he assumed it was Ikenna.

Ikenna told the professor he had gone abroad with the Red Cross. Ikenna would tell him only that he went to Sweden and had been there since. The professor told Ikenna he and his wife had gone to America until 1976. They'd returned only a few days and couldn't bear to live in their house after they had seen what the federal soldiers had done to it. They now lived in a different house on a different street. Ikenna asked about Zik. The professor had to tell him that she was killed in the war. Ikenna told the professor he had done what he could to help the war efforts naming his work in organizing the Biafran rallies as well as fund-raising for the World Council of Churches. Ikenna asked the professor to verify that Chris Okigbo had died. They both agreed they'd lost a great man.

The professor noticed there were tears in Ikenna's eyes when he learned that Ebere had died. The professor told Ikenna that Ebere still visited him. He noticed Ikenna responded to him as if he were mentally ill. The professor tried to make himself look more presentable by correcting himself by saying that Ebere had visited America often. He knew he shouldn't believe that a living man could be visited by his dead wife. He hadn't believed it could happen until he'd been visited by Ebere three weeks after her funeral. She had come into the house, pulled back the bedcovers, and rubbed Nivea into his skin. He hasn't told his daughter about these visits because he is afraid she will think he is crazy and will make him move to America with her. Ikenna asked the



professor about his daughter. It was only because she was born in America that she was hired to work as a doctor there.

They talked about the state of the university. The professor tells Ikenna that he hasn't been paid his pension since he retired. Ikenna questions why no one was doing anything to make changes. Ikenna referred to the rumors he'd heard about fake medicine being sold. The professor wondered if he knew that it was because of this fake medicine that Ebere had died. He didn't tell Ikenna what had happened. At home that night, the professor went to bed, waiting for the sound of a door opening and closing, a sign that his wife had come to visit.

Analysis

This story is told from the first person point of view of the main character. It gives the reader the feel that the professor is telling the story directly to his reader. Again, the story is told in the present tense though a good deal of the background information about the professor, his family and what happened to them during the war is told in the past tense. What happened to Nyowe in the war is not as important as the person he has become because of that war. Just like Nyowe, the reader is left wondering how Ikenna was allowed out of the university without getting killed. Because Ikenna gives Nyowe so little information about his escape from the university Nyowe wonders if Ikenna was a traitor to his country in order to buy his freedom.

The main theme of this story deals with the clash between cultures. In this case the clash is a personal one for Professor James Nwoye. He is an educated man who believes he should not stoop to the traditions of the people of his country. He thinks his education puts him above these superstitions yet he still has to suppress the desire to throw a handful of sand at Ikenna Okoro, a man he believes is dead. The reader learns at the end of the story that despite his Western education, Nwoye believes he is being visited by the ghost of his late wife. He does not tell anyone about these visits because he is afraid they will think he is mentally ill.

As the story develops, the reader realizes that it is these perceived visits from his wife that kept Nwoye alive and looking forward to each day. Much of his life has caused him pain and sorrow. He has retired from the university but has not received any of his pension checks since the beginning of his retirement. Previously, during the war, one of his daughters is killed. After the war, he and his wife move to America for a short time after they see what the federal soldiers have done to their town and, more specifically, their house. After they move back to Nsukka, Nwoye's wife gets sick. She dies because the medicine the doctors use to treat her with is expired and does her no good. His daughter and grandchild currently live in America.

One of the things of which Nwoye seems proud is that his daughter had been born in America. When she tries to get a job as a doctor in America she is at first turned down because she has studied at a university in Nigeria. Nwoye notes that when Nkiru tells



them she is an American citizen and not just another immigrant, they have no choice but to let her stay.

Children are important in the African culture. This is seen by the way that the workers who don't get their pensions curse the vice chancellor of the university. One of the curses they put upon him is that he won't have children. It is considered bad luck, a disgrace for an African to have no children. Notice also how common it is for people to lose children because of the war. In this story Okoro asks Nwoye about his daughter Zik. Nwoye has to tell Okoro that Zik died during the war. Okoro tells Nwoye that he is sorry about Zik's death but doesn't ask for specifics as if it is so common for children to be killed in the war that the cause isn't even questioned.

Relationships are also important in this section of the story. The relationship in the forefront is that between Nwoye and his wife. He is convinced that she still visits him to rub Nivea into his skin even though she has been dead for weeks. This belief that his wife comes back from the dead is in contrast with the Western educated belief that ghosts don't exist. In fact, Nwoye has to stop himself from throwing sand at Okoro when he first sees him. Throwing sand at a person suspected of being a ghost is an action based in African superstition that proves if a person is dead or alive.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Okoro and his life after the war in Nsukka. How do you think he is able to leave the campus without being killed after it is invaded by federal soldiers?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Nwoye's belief that his wife's ghost visits him.

Discussion Question 3

How has Nwoye's life been a disappointment to him? Discuss the bad experiences through which he and his family live.

Vocabulary

indulgent, incessant, preen, tentative, defiantly, reams, peremptory, erudite, asperity, rhetoric, invincibility, reverberated, nascent, diffidence, inordinately, nostalgia, perplexed, pacifying, abated, inept, stagnated, intrepid, ineluctable, segue, diffidence, egregiously, implacable, tacit



On Monday of Last Week

Summary

In the story "On Monday of Last Week" Kamara looked at herself in the mirror and imagined Tracy touching her stomach. Josh was waiting when she came out of the bathroom. He was Tracy's seven-year-old son. She prepared supper for Josh. They'd been practicing for Read-A-Thon a competition Josh had been named a finalist. Kamara thought he looked tired. Josh's father was white. His mother was African-American. Even when she was being interviewed by Josh's father Neil, Kamara had wondered about Josh's mother. She was told Tracy was an artist, that she worked in the basement and was not to be disturbed. Even though Kamara hadn't really wanted a job as a babysitter, one she considered demeaning, she had wanted a job in order to have a reason to get out of the apartment.

After working for three months, Kamara still hadn't seen Tracy. She'd dealt only with Neil who seemed overly anxious about raising Josh correctly. On Monday of last week, however, Tracy had come upstairs from the basement. When Kamara saw her she got the urge to lose weight and wear makeup again. As she fixed dinner for Josh she thought about how different parenting in America was from that in Africa. Parents were over-anxious and tried to protect their children too closely. She thought also about the dreams she and her husband had thought they could achieve if they lived in America. They had met at the university and had a hurried wedding before Tobechei left for America on a mission visa. It was six years before Tobechei was able to send for her to come to America as well. When Kamara did see Tobechei in America she didn't have the same feelings for him as she had while they were in Africa.

Tobechei had noticed the change in Kamara after her encounter with Tracy. On that day Tracy had touched Kamara on the chin and told her that she had beautiful teeth. She asked Kamara if she had ever been an artist's model. She made Kamara feel adored. Before she went back downstairs Kamara suggested Tracy show Josh the project on which she was working. Even though the painting just looked like haphazard paint splashes to Kamara, she praised it. Before Kamara and Josh went back upstairs Tracy asked Kamara if she would be willing to take her clothes off and pose as a model.

After Neil and Josh left the house Kamara went downstairs and told Tracy she'd be willing to sit as a model for her. Tracy seemed happy but said that day was not a good day. The next day Kamara knew that Josh hadn't won the Read-A-Thon. Neil was worried he was consoling Josh with too much sugar. Tracy came upstairs again even as Kamara imagined herself calling her husband and telling him there was an emergency and she needed to spend the night so Tracy could paint her. Neil introduced Tracy to Maren, Josh's French tutor. Tracy went to Maren and complimented her on her eyes. She then asked Maren if she had ever considered being an artist's model. Kamara sat down and took a cookie from Josh's plate.



Analysis

This story, like “Imitation,” is told from the point of view of a third person narrator. The focus in this story is the character of Kamara, who is working as a babysitter for a biracial American couple. The story, however, is told in the past tense. The action of the story takes place since Kamara saw Tracy on Monday of last week and describes the emotions she’s felt since then as well as her let down when Kamara learns that Tracy’s interest in her as a model is not unique. The author uses a smattering of similes, comparisons that use the words like or as, in this story. Some examples include “flat as a book cover” and “a tone as soft as a breath.” (p. 74 & 89)

A good deal of issues are addressed in this short story. Although Kamara has been promised a better life in America, she is disappointed with the life in which she finds herself. She gets a job babysitting, a job considered demeaning in Nigeria, just so she has a reason to get out of the house. She has been reunited with her husband after a six-year separation while he prepared for her to come to America but she doesn’t feel as attracted to him as she once had. Her unhappiness leads her to homosexual fantasies about the mother of the boy for whom she babysits.

Children are a theme in this short story. In Nigeria a good deal of a person’s success is determined by whether or not a couple has children. These children are necessary to carry on the family lineage. When Kamara is finally able to join her husband in America she is pressured by her family back home to start having children. Tobechi, however, buys Kamara birth control pills because he wants them to be alone together for the first year. With his knowledge Kamara is flushing these pills down the toilet and willing herself to get pregnant. She wants something to think about and care about.

Intertwined in this theme of children is the clash of culture between Nigeria and America. As Kamara works as a nanny for Neil and Tracy she has a good deal of time to contemplate the way Americans are more protective and more anxious about their children than African parents. Kamara also is irritated by the way Americans believe they have achieved something unusual if they are good parents. In Africa it is understood parents are to care for their children, not something that is worthy of praise. Interesting is that Kamara reasons that the Americans anxieties about their children and time spent congratulating one another on being good parents is the result of too much food. She believes it is because they stay so full all the time that they have time to think and worry about things that haven’t even happened and might never happen.

Consider also Neil’s reaction when Kamara refers to Josh as being “half-caste.” Although the term is not derogatory in Nigeria Kamara learns it is considered a bad word in America. To Kamara, Josh, whose mother is African-American and father is white, is half-caste but she doesn’t think being biracial is a bad quality. She associates these children with being light-skinned, good looking and having privileges other children don’t because they usually have grandparents in America.

In the theme of immigration notice how eager Tobechi is to get a visa to go to America. Notice also how long it takes to get himself a green card showing he is a citizen of the



United States so he can send for Kamara. Whenever Tobechei is questioned about what is taking so long to send for Kamara, Tobechei tells her only that he is “sorting his papers.” By the changes Kamara notices in his love making when they are finally reunited, it can be suspected that he has been enjoying himself in America and learning the ways of American women when they were apart.

Notice also that even though Kamara wants to join Tobechei in America and has longed for him, she recognizes right away upon arrival in America that their relationship is not the same. There are changes in him that she can not reconcile. Sometimes she even wonders if he is the same man with whom she had fallen in love with back in Africa. These feelings of disappointment and depression leave Kamara open to Tracy’s compliments.

Even though Kamara has never thought of herself as a homosexual, she is attracted to Tracy and wants to be accepted by the alluring woman. Kamara is excited and even begins a plan to loose weight after. Kamara believes Tracey’s compliment of her is unique, which makes Kamara feel noticed and special. She believes Tracy is coming on to her. When she hears Tracy give Josh’s French tutor a similar compliment, Kamara realizes she isn’t unique to Tracy at all, just another person. Kamara’s acceptance of lack of uniqueness in Tracy’s eyes is shown by her act of taking a cookie from Josh’s plate. Kamara breaks her diet when she realizes Tracy is not uniquely attracted to her at all.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Neil’s style of parenting. Do you agree with Kamara that he is overprotective? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Kamara so infatuated with Tracy? What might have sparked her attraction even before she sees the woman? Why does she think Tracy is infatuated with her as well?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Tobechei. Why do you think it takes so long for him to call for Kamara to join him in America? What do you think he is doing during that span of six years?

Vocabulary

fragility, commission, attentive, inconsequential, sated, consoled, interspersed, ungainly, riffled, haphazard, precociously, demeanor, burnished, indulgent



Jumping Monkey Hill

Summary

In the short story "Jumping Monkey Hill" Ujunwa thought it was odd that the African Writers Conference was held at a resort that seemed very touristy. She later learned it was Edward Campbell who had chosen Jumping Monkey Hill as the place for the conference. It was Edward who picked her up at the airport. As they waited for a Ugandan participant in the conference, Edward sat close to her and questioned her about her job. Ujunwa told him only she'd lost her job just before she had left for the conference. When they arrived at the resort Edward made introductions during lunch. The Ugandan was the only person whom Ujunwa disliked immediately. He spoke only to Edward and ignored the other participants. They knew he was the winner of the Lipton African Writers' Prize.

Edward told the participants that during the conference they would be expected to write one piece that would be possibly be published in the "Oratory." Edward introduced himself as having a passion for African literature. He introduced his wife Isabel as being an animal rights activist. When Isabel had told Ujunwa the next day that she must have royal blood because of her attractive bone structure Ujunwa lied and told Isabel that she was indeed a princess. She told a story about her ancestors capturing a Portuguese trader and keeping him in a cage. Isabel didn't comment on the story but asked Ujunwa to consider supporting her anti-poaching campaign.

Back in her room, Ujunwa started her story. The story is about a girl named Chioma, a college graduate looking for a job. At her first interview, the man interviewing her squeezes her breasts. Chioma leaves the interview and hears nothing from it. At her next interview Chioma is told someone who is foreign educated is wanted for the job. Chioma laughs as she walks out. She finally goes to her father to ask for help in getting a job. He pretends to be angry with her, but gives her money and agrees to try to help her. Chioma notices a picture of her father's new girlfriend is sitting on his desk.

At dinner that night at the conference, ostrich was among the foods served. Ujunwa did not know that people ate ostrich but Edward claimed it was an African staple. After dinner the participants in the conference - with the exception of Edward, Isabel and the Ugandan - talked. One woman told how she'd revealed to her parents she was a lesbian but they still spent time looking for available men for her. The talk eventually led to fathers. Ujunwa told the group there was nothing to say about her father. She told them she was definitely not writing about her father even though he had done something that had both hurt and surprised her.

After breakfast Ujunwa continued writing. In her story the heroine gets a call from Merchant Trust, a bank her father had contacted. She is to be hired on a trial basis for the marketing department. Yinka will work with her during her trial period. Chioma is disappointed because the man interviewing her doesn't look at her like a man usually



looks at a woman. Later she goes to the house of an alhaji with Yinka. Yinka agrees to sit in the alhaji's lap as she talks to him about banking services. Yinka reminds Chioma of the Yellow Woman, her husband's lover. That woman had gone into the boutique store that her mother owned with the idea of buying shoes there. Knowing that she would pay for the shoes with money that was really her husband's, Chioma's mother had called the woman a husband snatcher and had run the woman out of her store. Chioma's father had yelled at her mother telling her that she had disgraced him. He then moved out. Chioma's mother refused to do anything to encourage him to come back.

During the conference, Ujunwa began to notice that Edward often stared at her body. One day when Ujunwa offered to stand up so Edward could have a seat in the shade, he told her he'd rather she lie down for him. The Ugandan heard and laughed. After a moment Ujunwa laughed as well. She later wanted to tell the Zimbabwean what Edward had said but the Zimbabwean seemed distracted by the feedback she'd gotten on her story. Edward had called the story about a childless couple "passé." The next day when the Senegalese read from her story Edward told her that homosexual stories weren't indicative of Africa. Other writers, including Ujunwa clearly disagreed with him.

Later, Ujunwa joined some of the other writers in the bar. They discussed the way the other white guests at the resort looked at them suspiciously. Ujunwa was suddenly angry with herself for laughing at what Edward had said to her. When Ujunwa made the comment that Edward was always leering at her, the other writers agreed. They believed Edward had sexual fantasies about her. Ujunwa felt betrayed because all of the others had also noticed the attention that Edward paid to her.

The next evening the Tanzanian read his story. Edward said that his story would be the lead story for the "Oratory." Edward thought the story was relevant but Ujunwa thought it was badly written with underdeveloped characters. Back in her room Ujunwa continued writing. The alhaji is talking to Chioma. He says that he will do business with Merchant Bank but only if Chioma will be his personal contact. He offers to give the women some perfume as a gift and asks them to follow him. Instead of following him, however, Chioma walks out the door and takes a taxi to the bank where she clears out her desk.

At breakfast the next morning Ujunwa learns that Edward had also been making suggestive comments to the Senegalese. When Ujunwa asked the Senegalese how she had replied to Edward's comment the woman said she felt there was no need to say anything to him. Ujunwa asked her why women didn't speak up for themselves more often. Instead of getting a response, the other participants began discussing the nationality of the cooks and their opinions of the food. The black south African was the only one who commented on Ujunwa's question. He said that Edward was a harmless old man. Ujunwa yelled at him. Meanwhile the Kenyan suggested Ujunwa was angry about more than just Edward. Later, Ujunwa bought a necklace with a faux ivory tusk. When Isabel saw it she assumed it was fake and commented on how real it looked. Ujunwa took advantage of the opportunity and told her it was real.



After she read her story, many of the other writers, including the Ugandan, commented how real the story was and the excellent job she'd done of capturing the atmosphere of Lagos. Edward, however, declared that the story wasn't plausible and things like the sexual advances in the workplace that Chioma encountered didn't happen in real life. Ujunwa saw victory in Edward's eyes. She got up and laughed telling Edward the only part of the story that she'd changed was the fact she rode home in the Jeep instead of getting a taxi. She walked away from the group because she felt tears welling up in her eyes. She wondered if Edward would consider the way she ended her participation in the writers conference plausible.

Analysis

The clash between cultures is central to this short story. Specifically, there is a disconnect between the real Africa and the Africa that tourists visit. From the beginning of the conference, Ujunwa notices that the resort at which it is held is not indicative of Africa at all. It is more like a white man's dream of Africa. One of the comments she makes is that a person can visit that resort and never realize how many black people actually live in Africa. The only blacks mentioned are the black women who discreetly make the beds and clean the rooms. Later in the story, as the conference participants get to know one another better they begin to share their feelings that the other white people who are staying at the resort treat them strangely, as if they don't really belong there. Significant is that it is a rich white man who decides to have the conference at that particular resort.

Edward Campbell, who is the mind behind the conference, claims to be an expert in African literature. When it comes time for him to critique the work of the students it appears that Edward has only a romanticized vision of Africa. He does not believe African literature should include stories about homosexuality. He also does not believe that stories about the Africans' belief in superstition are relevant. Finally, he does not believe that women in Africa suffer bias or that they are required to use their sexuality in order to get and keep jobs. Based on the way he treats Ujunwa and at least one of the other women at the conference, Edward knows women are judged based on the sexuality. He makes sexual comments to both Ujunwa and a woman from Kenya even though he knows she is a lesbian. After Ujunwa reads her story in which the heroine walks out of a job when a client indicates she is "hot" and forces the other woman working with her to sit in his lap as he discusses banking options Edward argues that African women are respected and were not treated as Ujunwa indicates they are in her story. He says the story is not plausible. His actions, however, are in direct contrast to his words as he seems to see Ujunwa only in relation to her sexual appeal.

One of the recurring aspects of these stories is a strong woman as a heroine. In this story it is Ujunwa who turns out to be the strong female character. She asks of the other woman who have been sexually harassed by Edward why women don't speak up about their injustices. The reactions of the other writers, who attempt to change the subject, prove that the idea of women standing up for themselves - or even talking about the subject - is taboo. Remember that Ujunwa's story is her own story of trying to



get a job in her town of Lagos. She is unable to get a job on her own qualifications, unless she allows herself to be a sexual plaything from the men for whom she would work. Even though both the main character of the story and Ujunwa need jobs, they both walk out of the jobs in which they are sexually harassed just like Ujunwa walks out of the writer's conference.

Notice that even though Ujunwa revolts against the idea of being sexually harassed, she shows in ways that she builds her self-esteem on the affirmations she gets from men. In her story, for instance, Chioma gets upset and walks out because the one of the men who interviews her squeezes her breasts. In another interview, however, Chioma is disturbed because the man talking to her does not look at her the way a man looks at a woman. Similarly, when Ujunwa learns that Edward is making sexual advances toward another writer at the conference she is disturbed because she realizes his attraction is not unique to her.

This story is unique in its structure because the story of Ujunwa and the conference is told in the past tense. The story she writes about Chioma for the conference, however, is written in present tense. Because the author clearly makes distinctions between Ujunwa's story and Chioma's it is easy to keep the two separated. The parts of Chioma's story are also presented in indented paragraphs to ensure there is no confusion.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Ujunwa, Edward and Isabel are the only characters to whom Adichie gives a name in this story? Why is it significant that the other characters are referred to only by their area of origin?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss sexual bias as it is presented in the story. Do you think Edward is only a harmless old man? Or do you think he is baiting Ujunwa to see how she will react to his advances?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Ujunwa's encounters with Isabel. Why does she lie to the woman both about her ancestry and the faux ivory tusk she wears?

Vocabulary

discreet, incongruous, complacency, affluent, cowries, pious, sacrilege, emboldened, emphatic, avuncular, deranged, prurient, viable, sanguine, pique, bereft, antagonize, implausible



The Thing Around Your Neck

Summary

In the story “The Thing Around Your Neck” you thought when you went to America that you would have a car and soon have a nice house. Your uncle had put all of the names of your family members in for the American visa lottery. You had won. You would live with him until you were able to support yourself. Your uncle told you America was all about give and take. He helped you get a job at a gas station and enrolled you in community college. You felt at home with your uncle until he molested you one day. You left the next morning. You wound up in Connecticut where you got a job at a restaurant. You sent half your earnings back to Nigeria to your family. They thought you were lucky because you’d won the visa lottery. You wanted to write home about all the things you were experiencing in America but because you didn’t have money to send gifts back home you chose to write to no one. Because you didn’t write, only sent home money in envelopes with no return address, no one knew where you were. At night you felt as if there was something around your neck choking you.

You were surprised when a man at the restaurant asked you what part of Africa you were from and seemed knowledgeable about the country. The next two times you saw him in the restaurant the man continued to talk to you about Africa even though you told him the conversations were against restaurant policy. The fourth time the man came in you gave his table to another waitress, but he was waiting outside when you came out. He asked you to go out with him. You refused that day and the next three days as well. The fifth night when he was not outside the restaurant you panicked because you were afraid he’d given up on you. When he did walk up you told him you would go out with him before he even asked.

You became close enough to the man that you began telling him the truth about yourself and your family. You even told him about the way your father had accidentally hit the car belonging to a big man. Your father had cried and begged forgiveness. He was allowed to go free. You were upset when you went with him to Chang’s one day and the waiter had asked him if he had a girlfriend in Shanghai, a city he had recently visited. You interpreted this as meaning the waiter could not imagine you as his girlfriend. He apologized even though you could tell he didn’t understand why you were upset. As your relationship deepened, the thing around your neck that felt as if it were choking you began to loosen.

You noticed people’s reactions to you as a couple, a black woman and a white man. His parents, however, made you feel normal. You were angry with him after your visit when he talked about how they had portioned out their love for him only when he did as they wanted. He’d also made you angry when he refused to take you and go to Quebec with them when they invited you.



When you finally wrote home to your parents and told them where you were you got a letter back stating your father had died five months ago. You cried and tried to think what you might have been doing when your father died. Your boyfriend offered to go with you to see your family but you said you needed to go alone. He asked you if you would come back. You reminded him you would lose your green card if you didn't return in a year. You hugged him tight before letting go.

Analysis

This story is particularly interesting because it is told in the second person point of view, a point of view used sparingly by writers. The author speaks directly to the reader as if the reader is the main character in the story, the one who won the visa lottery. The author does not use the pronoun "you" sparingly; she uses it regularly and forcefully, constantly putting the reader in the place of the young Nigerian girl trying to make her way in America but floundering.

Although the story starts out as one of hope the reader gets the feeling right away that Akunna's experience in America will be a negative one. First of all she and her relatives have unrealistic expectations of America. Even though Akunna will have more opportunities than she did in Nigeria, she won't be able to earn enough in a month to buy a big car. To add to Akunna's disappointment, the family member who is supposed to help her settle in once she arrives in America instead wants sex from her. Because she doesn't want this type of relationship Akunna is forced out on her own before she is ready. Like other stories in this collection, the author doesn't tuck in all the loose ends nice and neat for the reader. She leaves the reader, like her boyfriend, wondering if Akunna will come back to America. Because of the second person point of view, the reader is left feeling as if he is responsible for making this decision.

In this story the main character Akunna learns that America isn't the paradise her family had led her to believe. Notice the way her home is described at the beginning of the story. Akunna lives in a room with her father, mother and three siblings. Six people living together in one room. They don't own enough chairs for everyone to have a seat when their family visits. The walls are unpainted. Despite what her family believes, things are not much better for Akunna in America. Akunna's uncle makes inappropriate sexual advance toward her, so she decides to leave his home. She finds a tiny room with stained carpet to rent, and after she sends money home to her family and pays her rent she has no money to take college classes, buy gifts for her family or anything else. Her life doesn't appear to have improved that much after her move to America. Ironically, Akunna's family believes that winning the visa lottery is a blessing for Akunna. They all envy her good luck. They believe, and made her believe, that she will soon be rich in America. She is both embarrassed and disappointed by the way her life in America has turned out.

The clash in cultures between Akunna's life in Nigeria and her new life in America is also a major theme in this story. Akunna discovers that Americans are nosey and strange. They ask questions about her hair. They talk openly about things that are



considered too private to talk about openly in Nigeria. The people in America waste food while those in Nigeria survive on little. She remembers the finger sized pieces of meat that had been all her family could afford. In America she dates a man who chooses not to eat meat because he believes it is harmful. Akunna is surprised by the choices people have in America. In Nigeria, life is dictated to people, they do not get to choose what they do and don't want to do.

To complete Akunna's heartbreak, her father dies while she is in America. He dies during the time her parents do not know how to get in touch with her. When she does finally send them her address, she is notified of his death and that the money she has been sending to them has been used to give him a nice funeral. It is because of her father's death that Akunna goes back to visit her family. The story closes with the reader left to make up his own mind about whether Akunna will return to America.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think that Akunna will return to her American boyfriend? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of the author's choice to use the second person point of view in this story.

Discussion Question 3

Was Akunna as lucky as her family members thought she was when she won the American visa lottery? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

syllabi, cajoling, parastatal, expiation, condescending, maudlin, dictate, sediment, solidarity, courier



The American Embassy

Summary

In the story "The American Embassy" a woman stood in line at the American Embassy. She was the 48th person in line. She did not notice much going on around her. When the man behind her asked her a question she was surprised and had to bring herself back to reality. Her doctor had advised her to keep her mind blank. He refused to give her any tranquilizers because he said she needed to be alert during her interview to request a visa. She couldn't keep herself from thinking about her four-year-old son with the splash of blood on him. When the man behind her tapped her on the shoulder she nearly screamed from the pain caused by a muscle she'd twisted when she jumped from the second floor balcony of her apartment. The man pointed out to her the way a soldier was whipping a man for no apparent reason. Other people waiting in line had developed spur of the moment friendships. The woman had not.

She'd buried her son two days ago. One day before that she'd snuck her husband to the home of a friend in the trunk of their car. The day before that, her life had been normal and she'd had no idea how much it would change. The man behind her continued to talk about the whipping. The woman wished he would shut up. The way the soldier swaggered reminded her of the swagger of the men who had broken into her house and demanded to know where her husband was. They tore the house apart looking for him. One of them commented about the story that her husband had written for the newspaper. That man grabbed her but one of the other men said it was time for them to go. That was the time that Ugonna came in and began screaming. One of the men had a gun and shot the child.

The man behind her interrupted her thinking when he offered her an orange. She shook her head. It still hurt from her jump. The men had been discussing what they should do about the dead boy when she jumped from the balcony and crawled into the trash bin. They had been talking about shooting her as well. The man behind her began giving her advice on how to best get through her interview. When she told him she was applying for asylum he said it would be difficult to prove. She wondered if he read "The New Nigeria" the pro-democracy newspaper for which he husband had worked. In a recent piece he had accused the leader of inventing a coup. Her husband had been held a prisoner for two weeks after the article was published.

She asked the man behind her if he read "The New Nigeria." He said he did and that the editors were brave. The woman realized it wasn't bravery but instead a form of selfishness. It was after he'd published an article compiling all of the killings, lost contracts and missing money that the trouble had really begun. He'd tried to hide the fact he was nervous from her but he soon got a disturbing anonymous phone call telling him the head of state was furious about the article. He would be arrested and would not come back. The woman had immediately gotten him into the trunk of the car and had driven him to the house of his coeditor. He was sneaked over the border to the Benin



Republic. She planned to apply for a visa at the end of the school year. She believed she and her son would be fine. Because he son was agitated that night she'd let him stay up with her. She wished she had made him go to bed.

Inside the embassy the interviewer asked the woman for more details about her story. She decided not to talk about Ugonna, not to use him and his death as a way to get a visa. She would tell the interviewer only that Ugonna had been killed by the government. The interviewer asked for proof the government was responsible for the boy's death. It was when the woman said that the United States could offer her a new life that the woman realized that it was Ugonna who had given her a new life. She realized the new life she wanted was one where she could plant flowers on her son's grave. An interviewer told a man he would no longer listen to the applicant's lies. The man grew angry and had to be led away. The woman realized her future rested on a woman who did not understand her. She turned and left the embassy.

Analysis

What is of particular note in this story is the way the author develops the story and the tone of the story despite the tunnel mindedness of the main character. Because the woman is still so bereft by the way her life has changed, she does not notice much of what is going on around her. The author describes the scene by pointing out what the woman isn't noticing. It is by describing the things that the woman isn't noticing that the author gives the reader an idea about the atmosphere around the embassy before those wishing to file for visas are allowed to go inside. There are vendors of all sorts hoping to make money by selling food, cigarettes, newspapers and even renting chairs to those waiting in line. Beggars also work the line of hopefuls.

The story is written in the third person point of view. The woman is never given a name. The reference to her only as "she" makes it seem as if she could be any woman. It is as if the author is trying to make the point that any resident in Nigeria is in threat of being harassed by the Nigeria government if they go against the wishes of government officials.

As the story progresses, the reader begins to get small bits of what has happened to the woman and her family before he is allowed to understand her story in full. In the recent past, her husband Due to her husband writing critical stories about the Nigeria government, government officials intended to arrest him and kill him. Instead, they shot his four-year-old son. The mother of the boy now waits in line to get asylum to America.

One of the major themes addressed in this short story is that of children. The woman believes she has found her purpose in life when she is finally able to get pregnant with a son. It is indicated in the story that she had trouble getting pregnant because her womb is full of fibroids. Once her son is born, she identifies as being his mother. It is the identity that makes her most happy. In Nigeria, children are important in order to carry on the family lineage. If a couple has no children it is considered a disgrace.



The theme of relationships is also discussed. The relationship in particular is that between the woman and her husband. While some think her husband is brave for speaking out against the Nigeria government the woman thinks he is selfish. She sees his acts from the point of view of the person who has been most hurt by the repercussions of what he did. It is easy to think a person is brave if you aren't the one who has to live in fear of retaliation.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think the woman would be granted asylum if she explained her story to the person interviewing her? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is your opinion of the woman's husband? Is he brave or selfish for writing the types of articles that he wrote?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the woman decide to stay in Lagos? What would you do in her situation? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

denunciations, flamboyant, fermentation, aspirational, asylum, subsidies



The Shivering

Summary

In the story “The Shivering” Ukamaka was surprised when a man claiming he was Nigerian knocked on her door and asked to pray with her for their country. A plane had crashed in Nigeria the same day the Nigerian first lady had died. Ukamaka had been searching the news for information about the crash. She feared her ex-boyfriend Udenna had been on the plane. Even though she was unsure about letting the man into her apartment she did so. They held hands and he prayed in a Nigerian Pentecostal way that made Ukamaka uncomfortable. As he prayed Ukamaka started to shiver. She wondered if it was God. She’d gotten the same feeling when she had spoken in tongues once while saying her rosary one morning. The shivering stopped as soon as it started. When the man finished praying Ukamaka went to the bathroom. The strange man was still there when she returned. He introduced himself as Chinedu.

The man stayed even though Ukamaka wished he would leave. He said the crash was God speaking to their country. He said the only friend he had that he thought might have been on the plane had emailed him saying he was fine. Ukamaka shared that she was afraid her ex-boyfriend had been on the plane. The phone rang. When Ukamaka finally picked it up it was her mother telling her that Udenna was fine. Ukamaka cried in relief and Chinedu hugged her. Ukamaka asked Chinedu to stay for lunch. As they ate she asked him if God preferred some people to others, if that was why some were saved from the crash while others perished. Chinedu told her that God’s ways were different from human ways, that He didn’t always make sense in a human type of way.

Ukamaka remembered that Father Patrick had also told her that God didn’t always make sense. It was what he told her when she went to talk to him after Udenna had broken up with her at Thomas Sweet during their Sunday ritual of grocery shopping. He told her their relationship had become staid. Back at her apartment, Ukamaka explained to Chinedu that it didn’t make sense for God to save Udenna because he was not the nicest or kindest person who would have been on the flight. Chinedu noticed a picture Ukamaka said she kept forgetting to remove and asked if the man in the photo was Udenna. Ukamaka replied that it was. She believed he looked like Thomas Sankara, the president of Burkina Faso who had been assassinated.

Chinedu asked Ukamaka to check for the latest news on the plane crash. New reports indicated there were no survivors. Chinedu voiced his opinion that the plane crash was a wake up call from God. Ukamaka told him she’d once gone to Mass daily but had decided one day just to stop going. She compared her belief in God as she got older to her belief in Father Christmas. She then told Chinedu that Udenna had never told her that he loved her because he thought the expression was cliché. He was always struggling to be different, she said. She added he’d always wanted to manage the amount of happiness she felt and often put down the things she liked. Chinedu nodded as if he understood.



In the following days she ate dinner with Chinedu in her apartment after she returned from school. Although she and the other foreign students who lived in her building never spoke to or acknowledged each other, Ukamaka noticed Chinedu had made friends with several of these students. He explained he didn't have a car and had to have some way to get to the grocery. She began driving him to church on Sundays. They would then go grocery shopping together. She noticed he didn't buy much and scoured the flyers for sales. He was surprised at how much more money people were willing to pay for vegetables grown without chemicals when she took him to an organic food store. When Ukamaka offered to buy Chinedu lunch he told her that he was fasting. He said it was for a reason too personal to discuss.

As they drove Ukamaka said she was surprised that Udenna hadn't called her. Chinedu suggested it might be best he didn't. When Ukamaka said it wasn't as easy as Chinedu thought - that it wasn't easy to love an asshole - Chinedu countered that he did know what it was like. He surprised her by telling her that he had been with his boyfriend for two years. He told about his relationship with Abidemi. Chinedu had liked the way Abidemi was possessive of him. The relationship ended when Abidemi said he was getting married. Chinedu had always known that Abidemi would eventually get married. He thought perhaps it was because he had met the future bride that the relationship had ended. What bothered him most was the Abidemi had not been conflicted as he sat talking with his boyfriend and his future wife. When Ukamaka compared Abidemi's actions to Udenna, Chinedu seemed angry. He told her that not everything was about Udenna. He told her coldly that she should consider that Udenna didn't really love her. She asked him to leave her apartment.

Ukamaka had been noticing strange things about Chinedu. After a week she tried to talk to him. When she knocked on his door he told her only he was busy and closed the door in her face. She went back to his apartment on Sunday and apologized. She asked him if he wanted her to take him to church. He refused but allowed her inside his apartment. He finally told her his story. His visa had been expired for three years and his friend had allowed him to stay in his apartment. He'd lost his job with a construction company because his boss didn't want trouble if there was a raid looking for undocumented workers.

Ukamaka convinced Chinedu to go to church with her. On the way she told him about the shivering she'd had on the day that he had prayed with her. He told her that it was a sign from God. Ukamaka was suddenly jealous of Chinedu's faith. At church Ukamaka made Chinedu smile when she asked him if he liked Father Patrick. She assured him they would not let him get deported, that they would find a way. Chinedu admitted that he too had a crush on Thomas Sankara. They laughed together as the priest walked through the congregation blessing them with sprinkles of holy water. Ukamaka thought how Nigerian priests used a leafy branch to distribute the water. When they were finished, the congregation was drenched, but felt truly blessed.



Analysis

This is a story about faith and relationships. Chinedu initiates a relationship with Ukamaka when a plane crashes in Nigeria and the first lady dies on the same day. Ukamaka is a character who is defined by his faith. He believes that the plane crash is a sign to the people in Nigeria that things need to change. He prays to God that the Nigerians will see the wrong in their ways and will repent. The reader learns by the end of the story that Chinedu has been dealing with his own personal tragedy throughout the course of the story even as he prays for the people of Nigeria and listens to Ukamaka's problems. His visa is expired and he is awaiting notification that he will be deported back to Nigeria. He has been praying and even fasting, hoping for God to intervene in his life.

Ukamaka, however, is a Nigeria who has lost her faith. As a child she says her rosary and attends mass daily of her own choice. One day, however, she stops going when she gets the idea that God is like Father Christmas. She believes He is not real, but only a nice story she's been told. In Ukamaka's adult life, it has not helped her faith that when she tells her ex-boyfriend about an experience that she has one day while saying her rosary, a feeling that she believes is a sign by God, her ex-boyfriend tells Ukamaka that she has manufactured the experience. Although she's begun going to church since her boyfriend broke up with her, Ukamaka has still not regained her faith.

It is Chinedu's faith in action that helps Ukamaka regain her own faith. As he holds her hands and prays with her during their first meeting, she begins shivering during the prayer. The shivering stops as quickly as it started. When Ukamaka tells Chinedu about her experience he does not tell her she manufactured the experience. Instead, he tells her that it is a sign from God.

Notice the imagery at the end of the short story where the American priest blesses the people in the congregation with holy water. Ukamaka compares the sprinkling with water the parishioners get in the American church with the drenching they get in the Nigerian church she once attended. While it is perhaps not ideal to get drenched with water during a church service, Ukamaka states that it is during these drenching sessions that she feels completely blessed. This imagery indicates that one must deal with some hardships and difficulties before they can understand the nature and blessings of God.

Notice the way the author develops Chinedu's character as seen through the eyes of Ukamaka. Chinedu makes Ukamaka nervous when he first meets him. She is uncomfortable with his prayer in which he binds demons, casts them into the sea and covers things in Jesus' blood. It reminds her of a Nigerian Pentecostal church. She also draws conclusions about Chinedu based on the opinions that she gleaned from her ex-boyfriend. Because Chinedu has a lumpy, vein scarred forehead Udenna would have said he was common and from the Nigerian bush. Because of his commonness Udenna would not have been friends with the man. The reader should notice things about Chinedu that signal he is in distress. He always wears the same clothes. He eats



hungrily at Ukamaka's house but if they are in a place to buy a meal in a restaurant he tells her that he is fasting. Note also he buys only the cheapest food at the grocery store. It is not until Ukamaka visits Chinedu in his apartment that she puts these things she had noticed together and realizes that Chinedu is in a precarious position as he waits to be deported back to Nigeria.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Udenna and Chinedu. Discuss the difference between their explanations of what Ukamaka believes are religious experiences.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss faith as it is presented in this short story.

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Ukamaka believes Chinedu's statement that her shivering is the result of God? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

vaguely, pugilistic, sanctimonious, machinations, meticulously, incomprehensible, demeanor, preambles, staid, tangible, puerile, decadence, ambivalence, asexual, nostalgic, prefect, deportation, unambiguous, subdued



The Arrangers of Marriage

Summary

In the story "The Arrangers of Marriage", because her new husband had always referred to his home as a house Chinaza was surprised to find herself in an apartment with little furniture. He woke her up the next morning having sex with her. Her aunt and uncle had been pleased they'd been able to arrange for her to marry a man studying to be a doctor in America. They'd had only two weeks to get to know one another before they were married. At breakfast Chinaza asked Ofodile if he had dried milk for their tea. He said he didn't drink his tea with milk any longer because he'd gotten used to the way things were done in America. Ofodile corrected Chinaza on some of the phrases she used that weren't accepted in America and also told her he'd changed his name to an American one. He was Dave Bell. He required her to use her American name as well. He explained to her that if she wanted to get anywhere in America she had to be as mainstream as possible.

Later, Ofodile took Chinaza to show her how to do the shopping and how to ride the bus. She didn't like the way the meat they bought was already wrapped up. She was also dissatisfied when she saw a brand of biscuits she recognized and wanted to buy it just to have something familiar in her cart. Ofodile substituted the generic because it was less expensive, negating Chinaza's reason for wanting to buy the package in the first place. He explained he bought store brands because he was not yet an attending physician and could not afford anything but the store brand. That same day Ofodile also took Chinaza to a mall. They ate pizza in a food court, a place that Chinaza thought was lacking in dignity. She refused to take the escalator, asking instead if they could take the lift. He husband corrected her telling her it was an elevator, not a lift.

After Chinaza cooked coconut rice Ofodile smacked his lips over it but brought her an American cook book the next day. A neighbor had commented on the smell of the rice. He didn't want them to be known as the couple who filled the building with the smell of foreign food. Chinaza found American cooking difficult and discouraging.

Chinaza thought Nia was the kind of woman of whom her aunt would disapprove. They met one another at the apartment building's mailboxes. Nia invited Chinaza to have a soda in her apartment. Nia offered to show Chinaza around Brooklyn but told her it would have to be on a day she wasn't working in her hair salon. She offered to help Chinaza get a sales job at Macy's. Chinaza was excited at the idea but told Nia she hadn't gotten her work permit yet. Nia advised Chinaza she should get her permit by winter if Dave had filed for one for her. When Chinaza told Ofodile she'd met Nia he warned her that Nia could be a bad influence.

Chinaza was surprised when she walked out of the apartment building one day to discover it was snowing. That night at dinner she asked Ofodile about her work permit. He told her that the American woman he had married so he could get his green card



was causing trouble for him. When he had married Chinaza he had not yet been divorced from the American. Chinaza was angry to learn he was married before even though Ofodile told her the marriage was only one paper. She said she should have been told before they got married. When she asked him why he had married her he told her he had wanted to marry a Nigerian girl. He had been told she was light skinned and was quiet.

That evening Chinaza packed her clothes and went to Nia's apartment. Nia comforted Chinaza telling her that Ofodile should have told her about his marriage but that it wasn't a real marriage. When she asked Nia if she'd ever met Ofodile's wife or any of his girlfriends Nia turned away dramatically. When Chinaza asked again Nia told her that she'd had sex with Ofodile two years ago but the relationship hadn't gone anywhere. Nia suggested then that Chinaza wait until she got her papers and got a job before she left. Chinaza knew she was right. She went back to Ofodile that night. When she rang the doorbell he opened the door and let her inside.

Analysis

Relationships, or perhaps the lack of a relationship, is an important theme in this short story. The story is about a Nigeria woman whose aunt and uncle arrange a marriage for her. The woman, named Chinaza, is given only two weeks to get to know her husband-to-be Ofodile before they are married. Later in the story Chinaza's friend asks her why she never calls Ofodile by his name. Chinaza doesn't call him by his name because she feels she really doesn't know who he is. He is still a stranger to her. He feels even more like a stranger when Chinaza learns by chance that he has been married before to an American woman. Even though Ofodile says it was only a marriage on paper so he could get his green card, Chinaza is deeply hurt and angered that she has not been told before about his previous marriage. Worse is the fact he is legally still married to the American woman when he marries Chinaza. Because that marriage is not resolved, Chinaza is not able to get her work permit, a permit that could allow her to make her own money and become self-sufficient.

Notice also that although Ofodile tells Chinaza he wants to assimilate with the Americans and their culture as much as possible he treats Chinaza in a way that is reminiscent of the way women are treated in Nigeria. He treats her almost as a possession instead of a person. He does not tell her about his marriage to an American woman in order to get his green card. He doesn't tell her that he is still legally married to another woman when he marries Chinaza. He insisted that Chinaza change her name to an American name so she will fit into American culture. He criticizes the way she speaks even though she's been in America less than one week. He won't let her cook Nigeria food or speak in any language other than English even when they are at home alone together. He reveals that he married her not because he loves her but because he thought she would be quiet, follow his demands blindly, and not make a fuss. Notice that he also marries her with thoughts of his future children. He tells her that he is glad she is light-skinned because light-skinned blacks fit in better with the Americans.



Although Chinaza tries to break away from her husband and make her own way, she ultimately has no other choice but to go back to him. To go back to Nigeria would be foolish because jobs are so scarce there. Ofodile has to file for Chinaza's work permit. She can not get a job until she has those papers. If she leaves him, chances are that Ofodile will never file for her work permit, an act that would keep her from ever being able to be self-sufficient. Because she has married a doctor in America Chinaza's aunt and uncle believed they have set her up in royal fashion. They do not understand, or want to try to understand, any of the things about Chinaza's arranged marriage that make her unhappy.

The only friend Chinaza has in her life is Nia, the woman whom Ofodile tells her is a bad influence. The relationship has some ironies since Nia admits to Chinaza that she had slept with Ofodile two years before he was married to Chinaza. Another thing to consider is that Chinaza is forced to give up her Nigeria name and take an American one so that she will fit in better with American culture, while Nia, an African American, has legally changed her American name to a Swahili one. When Chinaza goes to visit Nia her friend fixes her tea with milk and sugar in it, the way Chinaza is used to drinking her tea. Chinaza also teaches Nia some phrases of Igbo.

After Chinaza leaves Ofodile it is Nia who makes her realize that her best bet is to stick it out with Ofodile until she gets her work permit and then a job. Nia also makes an interesting comment about love. She tells Chinaza she read a book that said: "We don't fall in love, we climb up to love" (p.185). Although both women know the lack of love isn't the most severe problem in the relationship, Nia makes an interesting statement about the way love, even in its best situations, calls for work on the part of both members of a couple.

Notice the way the author's word choice sets the tone for this story. The reader gets the idea right away that the apartment isn't ideal just by the adjectives used. The stairs are "brooding" the hallway "airless" and the carpet "frayed." (p. 167) The numbers on the door are "unevenly fashioned" and "plastered" on the door indicating a lack of care in the appearance of the apartment building. Once inside the apartment the narrator even personifies the apartment walls noting that it appeared they had "become uncomfortable with each other, with so little between them." (p. 168) There are a variety of similes used in the story. For example the officer at customs had examined the foods the main character had brought "as if they were spiders." (p. 168) She describes one of the women she sees at the mall food court as having "a body as wide as a pillow held sideways." (p. 176)

In this short story the author chooses the use the first person point of view. The point of view allows the reader to feel close to the narrator so that he sympathizes with her negative impression of America and American culture. By telling the story in the first person point of view the author is also able to capture the loneliness that the narrator feels in her new home.



Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Ofodile does not tell Chinaza he had to marry an American woman in order to get his green card? Why does he allow the wedding to Chinaza to take place when he knows his divorce isn't final?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Ofodile's belief that he has to change to fit into American culture in order to make a life for himself in America? Why does he try to force Chinaza to change as well?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think a one night stand was all there was to Nia and Ofodile's affair? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

brownstone, brooding, sedate, interminable, lewd



Tomorrow is Too Far

Summary

In the story “Tomorrow is Too Far” the narrator, referred to as “you,” describes the last summer she spent in Nigeria with her Grandmama. Your brother Nonso was the only one allowed to climb the fruit and nut trees to shake down the fruit. Grandmama also taught him alone how to cut down coconuts. Nonso always got the first sip of coconut milk even though Dozie, Nonso’s cousin, was the oldest boy. Grandmama said it was because Nonso was the son of her son while Dozie was the son of her daughter. For this reason Nonso would carry on the family’s lineage. You remembered a summer several years before when you had fallen in love with your cousin Dozie. In the summer in which the story is set your love for Dozie grew even as your hate for your brother got deeper. The narrator notes at the end of this first section that it was that same summer that her brother died.

The day that Nonso had died Grandmama had screamed at his body telling him that he had betrayed her and asking who would carry on the family lineage. You remembered the madness that lurked in your grandmama’s eyes as she called your mother. The mother wanted to body sent to America for burial but Grandmama believed it should have been buried in Nigeria. When you talked to your mother on the phone she kept asking if you were okay. You wondered if she suspected that you were okay. You remembered the way she’d laughed each time she came out of Nonso’s room at night. She had never laughed that way for you.

You return to Grandmama’s house for the first time since Nonso’s death when your Grandmama dies. Dozie is there as well. He tells you he is surprised you have come back because he knows how much you hated your Grandmama. When he had called to tell you that Grandmama had died you thought of all the things you had not allowed yourself to think about, like Nonso’s death.

The narrator remembers the day of Nonso’s death. Your father asked your mother after the funeral how Nonso had died. When she packed up his room and threw away his things, your mother didn’t ask if you wanted to keep anything. Three months after the funeral she told you that she and your father were getting divorced and asked how Nonso had died. You lied and told her that it was your Grandmama who encouraged Nonso to climb the tree and then scared him by telling him there was a snake there. You told your mother that after Nonso fell your Grandmama yelled at him but did nothing to help him even though he was still alive. You thought your mother would know that was a lie because she had seen Nonso with his head split open because he landed on a rock. She called your father and told him. He later told you to be careful what you said about Nonso’s death because your words could cause more hurt. You wondered if he knew you were lying.



You had realized that summer that something needed to happen to Nonso in order for you to be able to live. Nonso was stifling you and you came up with the idea of scaring him with the snake. You wanted only to mar his perfection, not to kill him. You told Dozie about your plan. You had challenged Nonso to climb the tree. When he was near the top you screamed you saw a snake, and then Nonso let go and fell.

You waited for your mother to start taking notice of you but it never happens. You listen as Dozie tells you he'd begun to dream about Nonso. He asks if you dream about Nonso and you tell him that you don't. He walks away as you wish you could tell him about the things you did experience. You are crying as you stand alone under the avocado tree.

Analysis

This is a story of jealousy and the loss of a family's oldest son Nonso. As a child, the narrator is jealous of all the attention and pampering her older brother gets because he is the oldest son of her Grandmama's son. Even though Dozie is older he gets no preferential treatment because he is the son of Grandmama's daughter. Nonso is the one expected to carry on the family's lineage. He is the only one allowed to climb Grandmama's fruit and nut trees to shake down the ripe fruit and nuts. Grandmama teaches Nonso how to cut down coconuts and always lets him have the first drink of coconut milk. Along with having all of their Grandmama's attention Nonso also gets the best of his mother's attention. The narrator hears the way her mother laughs when she comes out of Nonso's room after she tucks him into bed. She never laughs that way when she leaves the narrator's room. Because the narrator is starved for attention and feels as if Nonso is suffocating her, the narrator comes up with a plan to hurt Nonso. She wants only to mar his perfection - she doesn't intend to kill him.

The relationship between Dozie and the narrator is significant. The narrator believes in her childhood that she will be setting Nonso back not only to benefit herself but also to help Dozie. She feels the adults partiality to Nonso is just as painful to Dozie as it is to her. Later, when the two meet at Grandmama's house as adults and for the first time since Nonso's death it is clear that Dozie neither understood what the narrator planned to do nor does he approve of what she had done. He blames her for the guilt he feels from Nonso's death and his part in it happening simply because he doesn't ask the narrator to stop her plan when they are children.

Notice the way the author develops this story. She gives the reader only bits of information as the story progresses. She doesn't tell the reader until nearly the end of the story what actually happened to Nonso. The reader knows something bad had happened right from the beginning. She notes how the summer about which she writes is the summer before the narrator's parents get divorced. It is the same summer that is the last one you spent with your Grandmama. She ends the first section of her story by telling the reader it is the summer that Nonso dies. After she drops this bomb, she goes back to give more details of the summer. The author begins to give hints about the way that Nonso dies. She does this by first telling that the narrator is all right after Nonso's



death. The reader later learns the narrator plans the accident that results in Nonso's death. The author then has the narrator concoct a story about how her Grandmama had encouraged Nonso to climb the tree and then had scared him by telling him there was a snake. Since the narrator wonders if her parents know she is lying, the reader knows it isn't actually Grandmama who is responsible for Nonso's death either. It isn't until almost the end of the story that the reader realizes it is the narrator who, as a child, encourages Nonso to climb the tree and then scares him, causing him to fall out. This way of revealing the story bit by bit creates suspense and encourages the reader to try and guess what happened and, most likely, surprises them at the end with the revelation of what actually happened.

Interesting also is what Dozie has chosen to take away from the accident that killed Nonso. As a child, he knows that the narrator wants to do something to hurt her brother but he doesn't stop her. Eighteen years later, Dozie has decided that the narrator planned the accident and then blamed it on their Grandmama because the narrator hates her. He also believes the narrator had wanted Nonso dead and feels no grief for him. Dozie believes he is alone in his guilt and regret about that summer. The image of the narrator standing underneath the avocado tree from which her brother had fallen, crying and alone indicates that she also is grieved and feels guilty because of her brother's death.

This is another of Adichie's stories in which she chooses to use the second person point of view. The author's reference to "you" as being the one who set up the circumstances that caused Nonso's death is unsettling for the reader. The reader feels as if he has actually done something wrong, that he is the young girl who felt so jealous of her preferred older brother that she had to do something to mar his perfection.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator want to harm her brother when they are children? What outcome does she think this injury will have on her older family members?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way that the author develops her story. Why might the author take this approach?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the narrator is never given a name? What does this signify?

Vocabulary

presided, commune, amoral, lineage, fetish, azure



The Headstrong Historian

Summary

In the story "The Headstrong Historian", years after her husband died, Nwamgba still enjoyed memories of her husband, Obierika. When Nwamgba insisted Obierika was the man she would marry her parents weren't happy because he was an only child and his father was an only child. Her father decided to let her marry Obierika because he came from a good family.

When Nwamgba met Obierika's cousins Okafo and Okoye she hated them at first sight. She sensed their envy of Obierika. As Obierika got richer they envied him more and more. They didn't work but came to Obierika for food. They suggested to Obierika that he marry another woman after Nwamgba had several miscarriages. Obierika said he would not marry another woman until they were older so they would have someone to take care of them. Nwamgba decided to get Obierika a wife by herself. Her friend Ayaju suggested a woman as a wife but she thought of another option which would be for Nwamgba to have an affair. As they talked Nwamgba felt a stab in her back and knew she was pregnant and that she would have another miscarriage.

When she did have her miscarriage she suggested a new wife to Obierika but he delayed seeing the girl she suggested until Nwamgba was pregnant again and this time carried the baby to term. The boy, whom they name Anikwenwa, had Obierika's curiosity. Okafo and Okoye continued to come around. They were more jealous than ever. Obierika died suddenly one day and Nwamgba knew his cousins had poisoned him. During Obierika's funeral Okafo and Okoye took the ivory tusk that had belonged to their family saying it should go to brothers and not sons. They cleared his barn of yams and took his goats. The elders of their town asked them to leave Nwamgba alone after she sang about how they were cheating a widow. Members of the Women's Council threatened him. She kept a close watch on Anikwenwa.

Nwamgba learned from Ayaju about the white man's power and his guns. Ayaju had decided to send her son to the white man's school so he would have their power. Nwamgba dreamed of killing Okafo and Okoye with the guns that belonged to the white men. When white men visited their clan Nwamgba hurried to go visit them. She was disappointed because they didn't have their guns with them. They were missionaries.

Ayaju told Nwamgba the white people had set up a court in Onicha. Ayaju said it was allowed because they were the people with the power. She suggested that Anikwenwa should learn the ways of the white people. Nwamgba refused then but changed her mind after Okafo and Okoye took a piece of her land. The elders had allowed it to be done because they said they were farming it for her. Ayaju also told her a story of white man's court where a Nigeria who could speak English won a court case even though he was lying because he knew the white man's ways. A third incident that changed



Nwamgba's mind was a boy who had been abducted and sold as a slave was returned to his mother by missionaries.

Nwamgba decided against sending Anikwenwa to the Anglican mission because they were teaching in Igbo. She sent him instead to the Catholic mission. The boy's name was changed to Michael in order for him to be baptized. Anikwenwa at first did not like school. When the other boys in his clan began to admire him because of his clothes and his ability to speak English Anikwenwa began to like school better. It bothered her, however, that the curiosity in his eyes was not as strong. He stopped eating the food she cooked because he said it had been sacrificed to idols. She was proud, however, that with the help of Father Lutz, Anikwenwa had been able to prove the land Okafo and Okoye had taken from them actually belonged to them. He also asked the pair for his father's ivory tusk back and got it.

She was devastated when Anikwenwa told her he was going to Lagos to study to be a teacher. She did not see him for many years. When he returned he talked about winning souls and being hired as the catechist at the new mission. Nwamgba saw how different her son was from her and wondered if she was responsible for changing his destiny. One day when Nwamgba was sick with malaria Anikwenwa came to her telling her that he was getting married. The Christian ceremony in which Anikwenwa was married was laughable to Nwamgba. She tried to dislike Anikwenwa's new wife Mgbeke, but she was so eager to please and apologetic that Nwamgba pitied her instead.

Mgbeke was beaten by the women of the clan when she went to get water at the Oyo stream with her clothes on. It was considered a disrespect to the goddess of the stream to get water there with clothes on. Anikwenwa threatened the women and embarrassed his mother. Father O'Donnell was more respectful but was told Mgbeke could not get water from the Oyo stream while clothed.

After Mgbeke had three miscarriages Nwamgba went to the oracle herself because Anikwenwa would not go. Afterward Mgbeke did get pregnant. Nwamgba hoped they would have a son because she believed the baby would have Obierkia's spirit reincarnated in him. When the baby was born Nwamgba never recognized her husband's spirit in him. Mgbeke finally had another baby, a girl. When Nwamgba first held Grace, whom she called Afamefuna, she recognized her husband's spirit in her. The girl listened to and learned the poetry and songs of the clan. She also watched as her grandmother made pottery. Nwamgba died when Grace was in secondary school. Nwamgba wanted to see her granddaughter but her father would not call her because she was taking exams. Grace came home on her own because she got a strange urge to go home.

After her grandmother's death, Grace studied the ways of the Nigeria natives. She scorned her father after he slapped her at school one day when her teacher slapped her because she laughed when the teacher told her that her grandmother's call and responses were not considered poetry. She learned stories about the way the white people had taken over the Nigeria peoples' villages. She changed her major to history



when she heard a distinguished Nigerian say that he didn't think that African culture should even be a subject. She wrote a book about the history of South Africa.

She realized when her fiance told her that she was misguided to write about the primitive culture that their marriage would end in divorce. As she wrote international reports and earned good deals of money for things that were common sense, she imagined her grandmother chuckling. She legally had her name changed from Grace to Afamefuna.

Analysis

In this story the idea of culture clash is seen from a different angle than offered in the other short stories in this collection. While the other stories have addressed this theme from the viewpoint of Nigerians going to America and dealing with differences between their culture and the American culture, this story deals with Nigeria at the time the missionaries and soldiers are going in and trying to tame the area. The clash in this story is between the older Nigerians, like Grace's grandmother, who believe in the spirit world and those, like her own son Anikwenwa, who embraced the ways of the white people. Interesting in this story is that Nwamgba embraces the ways of the white people that can help her but does not want anything to do with those that can't help her. She wants to be able to pick and choose. She wants her son educated in the white people's ways because she wants to be able to get revenge on Okafo and Okoye. She also wants her son kept safe from these men. She gets both of these things. She is not happy, however, when Anikwenwa begins to follow the beliefs of the Christians and refuses to participate in any of Nwamgba's non-Christian ceremonies or even eat the food she fixes.

The Christian and non-Christian way clash in a violent way when Nwamgba's daughter-in-law is beaten when she goes to get water from the stream believed by the Nigerians to be owned by a goddess, named Oyi, with her clothes on. It is considered disrespectful to the goddess, who is believed to be the protector of women, to get water from that spring while clothed. In this story the rules are not changed to allow Mgbeke to get water from the Oyi Stream while dressed, Nwamgba does notice changes in the way the gods of the Nigerians expect to be honored. When she goes to the oracle seeking help for Mgbeke's miscarriages she is required to bring gin instead of the traditional palm wine.

The importance of children and their role in carrying on the family line is important in this story as well. Nwamgba's parents almost do not let her marry Obierika because his family has a history of having only one child per family. Obierika is an only child and his father is an only child. Not only do these families face the possibility their one heir could be killed or die before that get a chance to pass on the family name, but not having children is considered a punishment. Some say people with ancestors who had sold a girl into slavery are cursed by having only one child.



Notice the lengths to which Nwamgba is willing to go to get Obierika an heir. After she has miscarried several times she decides Obierika needs to get another wife. When he doesn't take steps to find his own wife Nwamgba starts looking for one by herself. Nwamgba's friend suggests to her that Nwamgba take a lover. Nwamgba refuses this suggestion because she knows it will indicate that Obierika is impotent. Nwamgba knows Obierika was not impotent because she has gotten pregnant many times, but miscarries each time. Notice that the difficulty in getting pregnant and carrying the baby to term do not stop with Nwamgba. Her daughter-in-law Ayaju has several miscarriages before getting pregnant with each of her children. Grace also has trouble getting pregnant, in fact, she never has a child during the time period covered by this short story.

Relationships are also a major theme in this story. One of the significant relationships is that between Obierika and his cousins Okafo and Okoye. Because Obierika is an only child he likes to think of Okafo and Okoye as his brothers. Nwamgba recognizes from the time she first meets Okafo and Okoye that they are jealous of Obierika. They become more and more jealous as Obierika gets richer. Their jealousy reaches a breaking point when Nwamgba finally bores Obierika a son. Obierika dies suddenly. Nwamgba believes that Okafo and Okoye have poisoned him. After Obierika's death Okafo and Okoye begin stealing from Nwamgba. They take the family's ivory tusk that should have gone to Obierika's son. They also take all the yams he had stored as well as his goats. It is as a result of this bad relationship that Nwamgba decides she wants her son schooled in the ways of the white people, so he can help her get revenge on Okafo and Okoye.

Another significant relationship in this story is that between Grace and her grandmother. While others do not see the significance of the history of the Nigerian natives, Grace appreciates the poems and stories her grandmother recites to her. Her grandmother believes the spirit of her husband has been reincarnated in Grace. Eventually, Grace studies and writes books about the native Nigerian beliefs and the way their world has been changed by the white people.

This story is told in the third person point of view and in the past tense. The author doesn't do much experimenting with point of view or tense in this story perhaps because she wants to let the plot of the story and the changes in the Nigerian culture described in the story take the focus.

Discussion Question 1

When Ayaju suggested that Nwamgba get a lover in order to get her pregnant, why do you think that Nwamgba does not tell Ayaju about her miscarriages?



Discussion Question 2

Consider the way that Mgbeké is treated by the women of the village when she goes to get water from the stream with her clothes on. How does one decide who is in the wrong when two cultures clash?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the relationship between Grace and her grandmother. Why do you think Grace is so interested in the old ways of the people in Nigeria when others aren't?

Vocabulary

aghast, cosmopolitanism, retort, impotent, oracle, malevolence, successive, abominations, rancor, emasculated, catapults, heathen, infuriated, circuitous, indulgent, ponderousness, admonished, ludicrous, titillated, eminent, rapturous



Characters

Nnamabia

Nnamabia is the central character in the story “Cell One.” Nnamabia is the older brother of the narrator of the story. He is described as being attractive and popular. He has a habit of being overly dramatic in telling his stories. The narrator suspects her brother is responsible for the second break in at their house during which their mother’s jewelry is taken because he is so dramatic when he tells his sister someone had robbed their house.

All of his life Nnamabia’s parents, his mother specifically, had made sure he did not get into trouble or suffer any negative consequences when he did things wrong. For this reason he does not take his actions seriously until he is put in jail because it is suspected he is a member of a gang. Even after he is first in jail, the seriousness of his situation does not set in until he sees police officers abusing an elderly man. The man had been arrested because his son was wanted on robbery charges. Because the police could not find the son they arrested the father.

Nnamabia is highly upset because of the way the man is treated. He stands up for the man because he doesn’t think the way he is being treated is right. Nnamabia yells at the police about the way they are treating the old man even after the police threaten to take him to Cell One, a place that Nnamabia had nightmares about.

It is when Nnamabia is finally released from jail and he tells no dramatic story about the way he was treated after he stood up for the old man that the narrator thinks Nnamabia has truly been changed by his experience.

Cell One Narrator

The narrator of the short story “Cell One” is the younger sister of Nnamabia. She is not only less physically attractive than Nnamabia but also feels as if she is living in Nnamabia’s shadow. Throughout her childhood, her parents pamper Nnamabia and make excuses for his behavior. Despite her knowledge that her brother is a trouble maker the narrator realizes at the end of the story that her brother has been changed by his jail experience when he does not tell a dramatic story about his time in Cell One.

Nkem

Nkem is the main character in the story “Imitation.” Born to a poor African family, Nkem's family believes she is fortunate because she has married a man rich enough to move her to America. Her problem is that her husband lives the majority of his life in Lagos. Nkem learns at the beginning of the story that her husband is not only having an affair but is also allowing his girlfriend to live in their house in Lagos.



Although she suspects her husband had married her because she's never spoken out against him before, she decides to tell him that she and their children will be moving back to Lagos instead of staying in America. This decision shows the strength of Nkem's character because she gives up a good deal that she'd wanted both for herself and her children when she chooses to move back to Africa. She believes it is worth what she will lose in order to save her marriage.

Amaechi

Amaechi is the house girl that Obiora hires to take care of his house in America in the story "Imitation." Nkem is often surprised how similar her childhood and Amaechi's had been. They both were familiar with poverty and hunger as children. Nkem, however, is considered lucky because she married a rich man. While Amaechi works for Obiora she and Nkem become friends. Even though Amaechi suggests to Nkem that she needs only for Obiora to make his girlfriend move out of the Lagos house to make things better Nkem knows she wants a real marriage, not an imitation of one.

Obiora

Obiora is Nkem's husband in the story "Imitation." He is having an affair and allowing the woman to live in the house belonging to him and Nkem in Lagos. Obiora is shocked when he learns that Nkem wants to move back to Lagos to live full time. Nkem suspects that Obiora married her because she had never second guessed him and had always done what he wanted her to do.

Ijemamaka

Ijemamaka is Nkem's friend in the story "Imitation." She is the one who tells Nkem that Nkem's husband Obiora is having an affair and allowing his girlfriend to live in their house in Lagos.

A Muslim Woman

It is a Muslim woman in the story "A Private Experience" who directs Chika to the safety of an abandoned store in which they take refuge together during a riot in the Kano market place. This Muslim woman is the direct opposite of Chika. The Muslim woman is poor and uneducated but she has a very strong faith. She prays to Allah for the protection of her own daughter, who had been in the market place, as well as Chika's sister. She places her worn wrapper on the floor of the store so she and Chika can sit without getting dirty. She uses her head scarf to bind a cut on Chika's leg. The kindness of the Muslim woman is particularly moving when the reader learns that the riot from which the two women are taking refuge was caused when a Christian ran over a copy of the Holy Koran with his truck. The Muslims in the market place are slaughtering Christians because of that one careless act.



Chika

Chika is one of the main characters in the story “A Private Experience.” She is a privileged, rich girl who is studying medicine at the university. It is her first visit to the marketplace in Kano when a riot erupts. She is running when a Muslim woman encourages her to take refuge with her in an abandoned store. Chika feels out of place, especially when the Muslim woman prays to Allah, because Chika is a Christian. Chika develops a respect for the woman and her religious faith. After her experience with the Muslim woman Chika no longer tells her family that having Masses said is a waste of money.

Nnedi

Nnedi is Chika’s sister. She is a character mentioned in the story “A Private Experience.” Nnedi and Chika are shopping in the marketplace in Kano when a riot breaks out. Chika is separated from her sister. She never hears from Nnedi again nor does she locate her body.

Professor James Nwoye

Professor James Nwoye is the central character in the story “Ghosts.” He believes he is seeing a ghost when he runs into his former colleague Ikenna Okoro on campus. The reader later learns that Nwoye has also been being visited by the ghost of his late wife. She comes into his bedroom at night to rub Nivea into his skin.

Through the course of the story Nwoye recounts the disappointments and bad luck he has suffered during his life: In his young adult years, federal soldiers attack and taken over the campus where he lives. He and his wife move from their home after the soldiers vandalize and trash it. The couple also lose a daughter in the war.

After the war is over they return from America to their campus town. Nwoye’s wife gets sick and dies because the medicine with which she was treated is expired and not effective. The only thing that keeps Nwoye living now is looking forward to the visits he believes he receives from his wife’s ghost.

Ikenna Okoro

Ikenna Okoro is the man in the story “Ghosts” whom Professor James Nwoye believes had died when federal soldiers attacked the campus at which Okoro and Nwoye both worked. It is many years later when Nwoye encounters Okoro on the campus. He has trouble believing Okoro is really alive. Okoro gives Nwoye little details about how he got away from the federal soldiers. Nwoye wonders if Okoro was disloyal to their government in order to earn his freedom. Okoro tells Nwoye that he had done what he



could in the war effort. He also says that he had moved to Sweden and had lived there ever since the war.

Kamara

Kamara is the main character in the story “On Monday of Last Week.” After immigrating to America with her husband, Kamara is unhappy with the way her life is going. She has waited six years after marrying her husband to join him in America, but after finally arriving she finds herself no longer attracted to him. She gets a job as a nanny, a job she believes is below her, just to have a reason to get out of the house.

Kamara develops an infatuation with Tracy, the mother of the boy for whom she babysits. Tracy is an artist who spends much of her time in the basement of her home working on her art. Kamara wonders what the woman is like. One day Tracy finally comes up from the basement and Kamara is able to meet her face-to-face. Tracy compliments Kamara on her teeth and asks if she would be willing to sit for a nude portrait. Kamara thinks Tracy is attracted to her. She is happy with the thought of a new relationship until she hears Tracy compliment another woman and ask her to sit for a nude photo as well.

Tracy

Tracy is a character in the story “On Monday of Last Week.” She is the mother of Josh and wife of Neil. One day while Kamara is babysitting Josh, Tracy comes upstairs and compliments Kamara on her beautiful teeth. Tracy later asks Kamara if she is willing to sit nude as a model for her. Although she is married Kamara feels a homosexual attraction to Tracy. Kamara loses her attraction for Tracy when she hears Tracy compliment another woman on her eyes and asks her to sit as a model for her.

Neil

Neil is Josh’s father in the story “On Monday of Last Week.” Neil appears to be Josh’s primary caregiver. He is the one who hires Kamara as Josh’s nanny. He also keeps a close watch on Josh’s diet and tries to find foods that will be best for his development. Kamara believes Neil is overprotective of Josh.

Tobechi

Tobechi is Kamara’s husband in the story “On Monday of Last Week.” He lives in America for six years before he is prepared for Kamara to join him. When she is reunited with her husband, Kamara does not find him as attractive as she had when they first met one another.



Josh

Josh is the son of Neil and Tracy in the story “On Monday of Last Week.” He is intelligent but highly over-protected by his father.

Edward Campbell

Edward Campbell is a character in the story “Jumping Monkey Hill.” He is an elderly white man who is the organizer of the African Writers Conference. He picked the resort “Jumping Monkey Hill” as the resort at which the conference is being held. Although he tells those attending the conference that he studied African literature and culture, he seems to lack a good knowledge of the real Africa. He argues with the writers at the conference telling them that homosexuality isn’t a relevant topic for Africans. Neither are the rituals and superstitions of the older Nigerians, according to him. He also tells Ujunwa that women in Africa are not degraded or seen as sexual objects. Edward’s actions, however, directly contradict his words because he oogles Ujunwa and makes sexually charged comments to her during the conference.

Ujunwa Ogundu

Ujunwa Ogundu is a character in the story “Jumping Monkey Hill.” She is the participant from Nigeria who is chosen to participate in the African Writers Conference. Before attending the conference Ujunwa quit her job at the bank at which she’d been hired for a trial period because she felt she was being sexually harassed. As the conference progresses Ujunwa notices that Edward Campbell, the man who arranged the conference, leers at her. She notices he looks at her breasts instead of her eyes. He also makes sexually charged comments to her.

Akunna

Akunna is the main character of the story “The Thing Around Your Neck.” Akunna thinks she is lucky when she wins the American visa lottery. Once she is in America, however, she learns life there is difficult, just like it is in Nigeria.

Ugonna’s Mother

The woman in the story “The American Embassy” is the main character in that story but she is never given a name throughout the course of the entire story. She is referred to at one point as “Ugonna’s Mother” the title which she seems to prefer. In this story the woman is seeking to get asylum to allow her to go to America.

She is the wife of a man who writes for a pro-democracy newspaper. He writes several articles that infuriated members of the government. It is because of one of these articles



that government assassins are sent to the woman's house looking for her husband. They cannot find her husband because the woman has already taken him to his coeditor's house and he has been snuck across the border.

The woman had intended to go to America after the end of her school term but decides to apply for asylum after her son is shot. Instead of staying for the entire interview, however, the woman leaves because she decides she wants to stay in Nigeria where her son's body is buried. She also doesn't think the disinterested woman who is interviewing her has the right to know anything about Ugonna.

Ugonna

Ugonna is the four-year-old child in the story "The American Embassy." Ugonna is shot and killed by government assassins who come to the boy's home with the intent of arresting his father.

Ukamaka

Ukamaka is one of the major characters in the story "The Shivering." She develops a relationship with a gay man who lives in her apartment building after he comes to her wanting to pray with her after a plane crashed in their country. Ukamaka talks to the man mainly about her ex-boyfriend Udenna who is supposed to be on the airplane that crashed. Luckily, he misses his plane and is not killed in the crash.

It is only after Chinedu speaks up and tells Ukamaka that he understands her destructive relationship more than she thinks because he has been involved in a destructive relationship as well that she becomes interested in talking about his troubles. Near the end of their story Chinedu finally admits to Ukamaka that his visa is expired and he is in danger of being deported. Ukamaka promises her new friend they will do something to keep him from being sent back to Nigeria.

Chinedu

Chinedu is the gay man in the story "The Shivering" who befriends Ukamaka when he goes to her apartment and asks to pray with her after a plane crashed in Nigeria. He is a highly religious man who is completely different from Ukamaka's self-centered ex-boyfriend. Although Ukamaka assumes that Chinedu is a student at Princeton she doesn't learn until much later in their relationship that Chinedu has lost his job and his visa has been expired for three years. He fasts and prays, hoping for a way to keep from being deported back to Nigeria.



Ofodile Udenwa aka Dave Bell

Ofodile Udenwa is a character in the story “The Arrangers of Marriage.” He is the husband chosen for Chinaza Okafor. Ofodile is in the process of becoming a doctor but has not yet earned his doctorate. He still earns a very low rate of pay and lives in a small apartment with little furniture. Despite his poor conditions, Ofodile tries his best to assimilate with the Americans. He speaks only English and eats only American food. He has also changed his name to an American one. He has chosen “Dave Bell” a name his new wife thinks is strange because it has no similarity to his Nigerian name. He insists Chinaza also take an American name and fit into American culture.

Chinaza Okafor aka Agatha Bell

Chinaza Okafor is the woman in “The Arrangers of Marriage” who is set up to marry Ofodile Udenwa. The arrangers of the marriage think Chinaza is lucky to marry a doctor. They don’t tell Chinaza about any of the negative qualities of the man, like his habit of snoring or his lack of furniture. Once she arrives in America Chinaza misses Nigeria and the Nigerian culture. She is also distressed because her husband insists she embrace American culture. She is angered when she learns her husband has been sabotaging her attempts to get a job. She packs up with the intention of leaving him but goes back when she realizes she has no hope for any sort of future without him.

Narrator of “Tomorrow is Too Far”

The narrator of the story “Tomorrow is Too Far” is the sister of Nonso and cousin of Dozie. She thinks it is unfair that Nonso is treated so much better than the others even though Dozie is actually older. She also thinks it is unfair that Nonso is the only one allowed to climb the trees to shake the fruit and nuts out of them when she is actually a better climber than Nonso is. One day the narrator has had enough of her brother and decides he is just too special. She wants to do something to mar her brother’s perfection but doesn’t intend for her stunt to kill him. When she is asked about the cause of Nonso’s death, she blames it on Grandmama saying she is the one who had dared Nonso to climb into the tree and had scared him with the snake.

Nonso

Nonso is the brother of the narrator of the story “Tomorrow is Too Far.” Nonso is the oldest son of Grandmama’s oldest son, making him her favorite and the son who will carry on the family lineage. Nonso is the only one who is allowed to climb Grandmama’s fruit and nut trees to shake down the ripe fruit and nuts. One day the narrator challenges Nonso to climb up high in one of the trees. When he is almost at the top she tells him she sees a poisonous snake in the tree with him. Nonso is scared and falls out of the tree. He dies from the fall.



Grandmama

Grandmama is a character in the story “Tomorrow is Too Far.” When others ask, the narrator of the story tells them that it is Grandmama who came up with the idea of scaring Nonso with the snake after he climbed up in the tree. In reality, Grandmama had nothing to do with Nonso’s death. After she sees that they boy is dead she cries out that he has betrayed her because he is the oldest boy in the family, the one who is supposed to carry on the family’s lineage.

Dozie

Dozie is a cousin to Nonso and the narrator in the story “Tomorrow is Too Far.” Dozie is the only one besides the narrator who knows that the narrator is responsible for Nonso’s death. When they are older and return to Grandmama’s house after she dies, Dozie is discourteous to the narrator.

Nwamgba

Nwamgba is the main character in the story “The Headstrong Historian.” She is the mother of Anikwenwa and wife of Obierika. Nwamgba believes that Obierika’s cousins Okafo and Okoye poisoned him because he is happy and fortunate. After Obierika dies Okafo and Okoye begin to mistreat Nwamgba. They steal from her and even take the ivory tusk that belonged to her husband. They say the tusk should not go to her son. Because she wants to get revenge on Obierika’s cousins Nwamgba wants her son Anikwenwa to learn American ways. She believes the Americans are powerful and wants Anikwenwa to have that power. She is happy when, as an adult, Anikwenwa asks for his father’s ivory tusk back and gets it. She is not happy, however, because she feels she is losing her son. When Anikwenwa has a daughter Nwamgba is happy when she sees Obierika’s spirit in the girl’s eyes.

Afamefuna aka Grace

Grace is the daughter born to Anikwenwa in the story “The Headstrong Historian.” When she is born Nwamgba sees Obierika’s spirit in her eyes. Nwamgba gives her granddaughter the African name Afamefuna which means “My name will not be lost.” Unlike Anikwenwa’s son, Grace listens to her grandmother’s stories and watches her make pottery.

The year that Grace goes away to secondary school Nwamgba feels her time has come to die. She asks only to see Grace but her father says the girl is taking exams and cannot come. Even though she has not been told what is happening, Grace comes home on her own because she has not been able to sleep and feels an urge to go home. As Grace grows older, she begins studying the history of Africa and eventually

writes books about the history of Southern Nigeria. Eventually she officially changes her name to Afamefuna, the African name her grandmother had given her.



Symbols and Symbolism

Jewelry

In the story "Cell One" the theft of jewelry represents a personal attack on Nnamabia's mother because the pieces are her prized possessions. When Nnamabia fakes a robbery at his parents' house he takes his mother's jewelry. He later admits that he pawned it and spent all the money. The narrator indicates the jewelry was the only thing of value the family had in its home.

Benin Mask

In the story "Imitation" the imitation Benin mask is a symbol of Nkem's belief that her marriage is also an imitation. Nkem identifies with the men who once guarded the Benin masks that she and her husband have copies of in their home. She wonders if these men, like she, wished they had protection and had some control over their lives. The imitation mask is also significant because Nkem sees her marriage, in which her husband has a live-in girlfriend, as an imitation of a marriage. She wants a real marriage and will do what it takes to get it.

Holy Book

This holy book, the Koran represents Allah to the Muslims. In the story "A Private Experience" it is because a copy of the Holy Koran is run over by a truck that a riot breaks out in the marketplace of Kano. Because the Koran represents Allah to the Muslims, desecrating the book was the same as dishonoring their god.

Finger Rosary

This finger rosary in the story "A Private Experience" is a symbol to Chika of how far she had moved from her faith. Although Chika wears this finger rosary, it is not a symbol of faith to her as it should be. When she watches the Muslim woman practicing her own religion Chika realizes how far she has moved from her faith.

A Scarf

In the story "A Private Experience" the scarf worn by the Muslim woman is a symbol of the woman's faith as well as her friendship and love despite her poverty. Chika asks if she could keep this scarf that belonged to the Muslim woman. Chika suspects the woman had used the scarf, which is pretty in a gaudy way, as a head cover. When Chika cuts her leg, the woman uses it to bandage Chika's cut. Before they separate Chika asks the woman if she could keep the scarf.



Handful of Sand

In the story "Ghosts" the sand that Professor James Nwoye believes he needs to throw at Ikenna Okoro represents the old African belief this is the way to tell if a man is really alive or not.

Nivea

In the story "Ghosts" it is the lotion Nivea that symbolizes Ebere Nwoye's late wife.

Juiced Spinach

In the story "On Monday of Last Week" the juiced spinach that Kamara allows Josh to dump out while she is in the bathroom represents the over-protectiveness of Josh's parents.

Tooth-Shaped Pendant

In the story "Jumping Monkey Hill" this tooth-shaped pendant represents Ujunwa's belief that she has to be something other than what she is in order to impress the other writers at the conference. Even though this tooth-shaped pendant is really only plastic Ujunwa tells Isabel it is real ivory after Isabel makes a comment about the way that faux ivory looked real in the story "Jumping Monkey Hill." Ujunwa uses the necklace as a way to play on an earlier comment by Isabel that Ujunwa had to be of royal stock because of her beautiful bone structure.

Burton's Rich Tea Biscuits

In the story "The Arrangers of Marriage" these biscuits which Chinaza is familiar with from Africa represent home and family to her.

"Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook"

This American cookbook, a symbol in the story "The Arrangers of Marriage," represents Ofodile's desire to fit in with the Americans.

Ivory Tusk

The ivory tusk in the story "The Headstrong Historian" is a symbol of the title that belongs to Nwamgba's husband. When Obierika dies his cousins take the ivory tusk that had belonged to him. When Anikwenwa gets old enough he demands the cousins give him the tusk back. Nwamgba is proud when the cousins do as Anikiwenwa asks.



Settings

Nsukka Campus

Nsukka is a town in Nigeria in which the University of Nigeria is located. This town and the campus are places in which part of the short story “Cell One” is set. Almost the entirety of the story “Ghosts” is set on the campus of the university. This university and town is also mentioned in the story “On Monday of Last Week.” It is at the university that Kamara and her husband first meet.

Enugu Police Station

In the story “Cell One” it is to the Enugu Police Station that Nnamabia is taken when he is arrested because it is suspected he is part of a cult that killed three students.

Cell One

In the story “Cell One,” Cell One is the cell where prisoners are taken and tortured.

Empty Store

It is in an empty store near the marketplaces of Kano that Chika and a Muslim woman take refuge during the riot in the story “A Private Experience.”

City of Kano

In the story “A Private Experience” Chika and her sister Nnedi are visiting the city of Kano the first time when the marketplace in which they are shopping erupts in a riot. Kano, like many of the other settings featured in these short stories, is a city in Nigeria.

The University Bursary

It is outside the university bursary in the story “Ghosts” that Nsukka that Professor James Nwoye sees Ikenna Okoro for the first time in years. He had thought the man had died during an attack on the university by federal soldiers.

Jumping Monkey Hill

In the story with the same name Jumping Monkey Hill is the name of the resort at which the African Writers Workshop is held.



Connecticut

In the story “The Thing Around Your Neck” Akunna winds up living in a small town in Connecticut after obtaining a visa to go to America.

Chang’s

Chang’s is the restaurant in “The Thing Around Your Neck” where Akunna’s boyfriend takes her on their first date.

American Embassy in Lagos

The American Embassy in Lagos is the setting of the short story “The American Embassy.”

Ukamaka’s Apartment

Ukamaka’s apartment is the major setting for the short story “The Shivering.” It is to her apartment that Chindu comes to pray with her after a plane crashes in their home country of Nigeria.

Thomas Sweet

Thomas Sweet is the name of the restaurant in which Udenna tells Ukamka that their relationship is staid in the story “The Shivering.”



Themes and Motifs

Culture Clash

The clash between the Nigerian and American or white cultures is one of the major themes in this collection of short stories. This theme occurs mostly in stories where Nigerians immigrate to America. There is also one story in which the cultures of the white men clash with those of the Nigerian natives.

The majority of stories deal with a clash in cultures when a Nigerian immigrates to America and has to deal with the differences in cultures. The story "On Monday of Last Week" deals with this culture clash. Kamara, who works as a nanny, feels this culture clash when she considers how anxious Josh's father is in his parenting in comparison to Nigerian parents. Kamara also is bothered by the way American parents believe they are due praise for being good parents while Nigerian parents believe it is just part of a parent's responsibility to take care of his children. The story "The Arrangers of Marriage" also deals with this culture clash. Chinaza's stress over her new marriage and move to America is made worse because her husband insists that she follow his lead and assimilate with the Americans. She is forced to change her name to an American one, speak in English and eat food that sickens her.

Another story that illuminates the culture clash between the whites and Africans is "Jumping Monkey Hill." In this story a white man denies that African women deal with any sexual bias or harassment while he actively harasses one of the black writers at a writers conference he has arranged. The main character of the story, Ujunwa, also describes how the African resort at which the conference is held is a whitewashed version of Africa, void of any blacks except for the staff members.

It is the story "The Headstrong Historian" that tells some of the story of the whites' attempts to tame and Christianize Africa. Nwamgba, one of the main characters of the story, is willing to accept the ways of the white men as long as they are a benefit to her. For example, she sends her son to school at a Catholic mission because she wants him to learn the ways of the Americans and have the power she feels they have. She is pleased when her son is able to use his knowledge of the white men's ways to get revenge on cousins whom she suspects killed her husband and then have abused her after his death. When her son chooses to follow the Christian faith and reject the spirits that his mother has raised him to believe, Nwamgba is unhappy and feels she has been betrayed.

Attitudes Toward Children

One theme in this collection of short stories is the differences in the adults' attitude toward between the Nigerian and American cultures. In Nigerian culture children, particularly males, are important because they carry on the family lineage. Those who



do not have children are believed to have committed some crime for which they are being punished. Other stories mention the differences between raising children in both the African and American cultures.

“Tomorrow is Too Far” is one of the stories that most clearly shows the importance of male children in the Nigerian culture. In this story the narrator learns that her brother is the one responsible for carrying on the family’s lineage even though he isn’t the oldest boy in the family. Nonso is the most important of the male children because he is the oldest boy born to the oldest son of Grandmama. When Nonso dies Grandmama yells at his dead body that the boy has betrayed her and the family by dying.

“The Headstrong Historian” is another story that describes the importance placed on having children. Because Nwamgba has trouble getting pregnant many people, including her husband’s cousins, believe she should allow her husband to marry another wife so he will have heirs. It is these same cousins, however, who are unhappy and eventually kill Obierika when Nwamgba does give birth to a baby boy. They know this boy will knock them out of the line to inherit from Obierika. Notice also in this story that Nwamgba’s parents almost do not let her marry Obierika because his family has a history of producing only one child. They believe this is a sign there is some crime in the family, like selling a girl into slavery, for which they are being punished by their lack of many children.

The story “On Monday of Last Week” is one story that illustrates the differences in parenting between the Nigeria and American cultures. In this story Kamara notes how anxious and overprotective Josh’s father is about his parenting. She also notes that American parents believe they are special if they are good parents. In Nigeria it is accepted that parents are to take care of their children without expecting praise. In the story “The Headstrong Historian” an American view of Nigerian parenting is shared. The Catholic teachers at the mission often punish the Nigerian students severely because they believe these children have been pampered by their parents.

Challenges of Immigration

While many Nigerians believe that immigration to America is a dream opportunity many of these short stories show the real challenges associated with the immigration process as well as the difficulties associated with living in a foreign country. There are many characters — especially women — featured in the stories who don’t find America to be the refuge they believed it would be. The difficulties with getting a visa to go to America is another topic that occurs frequently in the stories.

In the story “Imitation,” for instance Nkem chooses to move back to Nigeria because her husband has taken a live-in girlfriend into their home in Lagos while she and the children live in America. In the story “Ghosts” the professor’s family moves to America for several years after the university where he worked is taken over by federal soldiers. The only good thing that seems to come of the move is the birth of their daughter in America. Because she is American born, the American hospital to which she has applied



for the position of a doctor cannot discriminate against her because she was schooled in Nigeria.

In the story “The Thing Around Your Neck” Akunna’s family believes she is lucky when she wins the American visa lottery. She is to live with her uncle until she gets a job and gets on her feet but that falls through when her uncle tries to force her to have sexual relations with him. She leaves her uncle's house and struggles to support herself with a waitressing job. She does not have the money to attend college classes. She feels she is a disappointment to her family and does not share with them how badly things are going for her in America. At the conclusion of the story she returns to Nigeria after her father dies. It is uncertain if she plans to return to America.

Another story that deals with the problems with immigration is “The Arrangers of Marriage.” In this story Chinaza learns after she’s married Ofodile that he is still married to an American woman whom he’d married in order to get his green card. Now that woman is holding up their divorce in hopes of getting more money from Ofodile. Because the divorce has not gone through, Chinaza cannot get her work permit. In the story “On Monday of Last Week” it takes Kamara’s husband six years to get his own papers in order in America so that he can send for her to come and live with him.

Finally, in the story “The American Embassy” a woman whose young son has been killed by a government official tries to get asylum to go to America. After she goes through the process of standing in line and filling out paperwork, she decides against leaving the country. Even though she does not get asylum, the story brings to light the difficulties of the process to get a visa and the hoops through which those wanting passage to America have to jump.

Strong Women

Another theme in common among many of the stories is that of a strong leading female character. One of the stories that features a strong leading female character is the story “A Private Experience.” In this story a Muslim woman reaches out to a Christian woman to help her during a riot in the city of Kano. What makes the Muslim woman’s actions even more selfless is that the riot starts because a Christian man runs over a copy of the Holy Koran with his truck. The Muslims who see the desecration pull the man out of his truck and kill him by cutting off his head. As the Muslim woman shows the Christian woman a place where they can hide from the rioters, Muslims are slaughtering Christians in the market place. The woman not only prays to Allah, openly showing that she practices the Muslim faith, but also prays for the Christian woman’s sister, who has disappeared during the riot. This Muslim woman shows that hate does not necessarily conquer all.

Another strong female character is that of Ujunwa in the story “Jumping Monkey Hill.” Even though she suffers with some esteem issues because of the sexual bias toward women in her country, she refuses to allow herself to be sexually harassed in the work place. She walks out of one job interview and quits another job when she is approached



with sexual innuendos. At a writers conference, she writes about her experiences. The organizer of the conference, an elderly white man who has been sexually harassing Ujunwa since the beginning of the workshop, tells her that the story she's written isn't plausible because women were not sexually harassed in Africa but instead respected and given positions of authority. Just as she had walked off her jobs because of harassment, Ujunwa leaves the conference because of the way the man is treating her.

Significant is the fact that although Ujunwa does not want the men's sexual advances, she finds herself feeling slighted when she does not get the attention she is accustomed to getting from men. For instance, when Ujunwa interviews for a job with a man who barely looks at her, she wonders if she has done something wrong or is for some reason unattractive to him. Similarly, when she learns the old white man at the conference is also harassing another of the black writers, she is offended that she isn't the only one being harassed.

The story "Imitation" also features a strong female character. Nkem chooses to give up the ease of life and benefits of life in America to move back to Nigeria in order to keep her husband from keeping his life in girlfriend. She is contrasted with a woman who is aware her husband is having affairs but doesn't want to give up the easy life she has in America in order to do something to stop the affairs.

A final story that includes strong female characters is the story "The Headstrong Historian." Both Nwamgba and her granddaughter Grace, or Afamefuna, are strong women. Even the white missionaries notice Nwamgba's quiet strength and wish they could convert her to do missions work. It is this quiet strength that keeps Nwamgba grounded in her own faith and fighting for her way of life even during a period of change. Nwamgba's husband is killed by his jealous cousins. She has to fight against these cousins as well as the laws of her village in order to try to hang onto what is rightfully hers. Years later, Nwamgba's granddaughter shows this same strength as she pays homage and respect to the ways of her grandmother and other native Nigerians by writing about their ways of life even though others tell her that her work is misguided.

Strained Relationships

A theme that is touched on in almost all of the stories is that of strained relationships and the effect this strain can have. In the story "Cell One" the relationship is between that of a brother and sister. The sister tells the story of how her pampered, overly dramatic brother seems to change after he sees what is done to an innocent elderly man in a Nigerian jail. In the story "Imitation" the primary relationship is between Nkem and her husband. When Nkem learns her husband is cheating on her she decides to move back to Nigeria with her husband in order to stop the affair. In "A Private Experience" a Christian woman and Muslim woman form a friendship despite the fact people of their corresponding faiths are fighting and killing each other just steps away from them. In the story "Ghosts" a professor's relationship with his wife is so strong that he believes she comes to visit him even after her death. In the story "On Monday of Last Week" Kamara is disappointed in the way the relationship with her husband has



progressed since she has finally been able to join him in America. For this reason she gets caught up in a homosexual fantasy with the mother of the child for whom she nannies.

Another story based on a relationship is "The Shivering." In this story a gay man befriends a woman who has lost her faith. His quiet life of simple faith helps her to regain her faith while she learns to be a friend to him. The story "The Arrangers of Marriage" tells the tale of a woman who is disappointed by her arranged marriage. Even though the man lied to her about being married previously, she is forced to stay with him because she has no way to support herself in America. In the story "Tomorrow is Too Far" a jealous sibling accidentally kills her brother when she tries to find a way to make him less perfect in the eyes of her parents and Grandmama. Finally, in the story "The Headstrong Historian" a grandmother bonds with her granddaughter who respects the ways of the native Nigerians. The granddaughter is a comfort to the grandmother after her own son converts to the ways of the white people after she sends him to be schooled in a Catholic mission.

Styles

Point of View

These stories are told using a variety of points of view. The most common point of view used is the third person point of view. These stories can be identified because the main character is referred to as “he” or “she.” “Imitation,” “A Private Experience,” “On Monday of Last Week,” “Jumping Monkey Hill,” “The American Embassy,” “The Shivering” and “The Headstrong Historian” are told from the third person point of view of an omniscient narrator.

The stories “Cell One,” “Ghosts,” “The Arrangers of Marriage” are told in the first person point of view. This point of view can be identified by the use of the pronouns “I” or “we” as the narrator refers to himself. A few of these stories are even told from the second person point of view, a rarely used point of view. In these stories the main character of the story is referred to as “you.” Stories told in this point of view are “The Thing Around Your Neck” and “Tomorrow is Too Far.”

Even though these stories are told from a variety of points of view they are typically told from the viewpoint of a single central character. In “Cell One,” for instance, the story is told by Nnamabia’s sister from her point of view. She is able to tell only what she knew about her brother’s story. Similarly in “Imitation” the story is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator but the story focuses on Nkem. The narrator only knows and tells Nkem’s thoughts and emotions. Similarly in the stories told in the second person point of view the focus of the story is on the main character, most often the one referred to as “you.” The narrator tells the story as it relates to this character.

Language and Meaning

One of the most significant aspects of the language in this collection of short stories is the Igo words and phrases scattered throughout the stories. The phrases and words aren’t used often but when they are the context easily allows the reader to understand what they mean. For instance, in the story “The Arrangers of Marriage” Chinaza says, “Ike agwum” on p. 186. Her husband answers “Yes, I’m exhausted, too,” leading the reader to understand that Chinaza had said something about being tired. Similarly, in the story “Imitation” Nkem refers to Obiora as Amaechi’s “oga” on p. 33. Although the text does not explain what an “oga” is it can be understood using context clues that it is a word for boss.

Additionally, the author uses her words to paint emotional pictures of what she describes. For instance, at the writers conference in “Jumping Monkey Hill” she describes dinner as “creamy chicken prettied with herbs” and “sparkling water that came in glossy bottles.” (p. 98) All of the adjectives describe their nouns in a positive, rich-sounding way. Compare this description with that of Chinaza’s first sexual encounter



with her new husband. She recounts how the marriage arrangers do not tell her the whole story of her new relationship and that some of the things they don't mentioned are: "mouths that told the story of sleep, that felt clammy like old chewing gum, that smelled like the rubbish dumps at Ogbete Market." (p. 169) This description is not pretty like the one in "Jumping Monkey Hill" but instead makes the reader cringe just as Chinaza does at her new husband.

Structure

This book is divided into a total of 12 short stories. These stories average a length of 18 pages. The shortest is "Tomorrow is Too Far" which has only 11 pages. The longest is "The Shivering" at 25 pages.

These stories are most often told in the past tense. Exceptions are include the story "Cell One." This story is told in the present tense. The story "A Private Experience" is also told in the present tense. This story includes a variety of flashes forward through time that let the reader know what Chika will learn about the riots in the future. Another interesting use of tense is seen in the story "Jumping Monkey Hill." In this story the main story is told in the past tense while the story that Ujunwa wrote for the conference was written in the present tense.



Quotes

Even then, I felt that there was a theatrical quality to the way the drawers were flung open, as if it had been done by somebody who wanted to make an impression on the discoverers. Or perhaps it was simply that I knew my brother so well.”

-- Narrator (Cell One paragraph 3)

Importance: Nnamabia’s sister knows him well enough to know he is responsible for faking the robbery in which his mother’s jewelry is stolen.

She imagines — and this she imagines herself because Obiora did not suggest it happened that way — the proud young men wishing they did not have to behead strangers to bury their king, wishing they could use the masks to protect themselves, too, wishing they had a say.”

-- Narrator (Imitation paragraph 7)

Importance: Nkem imagines that just like she, the men who are to protect the king wish they had some say in their own lives.

It is one of the things she has come to love about America, the abundance of unreasonable hope.”

-- Narrator (Imitation paragraph 16)

Importance: As Nkem watches the man from the interior design store as he looks at her house, praises it and looks as if he thinks he might own a house like it someday she thinks about how Americans seems to have hope for better things even if their circumstances don’t give them cause for hope.

Later, Chika will learn that, as she and the woman are speaking, Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones.”

-- Narrator (A Private Experience paragraph 3)

Importance: Even as Chika, a Christian, and a Muslim woman are taking refuge together in an abandoned store, the Muslims are killing Christians in a riot in Kano, Nigeria.

She will find out it had all started at the motor park, when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian.”

-- Narrator (A Private Experience paragraph 10)

Importance: In this short story the author uses several references to the future to tell the reader the things Chika will learn about the riots. This is one of those references in which it is indicated Chika will learn the riot started when a Christian man was killed because he ran over a copy of the Holy Koran with his truck.



We have only spent a week here with our aunty, we have never even been to Kano before,' Chika says, and she realizes that what she feels is this: she and her sister should not be affected by the riot. Riots like this were what she read about in newspapers. Riots like this were what happened to other people.”

-- Chika (A Private Experience paragraph 25)

Importance: Chika shares with the Muslim woman that she has never been to Kano before this trip. She has never thought that she would be caught up in the middle of a riot, even in a place that was torn by riots. It is as if Chika thinks she is somehow above the riots.

Saying those words to herself changed nothing, because what had happened in the kitchen that afternoon was a flowering of extravagant hope, because what now propelled her life was the thought that Tracy would come upstairs again.”

-- Narrator (On Monday of Last Week paragraph 33)

Importance: Since meeting Tracy, the mother of the boy she babysits, Kamara has begun to live for the hope that she will see Tracy, whom she believes is attracted to her, again.

Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really.”

-- Narrator (Jumping Monkey Hill paragraph 21)

Importance: Edward, an old white man, tells his group of writers that homosexual stories are not indicative of the African culture. He believes he knows better about the lives of Africans than the Africans themselves do.

He told you that 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.”

-- Narrator (The Thing Around Your Neck paragraph 3)

Importance: In America, the narrator's uncle tells her he has gotten a good job with a good salary simply because he is African. His position is based on his race, his inclusion as an employee at the company makes the company seem diverse, a quality they need for good public relations.

You did not know that people could simply choose not to go to school, that people could dictate to life. You were used to accepting what life gave, writing down what life dictated.”

-- Narrator (The Thing Around Your Neck paragraph 17)

Importance: The narrator of this story is surprised how people in America feel they can determine their own futures. She is accustomed to life in Africa where a person's life is determined by his circumstances.



If a fortune-teller had told her that she, in the space of a few days, would no longer recognize her life, she would have laughed. Perhaps even given the fortune-teller ten naira extra for having a wild imagination.”

-- Narrator (The American Embassy paragraph 10)

Importance: The narrator of this story is surprised how quickly her life changed from one that was happy to one where she is trying to get a visa to go to America to seek refuge. In the span of only a few days her husband has run from people trying to arrest him and her young son has been killed.

She let into her apartment a stranger wearing a slack Princeton sweatshirt who had come to pray about what was happening in Nigeria, and when he reached out to take her hands in his, she hesitated slightly before extending hers.”

-- Narrator (The Shivering paragraph 5)

Importance: Ukamaka let a man into her apartment simply because he claims to be Nigerian, an act that is not like her. They are both in shock after having learned of a plane crash in Nigeria.

Have faith. ‘Have faith’ was like saying be tall and shapely.”

-- Narrator (The Shivering paragraph 39)

Importance: Chinedu tells Ukamaka to have faith as if that task is an easy one. Ukamaka believes it will be just as likely for her to be able to turn herself into a person who is tall and shapely as it will be for her to have faith.

Because it is the nature of God. If you understand the basic idea of God’s nature being different from human nature, then it will make sense,’ Chinedu said, and opened the door to climb out of the car.

-- Chinedu (The Shivering paragraph 176)

Importance: Chinedu tells Ukamaka that God doesn’t appear as she expects Him to because she doesn’t understand the nature of God. He explains God’s nature is different from that of humans.

They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. No mention of offensive snoring, no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats.”

-- Narrator (The Arrangers of Marriage paragraph 10)

Importance: Chinaza indicates that the people who arrange marriages do not tell any of a prospective husband’s bad habits or undesirable characteristics. She is not aware until she is actually married to Ofofode that he snores and that he doesn’t actually live in a house but instead an apartment with very little furniture. Chinaza is also surprised when she learns how badly her new husband wants to fit in with the Americans.



You don't understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You have to use your English name here."

-- Ofodile (The Arrangers of Marriage paragraph 53)

Importance: Ofodile explains to his new wife Chinaza that he believes they have to do their best to fit in with American culture in order for them to succeed in America. Ofodile requires Chinaza to change her name to an American name, speak in English even when they are alone together and cook only American food.

Grandmama screamed at him — at his limp body — saying *i laputago m*, that he had betrayed her, asking him who would carry on the Nnabuisi name now, who would protect the family lineage."

-- Narrator (Tomorrow is Too Far paragraph 6)

Importance: Instead of being grieved that her grandson has died, Grandmama is angry when she learns the boy had died because she believes he had betrayed her, as if he carried out his own death. Her reaction shows the importance of the first male child born in a family. The boy is the prized child who is expected to carry on the family's lineage.

Even at ten you knew that some people can take up too much space by simply being, that by existing, some people can stifle others. The idea of scaring Nonso with the *echi eteka* was yours alone."

-- Narrator (Tomorrow is Too Far paragraph 22)

Importance: In this quote, the narrator admits that it is her idea to scare Nnabuisi by telling him there is a snake in the tree she has challenged him to climb. As a child, she wants to hurt Nnabuisi because she has always felt crowded and threatened by him.

Nwamgba's retort was sharp, because she did not like Ayaju's tone, which suggested that Obierika was impotent, and as if in response to her thoughts she felt a furious stab in her back and knew that she was pregnant again, but she said nothing, because she knew, too, that she would lose the baby again."

-- Narrator (The Headstrong Historian paragraph 6)

Importance: Because of the pain Nwamgba feels in her back she knows she was pregnant again, proof that Obierika is not impotent. She doesn't tell her friend Ayaju, who insists that Obierika is impotent that she is pregnant because she also knows she will lose that baby just as she has miscarried the others.

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."

-- Narrator (The Headstrong Historian paragraph 11)



Importance: Nwamgba wants her son to learn the ways of the Americans because she believes these Americans have power. She wants her son to have this same power.

She felt her son slipping away from her, and yet she was proud that he was learning so much, that he could become a court interpreter or a letter writer, and that with Father Lutz's help he had brought home some papers that showed that their lands belonged to him and his mother. Her proudest moment was when he went to his father's cousins Okafo and Okoye and asked for his father's ivory tusk back. And they gave it to him."
-- Narrator (The Headstrong Historian paragraph 21)

Importance: Nwamgba senses that her decision to have her son educated by the Americans has changed his life, taking him away from her. She is proud of him, however, when he asks his father's cousins for the family's ivory tusk back and it is given to him.