

A Stylistic Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck'

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Abstract

A narrator's role in a story and his relationship with the characters are determined by the point of view from which the story is told. Sometimes he is a character in the story and the story is viewed from his perspective; at other times, he is an omniscient narrator, telling the reader about all the characters in the work. On very few occasions the audience is a character and the story is viewed **from** their point of view. This paper discusses the linguistic techniques, language choice and their effects in the realisation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story, 'The Thing Around Your Neck'. It explores the author's rare style of the use of the second person narrative perspective all through the entire work which, among other things, makes the reader not just a member of the audience, but a part of the action. This style is of particular interest to this research and discourse on its application runs through the major part of the work. A stylistic analysis of the text is adopted in order to assist readers in making proper meaningful interpretation of the story, and thereby increase their appreciation of the work.

Keywords: Style, Point of View, Second Person Narrative, Stylistic Analysis

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a renowned writer from Eastern Nigeria. She has published a collection of poetry, *Decisions* (1997), a play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998); three novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013) and two books of non-fiction, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017). Her short stories include: *That Harmattan Morning* (2002), *Ghosts* (2004) and *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). She has done a couple of TED Talks including 'The Danger of a Single Story' 'We Should All Be Feminists' and has won several literary and non-literary awards.

Chimamanda is a good story teller. Her works which cover politics, civil war in Nigeria, etc. are widely read and appreciated within and outside the continent. These, especially her first two novels, have earned her several awards. She is known for her blunt statements, some of which have led to controversial discourses amongst many.

Style

Style refers to a manner of writing, doing or presenting things especially in a fashionable manner. In literary work, it is the way a piece is written. Different things put together make up a writer's style; like tone, word choice, grammar, language, descriptive technique, etc. Louise Harnby agrees **with** this when he says it is 'the literary element that describes the way that the author uses words – the diction, sentence structure/arrangement, figurative language of the writer **that** help to establish mood, images and meaning in the text'. 'Style is the author's choice of words and phrases, and how he arranges these words and phrases as sentences and paragraphs. This allows the author to shape how the reader experiences the work' (David Madden, 2009). Simple wordings and straight-forward sentences, as against difficult vocabulary and elaborate sentence structure may be the distinguishing characteristics of different writers. This distinction will obviously account for the differences in readers' perception of the writers' works, albeit on same theme. Authors differ in their style of writing; so also, the works of an author may differ in style. They may choose a particular style in one work and a different one in another. Chimamanda's major literary genre is prose fiction, as we can see from the above. She veers a little from her regular pattern in the publishing of her collection of short stories; and also, when she changes her narrative style and uses the least common of the narrative techniques – the second person narrative (you) – in 'The Thing Around Your Neck'.

Short Stories

Interest in short stories from the various cultures of Africa has been growing since the late 1950s. In sub-Saharan Africa, short stories often focused on wild fancy, stark realism and political commentary. The work of the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, *Civil Peace* depicts the turbulent aftermath of the Nigerian civil war. Nordin Gordimer, the South African writer, has also written several disturbing stories of family and race relationship, which had tended to x-ray social and political tension in South Africa, e.g. *Something Out There*. Doris Lessing, the Zimbabwean writer had earlier followed in this tradition. It is, therefore, no strange occurrence to find

Chimamanda Adichie following this established tradition of writing short stories. History has it that the earliest ancestors of short stories are ancient tales, simple stories that date back to Egyptian writings that are about 6,000 years old.

Fiction

Fiction, on the Nigerian literary landscape, came from Amos Tutuola's *The Palm wine Drinkard and His Palm wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (1950). There, a man journeys to the land of the dead to retrieve his bartender. The book gained ascendancy in Europe and America as critics mistook his idiosyncratic English for bold stylistic experimentation. Achebe, inspired by Tutuola's success, albeit an educated Nigerian, came up with *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Other Nigerian fictional writers came up thereafter: Cyprian Ekwensi, whose most popular *Jagua Nana* (1961) chronicled the life story of a charming Lagos prostitute; Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1960) which dwelt on the social problem the woman in her culture faces.

Narrative Point of View

This is the description of 'whose head we are in' when we read a book. It is seen as the perspective from which we discover what is going on, and the smells, sounds, sights and emotions involved. An author may choose to write from the first, second or third person point of view and this is shown from the pronouns he utilizes. His choice is determined by how he wants his story to be viewed by his readers. As pointed out above, the first and third person narratives are common amongst writers; but the second is not so common. We will take a look at the different narrative techniques and their features.

First Person Point of View

A story written in the first person narrative point of view is told from the narrator's perspective. The first person narrative point of view is characterised by the pronouns, I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ours. It suggests that the narrator is among the characters in a literary work and a part of the events in the story. The reader, therefore, views the story from his perspective.

Advantages

Caitlin Berve gives some advantages of the first person narrative; according to him, 'The biggest advantage of first person point of view is how deeply it delves into the mind of the narrator'. We get to see all of the narrator's thoughts, feelings and knowledge, he says. And we may add: his biases, concerns and attitude towards a person or an issue. Other advantages of the first person point of view, as stated by

Berve, are that:

- it allows the author tighter control over the information and elements of the story, especially when the narrator is an outsider who does not know everything about the story, history, or other characters;
- because the author is telling his own story in a memoir, he is expected to tell it in the first person;
- it can be powerful and add voice, emotion, and perspective to a piece, as well as control the release of information.

Disadvantages

One major disadvantage of the first person narrative point of view is that since the reader is only able to view the story from the author's perspective, he only knows what the author knows and nothing more. As a result of this, it is, as Berve puts it, 'inherently biased and the most subjective of all the points of view'.

Third Person Point of View

In third person point of view, the narrator is not a part of the story and the characters never acknowledge their presence. They exist outside the story, even though they seem to know everything about every character in the story – their thoughts, wishes, assumptions, etc. Simply put, the third person point of view belongs to the person (people) being talked about. Pronouns used in the third person narrative are: he, she, it, its, itself, his, him, himself, her, hers, herself, they, them, their, theirs, themselves. Unlike the first person narrative, the reader does not see directly through a character's eyes, but often the narrator describes the characters' thoughts and feelings about what's going on.

The above is, however, a general description of the third person narrative point of view. Gary Smailes gives different types of third person narrative view point: subjective/objective and omniscient/limited. According to him, 'All third person point of view is written using a detached and anonymous narrator, but the information the narrator possesses about the characters differs significantly between different types of viewpoint'. The third person point of view subjective narration involves a narrator with access to one or more character's personal feelings and thoughts. In other words, the narrator understands the thoughts and feelings of, at least, one character. As for the third person point of view objective narration, the narrator does not describe the feelings or thoughts of any of the characters but, rather, just the exact facts of the story.

According to Smailes, the narrator knows everything happening within the story's world, including what each of the characters is thinking and feeling in the

Third person omniscient point of view; while he conveys the knowledge and subjective experience of just one character in the third person limited point of view (Berve also refers to the latter as third person close). In other words, the narrator is focussed on a single character and only knows this character in the limited point of view.

The third person limited is similar to the first person point of view in the sense that just as in the first person point of view, the reader only sees the story from one character's perspective and the disadvantage is that they have limited knowledge of the other characters in the story.

Second Person Point of View

The second person narrative point of view is an uncommon point of view. Here, the pronoun used in the work is 'you', with the narration done on an intimate basis, in a strange way. This is so because it looks as though the author is talking directly to the reader as a character. The ability of the writer to intrude into his/her character gives strength and weakness to its usage. The reader is at the steering wheels, so to speak, even though directed by the narrator. The reader is placed at the heart of the story and yet we – the 'you' – know less than the narrator. At any time, the reader feels implicated rather than attached, he can be pulled out of it rather than being enmeshed deeper into it. This occurs especially if the reader feels he does not identify with the 'you' and that he cannot discover what we think, see or do. Harnby says it can be used to report on the actions and thoughts of the character. The second person narrative view point arouses curiosity – one begins to wonder about who the 'you' is and how it is that the narrator knows so much about them. Harnby claims it gives us a sense of immediacy, but an almost amnesiac dislocation.

'The Thing Around Your Neck'

'The Thing Around Your Neck' is one of the stories in Adichie's collection of short stories titled *The Thing Around Your Neck*. The collection comprises 12 stories, three of which are written in the first person narrative (I, we), seven in the third person (he/she/they) and two in the second person (you). From the very onset, the writer addresses the thought of the persona, a female immigrant from Nigeria to America. The obviously present, but silent character (Akunna) is a beneficiary of the famous American visa lottery amongst many other family members, whose particulars were featured in the entries by a purported 'uncle' based in Maine, USA. She goes through the rites of departure in Nigeria with family members and friends, all wishing her well, while inundating her with their multifarious demands. All she says is 'okay, no problem' to their goodbye salvos.

The author surreptitiously captures the preconceived notion of the small world of family members about America as a place where one's dream can always come true – have a big car, big house and probably a gun, like all Americans are supposedly rumoured to possess.

In a scenic and picturesque description, Adichie captures the events of her reception in America. She checks into the uncle's home after a nauseating snack of hot-dog. The inner thoughts of the character are glaringly mirrored by the writer as the former tries to settle into the small white town in Maine. The 'uncle' paints a larger-than-life picture of his bloated personality to the new guest; assisting her to apply for a cashier job in the gas station on Main Street and enrolling her in a school where the attitude and character of the students are questionable. The aim of this do-gooder position of the uncle is revealed to be an attempt to win her understanding in having a favourable sexual relationship between the two of them.

As expected, the mixture of the arrogance and ignorance of the whites about the true picture of Africa and Africans is revealed in the cranky questions they ask the immigrant: where she learned to speak English and if Africans have real houses. At this early stage of the short story, one is tempted to query the timing of the events of the story. Does the time of the American visa lottery not suggest that Americans were already well educated about Africa? If yes, how come these obnoxious questions about Africa's genuine ontology?

The initial joy and laughter she shared with the 'uncle' and his family is aptly captured in a paragraph where the 'uncle's' wife called her 'nwanne' (sister, in Igbo language). It was an atmosphere of family camaraderie, until the devil took over the 'uncle's' mind. The author addresses the persona in the characteristic second person narrative point of view; she stands aloof and runs through the mind rift of the character like someone who once heard the story and was now reliving and recounting it with fresh meaning attached to it. It is an opportunity to draw the readers' attention and sympathise in a cathartic manner.

The unbecoming manner and sinister advances of the 'uncle', who is now revealed to be 'a brother of her father's sister's husband' and not actually a blood uncle, forces her to relocate to a small town in Connecticut, the farthest she would get from the randy uncle. In her new abode, everything is new: she has to fend for herself and learn out of school. She often passes her time by filling the gaps of her emptiness with reminiscences of home in Nigeria.

The reader is pulled along unwittingly in this galloping narrative. As it can be seen, the second person point of view breaks the fourth wall by directly addressing the reader with the pronoun 'you'. It helps create an interactive literary experience,

bringing the reader into the story. Jodie Robins posits that as writers, we want to push boundaries; as we try to set ourselves apart from everybody else. The second person point of view helps to create a memorable and long character that feels as real to us as the person we shared our last meal with. The bravery of Adichie in writing in this point of view definitely helps her to achieve this aim. The fact that we are given a ride into the thoughts of the character makes us inevitable targets of conditional catharsis, as we – the readers – are put in an uncomfortable position/dilemma. For example, do we pity the harassed character of the girl who is forced to relocate to Connecticut or do we understand the luscious feelings of the uncle who feels he should be rewarded with sex for helping the girl to emigrate to the USA?

After you pushed him away, he sat on your bed – it was his, after all – and said you were no longer a child at twenty-two. If you let him, he would do many things for you, smart women did it all the time. How did you think those women back home in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City? (116 – 117)

The thoughts of the writer are definitely infused into the narration, as we can see the view points of the smiling ‘uncle’ who believes he only has to take his time to break the youngster’s resolve. In his subconscious, he cannot imagine her taking any bold step to go out on a limb at this stage of her early existence in the USA. Commentators on the second person narrative point of view all agree it can be quite draining to write a full novel in the point of view, so they generally recommend it in a few chapters. Adichie experiments it in this story and another one ‘Tomorrow is Too Far’, and masterfully so, perhaps due to the length of the stories.

The writer invites the reader and tugs at his subconscious to walk through the magical gates of the character’s heart and thus situate our feelings therein, and thus become a sympathetic character in the story, albeit outside it physically. Robins quotes Kathy Fish as saying that writing in the second person is the literary equivalent of making good eye contact’, a position she completely concurs with. She opines that as a form, it is well used in short stories and flash fiction, as it permits much experimental writing. The work under review affords us all these. It urges the reader to become the object of his address, as this creates intimacy and enables us to become totally immersed into the story. The desire of the girl to write letters, after getting a clearer but different opinion of America and her citizens, was like a choking vice-like grip around her neck. She has memories to share with her relations at home as well as with her friends. The difference between their opinion and the reality on ground in America was too striking for her to keep to herself. At some other times,

she feels a sense of escape from prying eyes – **something** that even the reader could wish to do being in the same situation.

Nobody knew where you were, because you told no one. Sometimes you felt invisible and tried to walk through your room wall into the hallway, and when you bumped into the wall, it left bruises on your arms. (119)

The experiences of Adichie are obviously reflected in the story in a completely new literary experiment. Her reflections on the condescension of the average American academic about the race called Africa is very clear to her, as the writer unwittingly draws the reader into the opinions of Professor Cobblechek who thought himself better than the people he knew about (Africans) at Maine Community College, and the humbler, but younger undergraduate whose knowledge of Africa has created a desire in him to learn more. As she gets the attention of the loquacious customer, she could see she is getting to a point where company rules are about to be broken. This relationship that has started to blossom beyond the restaurant, allows her to get a better **view** of the differences in the academia in Nigeria and America. It is an eye opener to the reader who has never travelled to America.

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.

The relationship with the young American acquaintance gets deeper and it affords the grandiose of a reflection on the differences between their parentage – his mother, a tutor who teaches women's studies, while her father was a junior driver for a construction company. The chaotic traffic situation in Lagos city is given a brief discourse with an unfortunate incident her father got involved in once on a rainy day in Lagos.

It is clear that her life is changed with the relationship as she reflects on her emotional moments with the man. She, however, feels like a second-rate sex toy to the man, after their visit to the Chang's Chinese restaurant, as the familiar waiter's knowing conversation on his Shanghai 'girlfriend' is not denied.

So that night you didn't moan when he was inside you, you bit your lips and pretended that you didn't come... (124)

The ups and downs of the love escapade she is now involved in affords the character and the reader the privilege of knowing the social differences between the two. The man brings gifts to her as memorabilia, but she sees only the usefulness of any gift not just **the** aesthetics. She rejects a trip to Nigeria on his sponsorship because it would

be an obvious choice for him to gawk at the lives of poor people who would never gawk back at his life. As their love life deepens, she could feel the 'thing that wrapped itself around' her neck 'begin to loosen', to let go. (125)

The 'abnormal' relationship draws all sorts of reactions from different races (racial angles), but the young man's parents believe it is normal, more so when he had never actually brought home a lover. She is however grateful that his parents did not see her as 'an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk' to be examined; and its quality estimated! She cries mysteriously without any explanation. With the interval of time, the character being x-rayed finally musters the courage to write home, shipping the crisp dollar bills between the letter. The response, a courier-sent reply comes from her mother, since she included a return address of her location. The shocking revelation of her father's demise, five months earlier, is made. Perhaps some of her bad moods in the recent past, hidden in the curtailed narration, must have had a mystic attachment to her father's death - when the thing around her neck began to loosen. The money she sent is obviously lavished in giving the late father a so-called befitting burial. The emotions of her loss are only captured clearly in our involvement in the departure to Nigeria. She has her love tugging her heart to return to America – after all, she has a green card. She could always come back so long as her visit to Nigeria does not violate the green card regulations.

From the discourse made so far, the use of the second person narrative point of view has afforded Adichie ample opportunity to make the audience more active in the story and action. We have been surreptitiously made a character in the story and our feelings or emotions are implicated and we are forced to side with the character. For example, what would you, as a reader do, if you experienced the loss of a father like the young lady did? The emotional contrition around her neck could possibly be the desire to better the lives of the poor parents, especially remembering the poor state of her father. Now that he is no more, would she go home to pay her last respects, would the reader not do same, put in the same situation?

The narratological distinction that is radically affected in the second person texts is that between the various levels of discourse with communicational structure of narrative. In particular, opines Genette, characters are usually conceived of as existing on a different (and lower) ontological plane from that of the narrative discourse. This stance is maintained in 'The Thing Around Your Neck' from the beginning to the end of the story. The main character at every point is painted as insignificant, used and virtually empty.

The use of 'you' in the second person context in the teller mode, their deictic properties are even more strongly in evidence, both for their marked nature and their

immediate effective quality. 'You', therefore is one of the attention-inducing features of the discussion mode. It always attracts and alerts the current listener to pay attention, since he or she may be directly called upon to simulate an aura of intimacy or closeness, adding even further to the effect of involvement. The 'you' use invokes direct reader participation in the text (Monika Fludernik).

The second person narrative uses the reflective narrative mode, and Franz Karl Stanzel opines that they immediately establish a deistic centre on the part of the protagonist and relate all deistic expressions to the deistic centre. Banfield concurs with this opinion; no wonder there is a preponderance of familiarising articles referential items relating to the subjectivity of the vocalizer and expression of subjectivity at the very beginning of reflector mode texts. This immediate descent, Fludernik suggests, that goes into the protagonist's psyche occurs with frequency at the beginning of short stories like the one under consideration.

Themes of 'The Thing Around Your Neck'

The general theme that pervades the stories in the collection has to do with the fraught relationship between men and women. The writer specifically explores the roles women are asked to play within their families and when in romantic relationships. This expectation is high in the story under review, as we see all the demands made of the protagonist, even at the point of her departure to America. With the huge dream of expectations hanging viciously around her neck, she is already pinned down to living a life where her own desires and needs are second or even third priorities. As it is clear in the relationship between the 'uncle' and his wife, the man has the freedom to roam and rove in quest of his selfish desires to fulfil his bloated ego, while the woman loses sight of their identities and sense of their agency in the course of the narrative.

This paper has attempted to discuss the stylistic analysis of Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck', especially as it has to do with the use of the rare second person narrative point of view. Carter suggests that the practice of stylistics comes about at any point of intersection of the language of a text with the element, which constitutes the literariness of the text. How does the writer's choice of language and other elements of style lend assistance to the clarity of the text, become the focus of a stylistic analysis? The choice of the writer's second person narrative point of view has greatly assisted the readers to correctly interpret the thematic preoccupation of the former.

The paper has no doubt been able to open the reader's eyes to the creative use of the second person narrative point of view and thus widen the reader's academic horizon.

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