

## **Of French Fries and Cookies: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Diasporic Short Fiction**

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Anglophone Nigerian literature started to receive widespread recognition as early as the 1950s, and Nigeria has, since then, not ceased to produce noteworthy writers. To pioneering figures such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Amos Tutuola, all of whom published their first works shortly before the nation's independence, have succeeded other household names, including Ben Okri, Buchi Emecheta and Niyi Osundare. A few years ago, the international literary scene witnessed the advent of a so-called 'third-generation' of Nigerian writers, comprising outstanding talents like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani and Chika Unigwe.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, the vast majority of these successful young authors live either in Europe or in the United States.

Over the past half century, it has thus become increasingly clear that the concept of Nigerian literature in its broadest sense could not be dissociated from the idea of diaspora. If Achebe and Soyinka are generally not considered diasporic writers,<sup>2</sup> this description has been applied to authors who settled in Britain as young adults and have spent most of their time there since then, such as Okri and Emecheta. It is not only their place of residence but also the subject

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<sup>1</sup> On the division of Nigerian literature into three 'generations' of writers, see e.g. Pius Adesanmi & Chris Dunton, "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations," *English in Africa* 32.1 (May 2005), pp. 7-19.

<sup>2</sup> Achebe moved to the United States in the 1990s for health-related reasons and Soyinka has held several academic positions in the United States and Nigeria since the 1970s, but both authors' works and personalities seem to be so strongly associated with their country and cultures of origin that no scholar appears to classify them as diasporic writers. As regards to Achebe, the exclusive classification as 'Nigerian' may partly be explained by the fact that the bulk of his oeuvre was written when he was still residing in Nigeria.

matters and influences found in their fiction which have prompted critics to categorize them as diasporic: Emecheta has written several novels (including the semi-autobiographical *In the Ditch* [1972] and *Second-Class Citizen* [1974]) exploring the hardships endured by African and West Indian immigrants in Britain, while Okri has combined Nigerian themes and European aesthetic influences in much of his work.<sup>3</sup>

If 'second-generation' Nigerian authors living in the West have been influenced by their diasporic background, the 'third generation' has been synonymous with an even more dramatic broadening of the concept of Nigerian identity. For instance, Helen Oyeyemi, who published her first novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005) at the age of eighteen, was born in Nigeria to Yoruba parents but left for Britain when she was four. In the midst of epithets thrust upon her in the press,<sup>4</sup> she has cautiously expressed her desire to lay claim to her African heritage<sup>5</sup> while remaining acutely aware of the complexities surrounding her background. Accordingly, she defines herself as having "the muddled perspective of someone who is in a Nigerian cultural framework but not of it"<sup>6</sup> and lucidly states that

any words that I reach for in describing Nigeria are automatically and inextricably loaded with a sense of foreignness – "vibrant", "colourful", "hot" – it's so close to cliché that it's

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<sup>3</sup> The same could nevertheless be said of Soyinka.

<sup>4</sup> She has, among other things, been described as "Nigerian," "British," "Nigerian-born [...] black and British" and "English-Nigerian." See respectively Gbenga Ogundare, "Three Nigerian Female Writers Become Hot Properties on the International Literary Scene," *News* (14 May 2004); Jay Macdonald, "Helen Oyeyemi: 'Icarus' More Than Usual Coming-of-Age Novel," *News-Press* (24 July 2005); "Reluctant Phoenix Takes Wing," *Scotland on Sunday* (9 January 2005); David Odhiambo, "Doubly Displaced on Two Continents," *Globe and Mail* (3 June 2005), <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/archives/doubly-displaced-on-two-continents/article884978/> (accessed 1 October 2010).

<sup>5</sup> She describes herself as "a Nigerian brought up in Britain" and uses the first person plural when talking about Africans. See "Home, Strange Home," *Guardian* (2 February 2005), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/feb/02/hearafrica05.development2> (accessed 17 July 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, "Home, Strange Home."

embarrassing, and it almost suggests that I don't even know what I'm describing anymore.<sup>7</sup>

Oyeyemi seems to confess that her lack of contact with Africa's daily realities has turned her birthplace into a 'continent of the heart' seen through foreign eyes. Despite many fundamental differences, this elusive sense of (un)belonging may not be unrelated to the Afro-Caribbean and African-American experiences, in which commonalities are articulated around two geographical axes, one of which individuals may have little or no first-hand knowledge of. Partial as this analogy may be (and must remain), this juxtaposition emphasizes the fact that migration from Africa – and the ensuing proliferation of hyphenated denominations – may have become an integral part of Nigerian identity, taken in its widest sense.<sup>8</sup>

The artistic exploration of this movement of migration is but a contemporary avatar of a theme that has a particular resonance in Nigeria's literary tradition, namely that of the cross- or multi-cultural encounter.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, culture clashes in all their guises have long been an essential constituent of the nation's fiction, from the depiction of ethnic conflicts to the examination of the legacy bequeathed by the British colonial rule in the country.

This three-fold concern with ethnicity, colonization and migration is embodied in the works of the Igbo writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who was born and raised in Nigeria, but moved to the United

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Grimmer, "Looking to Belong" (interview with Helen Oyeyemi), *Lip Magazine* 5.3 (March 2005). It would be interesting to examine to what extent this sense of 'foreignness' is reflected in Oyeyemi's description of Nigeria in *The Icarus Girl*.

<sup>8</sup> I discuss the concept of "Nigerian" literature (and the broader idea of "African" literature), and the related issue of labelling, in my PhD dissertation, "Style beyond Borders: Language in Recent Nigerian Fiction," U of Liège (2008), pp. 19-36.

<sup>9</sup> The distinction between cross- and multi-culturalism is Wilson Harris's. Critic Hena Maes-Jelinek concisely defines these notions developed in the Guyanese writer's work: "[cross-culturalism] implie[s] a real fusion of cultures in contradistinction with multiculturalism, usually a mosaic of separate cultures co-existing but seldom intermixing." See "Wilson Harris (1921- )," *Literary Encyclopedia* (22 March 2004), <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1998> (accessed 17 July 2009).

States to attend university and has mainly resided there since. In her early play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998), she portrays ethnic differences as an unbridgeable gap in the context of the Biafran war of the late 1960s. The ethnic and political tensions that culminated in the Nigerian civil war are also the focus of her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), whereas her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), tackles the problematic heritage left by the introduction of Christianity into Nigeria by exposing the limitations of a radical adhesion to Catholicism. The book presents a more balanced alternative in the adoption of an indigenized form of Christianity that is not dismissive of ancestral Igbo traditions.

The evocation of a hypothetical blending of cultures – whether this merging is impossible due to historical circumstances (as in *For Love of Biafra*) or presented as the only viable response in the aftermath of (de)colonization (as in *Purple Hibiscus*) – seems to be symptomatic of an ongoing quest for self-definition which is also at the heart of what might be called Adichie’s ‘diasporic’ fiction.

The term ‘diasporic’ is not intended as a fashionable tag designed to loosely describe the narratives written by Adichie after her move to the United States; rather, I believe that the word finds thematic reality in parts of her fiction. Several of her short stories indeed feature Igbo characters who have left Nigeria to settle in the USA, and occasionally in Britain. It is to this body of work that my use of the adjective ‘diasporic’ refers.<sup>10</sup> Of course Adichie’s extended stay in the United States is doubtless not unrelated to her repeated exploration of African identities in Western settings for, as she put it

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<sup>10</sup> At least nine of Adichie’s pieces (and their revised versions) fall into this category: “My Mother, the Crazy African” (n.d.) [republished with minor changes in spelling in 2009], “You in America” (2001) [and its revised version “The Thing Around Your Neck,” 2009], “Women Here Drive Buses” (2003), “New Husband” (2003) [and its revised version “The Arrangers of Marriage,” 2009], “Imitation” (2003) [a revised version of which was published under the same title in 2009], “The Grief of Strangers” (2004), “On Monday Last Week” (2007) [and its revised version “On Monday of Last Week,” 2009], “My American Jon” (2007) and “The Shivering” (2009). To these might be added several stories mainly set in Nigeria, but which feature narrators who are immigrants to Western countries: “Light Skin” (2003), “Recaptured Spirits” (2004) and “Do Butterflies Eat Ashes?” (2005).

herself in a different context, "I realized that I was African when I came to the United States."<sup>11</sup>

There are arguably points of convergence between the author's examination of cultural identity in her short fiction and in her first novel. The dynamics at work in Adichie's diasporic stories appear to be similar to those found in *Purple Hibiscus*, as in both cases the protagonists' (lack of) disposition towards cultural interaction is presented as a major element in characterization. In both genres too, the absence of balance in some of the characters' attitudes lies in their simultaneous disparagement of Igbo traditions and blinkered glorification of certain Western standards. In the stories set in the United States, this equation between an excessive form of westernization and a total abandonment of one's ancestral roots is made all the more complex by the addition of yet another parameter: that British habits are not necessarily associated with a potential leaning towards Western (and by association American) or neo-colonial values, but may, ironically enough, act as a mark of contemporary 'Nigerianness' despite being a legacy of colonization. This critical ambivalence is illustrated in the story "The Arrangers of Marriage," in which the heroine, who is going through an emotional struggle in her new American home, wants to purchase English "Burton's Rich Tea" biscuits because they "[a]re familiar."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in "My Mother, the Crazy African,"<sup>13</sup> the young narrator, who has lived in the United

<sup>11</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Our 'Africa' Lenses," *Washington Post* (13 November 2006), p. A21.

<sup>12</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Arrangers of Marriage," *The Thing around Your Neck* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p. 174. Further page references will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation "AM." The link between Burton's Rich Tea and the heroine's nostalgia for Nigeria was even clearer in the first version of the short story, "New Husband," in which it was stated that the biscuits "were in every store in Lagos" (p. 58).

<sup>13</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "My Mother, the Crazy African," *One World: A Global Anthology of Short Stories*, ed. Chris Brazier (Oxford: New Internationalist, 2009), pp. 53-59. Page references to this edition will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation "MCA." This story was published under the same title on the Internet in the early 2000s, and is still accessible online. See Amanda Ngozi Adichie, "My Mother, the Crazy African," *In Posse Review: Multi-Ethnic Anthology* (n.d.), [http://www.webdelsol.com/InPosse/adichie\\_anthology.htm](http://www.webdelsol.com/InPosse/adichie_anthology.htm) (accessed 17 July 2009).

States with her parents for several years, deplors that the British inflections in her speech give away her Nigerian origins.

As these two examples show, metaphors related to language and food are central in Adichie's examination of themes such as belonging, adaptation and discrimination, and they form a consistent pattern in the author's work.<sup>14</sup> To demonstrate this assertion, I would like to focus more closely on the two pieces mentioned above, i.e. "The Arrangers of Marriage" and "My Mother, the Crazy African." Reference will also be made to "The Thing around Your Neck"<sup>15</sup> and "The Grief of Strangers."<sup>16</sup>

"The Arrangers of Marriage" is narrated by a young Igbo woman named Chinaza Okafor, and opens as she first sets foot in the shabby apartment occupied by her new spouse, Ofodile Emeka Udenwa, on the East Coast of the United States. Before her wedding in Nigeria, Chinaza had been told by her uncle, who had organized this arranged marriage, that her husband-to-be was a rich doctor in America, only to learn after the ceremony, on the plane from Lagos to New York, that he was not quite the affluent medical practitioner she expected, but a badly paid intern. The narrator also has other reasons to feel disappointed with the allegedly "perfect husband" ("AM," p. 169) her uncle has found her. The man turns out to be rude and authoritarian and, on the first morning, he forces her into sexual inter-

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Unlike many of Adichie's stories that have been re-issued, "My Mother, the Crazy African" does not seem to have undergone revision between publications, except for some changes in spelling which I assume to be the result of editorial intervention.

<sup>14</sup> While it may be incidental that these metaphors are linked to the same body part, the mouth, it seems much less arbitrary that they are strongly evocative of culture. Moreover, in much of Adichie's writing, language and food trigger intense sensory – even sensuous – experiences which give access to the exploration of the cultural and sexual self. The theme of sensuality is not the focus of this essay, but it is worth mentioning since it reinforces the coherence of the double 'language and food' metaphor.

<sup>15</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Thing around Your Neck," *The Thing around Your Neck* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), pp. 115-127. Page references to this edition will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation "TAYN."

<sup>16</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Grief of Strangers," *Granta 88: Mothers* (Winter 2004), pp. 65-81. Page references will be mentioned in the text with the abbreviation "GS."

course before even greeting her. To her dismay, he also informs her several months later, and in a most casual way, of his previous marriage to an American woman, with whom he had entered into matrimony to obtain a green card. In short, this "new husband" ("AM," p. 167) is an obnoxious, one-dimensional character visibly created to serve as a foil to the narrator's more complex feelings.

Ofodile, whose attitude shows no potential for evolution as the story progresses, is endowed with a series of faults that range from the merely irritating to the utmost revolting. Among his many imperfections may be listed an obsession with social conformism, which translates into a strict adherence to what he perceives as typically American mores. Urging the heroine to adapt to life in the United States, he tells her:

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. [...] Look at the people who shop here; they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries. [...] They will never move forward unless they adapt to America. ("AM," p. 175)

One of the strategies Ofodile employs to blend into American society is to change his name to Dave Bell, arguing that "Americans have a hard time with Udenwa" ("AM," p. 172). He even imposes his views on his wife by forcing her to go by her English middle name, Agatha, even though she insists she has never identified with it: "my English name is just something on my birth certificate. I've been Chinaza Okafor my whole life" ("AM," p. 172).

Re-naming is found repeatedly in Adichie's diasporic fiction. Even though this shortening or changing of names can occasionally be the expression of a sense of familiarity or intimacy, it is more often than not the reflection of an obsession with integration at all costs. In "My Mother, the Crazy African," the teenage narrator, Ralindu, constantly tries to distance herself from her Nigerian background in the hope of being recognized as American by her teenage peers. One such attempt to deny her roots is exemplified in her decision to shorten her

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name to the more English-sounding “Lin,” much to the disappointment of her mother:

I call myself Lin when Mother isn't there. She likes to go on and on, how Ralindu is a beautiful Igbo name, how it means so much to her too, that name, Choose Life, because of what she went through, because of my brothers who died as babies. (“MCA,” pp. 53-54)

Ralindu's desire to be seen as the incarnation of the quintessential American teenager results in complete disregard for the etymological significance behind her name. Personal names are of considerable importance in Igbo culture: their meanings may, for example, mirror a family's history,<sup>17</sup> as is indeed the case in Adichie's story. By neglecting the weight of this semantic factor in her culture of origin – and, more particularly, in her mother's mind – Ralindu precipitates the metaphorical erasure of her family history and, by extension, of her own identity.

American society is certainly not blameless in the immigrants' desire to obliterate their roots. Some – if not many – Americans in Adichie's stories do stigmatize difference and attempt to neatly fit the ‘other’ into stereotypes. In “The Thing around Your Neck,” the narrator reports that some people believe that “every black person with a foreign accent [is] Jamaican” (“TAYN,” p. 119), while those who guess that the heroine, Akunna, is African tell her that “they lov[e] elephants and wan[t] to go on a safari” (“TAYN,” p. 119).<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it is suggested that Nigerian immigrants are at times complicit with this form of neo-colonial cultural homogenization, for they use the Westerners' narrow-minded expectations as a convenient excuse to get rid of an identity they find all too burdensome. This is most explicitly stated in “The Grief of Strangers,” a story featuring a

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<sup>17</sup> See Ebo Ubahawke, *Igbo Names: Their Structure and Their Meanings* (Ibadan: Daystar, 1981), pp. 100-101.

<sup>18</sup> The original version of the story, “You in America,” was even more incisive, for it stated that some Americans thought that “Africa was a country where everyone knew everyone else” (p. 29).



female poet named Chinechelum. As part of a matchmaking scheme, the young woman's aunt "connect[s]" ("GS," p. 67) her to an Igbo man called Odin, whom the heroine goes to visit in London. While they are having dinner in a restaurant, Chinechelum remarks that "Odin doesn't sound like an Igbo name" ("GS," p. 79). He responds by stating that he has shortened his full name, Odinchezo, believing that "it's easier for these people" ("GS," p. 79).<sup>19</sup> Chinechelum reacts rather critically:

"Oh," Chinechelum said [...]. She remembered how she and Ikeadi [i.e. her boyfriend, who has lain completely paralysed in hospital for nearly a decade] used to criticize her Aunt Ngolika for calling her son "Bob" although his name was Nnaemeka, and then saying it was because of "these people". "What people?" she wanted to ask Odin. You didn't have to deny your heritage and then blame some phantom people for a choice that you had made. ("GS," p. 80)

The sudden switch from the third to the second person ("she wanted to ask Odin" is followed by "You didn't have to deny your heritage") and the absence of quotation marks in the final lines of this passage indicate that the last sentence in the extract can be read either as free indirect speech or as an intrusion of the third-person narrator. If the comment is merely intended as criticism against Odin's behaviour on Chinechelum's part in the former case, the sentence acquires a powerful non-fictional impact in the latter configuration, where it may be viewed as a more general statement directed towards the reader.

This example aptly illustrates that the writer is above all critical of the hypocrisy that lies behind re-naming.<sup>20</sup> This view, which is

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<sup>19</sup> Ironically, the name that is supposed to help the young man fit into British society does not sound English at all – if anything, "Odin" evokes Scandinavian mythology, in which it is the name of the chief god. While this reference may be incidental in isolation, it will become clear in the course of this essay that similar elements can be found in "The Arrangers of Marriage," suggesting that a conscious literary strategy might be at play.

<sup>20</sup> The use of nicknames or shortened names is not always unfavourably depicted by Adichie. For instance, the narrator's brother in *Purple Hibiscus*, whose name is

repeatedly expressed in her short fiction, is made all the more ambiguous by the fact that the author herself at some point wrote under the Americanized name “Amanda N. Adichie,” before changing it to “Amanda Ngozi Adichie” and eventually reverting to the more Igbo-sounding “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.”<sup>21</sup>

What is more interesting to note in view of the focus of this article is that when re-naming is associated with an attempt to discard Igbo culture in Adichie’s work, it frequently goes hand in hand with a rejection of the language altogether. In “My Mother, the Crazy African,” when the mother, named Chika, addresses her daughter in Igbo in front of Ralindu’s American friend Matt, the young heroine “pause[s] for a long moment so Matt won’t think [she] understand[s] Igbo so easily” (“MCA,” p. 57). In a similar effort to cast off her linguistic heritage, Ralindu tries to modify her accent by practising her elocution, in order to acquire “the right American inflections” (“MCA,” p. 56). Pronunciation is again her chief preoccupation when she condemns the British colonization of Nigeria. She does not denounce the exploitation of the Nigerian people by the Europeans or blame the colonial powers for imposing their language, but merely deplors that “it’s so hard to lose the way [the British] stress their words on the wrong syllables” (“MCA,” p. 56). By doing so, Ralindu does not assert her independence from the former colonial rule as much as submit to the neo-imperialism associated with the new, authoritative –

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Chukwuka, has been nicknamed Jaja since childhood because these were the only two syllables he could pronounce. Even if the rejection of Igbo culture is a major theme in the novel, it is never stated or implied that the use of this nickname might be an expression of a refusal to acknowledge one’s cultural heritage.

<sup>21</sup> “Chimamanda” means “my spirit is unbreakable” or “my God will never fall” in Igbo. See Ikechukwu Anya, “In the Footsteps of Achebe: Enter Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigeria’s Newest Literary Voice” (interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie), *Nigerians in America* (October 2003), <http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles/347/2/In-the-Footsteps-of-Achebe%3A-Enter-Chimamanda--Ngozi-Adichie%2C-Nigeria%92s-Newest-Literary-Voice> (accessed 17 July 2009). Adichie’s middle name, Ngozi, means “blessing.” See Michael J.C. Echeruo, *Igbo-English Dictionary: A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Igbo Language with an English-Igbo Index* (New Haven CT & London: Yale UP, 1998), p. 106.

in short, the “right” – standard of English imposed by the contemporary world power, the United States of America.

In “My Mother, the Crazy African,” Ralindu’s uncompromising allegiance to Americanness is reflected in her adoption of an informal tone, which is devoid of the formal characteristics commonly associated with West African English and which stands in stark contrast to her mother’s Igbo-influenced speech.<sup>22</sup> Ralindu’s informality is a meaningful element in the story’s narrative strategy, as it highlights the provocative edge of her speech:

Americans don’t care about that nonsense of being from your ancestral village, where your forefathers owned land, where you can trace your lineage back hundreds of years. So you trace your lineage back, so what? (“MCA,” p. 53)<sup>23</sup>

The heroine’s depreciation of her parents’ culture demonstrates how her self-conscious Americanized speech fits in with her attempt to deny her connection with Africa. Even the title of the short story, “My Mother, the Crazy African,” suggests the impersonation of an American voice, since it echoes Matt’s appraisal of Ralindu’s mother as a “crazy-ass African” (“MCA,” p. 59). But Ralindu’s partaking in neo-

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<sup>22</sup> Chika for example uses formulations such as “Do you want me to slap the teeth out of your mouth?,” a literal translation of a common Igbo reprimand (Obiora Udegbonam and Chika Unigwe, personal communications). Attributing such expressions to the maternal figure in the story is probably a way of rendering her use of the Igbo language, a code in which Ralindu refuses to communicate.

<sup>23</sup> In the first version of the story, the informality of Ralindu’s speech was reinforced by the narrator’s use of spelling. For example, in the phrase “it’s so hard” quoted in the last paragraph but one, “it’s” was spelled “its,” which can be considered an indication of the colloquial register typically linked with contemporary spoken American English. This orthographic ‘sloppiness’ recurred in the original version of the piece – for instance, “for God’s sake” was spelled “for Gods sake,” “let’s” appeared as “lets,” and “my room’s a mess” was rendered as “my rooms a mess.” I suspect the ‘corrections’ made in the republished version of the story are not the author’s, but the editor’s, who may have (wrongly, in my view) believed that Adichie had inserted these unintentionally.

colonial mimicry has no subversive undertones;<sup>24</sup> it is a thoughtless yearning for acceptance by Americans on the part of a teenager. More accurately, it is a distorted projection of what she believes this acceptance to involve, for Ralindu deliberately ignores the advice of her liberal American friend Cathy, who encourages her to “be proud of [her] accent and [her] country” (“MCA,” p. 56), and instead embraces the convictions of her uncultured boyfriend Matt. Ironically, Matt, the person whom she most wants to please, has no more than a casual interest in her, as the final sentence of the story makes clear: “He is looking at some other girl as we talk” (“MCA,” p. 59).

Ralindu’s inflexible views on American identity and her rigid distinction between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ accents epitomize a polarization of languages and cultures also found in “The Arrangers of Marriage” and in the rest of Adichie’s writing. Ofodile regards the act of forsaking his mother tongue as one of the keys to adaptation to America and, in keeping with this reasoning, he orders Chinaza to stop speaking Igbo in the shopping centre, arguing that “[t]here are people behind [her]” (“AM,” p. 177). He later asks her to speak English at home too so that she can “get used to it” (“AM,” p. 178). The adoption of a British-influenced Nigerian variety of English does not suffice in his view, for like Ralindu in “My Mother the Crazy African,” Ofodile is obsessed with American standards and constantly disputes his wife’s linguistic choices. For instance, he tells her that “Americans say [that phone lines are] busy, not engaged” (“AM,” p. 170), and he similarly instructs her to use “attending physician,” not “consultant” (“AM,” p. 174), “elevator,” not “lift” (“AM,” p. 177), “pitcher,” not “jug” (“AM,” p. 183), and “cookies,” not “biscuits” (“AM,” p. 174).

The last example suggests that it is perhaps through another aspect of culture, namely food, that the author makes her point most clearly. Food can be seen as a central constituent of cultural identity and has, unsurprisingly, often featured in cliché-ridden representations

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<sup>24</sup> This is, of course, a reference to Homi K. Bhabha’s “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 85-92. In this influential essay, the author states that colonial mimicry “is at once resemblance and menace” (p. 86).

of immigrants. Adichie does not fail to revisit such stereotypes in her stories. In "The Thing around Your Neck," it is rumoured that squirrels start to disappear after an Igbo man has moved into an American neighbourhood, as the locals "had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals" ("TAYN," p. 116). Quite appropriately, therefore, in "The Arrangers of Marriage," the lack of familiarity with foreign cultures is also transposed to the culinary field. When Chinaza arrives in America, the customs officer examines the foodstuffs she has brought with her "as if they were spiders" ("AM," p. 168) and seizes her sun-dried *uziza* seeds, "fear[ing] [she] would grow them on American soil" ("AM," p. 168). This concern over harmless grains exemplifies a deeper contemporary malaise, namely the anxiety over the idea that a 'foreign' culture – in the double sense of cultivation and civilization – might take root on American ground.

At a later stage in the story, an elderly neighbour comes to enquire about the unusual smell of the heroine's cooking: "That smell [...]. It's everywhere, all over the building" ("AM," p. 178). After this unflattering remark, the old lady somewhat redeems herself by adding that "It smells really good. The problem with us here is we have no culture, no culture at all" ("AM," p. 179). The woman's clumsy comments seem to reflect ignorance more than hostility, but the simple fact of being singled out as an outsider is too much to take for Ofodile. After this incident, he forbids his wife ever to cook African dishes again, and gives her a "*Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook*, thick as a Bible" ("AM," p. 179). He indeed regards American eating habits as gospel. When the couple go to the shopping centre, Ofodile takes Chinaza to McDonald's (which he calls "one of the wonders of America" ["AM," p. 177]) and to a pizza stand, informing her that "[pizza is] one thing you have to like in America" ("AM," p. 176). Chinaza complains that the "tomatoes [on her pizza] are not cooked well" ("AM," p. 176), but Ofodile dismisses her observation by stating that "[w]e overcook things back home [...]. Americans cook things right" ("AM," p. 176). Interestingly, the word "right," and the opposition right vs. wrong that it implies, surfaces again here. Crucially, this prescriptive attitude, based on a radical opposition between cultures, rests on rather shaky foundations. Food

items such as pizzas and French fries (another dish which Ofodile is fond of) may be so commonplace in the United States that they have become associated with mainstream American culture, but pizzas are of Mediterranean origin, and French fries, despite their misleading designation, were most likely invented in Belgium. Trivial as these examples may be, they serve to demonstrate how pointless cultural essentialism can be.<sup>25</sup> While cultures may be different, they are by no means static and mutually exclusive entities around which artificial boundaries can be drawn. The associations made by Chinaza between English biscuits and her Nigerian home on the one hand, and by Ralindu between British stress patterns and Nigerian English on the other, act as similar incarnations of the unavoidable influences between civilizations.

Even if the immigrant characters in Adichie's short fiction occasionally gesture towards a form of cultural equilibrium, they are seldom able to strike a balance between the various traditions they are confronted with. A tentative move towards cross-culturalism is evoked in "My Mother, the Crazy African," significantly again by means of culinary and linguistic metaphors. Although Ralindu constantly bemoans her mother's lack of adaptability to American society, Chika initiates a form of cultural syncretism in her cooking by mixing African and local ingredients to prepare her Nigerian dishes. Another linguistic element, related to the use of greetings and vocatives, shows that Americans can display a similar readiness to adapt to different lifestyles. Ralindu's American friend, Cathy, changes her linguistic habits out of deference for Chika. So, instead of greeting her older interlocutor with the usual American "Hi," Cathy uses the more formal "Good Morning," having been told that "that is how Nigerian children greet adults" ("MCA," p. 57). Furthermore, if Chika refuses to be called by her first name by her daughter's friends, she invites Cathy to call her "Aunty" ("MCA," p. 57), a term used in Africa and

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<sup>25</sup> A similar argument may be invoked as far as Ofodile's change of name is concerned, since "Dave" is an abbreviation of the Hebrew name "David." This allusion to the cross-cultural background of proper names ties in with my earlier remark about the Scandinavian origin of the name "Odin," the shortened form of "Odinchezo" adopted by one of the Nigerian characters in "The Grief of Strangers."

the Caribbean to address, among other people, older female friends. While Ralindu's mother continues to apply most of her African cultural standards in her new environment, she may not be as conservative as her daughter makes her out to be, for she does not refuse to enter into dialogue with the younger American generation.

Nevertheless, Chika cannot communicate with her own daughter when, shortly after the departure of Ralindu's boyfriend, she finds an incriminating bra behind the couch. Unwilling to accept the relationship between the two teenagers, she threatens to apply dried hot peppers to Ralindu's genitals to warn her against the disgrace of premarital sexual intercourse. Chika's inability to come to terms with this aspect of liberal Western society may perhaps be interpreted as an attack by the author on a form of conservatism found in some parts of Igbo society. Importantly, however, Adichie is not suggesting in her writing that conservatism is a characteristic inherent to African cultures. For instance, Eugene, the father in *Purple Hibiscus*, embraces colonial values at the expense of his Igbo identity but is driven by the same uncompromising belief in the difference between what is right and wrong, good and evil, when he inflicts severe corporal punishment on his wife and children. Similarly, in the short stories, the insistence on normality and uniformity, as well as the cultural imperialism of which immigrants are at times both victims and agents, are also forms of conservatism.

Ultimately, Adichie's stories sharply criticize the shortcomings of America and Nigeria, sometimes with rather bleak implications. In "The Arrangers of Marriage," neither of these societies seems to provide answers to the heroine's quest for well-being. In Nigeria, she was not allowed to pursue higher education and was forced into a loveless union with Ofofiele because her uncle would not let her marry her Yoruba boyfriend. When, towards the end of the story, she packs her bags and decides to leave her husband, she realizes that she cannot go back to Nigeria, because her relatives would condemn her choice. Her prospects in America are equally limited, since she is jobless and cannot support herself. Consequently, she is left with no other option but to remain with Ofofiele – at least temporarily for, like many other immigrants, Chinaza may be able to "get a job" and "start afresh" in

the “U.S. of fucking A.” (“AM,” p. 186), as her African-American neighbour Nia helpfully suggests.<sup>26</sup>

Adichie almost systematically concludes her pieces with ambiguous or open endings, perhaps to indicate that the cross-cultural experiences described in her work are complex and on-going processes. By refusing to provide a sense of closure, the author skilfully avoids reproducing the prescriptive attitudes to language and food whose validity she seems to put into question. Rather than imposing solutions, she subtly invites the reader to engage with the intricacy of the cultural and linguistic influences that have shaped the Nigerian experience, whether in Nigeria or abroad.

While Adichie draws upon the influence of previous generations of Nigerian authors in her work, her extensive interest in the progressive formation of cross-cultural identities bears considerable relevance to the contemporary Nigerian context(s). She has undoubtedly become one of the major voices of the country’s ‘third generation’ of writers, whether their home lies in Africa, Europe, America, or in the liminal spaces between.

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<sup>26</sup> The addition of this optimistic note is a marked departure from the ending of the original version of the story.



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