

Analyzing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Short Stories in The New Yorker Fiction Paradigm

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Abstract:

The American short story has always been one of the most important genres in the literary production of the country, with some of the most significant voices in world literature contributing to this form in the last hundred years. The reason for its proliferation lies not only in the brevity of form but also in the fact that it is curiously open to novel experimentation. Magazine publication, especially *The New Yorker* has been significant in aiding the rapid popularity of the short story as a compelling and competitive literary medium. This paper attempts to trace and understand the history and contribution of magazine journalism towards popularizing American short fiction and to comprehend *The New Yorker's* role in the development of the American short fiction. It also tries to understand the genre of *The New Yorker* fiction and its particular features. Finally, it aims to analyze four short stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie published in *The New Yorker* and determine how they contribute and augment the thematic and linguistic style of the magazine and how they introduce multivalent international and regional voices to the magazine's American fiction output.

Introduction:

March-Russel (2009: 3) significantly remarks how the coinage of a new term is brought about by a cultural change and that the arrival of the short story implied most significantly a change in the way prose fiction was articulated, produced and consumed. The American short story, as with its cousins elsewhere, enjoyed a quick and sharp popularity because the ambit of the new genre was adequate to cover the angst, isolation and alienation of a changing society. It reflected manifestly the psycho-social and cultural departures from studied normativity and produced some of the most original work in the beginning of the twentieth century and through to the modern and postmodern periods. The advance of the short story was aided and abetted by magazine publications and the popular magazine short story in the United States was at its peak in the 1930s just prior to the boom of television. The magazines that commonly published short stories included *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Esquire*, but as Martin Scofield puts eloquently "none was more sophisticated, successful and prestigious than that elegant mixture of seductive advertisements, metropolitan table talk, political commentary, witty cartoons and finely written fiction, *The New Yorker*". (Scofield 2006: 195)

Following the footsteps of the fiction template of Poe and O. Henry, the magazine soon established its own template of realist stories that evoked a nostalgia for innocence, middle class complexities, humorous but dark narratives of anxiety, failure and frustration that became eponymous with the genre of American short story itself. The popularity of the American short fiction lay in its ability to look into the lives of the ordinary that are rendered significance through moments of crisis:

The short story is perhaps the exemplary form for the perception of crisis, crux, turning point; and as such it has proved ideal for recording decisive moments, intimately private but often with broad social resonances, in the swift development of the psyche of the post-independence America. (Scofield 2006:238)

The short story remains an ideal form for experimentation with form and technique, something that has been promoted vociferously by *The New Yorker*. The pith and brevity of the magazine short fiction is also ideal for the current iPad-friendly mobile generation, as well as for the introduction of international, ethnic voices.

The New Yorker Magazine:

This section looks at the *The New Yorker* magazine in some detail to understand its development as well as the evolution of the *New Yorker* short story style. *The New Yorker* is an American weekly magazine that provides excellent coverage of current socio-political events; sports; cartoons; cultural commentary, fiction, essays and satire. It started on February 21, 1925 under the editorship of Harold Ross and has been in continuous publication since then. Its chief editors include Harold Ross (1925-1951), William Shawn (1951-1987), Robert Gottlieb (1987-1992), Tina Brown (1992-1998) and David Remnick (1998-present). The present fiction editor of the magazine is Deborah Treisman.

The magazine is notorious for its emphasis on high quality production, compulsive editing, fact checking and insistence on a particular style. But at the same time, publishing in the magazine places a high value on its contributors. Over the years the magazine has boasted the publication of prolific writers whose careers have become synonymous with the development of the American short fiction. They include John O'Hara, Shirley Jackson, Irwin Shaw, Eudora Welty, John Cheever, John Updike, Phillip Roth, Raymond Carver, Anne Beattie, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, Truman Capote, J.D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, Donald Barthelme, Grace Pally, Tobias Wolff, Richard Ford, Jamaica Kincaid, Leslie Marmon Silko, Amy Tan among others, all of whom have had a significant contribution in the American Literature.

Features of *The New Yorker* Fiction

Traditionally, *The New Yorker* fiction, especially in the writings of John Cheever and John Updike, Phillip Roth and Anne Beattie, concentrated on creating stories that delved into the “problematics of selfhood and meaning” (Clark 1993: 309) of the urban middle-class. Cheever and Barthelme experimented with their forms and yet retained the format of the middlebrow entertainment in these short stories that became hugely popular in the midcentury and was consumed by the mass. The stories mostly dealt with well-educated white characters experiencing the “melancholy of affluence, the doldrums of suburban marriage, the thrill or desolation of adultery and above all, its signature style of ending that was either elegantly oblique or frustratingly coy.” (Franzen 2015)

The New Yorker short story in the 1950s put an end to the ‘well-made fiction’ entertainment of O. Henry. It brought about an emphasis on sentence craft and rejected the closed ending narratives of the previous decades. A considerable stress was put on the microcosmic level of excellence in the choice of words and sentence, a style which is to a certain extent still retained now, with many comma'd prose, long passages of description that built a “negative emotional state” (Franzen 2015). The stereotype of the *The New Yorker* fiction generated a backlash in the late 1970s and 1980s. The emphasis on the portrayal of well-off white suburban folk gave way to more multi-ethnic voices with the retirement of its chief editor William Shawn in 1987, with the inclusion of writers of colour and immigrant groups, the short story now highlighted the narratives of “access and voice in a nation that historically limited their participation in social and political life” (Bendixen and Nagel, 2010: 466).

However, Deborah Treisman, the fiction editor of *The New Yorker* at present says that the magazine does not follow the notion of a trademark “*New Yorker*” fiction at the magazine any further. She indicates the diversity of the magazine in including writers from all backgrounds such as Joyce Carol Oates, Andre Aciman, Julian Barnes, Haruki Murakami, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jhumpa Lahiri,

George Saunders, Alice Munro and Aleksander Hemon to name a few. The fiction editor now looks for a freshness of perspective, observation, humour or feeling in the contributions. The choice of a story is determined by the “success of the story to stand in its own terms” (Treisman, 2008), linguistic inventiveness and thematic and emotional impact: “The styles and approaches can be as different as is humanly possible, as long as they’re effective.” (2008)

Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Publications in *The New Yorker*

Adichie, the Nigerian author who spends half her time in America, has published quite a few short stories in *The New Yorker*, which include “Sierra Leone, 1997” published on June 12, 2006; “Cell One” published on January 21, 2007; “Real Food” published on August 27, 2007; “The Headstrong Historian” published on June 23, 2008; “Birdsong” published on September 20, 2010; “Checking Out” published on March 11, 2013; “Apollo” published on April 6, 2015 and “The Arrangements” published on June 28, 2016. However, for the sake of thematic and linguistic analysis the paper takes four of her short stories namely “Birdsong”, “Cell One”, “Real Food” and “Sierra Leone, 1997”.

Thematic Analysis of Adichie’s Stories in *The New Yorker*

Adichie’s short stories published in *The New Yorker* deal with complex themes of class, race, female sexuality and sexism, the tyranny of dictatorship, civil war and the impact on youth. All stories are narrated from a first-person point of view and have been analyzed individually.

Story 1: “Birdsong”

This short story deals predominantly with the sexism in Nigeria. It is set in Lagos and looks into the nature of inherent sexism prevalent in all sections of the society. The narrator is an emancipated young woman who is working at a phone company in Lagos, who engages in an adulterous relationship with a married man. The story especially focusses on the hypocrisy of the patriarchal and the colonial attitude towards women, who are single and considered inferior, even though they are financially independent. It highlights the pressures on women to conform to the patriarchal tropes of female behavior such as marriage and childbirth and rearing as the goals of a woman’s life, almost always at the cost of self-effacement.

The lack of acknowledgement from men beneath the narrator’s station such as her lover’s driver; the waiter at the restaurant; the colleagues at the office who always expect her to serve cakes and refreshments because she is unmarried; the way in which even boys who are street urchins can glare at her because she is an unmarried woman, bring to the fore the predominant postcolonial hegemonic masculinity in the Nigerian society and the woman chafing against the patriarchal normativity. For example, the narrator is shouted at by a driver at the crossroads:

The driver had jumped out with his shirt unbuttoned, all sweaty bravado, and screamed at me.

“Stupid girl! You are a common nuisance. Why did you stop like that? Nonsense!”

The use of the birds in the story is symbolic and the birdsong at her lover’s colonial mansion stands for everything the narrator pines for in terms of relationship and ease of life. However, the mansion seems like a gilded cage. Carefully wrought, the story unfolds through memory association and follows the narrator’s thoughts from the present in a traffic jam to her experiences in the recent past. The metaphors of the birds and traffic jam are used repeatedly at intervals and reinforce the antithetical strands of freedom vis a vis the frustrating boundaries of gender roles in the Nigerian society. The traffic jam indicates the stagnancy in the narrator’s own life.

The story also builds into one of its many layers the pernicious influence of Christianity and colonial religious fervor that seeks to promote the sexist attitude even further. It also hints obliquely through the subplot at the office at the corrupt pseudo-colonial rules enforced by local dictators and leaders.

Story 2: “Cell One”

This story looks into the atmosphere of fear and corruption, and police brutality under a dictatorial regime in Nigeria. Set in Nsukka, the university town, it charts the sudden upsurge in campus violence, in an environment that has always been sheltered and peaceful. It explores the futile destruction of young lives, of well-educated boys, children of erudite campus professors, who ignore the growing cults within the campus, the cult rivalry, the gang violence and killing, and the culpability of the parents in ignoring the growing frustration of their children.

The campus operates as a microcosmic image of the way the country is run. Similarly, the jail in which Nnamabia, the handsome, charismatic elder brother of the narrator is kept is also run as a microcosm of the country’s dictatorial rule. In the jail system inmates have to buy their basic needs; the visitors bribe the police officers to be able to see their children and relations. Every cell, overcrowded with people, stands as a metaphor for the society where people with money had access to basic resources and those who did not were left to starve. His experience in the jail’s cell one, the beating and brutality, changes and subdues Nnamabia’s false bravado and his idealism. It alters also his parents’ complacency.

There are references to the influence of the American pop-culture through tangential references to the immensely popular songs such as “Thriller” by Michael Jackson and “Purple Rain” by Prince, which provides a temporal location to the story as well as familiarity to the American and world readers of the magazine. For a regional location, the story deals as well with the notion of cults and violent initiation to cults prevalent at the university campus across Nigeria.

Story 3: “Sierra Leone, 1997”

This story has a similar theme of the utter wastage of the potential of the youth of Nigeria to appease the power politics of the dictators of Nigeria. It refers tangentially to the aspirational value and representational freedom of America in the minds of the Nigerian youth. Set in the University town of Nsukka, this narrative reminisces warmly about the simplicity and loyalty of the “houseboy” Fide, who stayed with the narrator’s family as a servant for twelve years. Semi-autobiographical in nature, it depicts the pain and disbelief of the narrator when she hears about the death of Fide in Sierra Leone on a so-called peace-keeping mission, organized by the dictator General Sani Abacha who was infamous for robbing the rights of Nigerian citizens.

Story 4: “Real Food”

This autobiographical narrative reads like an episode from Adichie’s memory. It relates the close association of regional food with the tribal, national and cultural identity of an individual. It talks about the narrator’s childhood distaste for the ubiquitous Nigerian food, *Garri*, commonly called “swallow”, consumed as weekday lunch by her family. She recalls vividly the ingredients used to prepare *garri*, the sight, smell and colour of the food.

The nature of association with a tribe and its food is indicated in the following statements made towards the narrator over her revulsion of *garri*:

“Oh, you know, she is not like us local people. She is foreign.”

The Narrator wishes she had appreciated *garri* more because it was important to her beloved family.

Linguistic Analysis of Adichie's Stories in *The New Yorker*

There are certain linguistic peculiarities in Adichie's short stories, most commonly found in code-switching to Igbo or Pidgin English. There are also certain unique uses of metaphors and similes that are typically cultural, which enhance the linguistic resourcefulness of the stories.

Instances of code-switching:

Generally, terms that are inherently cultural such as slangs, jokes and greetings are kept in Igbo with English glossing such as these from "Sierra Leone":

- "You are a fat multipede, *nnukwuesu!*
- "Look at him, *ikeakpi*, with the buttocks of a scorpion."
- "*Bianukenemmadu*. Come and greet somebody."
- "*Nno*. Welcome."

Code-switching is retained to convey emotional outbursts, such as:

- My mother screamed, "*Ekwuzikwana!* Don't say that." ("Cell One")
- "Oh! Oh! *Chi m egbuo m!* My God has killed me!" ("Cell One")
- "*Na wa!* Look at how your eyes are shining..."("Birdsong"- the expression to be understood from context)

Local discourse markers like "sha" in "Birdsong", "Jkada" (motorbike) in "Birdsong" and "Cell One" along with names of food items like "jollof rice", "Okpa", "Nsala", "Okro", "Onugbu", "Egusi" also are observed.

Instances of Nigerian English and Pidgin English:

- The use of the term "houseboy" (in "Real Food" and "Sierra Leone")
- The use of the term "Big man" to refer to a leader or a rich man. ("Birdsong", "Cell One")
- The use of the term "swallow" to refer to *garri*, a soup-like concoction because it is meant to be swallowed: "The food (soup/*garri*) was well-pounded, but the soup was not tasty." ("Real Food")
- "Auntie, sorry oh! Nothing happen to the car." ("Birdsong")
- "So he thinks he can speak big English." ("Birdsong")
- "Ah! You are always rushing to leave because of this your man." ("Birdsong")

The cultural use of language in images, that is typically reflective of regional Nigerian culture and brings in a distinctly regional flavour to the stories.

- "His face is full of overseas."("Birdsong")
- "You need deliverance prayers."("Birdsong")

The use of irony, oxymoron and similes such as in the following instances, add to the beauty and innovation of linguistic expression.

- “He had a glowing ego, like a globe, round and large and in constant need of polishing.” (“Birdsong”)
- “It all made me helplessly powerful.” (“Birdsong”)

Conclusion:

The sustained contention of the publication of fiction in *The New Yorker* has been its emphasis on the quality of the story and the ability to stand on itself. All the stories analyzed take memory and add distinct sensory experiences as layers to that memory, to make well-wrought, thoughtful and seamless narratives. The stories have multiple themes, are very local and regional in flavour but in terms of a global audience of the magazine, the feelings evoked are very universal. They cater to the magazine’s benchmark for thematic finesse and linguistic inventiveness.

Adichie’s social realism successfully constitutes the magazine’s vision in including international writers in the promotion of multivariate ethnic and regional voices. To sum up, therefore, her stories and writing definitely carry forward the magazine’s efforts at inclusion and diversity in the twenty-first century, moving away from the portrayal of the white middle class bastion that was its hallmark in the previous century.

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