

The lasting impact of
colonialism in
western perceptions
of the global south:
rac...



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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* follows Akunna, a young Nigerian immigrant, as she adjusts to life in America. While there she begins a relationship with a white man who is eerily fascinated by African culture, and encounters the multiple skewed perceptions that Americans have of African countries, in particular Nigeria. Akunna and her boyfriend's strikingly different views of Africa represent the lasting impact of colonialism both in western countries and the Global South, and also reveal the danger of the Single Story perspective. In presenting such radically different characters, Adichie critiques the dominant western perception of Africa and African women and reveals the lasting impacts of settler colonialism on race and gender.

Adichie's depiction of Akunna and her boyfriend reflect the lasting impacts of settler colonialism on both colonized and colonizer nations. Akunna's boyfriend is obsessed with Nigerian culture, to the point where it seems as though he's claiming the Nigerian identity for himself. He "told [Akunna] he had been to Ghana and Uganda and Tanzania, loved the poetry of Okot p'Bitek and the novels of Amos Tutuola" (120). While Akunna initially "wanted to feel disdain... because white people who liked Africa too much... were condescending" (120). While eventually she's convinced to go out with him, and initially finds him less condescending than other white people she's encountered in America, she does eventually feel uncomfortable with his infatuation with African culture. This infatuation extends into the boyfriend attempting to claim African culture for himself: when he and Akunna are in the African food store and the cashier "asked him if he was African, like the white Kenyans or South Africans" (123), he's thrilled because he wants to

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take on the African identity even though it doesn't belong to him. He also claims to understand how Akunna feels when she tells him about her father's car accident, when in fact he has no idea how she feels, because he has not experienced her life nor the context surrounding it. She's upset by this, "because he thought the world was, or ought to be, full of people like him" (123). He thinks that he and Akunna are the same because of his desire to claim African heritage, but her life is distinctly different from his and he doesn't recognize their differences. There is a distinct difference between Akunna's relationship with Nigeria and her boyfriend's, because Akunna grew up in Nigeria and is intimately familiar with the culture, while her boyfriend, try as he may to appropriate Nigerian culture, is an outsider looking in.

The boyfriend's desire to claim African culture as his own is a reflection of the lasting impacts of settler colonialism. One of the most significant tenants of settler colonialism is the idea of colonizers coming to view themselves as true residents of the colonized location. Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill explore this concept in their essay Decolonizing Feminism, where they explain that "Settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there" (12). Much like with other forms of colonialism, the effects of settler colonialism continue to affect the colonized. Settler colonialism, however, allows colonizers to claim that they are the true residents of a country, erasing indigenous people from the narrative and preventing them from claiming land that is rightfully theirs. Arvin, Tuck and Morrill explain that in <https://assignbuster.com/the-lasting-impact-of-colonialism-in-western-perceptions-of-the-global-south-race-and-gender-in-the-thing-around-your-neck/>

settler colonial states “ laws have been constructed to enable white settlers to make claims of indigeneity” (12), a practice immediately made evident in *The Thing Around Your Neck*: Akunna’s boyfriend is not Nigerian, and embedding himself so deeply in African culture serves only to negate Akunna’s experiences as a Nigerian woman and take away cultural experiences from the people they belong to. In comparing Akunna and her boyfriend’s interactions with Africa, when Akunna was born in Nigeria and has memories of “[her] aunts who hawked dried fish and plantains, cajoling customers to buy and then shouting insults when they didn’t; [her] uncles who drank local gin and crammed their families and lives into single rooms” (117), and her boyfriend only understands Nigeria from the perspective of an outsider examining a foreign culture as something to study, Adichie makes a profound feminist statement about settler colonialism: how the culture of indigenous people, and particularly indigenous women, is stripped away when white people try to claim it for themselves.

Adichie also explores the idea of colonized women being seen as less than other women. When Akunna and her boyfriend are out to dinner and the waiter “ assumed [she] could not possibly be his girlfriend” (124), she’s upset by the assumption that as an African woman, her boyfriend would never date her, but he doesn’t understand why she’s upset. Adichie’s critique of western perceptions of Africa is made clear through her characters: she condemns both the perception of African women as inferior to other women, and criticizes the people who refuse to see that that prejudice exists. The discrimination Akunna faces reveals the lasting impact of heteropatriarchy, which Arvin, Tuck and Morrill explore in depth. They <https://assignbuster.com/the-lasting-impact-of-colonialism-in-western-perceptions-of-the-global-south-race-and-gender-in-the-thing-around-your-neck/>

explain that the “ management of Indigenous peoples’ gender roles and sexuality was also key in remaking Indigenous peoples into settler state citizens” (15), which is evident with Akunna: as white colonizers constructed ideas of womanhood that included only white women, reducing African women to something inferior and other, mainstream western society adopted that same view, allowing them to view African women as something other than women. Adichie does feminist work by drawing attention to the continued negative perception of African women, but she also criticizes it by depicting that white Americans don’t realize what they’re doing. Akunna feels the effects of racism and sexism profoundly, but the boyfriend doesn’t recognize this prejudice, a distinction that solidifies the difference between colonizer and colonized.

Adichie explores how differing experiences with prejudice can shape a person’s experience with a culture and their perception of the world. Akunna’s experiences as an African woman, who has experienced an intersection of racism and sexism as a result of her identity, allow her to recognize prejudice and be affected by it. When she arrives in America, she finds herself subject to ridiculous and ignorant questions from many white people: “ They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real houses back in Africa and if you’d seen a car before you came to America” (117). That prejudice extends to issues of gender as well, when she tells white Americans the meaning of her name and they respond “ Father’s Wealth? You mean, like your father will actually sell you to a husband” (120.) Her boyfriend, as a white man living in the United States, has had no direct experience with gender or race-based prejudice, and while he may attempt <https://assignbuster.com/the-lasting-impact-of-colonialism-in-western-perceptions-of-the-global-south-race-and-gender-in-the-thing-around-your-neck/>

to entrench himself in African culture, doing so is impossible when he is neither African nor a woman. Adichie critiques people who attempt to take on identities that don't belong to them by showing how they can never truly understand the experiences of those identities; she displays how the experience of African women is a unique one, that can only be understood by African women.

The Thing Around Your Neck explores the dangers of a singular perspective in regards to colonized countries. Akunna criticizes how her boyfriend "wanted to visit Lagos, to see how real people lived, like in the shantytowns" (120). His view that the only "real people" in Africa are ones who live in extreme poverty is indicative of a global belief that people in the Global South are inherently poor and lesser than people in western countries. While the boyfriend views the people of Nigeria as living in unspeakable poverty, he's still infatuated with Nigerian culture, gaining knowledge and objects like trophies. Akunna even remarks that she "felt grateful that [his parents] did not examine you like an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk" (126). The boyfriend's view of Nigeria, as both a land of poverty and a place from which to collect trophies, is a reflection of Adichie's "The Danger of A Single Story" talk, where she discusses the repercussions of holding only one view of a place or group of people. She explains that "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (13: 11-13: 23). The fact that the boyfriend sees Africans as poor, and views Akunna as one of his trophies, speaks of a single story perspective: the fact that he is not Nigerian and was not raised in Nigeria allows him to have deeply

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misconstrued views of the nation. His perception of Akunna as something to be owned is a reflection of the belief that African women are not really women continues to show the lasting impacts of settler colonialism; that he can view her as a trophy, a prize to be won, rather than a legitimate person. While Akunna has real, human memories of Nigeria, both ones of poverty and ones of family, her boyfriend does not, and that allows him to establish a single-story viewpoint of Nigeria. Through his opinions, Adichie depicts the dangers that a single-story can present, through negative perceptions of people based on their race and gender.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* addresses the complexities of race and gender for African women living in a (supposedly) postcolonial society. She discusses the lasting effects of colonialism on the way that westerners perceive Africans, and how westerners attempt to take on the identities of the cultures they have colonized. In creating radically different characters through Akunna and her boyfriend, she explores the implications of prejudice and stereotypes, and both critiques the settler colonialism that has put both in place and champions for the reclamation of African women's identities.