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**A POSTCOLONIAL DISH:
FOOD AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI
ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK***

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Artigo apresentado trabalho de conclusão de curso, requisito parcial para a obtenção do diploma de graduação no curso Licenciatura em Língua Inglesa.

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ABSTRACT: The article consists of a bibliographical research in which the short story *The Thing around Your Neck*, from the homonymous book written by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) is analyzed through the theoretical framework related to the themes of cultural heritage and identity in a postcolonial context. These themes are aligned to the author's descriptions of food, typical recipes and commensality. The methodology is defined as a literary analysis developed through comparative literature. The article is structured in three sections, being the first of them a brief approach of food as a relational phenomenon and as a system of communication through the theoretical framework of Barthes (2013) and Goldstein (2018). The second section discusses food in literature as a tool to add sensory details, to provide realism and to emphasize emotional states or cultural practices, according to Nicholson (1987) and Fitzpatrick and Boyce (2017). The third section analyzes how Adichie explores food as a symbolic tool to express postcolonial issues and to highlight cross-cultural identities in the mentioned narratives, based on works of Ngongkum (2014), Tunca (2010) and Ifeoluwa Mary (2022).

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Food; Postcolonial Literature.

1. An Appetizer

Rasool and Wratch (2023) assert that food is, in a first view, a biological need. It provides nourishment for the body and helps living things to survive. However, when it comes to human cultures, the idea of food seems much more complex. Through food, families reinforce their bonds, families create their own rituals, and whole communities recognize their members around a table by observing their cooking practices and their eating habits.

Therefore, food is not only a way to absorb nutrients, but it portrays the culture of a community or country, as an agent of communication (Rasool; Wratch, 2023). Through food, religious groups celebrate their deities and even social classes are hierarchized. In other words, food integrates cultural identities of communities, regions and nations. Indeed, cultural identity is not a simple definition.

According to Hall (1992), cultural identity is formed by aspects of identities that arise from a sense of “belonging”, and those aspects include ethnic, racial, and linguistic issues. Still according to the author, cultural identities are constantly transforming.

Literary authors have always perceived food and commensality as powerful tools to reinforce feelings, cultural practices and social strata. However, as a paradox, even though food has been mentioned in innumerable books, it has not received enough attention from literary criticism until the last decades.

Goldstein (2018) attributes this apparent “blindness” to the influence of philosophy, which led to a tendency to focus theoretical efforts on its classical themes, such as moral, religion and politics. The author claims that “if literature has long attended

to commensality, literary criticism, blinded by the biases of philosophy, has only recently begun to explore its importance” (Goldstein, 2018, p. 42).

Thinking about the long-term interrelation between food and literature, this paper aims to discuss it within stories of a contemporary writer. The award-winning Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie highlights the role of food as a symbolic representation. In her literature, the kitchen and the table are converted into focal points for specific cultural considerations, encompassing individual and ethnic identity.

Actually, Adichie’s literature explores various themes, including identity, cultural clashes, and the experiences of Nigerians both at home and abroad. Most of her main characters and narrators are women, often migrants, who face gender issues in their intimacy, but who are also affected by political contexts. According to Kharazi and Bahmani (2022), “Her works mainly deal with themes of culture, gender specific issues, family, domestic violence, politics, national identity, self-realization, and colonialism” (Kharazi and Bahmani, 2022, p. 113).

Colonialism is a recurrent theme in her stories, even within those that seem, at first, as exclusively personal stories. Indeed, as a writer, Adichie explores details of her character’s everyday lives to illustrate gender relations or political issues, which may lead the reader from an open market to the consequences of an ethnic conflict, or from a family table to an intricate concept of national identity. Indeed, Adichie’s narratives portray “a postcolonial context largely determined by a global environment in which human activities extend across national boundaries, calling for a re-visioning of such activities and communities” (Ngongkum, 2014, p. 79).

This is the reason why Adichie’s novels and short stories usually include domestic details such as traditional Nigerian meals. Food is an essential part of her narratives, creating an atmosphere in which the character’s cultural backgrounds are revealed and explored.

Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a short-story collection first published in 2009, presents twelve narratives in which food and commensality are raised as relevant elements. In these narratives, the author often refers to dishes, spices and cooking practices to emphasize differences between Nigeria and the United States, as well as characters’ cross-cultural identities.

Food highlights the author’s perception of both cultures, and it is also mentioned to debate stereotypes. According to Tunca (2010), “Food can be seen as a central

constituent of cultural identity and has, unsurprisingly, often featured in cliché-ridden representations of immigrants” (Tunca, 2010, p. 302-303).

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the short story that names the book itself, the representation of immigrants through food is an important feature. This feature was the main reason why this narrative was chosen for this work. We believe that these mentions of food as a literary device inspire a deeper inspection. This work, hence, is described as a bibliographical research; a literary analysis developed through comparative literature in which this narrative is used to exemplify the purposes or reasons why food is mentioned in literature.

2. Daily bread, daily sign

Recipes, ingredients and kitchen practices are part of our everyday lives, either biologically or anthropologically. Our survival depends on nourishment. Commensality and cuisine integrate cultural identities. In both ways, food is part of who we are. However, according to Lupton (1994), despite its potential for anthropological studies, food has not been a theme of specific academic works in this field until recently.

Lupton (1994) herself suggests a reason for this lack of interest: “Food and cuisine are basic elements of every culture. Indeed their very banality may be a major underlying reason for the lack of scholarly attention given to the analysis of food and cuisine as meaningful cultural phenomena” (p. 666).

According to the author, food has been perceived only as a biological need. Her analysis may be exemplified through the works of Nicholson (1987), who discusses the expression “daily bread” as a sign of the symbiosis between food and survival. Getting bread – a metaphor for food – through either hard work or a blessing means keeping alive. The author asserts that it is impossible to imagine life of an individual without the act of eating, or a species existence on Earth without sex.

In his words, “Eating and life, for a truly individual identity, are inseparable. Food is to the individual what sex is to the species” (Nicholson, 1987, p.37). The author explains the comparison by asserting that

Sex is the means of species-reproduction – the method that a species uses to perpetuate itself. But eating is the means of reproduction: consuming food is what the individual does in order to reproduce himself. Living and eating are thus metaphorically equivalent (Nicholson, 1987, p. 37).

Goldstein (2018) presents a wider perception of eating, beyond the necessity of nourishment or survival. The author mentions the complex relations that involve the consumption and production of food, which surpass its biological aspects and reach a symbolic meaning:

[...] we do not just consume food, we eat it. And eating is not simply a biological phenomenon. It is also a social one, even if one is eating alone. Food is relational. It doesn't stay in one place, one form, or one body. It circulates, first through ecological transformations that start with soils, plants, and nonhuman animals, and then through relationships with other people. Food constitutes a material trace of the biological, ecological, social, and symbolic interactions that link eater, eaten, and the macrocosm that surrounds them (Goldstein, 2018, p. 40).

Food is indeed relational, as stated by Goldstein (2018). All the food supply chain is marked by relations, including its production, processing, distribution, purchasing and preparation. Until the moment food is swallowed, social interactions are established, cultural choices are made and a considerable amount of work is put on it.

Therefore, anthropological issues about food are as relevant as its biological aspects. In the words of Nicholson (1987, p. 38), "Anthropology could be said without much exaggeration to be the study of how food is got, shared and consumed, food being as basic to socialization and social relations as it is to bodily existence".

However, beyond the purely logistic aspects that illustrate how food is indeed relational, there are symbolic issues around the act of eating. As an example, according to Santhiya (2019), food represent family bonds, reinforce ancestry and illustrate power relations:

Eating practices reveal multifaceted relationships between food and society. It involves material and metaphoric features of a culture. Food becomes an important identity marker. It defines gender roles, social class and social hierarchy in a family and thereby in a nation. Food is a cultural act (Santhiya, 2019, p.73-74).

Commensality is another theme that deserves attention. The term comes from the Latin *commensalis*, "with the table", or eating together. Commensal rituals often reveal important facts about cultures, not only considering the food which is served during these rituals, but also considering the choice of ingredients, the ways of preparation, the position of each person around a table or the etiquette rules required or not in a context. That is why Goldstein (2018) synthetizes commensality as "the range of relationships that emerge and are reified through the act of eating (Goldstein, 2018, p. 41).

In fact, commensality rituals bring people together. Everyone needs nourishment, as well as everyone needs human connection. Undoubtedly, whenever people are around each other at the same time, a commensal ritual is possible. It is part of human nature. We perceive it specially when we observe people who share the same cultural practices, because these practices influence and inspire culinary traditions. In other words, “humans also invent cuisines to justify their unity through the need of eating” (Partarakis et. al., 2021, p. 614)

Roland Barthes (2013) considers commensality while states that food is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usage, situations, and behavior” (p. 21). According to the author, food is a sign. He asserts that buying an item of food does not simply mean the manipulation of an object, but also the constitution of an information that signifies something to someone.

In his words, “To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign”. (Barthes, 2013, p. 25)

Barthes (2013) analyzes food through a semiotic perspective. If we think of examples from its perspective, we could easily remember dishes that are served only during special occasions like religious celebrations, or produced only in a season when some essential ingredient is available, or even remember a spice that made a family dish different from any other. More than nourishment, food may signify comfort, care or generosity.

Barthes (2013) defines this comfort as the “‘nostalgic’ value of food”. He claims that food is frequently perceived as part of an idealized rural society. He considers that “food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life; hence the paradoxical association of gastronomy and industrialization in the form of canned ‘gourmet dishes’” (Barthes, 2013, p. 24). Still about food and nostalgia, it is useful to mention Abarca (2020, p. xiii), who states that

This return provides the feeling of being home; this wholeness is created by the emotional experiences brought about from the familiarity of flavours, textures and aromas provided by food – real or imagined. Food, therefore, is a site of memory that enables the return to the whole, at least for one meal.

The aromas, textures and flavors mentioned by Abarca (2020) may be often related to memory, as a sign of a past as relief and belonging. However, food also

underlines cultural changes in one place over the years. Gastronomic traditions adapt to different tastes and needs, and this adaptation subverts our perception of food as a static sign. In other words,

Gastronomic tradition is dependent upon culture, and it is an unavoidable and promising tool for learning about cultural differences. This is even more the case in a globalized world, where not only food and ingredients are produced, processed and exported to different countries, but also advertised and promoted via mass media to the rest of the world (Stajcic, 2013, p.13).

Therefore, from a different semiotic possibility, food may also be a sign of a cultural product. By its advertisement and promotion via mass media, a certain edible item may remind us of a brand, a movie or a place. The opposition between the nostalgic value of food and the results of its industrialization are two poles of a global phenomena. In the preface of *Cuisine and Symbolic Capital: Food in Film and Literature*, Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar (2010, p. xix) offers a synthesis of this contrast:

Culinary struggles and the use of food metaphors evoke larger struggles for symbolic capital that are closely connected to a sense of community and humanity. For instance, often in a world as globalized as ours is now, there is a fundamental struggle over sustaining a historically bound vision of authentic food and family identity, (at least of home), as opposed to the food marketed as ‘authentic’ in restaurants and shops.

Considering the food available in a globalized world *versus* the “authentic” food related to family identity, we could say that food becomes a double sign. Food communicates both perceptions, which is possible because, as stated by Stajcic (2013, p. 7), food is as a system of communication:

Barthes uses semiotics to put the role and function of food into context. He claims that food functions as a sign, a sign communicating something in addition to itself, perhaps something other than itself. With food, we are not just buying or consuming a product but a whole system or chain of meanings. An apple is not just the red sweet object that you ingest for nutrition; it is the whole system that contributed to growing the apple: the sun, water, animals, human farmers. Also potentially in the apple is pesticide, transportation issues, Snow White, Macintosh and much more. You are not eating an apple, you are experiencing a system or grammar of food.

Thinking about the concept of a grammar of food is useful if we develop a discussion within literature, because literary authors have long discovered food as a

device to reinforce their character's cultural backgrounds or emotional states. Hence, it becomes the next topic of our analysis.

3. Edible narratives

The novel *The Edible Woman*, written by Margaret Atwood, brings both a synthesis of the value and a reason for studying the implications of food in literature: "Eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk" (Atwood, 1969, p. 53).

Even though academic works have not attributed significant meaning to food until a few past decades, as it was discussed in the previous section, literature seems to have always been fascinated by it. According to Goldstein (2018), "Literature has always been exquisitely attuned to commensality, even if Western philosophy notably has not. This is because literature has always been concerned with social relationships and with larger webs of connection" (p. 41).

Since the forbidden fruit was eaten by Adam and Eve in the biblical book of Genesis and became a metaphor for disobedience (Fitzpatrick and Boyce, 2017), food has been mentioned in narratives and has marked the "human weakness in relation to the gods but strength in relation to animals" (Nicholson, 1987, p. 38).

An author may describe the pleasure of someone while tasting a fruit, or the gestures of someone while handling a culinary utensil, or even a way someone cuts a vegetable, which makes the excerpt more realistic. It allows the reader to create mental images about the items described.

This finding is indeed a fact, but it could easily lead us to a poor analysis: one that believes that realism is the only purpose to mention food in literature. (Fitzpatrick and Boyce, 2017). While mentioned in literature, food also highlights characters' identities in a semiotic context, which is possible because, as stated by Barthes (2013), food is a sign.

Among the contexts in which food may be used as a literary tool, still according to Fitzpatrick and Boyce (2017), "cooking and consumption are additionally figured as sources of artistry, pleasure, erotic self-expression and authority" (p. 248). Being a sign, food embraces a wide range of human conducts, either positive or negative: "Despite its affiliations with violence and aggression, death and dissolution, food is also integral to positive literary representations of commensality in modern and postmodern writing" (p. 249).

Literary authors may create characters who poison others' meals, or who assume practices that are not accepted in most societies, such as cannibalism. They may use soup or porridge to exemplify the care of a loving mother for a child who is ill. They may also describe a dish or a dessert with adjectives as "creamy", "crispy", "watery", "sour", "sweet" or "salty", inspiring a synesthetic reaction in the reader.

In Literature, these descriptions cause such reactions because "substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food" (Barthes, 2013, p. 22).

If food communicates, an author may reinforce a character's social strata, age, personality, habits or the gender roles that are expected from it by describing what he or she eats, as well as where, when and how they do it. It helps readers to discover who characters are. Ultimately, it guides readers to understand a character's motivations towards attitudes or reactions they assume through a narrative. To rephrase, food compounds characters' identities as it compounds identities in life.

Food brings life to a literary text through what seems a simple association: if characters "need" to eat, it convinces us that they are "alive". Being "alive", they have identities. Or, at least, they become more similar to people we actually know, or people we do not know, but we would like to know, because they seem instigating. We would be convinced more easily that the existence of someone like that character is plausible. As it is stated by Nicholson (1987, p. 38),

In life, eating is a routine necessity, but in literature eating is always a symbolic act. In life people eat in order to be alive, but the characters of literature do not eat to live, since they aren't alive. They eat only for a symbolic purpose.

Therefore, mentions of food are not only tools to add sensory details to the text. Food is as symbolic in literature as it is in life. Or even more symbolic, once literary characters do not have a need for physical nourishment. Still about the topic, Fitzpatrick and Boyce (2017, p. 248) claim that

Throughout literary history, food has been intrinsic to articulations of identity. As this study has shown, the semiotics of consumption – what, how and where characters eat – reveal much about individual subjectivities and collective identities.

At this point of our discussion, we would like to focus on the idea of collective identities. It is an important feature of contemporary literature, which engages into themes such as migration, diaspora, affect, memory, and nostalgia. In a globalized world, marked by industrial processes that change traditional practices, often in an irreversible way, food is one of the features that keep a community together.

Contemporary literature takes advantage of descriptions of dishes, spices, recipes, kitchen practices or commensal habits to describe and emphasize cultural features of a community. It happens because “the physicality of food in literature is not straightforwardly divisible from its role as mediator of intersubjective relations, nor from its function as repository of cultural or symbolic meaning” (Fitzpatrick; Boyce, 2017, p. 294).

As a prominent author of contemporary literature, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie brings elements related to food and commensality to her narratives, portraying collective identities in Nigeria and migrants’ cross-cultural identities, which makes her stories a quite interesting source for literary analysis.

4. A postcolonial dish

Literature in Nigeria has offered thoughtful works about diaspora and its consequences. In the words of Tunca (2010), “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” (p. 291).

This literature offers a singular view of one of the most intriguing postcolonial issues: the domestic and psychological levels of change caused by colonization (Santhiya, 2019). We believe these issues are intriguing because, when someone searches for information about postcolonial processes, they are able to find a wide range of scientific works. Most of them describe macro effects of colonization, often including statistics about politics, economy and migration. But when it comes to a more personal level, which may embrace feelings such as discomfort, belonging and nostalgia, it is often contemporary literature that provides clues about these effects.

In this context, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie brings a singular view of women in a contemporary, postcolonial Nigeria. Her experience as someone born and raised in Nigeria, but who studied and lived in the United States, has shaped “a diasporic

perspective that has shaped her literary creativity and career as a prolific writer” (Ifeoluwa Mary, 2022, p. 37).

Tunca (2010) mentions three central themes that are embodied in Adichie’s works: ethnicity, colonization and migration. We would add gender to this list of Adichie’s recurring themes. Most of her narratives show a woman’s point of view of diverse aspects of a globalized society, from their intimacy to broader contexts: family, marriage, casual relationships, beauty standards, purchasing power, differences in language and accents, urban violence, ethnic and religious issues, political conflicts, and war.

Adichie’s characters represent what Tunca (2010) referred to as cross-cultural identities, because “regardless of their gender and their economic and cultural condition, experience an initial shock and respond differently to the cultural loss required in the process of adaptation to the new culture.” (Ifeoluwa Mary, 2022, p. 45)

In this process of adaptation, food plays an interesting role. Adichie’s novels, such as *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are suitable examples of how the author embraces food as a tool that refines her storytelling.

Ramone (2018) highlights food and commensality as issues that emerge in Nigerian culture and, more specifically, in Nigerian literature. Kharazi and Bahmani (2022) also highlight the importance of food and its cultural significance in the works of fiction written by some African writers.

The short-story book *The Thing Around Your Neck* discusses recurrent themes of Adichie’s while references about food and eating are raised. It presents twelve short stories, most of them about “women struggle to find their identity in unfamiliar settings” (Ngongkum, 2014, p. 82).

Along these stories, food is taken as a symbolic tool, specially as a metaphor for a cultural clash. The short story *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the seventh narrative from the book and the one that gives its name, describes precisely a cultural clash after the narrator won the American visa lottery.

The whole narrative mentions both American and Nigerian dishes and eating habits. Those elements are presented because, in Adichie’s literature, “Food, as a major motif in her works, is always present as an inseparable part in the lives of the characters and depicts their feelings, situations, and experiences” (Kharazi and Bahmani, 2022, p. 113).

In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the narrator is Akunna, a young Nigerian woman who moves to the United States and experiences the adaptation to a country where companies hire African people because “they were desperately trying to look diverse” (Adichie, 2009, p. 116).

The first mention of food is brief, but effective as a symbolic scene. It happens right after the narrator arrives in the United States to be hosted by her uncle: “He picked you up at the airport and bought you a big hot dog with yellow mustard that nauseated you. Introduction to America, he said with a laugh” (Adichie, 2009, p. 115).

In the narrative, Akunna’s “introduction to America” is not sightseeing or talking to a native person. Her journey as a migrant starts through swallowing America into a hot dog. Even though, as later mentioned in the story, she has strong memories about the culinary tradition of her home country, becoming an immigrant includes changing her eating habits. At this point, it is useful to mention Keating (2022), who states that

Providing an alternative view on the history of everyday life, food memories can be viewed as microhistories and micronarratives. Therefore, they can further be seen as a part of intangible culinary heritage; they construct the shared image of national cuisine (Keating, 2022, p. 85-86).

Akunna’s uncle does not behave as an outsider. He presents the hot dog as a sign of a “national cuisine” that, even though it seems strange to Akunna, it is familiar to himself. His attitude illustrates the analysis of Santhiya (2019), who claims that

Power and sense of superiority get glued to the food and eating habits of the colonizers. In the process of mimicking the colonizers, who are believed to be superior to them in every way, the colonized renounce the native food that is exclusive to their bio region (Santhiya, 2019, p. 73).

Akunna, on the other hand, does not enjoy the taste of that hot dog. To her, America itself, or at least eating what America represents, seems nauseous at first sight. The hot dog, as an introduction to America, represents a commensal ritual in which the narrator leaves her country behind. This cultural shock is a recurrent in Adichie’s literature, because

The characters all experience initial shock as they are confronted with the stark differences between their original culture and the host culture, and thus have to transition beyond that initial stage of shock to an active negotiation with the dominant culture in a quest for survival (Ifeoluwa Mary, 2022, p. 36).

In a few lines, the narrative brings a brutal contrast: “Then he told you how the neighbors said, a few months after he moved into his house, that the squirrels had started to disappear. They had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals” (Adichie, 2009, p. 116). According to Americans, hot dogs with yellow mustard seem civilized, but supposedly eating wild animals does not.

After being sexually assaulted by her uncle, Akunna decides to leave. In Connecticut, she misses the plantains and dried fish sold by her aunts back in Nigeria and wants to write to her family to tell about “the way people left so much food on their plates” (Adichie, 2009, p. 118), which seems strange to her while working at a restaurant.

Food leftovers, here, are more than a simple detail of Akunna’s routine at work. They become a cultural clash which is so shocking that she feels the need to write a letter to her family about it. For those people in America, leaving food on their plates is a common manner. It would not be considered impolite or offensive. The excerpt illustrates how “food is not only about what we eat but also about how we eat, in terms of presentation and with regard to the physical act of eating, which in turn includes manners and utensils” (Mahar, 2010, p. 7).

All these mentions exemplify how food may be used to express different feelings such as nostalgia for the narrator’s own culture and disapproval, or even sadness at the food waste, which makes the narrator perceive the dollar bills left on the plates as “an offering, expiation for the wasted food” (Adichie, 2009, p. 118).

The luck represented by the American visa lottery becomes frustration when she sees herself in a tiny room where she feels invisible. At night, she also feels something around her neck, trying to choke her before sleeping, like an anxiety attack, an excerpt that gives the short-story its title, and also names the book itself. As other Adichie’s characters, Akunna suffers because “Nigeria exists in their consciousness as stored memories which shape their responses to the new space” (Ngongkum, 2014, p. 91).

Another interesting mention of food may be read when Akunna meets a young white man at the restaurant. His eyes remind her of extra-virgin olive oil, “the only thing you loved, truly loved, in America” (Adichie, 2009, p. 121). In fact, this association is not a coincidence: extra-virgin olive oil is the only thing she loves; the man who has no name is the only person to whom she develops a deeper emotional bond. All her other affections are far from there, back in Nigeria.

Akunna may be defined as a transnational or postcolonial figure. She is Nigerian, lives in America and goes to Chinese restaurants with her boyfriend, who has traveled to Asia and buys her a Mexican scarf. The narrative flows through these different backgrounds, weaving intercultural elements while it describes the narrator's feelings of missing her own family and culture and trying to adapt to a culture where she does not belong or feel comfortable. It illustrates the idea of Ngongkum (2014), according to whom

These migrants, who are now a reality of the African landscape, have become emblematic figures of our postcolonial experience. Their very existence, as transnational subjects, problematises our understanding of concepts such as home and identity (Ngongkum, 2014, p. 78).

The relationship Akunna develops with the young white man is an example of her internal conflict between adaptation and discomfort. As a couple, they used to cause strange reactions in other people, because of “the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice” (Adichie, 2009, p. 125).

Akunna tries to bring this man closer to her own culture. To the reader, it may suggest a romantic scene: he had traveled to some African countries before meeting her and knows more about them than other Americans. However, she perceives how exotic these places seem to him. Then, when she cooks typical dishes from her country, *garri*¹ and *onugbu*² soup, the man throws up in the sink. As she felt nauseous about the hot dog, he also could not swallow the food she had prepared.

Food, in both excerpts, is taken as a metaphor of a postcolonial context. The differences between the couple's eating habits illustrate how different they are as individuals, including their position in social strata. In the narrative, this metaphor becomes meaningful because “Food and eating habits are not simply an act of pleasurable consumption but they hold within them, a legacy of power incorporated by the colonial rule” (Santhiya, 2019, p. 73).

After the man could not share her meals, Akunna decides to cook the soup with meat again. The man did not eat meat. He believes that animals, while being killed, “released fear toxins” (Adichie, 2009, p. 123). The excerpt also demonstrates his social privileges: he was able to choose what he would eat or not. Akunna did not have many

¹ Cassava flour, usually toasted and granulated.

² Typical Nigerian soup made from bitter leaf, meat, fish, crayfish, and spices, known for its nutritious and medicinal properties.

choices. This is the reason why she did not tell him that her mother cooked with *dawadawa*³ cubes containing monosodium glutamate.

The man would criticize it, possibly preferring natural spices. However, in Akunna's house, they could not afford what could be considered gourmet spices such as thyme and curry. They were too expensive. All these issues about their eating habits exemplify the social differences between the narrator and the man who seems to be her boyfriend.

His social privileges are also explored in other parts of the narrative, such as the one in which he tells her that he stopped studying for two years to discover himself, or the one in which he buys her presents that were only decorative, not useful in a practical way. He buys her a beautiful shiny rock, but Akunna says that the rock would work if she could use it to grind things.

Akunna reads a letter from her family and discovers that her father had died five months before. The letter does not offer many details about the death or the funeral, but there is one more mention of food: "They had used some of the money you sent to give him a good funeral: They killed a goat for the guests and buried him in a good coffin" (Adichie, 2009, p. 127).

Akunna becomes sorrowful for her father's loss. The letter describes briefly how the money she sent for her family was useful for the funeral expenses. Serving a goat for the guests, as well as burying her father in a "good coffin" are signs that she could provide some dignity for those rites.

The scene becomes deeper if the reader remembers that Akunna's father had been humiliated by a wealthy man during a car crash before she left Nigeria. In the scene, previously described by Akunna, her father pleaded while the wealthy man enjoyed the performance. Her father, in her words, "was just like the pigs that wallowed in the marshes around the market" (Adichie, 2009, p. 122).

Akunna refused to look at her father after he came back to their car. The humiliation affected not only her father, but also herself. Once her father was dead, though, the money she sent was enough to serve a goat for the guests. Considering this context, the goat, as a funeral meal, represents a commensal ritual in which the family honored the man who had passed away. The dignity, which was many times denied while

³ A flavoring made from fermented seeds of locust bean (*Parkia biglobosa*), commonly used to prepare soups and stews.

her father was alive, could be afforded by Akunna after his death. The excerpt illustrates the thoughts of Stajcic (2013), who states that

There is no closer relationship than the one with the family, and food plays a large part in defining family roles, rules, and traditions. It helps us to discover attitudes, practices, and rituals surrounding food, it sheds light on our most basic beliefs about ourselves and others (Stajcic, 2013, p. 5).

As an immigrant, Akunna could not be with her family while grieving for their loss. However, she could send money and help effectively while her family truly needed it. Adichie's storytelling suggests this internal conflict and describes it as physical discomfort, pain and a need to come back to her home country.

To Akunna, providing a goat as a meal during her father's funeral was not enough. She knows that she could not return to her life as it existed before, once her father had passed away. Nevertheless, she misses her family and needs to share her grief with them. When Akunna faces the dilemma of choosing between a relationship and the need of experiencing a painful loss with her family, she decides to leave.

The Thing Around Your Neck ends while Akunna's boyfriend drives her to the airport and asks her if she would come back, but she does not answer. She just hugs him and lets him go. The abrupt ending, without an answer about that relationship, had been suggested before, when Akunna opened a fortune cookie at a Chinese restaurant: "The next day, he took you to dinner at Chang's and your fortune cookie had two strips of paper. Both of them were blank." (Adichie, 2009, p. 121).

A fortune cookie, according to the tradition, could have brought her some advice about danger, a hopeful note or even a promise of good news, but Akunna does not have a single clue about her future. Two unusual blank strips of paper announce that the girl was not aware of her own destiny. Once more, as it happens in other excerpts of the short story, food accentuates feelings. Here, it represents doubt and contrast: everyone receives a message from a fortune cookie, but Akunna does not. The doubt remains after the narrative ends.

Through the whole story, food emphasizes differences between different cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Considering the dynamics in the relationship between Akunna and her boyfriend, we perceive that it reinforces Akunna's discomfort while perceiving that they did not share the same values. As a literary device, it is effective because

Food is sometimes present simply as what gets eaten but more often [...] it functions as a conduit for something else, signalling wealth or poverty, cultural difference or a sense of belonging, status and identity in terms of rank, gender and moral standing, and sometimes (but never simply) fashion (Fitzpatrick; Boyce, 2017, p. 3).

While discussing Literature's fascination with food and eating relations, Goldstein (2018) claims that food works as a social marker in a literary text. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, while eating meat sounds cruel to Akunna's boyfriend, supposedly releasing toxins of fear, in her practices, cooking soup with meat means feeling at home at least for a meal; serving a goat in her father's funeral means providing him dignity.

These are not opposite views of meat itself; they express opposite identities. Adichie's storytelling is purposeful while discussing eating habits because "imaginative writing uses these boundaries to contrast the movement of characters through an arc from exclusion to inclusion or vice versa" (Goldstein, 2018, p. 48).

The Thing Around Your Neck is a narrative in which complex postcolonial relations are portrayed through everyday details in the narrator's life. Those details include meals and cooking practices, especially because her sense of belonging and her perception of acceptance embrace commensal rituals. Having a cross-cultural identity, Akunna tastes both food from Nigeria and America, because experiencing life as an immigrant means experiencing their food. In a broader view, mentions to food illustrate economic, political and gender relations that affect Akunna's adaptation to life in America as an immigrant.

In Literature, paraphrasing the title of another Adichie's short story, we could say that even a private experience offers more than a simple view of facts or relations. The adaptation of a young Nigerian girl to life in America reveals more than a personal description. It offers a singular perspective of a broader postcolonial context.

5. A tasteful ending?

As a literary device, food is a significant feature and a cultural marker through which complex feelings such as bother, distrust, joy or sadness are materialized. It also expresses intricate bonds between communities and nations. Food not only improves the realism of a literary text, but it is mentioned and described for symbolic purposes. It

conveys messages and meanings, creating mental images and triggering reactions in readers.

As an example, food and commensality as features to reinforce cultural identities are recurrent themes that arise from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's literature. In the short story *The Thing around Your Neck*, as well as in other narratives from the homonymous book, food is an important literary device. Akunna, the narrator and main character of the story, mentions recipes, spices and table manners while facing hard experiences of cultural clash.

Akunna, as other characters in Adichie's storytelling, develops a cross-cultural identity while eating and swallowing foreign dishes. In Adichie's narratives about immigration, food is a metaphor for the adaptation to a new culture. Her characters interact with those who live near them, but keep their traditions as a way to feel closer to their native cultures. Food is meaningful as a sign of both belonging and rejection.

In many excerpts of the mentioned narrative, food plays a prominent role. The author explores its cultural significance, its connection to memory, its representation of identity, and its sensory and symbolic dimensions. In Adichie's literature, cultural identity is often related to experiences in the kitchen or around a table, which makes her storytelling an interesting source to analyze food as a sign, as stated by Barthes (2013).

It is possible because, as discussed, food is not only a biological necessity but also a significant aspect of social interaction. Not only the food itself, but also the ingredients used to prepare it, as well as recipes, table manners and commensal rituals communicate meanings. Through these elements, we may understand the formation of memories, nostalgia, and the expressions of different cultural backgrounds. Finally, as a synthesis, *The Thing Around Your Neck* presents food as a sign of social relationships and power dynamics in a postcolonial world.

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