

R.15

Literature – Short stories, fables and fairy tales

Ch. N. Adichie: “The Thing Around Your Neck” – Analysing short story

Xenia Riedl



© RAABE 2024

© lechatnoir/E+

Die Unterrichtseinheit erkundet moderne nigerianische Literatur anhand von Ch. N. Adichies Kurzgeschichte „The Thing Around Your Neck“. Sie untersucht Nigerias gesellschaftliche Situation, das Thema Einwanderung, den amerikanischen Traum und kulturelle Auseinandersetzungen. Durch vielfältige Methoden und Aktivitäten wird die Einheit abwechslungsreich und ansprechend gestaltet. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler entwickeln ihre Leseverstehenskompetenz und Kommunikations- und Recherchefähigkeiten, während sie ihr interkulturelles Verständnis und ihre Medienkompetenz ausbauen.

COMPETENCES

Competences:	1. Reading: understanding literary texts and analysing their linguistic and stylistic features; 2. Speaking: participating in complex conversations and discussions; 3. Writing: writing argumentative and analytical texts; mediating between German and English; 4. Learning: understanding authentic listening materials
Methods:	discussion, listening/viewing comprehension, mediating, reading comprehension, research role play, text analysis, (creative) writing
Themes:	analysis of a short story, Nigeria and a special situation, immigration, the American Dream, intercultural aspects, modern Nigerian literature

Facts

Nigeria is famous for its diverse literary scene, which reflects the country's cultural heritage, complex history and social reality. Among the many authors of Nigerian descent, three names are often mentioned: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have competed for the title of being "the greatest African writer". Achebe (1930–2013), whose novel "Things Fall Apart" (1958) depicts the effects of British colonial rule on Nigeria, can be called "the father of modern African literature" (Nadine Gordimer). Soyinka (1934), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, is a dramatist and poet as well as a political activist, who combines satire and criticism of post-colonial African governments and politics.

Nigerian American Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the most prominent of a younger generation of writers. Born on 15 September 1977, she grew up in the university town of Nnukka, where her father worked as a professor of statistics and her mother as the first female registrar. Adichie began to study medicine and pharmacy in Nigeria, but then moved to the USA to concentrate on writing. Her first novel, "Purple Hibiscus", about a girl growing up in a disintegrating family was nominated for the Booker Prize in 2004 and won her instant recognition. The first sentence of the novel ("Things started to fall apart at home.") is an

intentional allusion and tribute to Adichie's idol Chinua Achebe. "Half of a Yellow Sun" (2006) deals with Nigeria's sufferings during the Biafran War, and "Americanah" (2013) depicts the troubles of Nigerian immigrants in the USA and Great Britain. In addition to her novels, Adichie has published short stories and essays and delivered two famous TED talks. In 2013, Beyoncé sampled part of her speech on feminism in the song "Flawless". In recent years, Adichie has become the centre of a controversy over gender issues and freedom of speech. All these activities have made the author a prominent voice on issues such as African literature and identity, feminism, LGBT rights and cancel culture.

The short story "The Thing Around Your Neck" talks about Akunna, a naive 22-year-old girl from Lagos/Nigeria, who wins a green card in the American visa lottery and moves to the USA to realise the American Dream, for herself and for her family. Soon she learns that America means "give-and-take" and is confronted with the dark sides of immigrant life in the USA: fellow students at college, who treat her like an exotic animal, an abusive "uncle", a badly paid job in a restaurant in the middle of nowhere, anonymity and loneliness, and finally an American boyfriend who tries hard, but cannot really understand her. So, when a letter from her mother tells Akunna about her father's death, she decides to return to Nigeria.

Like all Adichie's works, "The Thing Around Your Neck" shows her talent as a storyteller. Apart from the central plot, little episodes depicting Akunna's former life in Nigeria and her experiences in the USA illustrate the differences between the two countries. Throughout the text, Adichie presents a critical view of life in the USA. The protagonist experiences prejudice and discrimination because of her skin colour, origin, gender and social status. She misses her extended family, her close-knit community in Lagos and, like many of the Nigerian characters in Adichie's stories, she cannot be truly happy in her new "home" country.

Notes on the material

The teaching unit aims at

- introducing students to one of the most prominent voices of African literature today;
- confronting students with a critical view on American/European attitudes and lifestyle from an African perspective;
- making students aware of the importance of informed judgment and the dangers of one-sided, preconceived opinions;
- encouraging students to reconsider their views and discuss them with their classmates.

Tasks relating to Adichie's story "The Thing Around Your Neck" form the core of the unit. The analysis of the short story is supplemented by additional material about Nigeria, the author of the story and recent developments in Nigerian literature.

Topic 1 introduces students to the country of Nigeria and its special situation. M 1 shows three photos taken in the city of Lagos. Describing and analysing the pictures will offer students a first impression of the protagonist's background. To gain a deeper understanding of Nigeria, students will work in groups to research four crucial aspects of the country: its ethnic diversity, religion, economy and current political issues. With this background information, they define the push and pull factors leading to migration from Nigeria to the USA and Europe.

Topic 2 deals with central aspects of the short story. In preparation for reading the text (M 2), students activate their prior knowledge about the American Dream. M 3 guides students step by step through the main part of the story, which shows Akunna's hope and her disillusionment with the American Dream. The tasks use a sentence completion exercise to check students' understanding of the characters' motives and an analysis of the narrative perspective and language of the text. As a homework assignment, students read the whole story and write a short summary of the plot. M 4 contrasts Akunna's initial isolation and despair with her growing interest in the young man, who appears to be different from the average American. To practice their communication skills, students will role-play a conversation between Akunna and her boss Juan. Further tasks include writing a profile of the young American and composing a diary entry describing the first date from Akunna's point of view. It explores how cultural and social differences strain the relationship, leading to growing conflict between the young people. A topic web helps students to get an overview of different aspects of cultural diversity. In groups, they analyse four episodes from the text, which illustrate the culture clash between Akunna and her boyfriend: "The story of the

car accident", "African food", "The girlfriend in Shanghai" and "Mystifying presents". Finally, a character analysis of the protagonist traces her personal development since her arrival in the USA. M 6 looks at the ending of the story. The tasks include a true/false exercise to check understanding and a four-corners activity that enables students to discuss their opinions about the future of the protagonist. A creative writing exercise uses these ideas to add a new ending, an epilogue, to the story.

Topic 3 introduces students to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and other representatives of modern Nigerian literature. Students analyse a cover of the feminist magazine Ms., which presents Adichie as a "Feminist storyteller". Then, they watch an excerpt from the famous TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (M 7). Adichie's biography, which contradicts the "single story" about Africa, clearly shows the problems of stereotyping. Taking a close look at the "danger of the single story", students develop strategies to avoid it. M 8 offers the text of an article from Deutsche Welle in German, which presents the latest developments in Nigerian literature. Students are asked to imagine that they have to inform an English-speaking group about this text and write a summarising English version. In addition to the mediation task, the information given in the text can be used as basis for further activities, like research on the Nigerian authors mentioned in the text and the study/presentation of one of their short stories.

Useful websites

About Nigeria:

- ▶ <https://www.britannica.com/place/nigeria>
- ▶ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/nigeria-population>
- ▶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview>
- ▶ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/nigeria/>

About Nigerian literature and authors:

- ▶ <https://www.chimamanda.com/>
- ▶ <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/the-four-generations-nigerian-literature-the-booker-prize-and-beyond>
- ▶ <http://www.ayobamiadebayo.com/about-ayobami/>
- ▶ <https://www.larimah.com/>
- ▶ <https://www.theonlytemioh.com/>

[last accesses: 08/05/2024]

Overview

Topic 1: From Nigeria to the USA

M 1 Worksheet – Discovering Nigeria

Topic 2: Ch. N. Adichie: "The Thing Around Your Neck"

M 2 Ch. N. Adichie: "The Thing Around Your Neck"

M 3 Worksheet – Immigrant life in the USA

M 4 Worksheet – A different type of American?

M 5 Worksheet – Cultural and social differences

M 6 Worksheet – The end of the relationship

Topic 3: Nigerian literature

M 7 Worksheet – Ch. N. Adichie: "The Danger of a Single Story"

M 8 Worksheet – Mediation

Topic 1: From Nigeria to the USA

Worksheet – Discovering Nigeria

These three photos capture the spirit of Lagos – Nigeria's megacity.



© Артём Манухов/Adobe Stock



© peeterv/iStock/Getty Images Plus



© Terver/Adobe Stock

Working with the pictures



3. Describe the pictures from Lagos, an African city of more than 20 million inhabitants. Imagine what life is like in a megacity like this.

Research



4. Work in small groups. Choose one of the following aspects of Nigerian society:
 - different ethnic groups
 - religious conflicts
 - economic issues
 - political issues
 Do internet research on the topic. Make notes and then report back to the class.

Organising your findings



5. Using the information you have learned about Nigeria, identify reasons why people might choose to leave for the USA or Europe. Consider push and pull factors.



Topic 2: "The Thing Around Your Neck" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Short story: "The Thing Around Your Neck"

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans.

- 5 They trooped into the room in Lagos where you lived with your father and mother and three siblings, leaning against the unpaired walls because there weren't enough chairs to go round, to say goodbye in loud voices and tell you with lowered voices what they wanted you to spend them. In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the things they
- 10 wanted were minor – handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes. You said okay, no problem.

Your uncle in America, who had put in the names of all your family members for the American visa lottery, said you could live with him until you got on your feet. He picked you up at the airport and bought you a big hot dog with yellow mustard that had created you. Introduction to America, he said with a laugh. He lived in a small white town in Maine, in a thirty-year-old house by a lake. He told you that the company he worked for had offered him a few thousand more than the average salary plus stock options because they were desperately trying to look diverse. They included a photo

20 of him in every brochure, even those that had nothing to do with his unit. He laughed and said the town was good, was worth living in an all-white town even though his wife had to drive a car to find a hair salon that did black hair. The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give-and-take. You gave up a lot but you gained a lot, too.

- 25 He showed you how to apply for a cashier job in the gas station on Main Street and he enrolled you in a community college, where the girls had thick thighs and wore bright-red nail polish, and self-tanner that made them look orange. They asked where you learned to speak English and if you had real house money in Africa. If you'd seen a car before you came to America.
- 30 They gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out the braids? They wanted to know. All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb? You smiled tightly when they asked those questions. Your uncle told you to expect it; a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, he called it. Then he told you how the neighbors said, a few months after he moved into
- 35 his house, that the squirrels had started to disappear. They had heard that Africans ate all kinds of wild animals.

You laughed with your uncle and you felt at home in his house; his wife called you *nwanne*, sister, and his two school-age children called you Auntie.

Worksheet – Immigrant life in the USA

M 3

Pre-reading activity

1. Explain your understanding of the American Dream.



Reading comprehension

2. Read the first paragraph of "The Thing Around Your Neck". Analyse the narrator's perspective. Show how the author attracts the reader's attention with the first sentence.
3. Read the first part of the story (ll. 1–113). Complete the sentences giving reasons for what happens in the story. Then check your results with a partner.
 - e) Akunna can migrate to the USA because ...
 - f) Her Nigerian relatives ask her to send presents because ...
 - g) Akunna's uncle likes his life in the USA because ...
 - h) The American girls at college ask a lot of annoying questions because ...
 - i) At first, Akunna feels at home at her uncle's house because ...
 - j) But then the young woman leaves because ...
 - k) In Connecticut, she cannot go to the ... because ...
 - l) Akunna does not write letters to her parents because ...
4. Sum up the differences between the Nigerian and American way of life Akunna notices while living in Connecticut (ll. 63ff.).



Working with the language

5. Explain the meaning and function of the images describing Akunna's situation in Connecticut (ll. 103–109).
6. Look at the picture and make a list of words to describe Akunna's feelings. Then share your list with your partner.



© alvarez/E



Homework: The plot of the story

7. Read the whole story and write a summary of the plot in about 100 words.



Topic 3: Nigerian Literature

M 7 Worksheet – Ch. Adichie: "The Danger of a Single Story"

Pre-viewing task



1. Look at the cover photo of the women's magazine Ms., which shows Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Describe how she is presented, and which aspects of her personality are highlighted.



© Feminist Majority Foundation

Working with the video



2. In 2009, Ch. N. Adichie held a famous speech at the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference where experts from many different fields present innovative ideas every year. Look at the gap text and listen to the first part of the speech (00:00–02:47 "… a single story of what books are.") <https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-the-danger-of-a-single-story>.

Video TED Talk: Ch. N. Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story"

<https://raabe.click/ted-Adichie>



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was an _____ reader. As a small child, she only _____ and _____ books. When she began to write stories, all her characters were _____ and had _____. She was convinced that books had to have _____ in them. Only later, she discovered African books. There were not many of them and they were not _____. But these books told her different stories, so she realised that African girls could also _____ in literature.

Mehr Materialien für Ihren Unterricht mit RAAbits Online

Unterricht abwechslungsreicher, aktueller sowie nach Lehrplan gestalten – und dabei Zeit sparen.
Fertig ausgearbeitet für über 20 verschiedene Fächer, von der Grundschule bis zum Abitur: Mit RAAbits Online stehen redaktionell geprüfte, hochwertige Materialien zur Verfügung, die sofort einsetz- und editierbar sind.

- ✓ Zugriff auf bis zu **400 Unterrichtseinheiten** pro Fach
- ✓ Didaktisch-methodisch und **fachlich geprüfte Unterrichtseinheiten**
- ✓ Materialien als **PDF oder Word** herunterladen und individuell anpassen
- ✓ Interaktive und multimediale Lerneinheiten
- ✓ Fortlaufend **neues Material** zu aktuellen Themen



Testen Sie RAAbits Online
14 Tage lang kostenlos!

www.raabits.de

