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## Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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*[W]e do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored by diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.*  
--Michel Foucault "Of Other Spaces"

In the last few years, literary studies have witnessed a revival of interest in the notions of space and place and the way in which they inform and dictate human life, society, culture and gender relations, as well as knowledge production and power structures. A paradigm shift in the meaning of space took place with what is often referred to as "human geography" and geocriticism. A revolutionary figure, French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) laid the foundation for Marxist spatial theory, upon which other notable thinkers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja built. Lefebvre notes in his pioneering book *The Production of Space* (first published in French in 1974 and in English in 1991): "the word 'space' had a strictly geometrical meaning; the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area. . . . To speak of 'social space', therefore, would have sounded strange" (1). It is to Lefebvre that we owe the first detailed discussion of space as a social product, or a complex construct which affects spatial practices and perceptions.<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter, titled "Plan of the Present Work," he even criticizes epistemologico-philosophical thinking and semiology for failing "to furnish the basis for" what he calls the science of space without which we lack "knowledge of space" (7).

Another influential figure regarding the notions of space, place, spatiality and site is French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). In his "Of Other Spaces," a 1967 lecture published in 1984, he brings up his notion of heterotopias, which is mainly based on the existence of many spaces that can sometimes be juxtaposed and combined in one site. He remarks that "we do not live in a homogenous and empty space. . . . The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space" (3). As indicated in the epigraph above, he further explains his statement by speaking of the set of relations that defines space and the six principles of heterotopias.

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This paper will apply Lefebvre's social space and Foucault's heterotopology to its reading and analysis of the settings of *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), a collection of twelve short stories by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977- ). The collection presents stories of women residing in different spaces—domestic, hybrid, border, and marginal—that color and shape their lives and destinies. These women live, according to John Madera, “between worlds, struggling with identity, with mapping, navigating, and trespassing boundaries.” “They all,” to quote Adichie, “negotiate a new place” (interview). This paper will focus mainly on three of these stories whose diverse spaces reflect the interrelation between gender, race, place, space, and power. Cross reference will also be made to a similar short story from Arabic literature.

### **Lefebvre's Social Space and Foucault's Heterotopia**

Lefebvre was a prolific thinker who produced many books and articles that were engaged with different themes, a major one was the nature of urbanization. Out of this came his *Production of Space*. The book's main contribution is his discussion of a new kind of space which he calls “differential space” that “accentuates differences” in contrast with the homogeneity of abstract space (52) and his shifting of the focus of study to the “processes of . . . [space's] production; the embrace of the multiplicity of spaces that are socially produced and made productive in social practices; and . . . the contradictory, conflictual, and, ultimately, political character of the processes of production of space” (Stanek ix). In the Marxian context, this socially produced space is affected by the state and by an important aspect of capitalism: hegemony. Thus it is directed by a hegemonic class that assumes dominance (Lefebvre 10). Lefebvre remarks: “(Social) space is a (social) product . . . the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power. . . .” (26).<sup>2</sup>

He makes it clear that from the early history of the ancient world up till the modern time every society produces its own space. Thus each society has its own “spatial practice: it [has] forged its own—appropriated—space” (31). This social space contains two sets of strongly interrelated or interlocking relations, those of production and reproduction. These relations have to do with the way labor is divided and organized in the form of “hierarchical social functions,” with the reproduction of labor power or the working class as well as with the biophysiological relations between the sexes along with the unit of the family (32). Lefebvre's long and interdisciplinary book discusses different issues and themes while making cross reference to philosophy, history, literature, architecture, the relationship between towns and cities and their territorial dependencies, and the

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history of the decline and rise of old and new cities/spaces. But the main notions which will be applied to the stories examined by this paper are his definition of social space (as defined in the above remark), his “conceptual triad” or “three concepts of spatial practice, representation of space and representational space,” (33, 38-9) as well as his discussion of dominated, dominant and appropriated space.

The first concept, spatial practice, means how a certain space is used in a specific way that defines and constitutes it; this happens through an interaction between the “subjects and their space and surroundings” (16, 18). Hence, spatial practice, he remarks, embodies a close relation between everyday or routine reality and urban reality, by which he means the routes and networks connecting “the places set aside for work, ‘private’ life and leisure” (38). Out of this interaction or connection a system emerges. Therefore, Lefebvre notes that spatial practice safeguards “continuity and some degree of cohesion,” which, in regard to social space and the relationship of every member of any society to that space, “implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance” (33). But most importantly, the spatial practice of any society, which embraces relations of production and reproduction, and which is “governed by different conceptual determinations” affects it greatly as it shapes and colors it (33, 419). It actually “secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it” (38).

Representation of space, according to Lefebvre, refers to the way in which space is conceived of or conceptualized by “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers . . . all of whom identify what is *lived* and what is *perceived* with what is *conceived*. . . . This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (38-39, italics mine). The representations of space take the form of maps, plans or any other designs that can change over time with the change of ideologies. Hence, Lefebvre, remarks that representations of space are about the history of ideologies (116).

The last concept, representational space, signifies space as “directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols. . . .” (39) It is the space of “inhabitants” and “users,” as well as some artists, writers and philosophers. Lefebvre describes it as “the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (39). He sees the slogans of protest that flooded the streets of Paris in May 1968 as symbolic manifestation of this dimension of space. We can look at this concept as denoting the space where protests, initiatives and social movements form. Lefebvre describes these three concepts or dimensions which constitute

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space as the “triad of the perceived, the conceived and the lived” and he asserts the interconnectedness of the three and the existence of a dialectical relationship among them (39). In other words, they refer to the physical space as we perceive or see it, to the mental space as we think of it, and to the actually lived social space with its symbols and idealized forms.<sup>3</sup>

By “dominated (and dominant) space,” Lefebvre means “space transformed—and mediated—by technology, by practice” (164). He gives examples of how space has been dominated from the early history to the modern time and links the origins of the dominance or the domination of space (which has its deep roots in history) to those of political power. Hence, “Military architecture, fortifications and ramparts, dams and irrigation systems” as well as “motorway[s] which brutalize the countryside and the land, slicing through space like a great knife” are examples of the dominated space, which he describes as “usually closed, sterilized, emptied out” (164-65). However, Lefebvre argues that the concept of the dominated/dominant space is not fully understood except when contrasted with, what he calls “the opposite and inseparable concept of *appropriation*” (165). He notes that we can apply this latter concept to a natural space that has been changed or modified to meet the needs and possibilities of a certain group (165). Lefebvre theorizes that dominated and appropriated space should, ideally, be combined; however, “history—which is to say the history of accumulation—is also the history of their separation and mutual antagonism. The winner in this contest, moreover, has been domination” (166). Hence, his concern with getting rid of domination and hegemony.

I have to note that in his detailed discussion of space and its related concepts and realms, Lefebvre’s focus was on the processes of producing space, its dimensions and notions in an attempt to come out with a knowledge that helps us to understand it better and alter the power structure. He might have never had literary analysis in mind, albeit that he speaks of space as portrayed by writers such as Victor Hugo and remarks that “any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about” (15). Still I am going to take the liberty in applying Lefebvre’s concepts and rather *appropriating* them (without diverting very much from his original meaning) to my discussion and analysis of Adichie’s stories whose spaces, I believe, are best understood and described through his notions of space.

Though much shorter than Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* and hence more limited in its ideas, Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces” has common themes with Lefebvre in regard to the concept of space, knowledge and hegemony. In his lecture, Foucault, too, highlights the importance of space, hints briefly at its

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history in Western experience, starting from the Middle Ages until our modern time, speaks of internal and external space and discusses the notions of utopias and heterotopias. He does not actually give a clear definition of heterotopia, but rather explains it and attributes certain principles to it.

Foucault asserts that our present age is one of simultaneity, juxtaposition, the near and far, the side-by-side and the dispersed, but it “will perhaps be above all the epoch of space” (1). Besides, the anxiety of our age has mainly to do with space rather than time (2). Speaking of the internal space, he relates it to the sacred and concludes that our modern life may still be controlled by certain oppositions which “remain inviolable” because we do not yet have the courage to break them down whether theoretically or practically. Thus, we have not yet succeeded in reaching what he calls “the point of a practical desanctification of space” (2).

Regarding external space, Foucault describes it as heterogeneous and defined by a cluster of relations which exist among sites and which we need to learn. Thus, we can understand and describe, for example, sites of transportation, of temporary relaxation and closed or semi-closed sites of rest via the network of relations defining them (2, 3). However, his main interest lies in two types of spaces which are somehow related to all the other spaces: these are utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are unreal, imaginary spaces which present society in a “perfected” way, whereas heterotopias are real places which he describes as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites . . . are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). I believe with other scholars that heterotopias can thus be interpreted as “counter-hegemonic spaces that exist apart from ‘central’ spaces that are seen to represent the social order” (Hetherington 21 qtd. in Topinka 59). Therefore, Topinka also views heterotopias as spaces offering us “an alternate space of ordering” and I would add reordering other spaces, especially the central spaces, while “paradoxically remaining both separate from and connected to” them (55). This is one way of resisting hegemony and disrupting the received and accepted knowledge. In order for this to happen, Foucault suggests a certain systematic description, heterotopology, which he believes would help us read, study and analyze these different spaces in any society (4).

He ascribes six principles to heterotopias. The first one indicates that heterotopias exist in every culture and assume different forms (4). Here he classifies two categories: crisis heterotopias, which are related to “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals . . . in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.” (4) They mainly exist in what he calls the primitive societies, whereas “[i]n our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be

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found” and they are replaced by what he terms “heterotopias of deviation” (4, 5). The second principle indicates that with the passage of time a society can change the function of its existing heterotopia. As an example he takes the cemetery which until the end of the 18th century was located in the church and the heart of the city, but then moved to its suburbs. Hence, it would not any more represent “the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place” (6).

The third principle describes heterotopia as “juxtaposing” in one single real place several incompatible spaces and sites; and the example he gives is that of the theater which brings different worlds and places on stage (6). In the fourth principle, Foucault links heterotopias with slices in time, which he terms heterochronies. This requires that we have “a sort of absolute break with . . . [our] traditional time” (6). Within this principle he speaks of two types of heterotopias, one of “accumulating time,” as we see in museums and libraries, and the second of temporary and fleeting time, as is the case in the festival and the vacation villages (7).

The fifth principle suggests that heterotopias assume a system of opening and closing, which makes them isolated and also penetrable to other sites; still they are not freely accessible to all people (7). With this principle, we can get access to the heterotopic site either through a compulsory entry (as is the case when entering a prison) or through performing certain rites and purifications which are “partly religious and partly hygienic” (7). This principle is related to the last trait which gives heterotopias a function in relation to all the other remaining spaces, such as those of power (see Topinka 60). This function, explains Foucault, reveals itself in two extreme roles: either to create a space of illusion (as is the case of brothels) or one of compensation, a meticulous and well—arranged space unlike ours which is messy and ill constructed (early Puritan and Jesuit colonies in North and South America are good examples) (8).<sup>4</sup>

This previous survey of both Lefebvre’s and Foucault’s discussion of space reveals that they share the same belief: that space is not an abstract void, but rather a product that denies homogeneity and which is shaped by different relations. Their notions, though coming from the western world, or what is debatably called first-world thinkers, can be applied, as I will show, to the post-colonial settings of Adichie’s stories. In fact, Lefebvre in his discussion of space confirms the fact that every society, regardless of time (ancient or modern) and place (anywhere in the world,) produces its own space (31). He explains this statement with reference to “the city of the ancient world” and the “Asiatic mode of production, its space, its towns or the relationship it embodies” (31). He even refers to magic and sorcery

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as having spaces of their own. Hence, in my examination of each of Adichie's different settings, the focus will be on how each space embraces a multiplicity of spaces, how it is socially produced and how it fits in some of the principles of heterotopias. I will also look into the contrast discussed by Foucault between utopias and heterotopias, which one can relate to Lefebvre's triad of the lived on one hand and the perceived and the conceived on the other one. "This suggests," to quote Lefebvre, "a possible criterion for distinguishing between ideology and practice as well as between ideology and knowledge (or, otherwise stated, for distinguishing between the lived on the one hand and the perceived and the conceived on the other, and for discerning their interrelationship, their oppositions and dispositions, and what they reveal versus what they conceal)" (53). In other words, I will show the interconnection and the oppositions existing among the various spaces in Adichie's stories as well as the way they are actually lived versus the way they are thought of.

### **Cell One**

"Cell One" is the first story of the collection. It is mainly about Nnamabia, the spoiled son of a university professor. The story traces his development from an irresponsible person into a mature young man who is even willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of an unjustly treated old man. The point of transformation takes place when he is arrested in a Nigerian prison and witnesses the corruption and brutality of the policemen. The story is narrated by his nameless younger sister. "Cell One" presents two major settings: the first one occupies the first half of the story, taking place in Nsukka campus, a "slow insular campus" in a "slower more insular town" (10). The second one mostly lies in prison.

The first space, which I am concerned with, embraces a multiplicity of spaces. It exemplifies Lefebvre's notion of social space as a social product which serves as a tool of thought and action, and a means of control, domination and power (26). This space includes the house of the protagonist and those of other professors, as well as the university where he and his colleagues study and where his father works. There are also some places of entertainment, such as the pub where Nnamabia is arrested. We can easily *conceive* that space and visualize a map of it. It seems as a secluded space that fits in what Lefebvre calls abstract space because it is coloured by some sort of homogeneity, being mostly occupied by subjects/users (inhabitants, workers and students who belong to the middle upper class) and is kept away from the outer setting of the town. It is a product of these male professors' somehow arrogant and self-deceptive attitude and values. This is evident when, despite their full awareness of the thefts committed by their sons, they turn a blind eye and complain of the "riffraff from town coming onto their

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*sacred campus to steal*" (5 italics mine). In other words, they *perceive* their setting as a privileged and sanctified one in contrast with the commonplace setting of the town inhabited by people inferior to them.

Consequently, they set their values or certain codes of attitude through which they protect their thieving children and keep anyone from trespassing their sacred setting. Hence, they never report these thefts to keep the police away. Even then, they know very well "the police superintendent" and their powerful connection makes the place "manageable" (11). We see in the first setting of the story a "dominated" space and we learn of the cluster of relations defining it. This brings Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice which is here decided by the patriarchal force and hence marginalizes women. This practice secretes the space, masters and appropriates it (Lefebvre 38). However, though the fathers should assume power, it is their teen sons who represent hegemony, have control over this space, and a strong voice. They end up acquiring more power. It is also their possession of space which forms their self-esteem and sense of empowerment. At first, they were stealing things from their houses or their neighbors', then gradually they formed cults on campus and their action developed into violence resulting in the murder of many of their peers. This accelerating and unexpected violence turns the peaceful, somehow homogenous setting into a heterotopic site in that we have incompatible spaces and worlds in this single real place (Foucault 6). At this part of the story, we have what seems to be like the stage of a theatre which juxtaposes contradictory sites: the university, allegedly an educational institution with certain codes of ethics, the professors' homes where children are supposed to be raised properly by educated parents, and finally these newly developed sites of crimes in different forms.

Moreover, in this female "space-off," the space that excludes women and does not welcome their active presence and contribution, women are either enclosed at home and adopt a passive attitude (for example, Nnamabia's mother who has nothing to say or do regarding her son's misbehavior) or forced to stay "inside their hostel rooms after classes" to avoid the violence on the street (8). Thus, even if they dare trespass the boundary space, they are forced to go back home or become—whether students or professors—subjugated and victimized not only by these young men, but ironically by the guards of justice, the police. For example the cult boys waylaid a university professor while driving, "pressed a gun to her head, shoved her out of the car, and drove it to the Faculty of Engineering, where they shot three boys" (9). Similarly, Nnamabia's cousin, Ogechi, a beautiful young woman who had two cell phones was harassed by the police officers who "called her a whore and asked her for so much money that she had knelt on the ground in

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the rain begging them to let her go” (13).

However, Adichie defies this patriarchal perceived, conceived and lived space by giving the narrative voice to the sister. She does not seem to be beautiful or attractive. She says that she could not attract the attention of a popular young man like Osita, another spoiled son of a university professor: “He never noticed me” (6). Besides, we see how in a patriarchal and post-colonial Nigerian culture the people pity her for not being as fair or handsome as her brother: “Nnamabia looked just like my mother—he had her fair complexion and large eyes. . . . When my mother took us to the market, traders would call out, ‘Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark?’” (6) Yet from the first page we see her as a very intelligent girl with an acute sense of observation. When she returns home with her brother from church and he opens the door only to tell her that they have been robbed, she remarks, “It took me a moment to understand, to take in the scattered room. Even then, I felt that there was a theatrical quality to the way the drawers were flung open. . . . Or perhaps it was simply that I knew my brother too well” (4). She realizes immediately that he was the one who committed the robbery. When her brother admits stealing and selling his mother’s jewellery, the mother’s reaction infuriates her so much that she remarks, “I wanted to slap her” (4). This bright girl is underestimated by her parents who do not give her the same care and love they lavish on their son.

Still she deconstructs the traditional societal and power structure of her confining or dominated space, and turns it into an appropriated one when she defies her parents and forces them to give in to her opinion. This happens during Nnamabia’s incarceration. The parents and the sister visit him daily, having to drive for three hours. However, in the second week, she acts in a way that reveals her as more mature than her own parents. She asks them not to visit her brother for many reasons, one of which is “it would not hurt Nnamabia to fend for himself for a day” (14). When her parents are unwilling to fulfil her wish, she takes action by breaking the windshield of their car. They are mad at her, but finally submit to her wish, which she regards as a “little victory” (14).

It is interesting to see in this domesticated setting, the sister at the beginning of the story “pick[ing] some ixora flowers” (3). But in the middle of the story, she “picked up a stone near the ixora bush and hurled it at the windshield of the Volvo” (14). I see this transformation as an act of self-assertion contrary to the negative and infuriating attitude of her parents, especially her mother. Hence, to use Lefebvre’s concept of representational space, the house as a *lived* space of domesticity and submission becomes the birthplace of an initiative, for it witnesses the revolt of the sister whom we expect to later assume more power and control

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like her brother. In other words, she succeeds in creating a new space for herself. So from a geocritical point of view, space in the first part of the story becomes transgressive, when the sister crosses the boundaries of established norms and reestablishes a new relation, or rather a new power structure, with her parents. In his discussion of social space, Lefebvre also remarks that it “incorporates” the social actions of its subjects or inhabitants who regard the “behavior of their space . . . at once vital and mortal: within it they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions” (34). They also “must either recognize themselves or lose themselves” in that space which they may both enjoy and change, but to accomplish this they must pass tests which can have “the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation, within social space” (35). I believe that this is exactly what the sister did by taking this initiative.

Regarding Foucault’s heterotopias, I can see—with some adaptation of his definitions—that the sister with her assertive and rebellious attitude has turned the space of the house from a crisis heterotopia, where certain sacred values that necessitate her subjugation and obedience exist, into a “heterotopia of deviation” (4, 5). This complies with critics’ examination of the “heterotopic order” through studying “the tension between power and resistance” and interpreting heterotopias as sites of resistance (Topinka 60). Thus “heterotopias hold up an alternate order to the dominant order . . .” (Topinka 60).

This same reading can be applied to the second setting of the story, the prison. Nnamabia defies and deviates from the sacred values and rules of the corrupt policemen when he stands up to them by defending the unjustly treated old man. Thus according to Lefebvre, he develops when meeting these unfair prohibitions and regulations which give absolute power to the policemen. He passes the test and creates a place of initiation within the space of the prison. It is also noteworthy that the prison by definition represents the fifth and sixth characteristics of Foucault’s heterotopias. Entering it is compulsory and it assumes a system of opening and closing which isolates it and makes it also penetrable to other sites. His parents can see him, but under certain conditions. Besides, it has a function as we can link it to other sites, especially those of power. The description of the prison cell where he is kept and the life taking place there invoke the concept of hegemony and the dictatorial police state of Nigeria. Thus the spaces created in “Cell One” can be read and understood within the framework of Lefebvre’s social space and Foucault’s heterotopias.

### **Imitation**

In “Imitation” we see Nkem, the wife of a rich Nigerian businessman, Obiora, who has to stay on in America (apparently like other Nigerian wives) with her

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children while her husband lives and conducts his business in Nigeria. He visits them two months a year. At the beginning, she is proud to have “married into the coveted league, the Rich Nigerian Men who sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies League” (26). But then she gets lonely and disappointed, especially when she learns from a friend who has visited Nigeria recently that her husband has a girlfriend who has moved into their house and lives with him. The story speaks of two Obiora houses, one in Nigeria and the other in America. The former is no longer home to her, and her bedroom there has become like a hotel room where she spends three weeks of the year during the Christmas vacation. The latter, which she regards as her real home and where the whole story takes place, is a hybrid, border and marginal space--a hybrid space since it is a house in a modern western context, that of America, but it accommodates African antiques as well Nigerian and American lifestyles exemplified by Nkem and her Nigerian maid on the one hand, and the Obiora children on the other one. The latter speak what their father calls proudly “big-big English” and become “*Americanah*” by acting like their American peers (38). It is also a border space as she feels alienated from the comforting familiarity of place and culture (she misses the sun in Lagos especially when it snows in Philadelphia) and cannot quite reconcile with this new cultural space. Hence she feels homesick and “retain[s] a notion of the shifting boundaries of the self” (Kakutani). However, like many women in her position, neither she nor her children can go back to settle or live in Nigeria: “America has grown on her, snaked its roots under her skin” (37). Thus she lives on the border; she neither belongs to America nor to Nigeria.

In that hybrid and border setting, a social product, different from her Nigerian one, emerges and “forces egalitarianism,” which blurs the line between “madam/housegirl” making the maid her confidante (29). However, this egalitarianism does not color her relationship with her husband, which makes the house a space of marginality. Nkem’s role is mainly domestic and her main goal is to please her husband: she would “have her hair set in a flip that would rest round her neck the way Obiora likes. . . . And wax her pubic hair into a thin line, the way Obiora likes” (27). It is interesting to see how the social space produced in this house in Philadelphia reveals Obiora, despite his absence most of the year, as representing the hegemonic class. Thus according to Lefebvre, he decides action, enjoys domination and power and retains the same role that he plays in Nigeria as one of the “Big Men” by imposing his superiority on his wife (29). Moreover, the spatial practice he assumes helps him to master and appropriate the space of his house in that foreign setting.

In this hybrid, border and marginal space, Nkem’s past recollections, together

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with Adichie's stream of consciousness technique and the old African antiques create heterotopias by invoking different and juxtaposing spaces and sites in one real place as well as opening the place onto heterochronies. The heroine's knowledge of her husband's affair triggers memories of her past life before meeting Obiora and marrying him. She came from a very poor family (her childhood was similar to that of her Nigerian maid in the US) and the poverty she represents in her recollections contradicts sharply with the richness of her American space. As a child, she "snatched the food up, whatever it was, and ate it," but her children would grow to "sniff at food that had fallen on the dirt, saying it was 'spoiled'" (24). The antiques brought by her husband, making the house seem partly like a museum, reflect Foucault's notion of heterotopia as linked with accumulative time (7). While looking at a Benin mask, Nkem recalls its history told to her by her husband. This brings another period of time that witnessed the dark history of British colonization. They stole thousands of African masks during their so called "expedition" and "pacification." They regarded these masks as their "war booty" and then put them in different museums (25). The very first line of the story depicts her watching the Benin mask while her friend is telling her of her husband's affair. Throughout the story, she keeps looking at this mask and at one point presses her face to it only to find it "cold, heavy, lifeless" (25). It is suggestive of the fake or imitative quality of her life, which brings up the title of the story. She also remarks that the Nigerian food she gets in America is fake, "imitation *yams*" (32). Ironically the mask was supposed to protect the Benin Kings by warding off the devils, and its custodians were "specially chosen people" (23). She too seems to be a lucky and a special woman by marrying this man and living in the States. Yet it turns out she is not, and apparently the mask has not protected her either. While contemplating the mask, she is also imagining the custodians protecting it "wishing they had a say" about many things. But they did not, just like her. This constant examination of the mask and its connotations can be suggestive of the contrast between utopias and heterotopias, the conceived, perceived and the actually lived (if I may take liberty in appropriating Lefebvre's notions). She has imagined a different life with her husband and children in America, but it did not come true. The story depicts the setting she occupies in America as deceptive and representative of the American dream. When she first moved to the US, she took pictures of herself and her husband in Philadelphia near the Liberty Bell "proudly scrawled *very important in American history* behind the pictures" (24). She was happy to bring up her children like her American neighbours.

In these different sites and through the heterotopias evoked by the house's contents, inhabitants and the heroine's memories, we see the "system" resulting

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from the interaction between “the subjects and their space and surroundings” (Lefebvre 18). Or rather, the spatial practice which makes Nkem—whether as the oldest daughter of her family in Nigeria or as the rich Obiora’s wife in America—submissive to and accepting the injustice she has suffered from. In Nigeria, she dated married men and was somehow abused by some to afford the needs of her very poor family. At one point she was even willing to be the fourth wife of a retired army general. Thus, she feels indebted to Obiora for marrying her and raising her on the social ladder. In America she has to accept her husband’s infidelity as a common matter. This is evident in her maid’s reaction to Obiora’s betrayal: “When *oga* Obiora comes next week, madam, you will discuss it with him . . . He will ask her to move out. . . . You will forgive him, madam. Men are like that” (34). But Nkem does not do that. She does not confront her husband. The conversation she exchanges with her maid makes us learn that Nkem knows too well that her husband has always had girlfriends: “You know *oga* Obiora has girlfriends. You don’t ask questions. But inside, you know. . . . There are things that are good if you don’t know” (35).

Nkem’s inability to face and deal with her husband’s infidelity is consistent with her attitude throughout her life with him: “he has never heard her speak up, never heard her take a stand. She wonders vaguely if that is what attracted him to her in the first place, that she deferred to him, that she let him speak for both of them” (41). Her only reaction is cutting her long hair, which Obiora likes. But this cannot be regarded as a revolutionary act as it shows how the female body has to somehow pay a price. This brings to mind the heroine of “All that Beautiful Voice that Comes from Within Her” by the Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr (1949-). In her story, Bakr depicts Sayeda (which means lady in Arabic, suggesting that this heroine can be any Egyptian woman) as confined, like Nkem, to her domestic space. She seeks recognition from her husband and neighbours when one day she discovers that she has a beautiful voice and she can sing. However, she is met with negligence because no one, including her mother and sister, is willing to listen to her voice. Her husband, thinking she is mad, takes her to a psychiatrist who too cannot understand her. He does not even give her a chance to explain to him what happened. Consequently, she ends up, like Nkem, losing her voice. For at the end of the story, when she tries to sing once more, she cannot. In an act of frustration, she throws the medicine prescribed by the psychiatrist in the toilet and flushes it, a symbol for putting an end to any hope for her voice to be heard.

So, unlike the positive and rebellious attitude of Nnamabia’s sister in “Cell One” the heroines, Nkem and Sayeda, in these two stories act in a passive way, by accepting silence and giving in to their marginalized positions. Nkem in the last

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scene of “Imitation,” in an act of analogy, examines the “Ife bronze head,” which was “the first original Obiora has brought” (39). So when she tries to have a say by asking Obiora to move back to Lagos, he tells her, “We’ll talk about it” (42). However we read in the last line of the story, “There is nothing left to talk about, Nkem knows; it is done” (42). She seems to comply with “choicelessness as a choice.” Thus though “Imitation” exemplifies many of the notions propagated by both Lefebvre and Foucault, it does not present heterotopias as sites of resistance unlike the case in Adichie’s first story, and the spatial practice of the house and its representation are not challenged by any means to make a change in its power structure.

### **A Private Experience**

In “A Private Experience” the setting takes place, like in “Cell One,” in Nigeria. It is mainly a narrow deserted store occupied by two women, an Igbo Christian, Chika, and a Hausa Muslim whose name we never know, thus they stand as symbols of any Christian and Muslim Nigerian women. Both are running away from a riot created by sectarian violence. While occupying this single space, the time frame of the story moves backward and forward, informing us of what will befall these two women and some of their relatives. As is the case in the previously discussed two stories, this enclosed space embraces also a multiplicity of spaces. We are constantly aware and reminded of the outer space, that of the city streets where during this tragic riot one cannot “even [be] sure who was who and who was killing whom” (45). Chika will later learn the reason behind it:

It had all started at a motor Park, when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the road side, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslim, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in: the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book. (46)

But we understand that this violence is a social and ideological product created by the hegemonic class, that of the country’s oppressive regime which, to quote Lefebvre, while producing this space, serves as a tool of, I would say, indirect action, and possesses the means of control and dominance (26). Chika remarks: “riots do not happen in a vacuum, . . . religion and ethnicity are often politicized because the ruler is safe when the hungry ruled are killing one another” (48). Being linked with the hegemonic ruling class turns this isolated space into a heterotopic site. It reflects the two last principles discussed by Foucault. Firstly the two women are forced to enter that place which, similar to a prison, is isolated from the outer chaotic space and yet is penetrable through a small window. Besides, as an indirect

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product of the corrupting ruling class, this site shares a relationship with the distant space of power despite their apparent isolation, and also functions, to use Foucault's words, as a way of "compensation," giving the women a shelter and providing them with a sense of security instead of the messy and scary space of the city.

To get back to the multiplicity of spaces reflected by this hiding site, we notice that in addition to its immediate relation with the outer space of the city, it, through hosting these two strangers, invokes other spaces of their different worlds. Firstly we have their various religious backgrounds reflected in the Hausa woman's head scarf and Chika's silver finger rosary (44). Regarding their social, cultural and financial worlds, we see, on the one hand, the Hausa woman as a poor uneducated person who sells onions and hides her very little money in her "worn black bra" (49). On the other hand, Chika is a rich medicine student at the University of Lagos, the commercial capital of Nigeria. While running to escape the mad violence of the riot, she loses her original Burberry bag, whereas the woman loses her plastic necklace. Chika even "smells something on the woman, something harsh like the bar soap their housegirl uses to wash the bed linen" (48). This indicates her unprivileged background; the soap used by the servants of Chika's family is used by this woman to wash her body.

When the riot started, the woman's oldest daughter, Halima, was out selling groundnuts, whereas Nnedi, Chika's sister, was buying groundnuts. However they share the same destiny, we know that Nnedi will never come back, but we know nothing of the daughter. There is a great chance that she too will not make it to her home. So the mother cries privately and says, "Allah keep your sister and Halima in a safe place. And because Chika is not sure what Muslims say to show agreement—it cannot be 'amen'—she simply nods" (51).

The Hausa woman does not tell us where she lives; yet we can visualize the poor and dirty space she inhabits. As well, Chika guesses from her "strong Hausa accent" and her facial features that she is a Northerner (44). On the other hand, Chika is visiting her aunt who lives in a rich secluded neighborhood. The irony here is that she ends up seeking security in another secluded space, this deserted store, with an incompatible companion. The social, financial and intellectual difference between them is also apparent when the woman shows her dry nipple to Chika who advises her to use lotion. The woman had five children and never did anything as such; nor did she ever receive medical care. Unlike her, Chika's mother had only two girls and she had her doctor to consult at any time (50). Thus, all these diverse socio-political spaces meet at this place.

These two women, who were supposed to be killing each other, appropriate

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the dominant/ dominated space of violence, hatred, and fanaticism into one of human interaction. This is evident when we see the woman putting her wrapper on the dirty floor of the store and inviting Chika to sit with her (46). We also read: “Later, Chika will learn that as she and the woman are speaking, Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones” (44). Besides, at the end of the story, Chika will keep the woman’s scarf with which she tied her wound: “May I keep your scarf? . . . The woman looks for a moment . . . then she nods. There is perhaps the beginning of future grief on her face, but she smiles a slight distracted smile before she hands the scarf back to Chika and turns to climb out of the window” (56). This last line of the story shows the bond created between them, which is not only symbolized by the scarf, but also through their expected future grief over their loved ones.

In a different interpretation of Foucault’s heterotopias, I see them replacing the heterotopias of crisis with ones of deviation. The people outside their enclosed space thought that by killing the Igbo Christians, they were doing something sacred. But these two women surpassed this illogical and fanatical thinking and created a human bond. Could it be due to their being women? In that sense, Adichie also uses them to deconstruct preconceived ideas. It is this poor ignorant woman who saves the rich educated Chika by taking her to their hiding place. She will later clean Chika’s wound and tie her scarf around it. Besides, she will be the one who tells her to leave the place when the danger is over. Still, the spatial practice of the police/ patriarchal state forces her (a simple Hausa Muslim) to stay away from the police who can harass her (55). Hence, when Chika later reads in the *Guardian* that “the reactionary Hausa-speaking Muslims in the North have a history of violence against non-Muslims,’ . . . she will stop to remember that she examined the nipples and experienced the gentleness of a woman who is Hausa and Muslim” (55).

In a forward movement of time, Adichie will show us the space of hostility and fanaticism after the end of the riot and the interference of the police. Chika is shocked to have come across that space and that world about which she has only read, but never imagined happening to her or her sister who was a political activist: “Riots like this were what she read about in newspapers. Riots like this were what happened to other people” (47). When later she will go with her aunt to search for Nnedi, they will find many burned bodies. Some are so distorted that she remarks “she cannot tell if the partially burned man is Igbo or Hausa, Christian or Muslim, from looking at that charred flesh” (53). This is a strong statement criticizing this violence and the illogicality behind it. The horrible tragedy will make her mad at the BBC radio’s coverage of the event: “religious with undertones of ethnic

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tension' . . . a fierce red anger will run through her at how it has been packaged and sanitized and made to fit into so few words, all those bodies" (54).

Thus in this humane and moving story, Adichie cleverly weaves diverse spaces into one single real space. Through spatial representation and spatial practice, she forces us to compare between the conceived, the perceived and the lived. A co-existence of different religions and ideologies may sound difficult, almost impossible or as unreal as a utopia in a hostile space, but Adichie makes it a reality through these two women whose different paths converge briefly. But the effect will last a lifetime.

### **Conclusion**

Examining the diverse spaces portrayed by Adichie in three of her short stories shows them as excellent examples of Henri Lefebvre's discussion of space as a social construct and product that has its tools of action, thought and domination. Similarly, they reflect Michel Foucault's heterotopias and some of their six principles. Adichie may have never read any of the two works written by these philosophers, but she seems to be fully aware of the power and values behind the production of space/spaces. As a writer laden with a post-colonial heritage and aware of what she labels "the danger of a single story," she exposes and deconstructs the power structure which shapes the different spaces and hence informs and dictates society, culture, politics and most importantly human life and gender relations. Through her *representations of space, representational spaces* and the diverse spatiality of her work, she presents different stories of women who suffer from various forces but react differently to them. Her treatment of her female characters and the spaces affecting their lives and destinies brings to mind the following quotation from one of her lectures: "There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is 'nkali.' It's a noun that loosely translates to 'to be greater than another.' Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: how they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power" (The Danger of a Single Story).

I would add to Adichie's remark my belief that in the stories, as well as in our modern world, space too is defined by the principle of *nkali*: who owns more space, who produces space and who reshapes the actually existing space. From that perspective too, I see Adichie's stories as representative of Foucault's description of the ship as "the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates" (9). Similarly, without challenging stories like hers, people tend to submit to the dominant/dominated space without trying to appropriate it. Works like

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hers invite us to compare between what is conceived and perceived and contrast it to what is actually lived. They fit partly with Lefebvre's concept of representational space, "the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" and also of some artists and a few writers and philosophers, who not only describe, but also aspire to change and appropriate the existing space/reality (39). Their attempts may never fully succeed, but they will definitely have an enlightening effect as well as challenge and threaten the power and space creating the one hegemonic story. And, to quote Adichie, "when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (The Danger of a Single Story). In other words, if we truly realize the heterogeneous nature of space/s and the set of relations producing and defining them, we will understand how every place endorses a multiplicity of stories. These relations/stories have to be respected or sometimes challenged in order for the paradise of co-existence to happen.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>It is important to note that one of the early books dealing with the science of space is Georg Simmel's 1908 book *Sociology: Investigations on the Forms of Sociation* in which he wrote on "the sociology of space."

<sup>2</sup>Lefebvre discusses in detail the role played by the hegemonic class in the shaping of space and using it together with knowledge to fulfill its own agenda, but this is not the focus of this paper. He remarks, "I shall show how space serves, and how hegemony makes use of it, in the establishment, on the basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a 'system'" (10). Therefore he seems to be concerned with getting rid of "the homogenizing efforts of the state, of political power, of the world market, and of the commodity world" which are created and practiced in and through abstract space (Lefebvre 64).

<sup>3</sup>This description is very much similar to Edward Soja's classification of three kinds of space, first space, second space and third space, (See Edward Soja *Third space*, Malden: Blackwell, 1996). I did not refer to his book as I wanted to narrow the theoretical background of my discussion and make it focused.

<sup>4</sup>Foucault explains this example by discussing the way a Jesuit colony was planned, in a way that made each family have its cabin along two axes, similar to the Cross. Thus, "Christianity marked the space and geography of the American world with its fundamental sign," making it a source of power (8).

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