



Article

Challenging the Narrative: Reclaiming History and Silenced Voices in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian"

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Abstract

The history of nations has traditionally been narrated through a male-centric lens, often prioritizing the experiences and achievements of men while glorifying their roles. Traditional historical accounts, which often claim to be neutral or objective, tend to be biased and lopsided as they have been written from the male hegemonic point of view. This ingrained gendered exclusion has not only impoverished the collective understanding of the past but also problematized the very notion of historical authenticity and narrative authority. Moreover, history itself is not a neutral record of facts, but a constructed narrative shaped by those in power. Therefore, it becomes imperative to interrogate the context and viewpoint from which the historical knowledge is produced. Women's stories, often consigned to the margins or omitted altogether, demand recuperation and reinsertion into the historical discourse. In response to this silencing, this paper foregrounds the necessity of reimagining history through a feminist lens, one that recovers subjugated voices and destabilizes the masculinist rendering of the past. The paper explores Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "The Headstrong Historian" as a counternarrative that centers on women's experiences during the era of British colonial rule and the African patriarchal system. By highlighting the resilience, intelligence, and courage of women, the story challenges the dominant, male-centered historical narrative while debunking the single-story of the past. The paper will also examine how Adichie employs narrative as a mode of resistance and reclamation, thus illustrating how storytelling becomes a potent instrument of women's agency.

Keywords: History, Gender, Agency, Single-Story

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Introduction

The historical narrative of nations has predominantly been constructed and conveyed by men. When accounts of the past are presented, there is rarely any critical engagement with the gendered perspective from which these narratives emerge. This oversight stems from the long-standing normalization of male-centric viewpoints, rendering the male perspective the default and unquestioned lens through which history is interpreted. As a result, the experiences and contributions of women have been systematically marginalized, with little effort made to reexamine historical events through a female perspective. This implicit exclusion suggests that women's stories are deemed insignificant, making it acceptable for them to be overlooked and forgotten.

'History' has always been a problematic term to define. In his text, what is History? E.H.Carr points out how history can be selective by mentioning Professor Talcott Parsons, who once called science 'a selective system of cognitive orientation to reality' (Carr, 11-12) and continues: *"But history is, among other things, that. The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts exists objectively and independently of the historian's interpretation in a preposterous fallacy, but one which is tough to eradicate."* (Carr, 12) This shows how history can be considered fluid and not fixed, thus implying that there cannot be only one story of the past. History can be selective so that historians can construct specific facts as a single truth. Michel Foucault describes the connection between truth and power in his book *Truth/Knowledge* (1980): *"Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and go to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth."* (Foucault, 113) He further explains:

truth is not outside power or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth is not the reward of free spirits... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only under multiple forms of constraint. Moreover, it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regimes of truth, its 'general politics' of truth, and the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as accurate. (131)

Likewise, in a society where patriarchy exists, certain notions and stories about gender have been constructed through selective facts. Therefore, it becomes necessary to revisit and retell specific fractions of history through women's eyes to provide a new perspective on history and an insight into the world of women. From a feminist perspective, *"what is particularly interesting, however, is the degree to which patriarchal power structures cut across the colonizer/colonized divide and do not allow women the potentially subversive positions and modes of operation open to men."* (Weedon, 288) The present paper focuses on women's lives before and during their nations' colonial rule.

The writer, however, belongs to the post-colonial era and wrote the text based on stories she heard or has read about. Due to the coming of Colonialism, things had changed for women, as their voices had been silenced most of the time. Men's value and position were raised to the highest after Colonialism came. So, *"By choosing to listen only to men, and present men's accounts as 'the' narratives about 'tradition' and the past, European administrators, colonial ethnographers and others effectively silenced women's voices."* (Ejikeme, 310) Thus, as a post-colonial writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie provides a woman-centered narration. This narration symbolizes the triumph of women's narration and their revision of patriarchal and authoritarian history.

For feminist post-colonial writers, the position of women in colonial and post-colonial locations has become the primary concern. In *Recasting Women* (1990), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argued that it is necessary to understand *"the 'historical processes which reconstitute patriarchy in colonial India'". While 'overarching theoretical formulations are helpful and necessary to undertake any work, they need constant testing and overhauling by historically and materially specific studies of patriarchal practice, social regulation and cultural production.'* (Weedon, 288) So, it becomes necessary to understand a society's cultural history, which becomes a major influence for post-colonial feminist writers. Similarly, Susie Tharu and K.Lalita argued in their work *Women Writing in India* (1993) that *"women's texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries...are best read as documents of the writers; engagements with the reworking of their worlds that accompanied British rule in India."* (Tharu and Lalita, 43) This again shows how literary texts cannot be read independently without their context. The development of a feminist reproach that can take an explanation of the structural relations that constitute difference must necessarily recognize the frequent ruthless history of colonialism and its role in shaping the modern world.

Hence, it becomes crucial to know the writing of the past and to know it differently than one has ever known, not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold on us. Revisiting and retelling have become necessary to achieve this goal. Adrienne Rich defines the act of re-visioning or revisiting the past for women as:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. We cannot know ourselves until we understand the assumptions we are drenched in. Furthermore, for women, this drive to self-knowledge is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (Rich, 18)

Therefore, this paper explores the importance of examining historical events through women's perspectives. It will analyze the distinct nuances and dimensions in

women's narratives, which often diverge from those constructed by their male counterparts.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative approach to explore and analyze Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *"The Headstrong Historian"* primarily through a feminist lens. The paper examines the text by utilizing theoretical and critical frameworks and is a literary analysis where theories, including post-colonial and feminist theories, are employed. The paper further contributes to enhancing knowledge about women's narratives and their agency to voices that allow them to construct their identities and thus help define themselves. Feminist theory offers tools to deconstruct the gendered hierarchies embedded in the text. In contrast, post-colonial theory explores how historical and cultural legacies of imperialism inform the characters lived experiences. This dual theoretical approach enables a more profound and critical understanding of the text, reflecting and challenging dominant ideologies. The study accentuates literature's potential to subvert normative discourses and offer alternative modes of representation by foregrounding the voices and experiences of marginalized characters, thereby emphasizing the necessity of reclaiming women's voices in retelling African histories. Furthermore, the paper aims to illuminate the complex ways literature reflects and resists systems of domination.

Results and Discussion

In *"The Headstrong Historian"* (2009), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents the story of a woman who, despite living in a traditional and highly patriarchal society of Africa where women have no voice, can rise and bewilder men. It is a story about Nwamgba, a Nigerian girl, who, despite knowing the misfortunes of the man's family, decided to marry him at any cost. Her husband, Obierika's family, has had a long history of miscarriages, and Nwamgba was no exception to that. People used to sing *"melodious mean-spirited words: She has sold her womb. She has eaten his penis. He plays his flute and hands over his wealth to her."* (200) The story shows how men were superior in the Nigerian culture. However, it is the women who are outstanding. Nwamgba showed her resilience through her sufferings. After going through multiple miscarriages, she did not complain, and she was also the one who suggested her husband take a new wife, to which he refused. She finally manages to give birth to a boy, Anikwenwa. After Obierika is killed by his greedy cousins, Nwamgba decides to send her son to a catholic mission to make him learn English so that he will be able to

fight the relatives with the teachings of the white men. Throughout its history, Africa has been overrun with Christian Missionaries who offered education and some support, if the 'natives' converted to their faith, learned English, and, to a certain extent, left behind their cultural roots. Anikwenwa was no exception, and he became increasingly distant from his mother and ethnic culture. He began to despise his roots' traditional customs and consider them primitive. He fully converts to Christian beliefs and practices, thus losing his connections to his ancestors' culture and roots. He tried every possible way to convert his mother to Christianity as well but failed to do so even till the end. However, the ending becomes quite optimistic when the story brings in Anikwenwa's daughter, Grace, who shows pride and interest in their culture, showing hope for restoring what was lost to British rule. Grace was the opposite of her father, as she seemed very interested in African culture and tradition. She became a history teacher who teaches African culture to people.

Nwamgba is portrayed as a brave and assertive woman who speaks for herself and makes independent decisions, defying the expectations of the traditional and patriarchal African society in which she lives. At a time when it was customary for parents to arrange marriages, Nwamgba boldly chose to marry the man she loved. This act alone challenges societal norms, particularly as she remains his only wife despite the widespread practice of polygamy. Through Nwamgba's character, Adichie disrupts the notion that women are merely objects of male desire and authority. Instead, she presents a woman with agency, determination, and a strong sense of justice. Her father recognizes her headstrong nature, notably when she wrestles her brother to the ground. Ashamed of the outcome, he suppresses the story, labeling it a rumor, an example of how patriarchal societies often resist acknowledging women's strength. In such societies, women who assert themselves are frequently viewed as rebellious or morally suspect and are often marginalized. Adichie uses Nwamgba to challenge this perception, illustrating that women can be strong-willed without being disrespectful or dishonorable.

Nwamgba also refuses to be silenced or dominated by her husband's family. After her husband's death, when his cousins attempt to seize her property, she confronts them publicly, expressing her grief and anger through loud protests and emotional songs. Her bold stand earns her the support of the Women's Council, the Elders, and Obierika's age grade members, who ultimately warn the two brothers to stop their actions. This moment underscores the importance of collective solidarity and how a woman's voice, when courageously used, can prompt societal intervention. Additionally, by giving Nwamgba only one child, a son, Adichie challenges the traditional belief that a woman's value in marriage is tied to the number of children

she bears. Though the first part of the story is set in a pre-colonial context, it addresses ongoing issues faced by contemporary African women, especially the pressure to bear many children and the economic dependency that often comes with marriage. Through Nwamgba, Adichie offers a vision of female empowerment, resilience, and the possibility of resisting societal expectations without losing dignity or identity.

Nwamgba is hardworking and can sustain herself as she runs a small pottery business with apprentices she trained. She can support her son through her hard work, which implies that women can earn their own living without any dependence on men or any other person. Here, Taiwo notes that:

The contribution of African women to literature and society has mainly related to their roles as wives, mothers, and partners. Their contribution to society's economic well-being is much greater than they have ever been given credit for. Women are primarily responsible for harvesting all crops. (1984, p.3)

Adichie reclaims indigenous female agency by centering Nwamgba's voice within a narrative historically dominated by colonial and patriarchal forces; through a feminist and post-colonial lens, the story challenges dominant historical narratives and reimagines the role of African women in the preservation and transmission of cultural memory.

Like Nwamgba, her granddaughter Grace is ambitious and determined to attain her goals. Grace is given the name Afamefuna by her grandmother, which means 'My Name Will Not Be Lost'. In Igbo culture, the naming of a person serves a kind of power it holds when the name is being called out. It acts like prayer, which is repeated each time that person is called. In a rapidly changing society, the name serves as an act of recording the traditions and histories of their people. She does not identify with Catholicism and follows her grandmother's traditional beliefs. She started to fight for the recognition and legacy of African heritage, even though her Catholic teachers at school kept suppressing the idea. She pondered with great sadness when African history was not even considered a subject for study and realized the link between education and dignity:

Grace would begin to rethink her schooling – how lustily she had sung, on Empire Day, "*God bless our Gracious King. Send him victorious, happy, and glorious. Long to reign over us*"; how she had puzzled over words like "*wallpaper*" and "*dandelions*" in her textbooks, unable to picture those things; how she had struggled with arithmetic problems that had to do with mixtures, because what was coffee and what was chicory and why did they have to be mixed? It was Grace who would begin to rethink her father's schooling and then hurry home to see him, his eyes watery with age... (217)

She later wrote a history and immensely contributed to developing African Studies as a field of study at universities, thus contributing to the revival of African identity. According to Egbunike,

Having identified the processes that brought about the dispossession of the peoples of Nigeria during the colonial era, Afamefuna subverts colonialist epistemologies through utilizing the printed book, an instrument of colonial authority, as the medium through which she repossesses the narrative of her nation. (Emenyonu, 25)

The title of her historical text is *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria* and it serves as a response to a chapter in a textbook Grace had encountered during her secondary school days titled *"The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria"* by an administrator from Worcestershire who had lived among them for seven years. According to Egbunike, this is a response *"to colonialist histories through foregrounding the prevalence of colonial violence in the 'pacification' process, asserting the author's agency in contesting and reclaiming the writing of her history. Pacifying with Bullets is inspired by the community's framing of the past which has hitherto been silenced in colonialist literature."* (Emenyonu, 26) Also Daria Tunca observes that the book's usage of the word 'reclaim' in the subtitle indicates how the formerly colonized have *"taken the reins of their national narrative"* (244).

The return of Grace to her ancestral home portrays a feeling of realization that the modern generation has about their cultural roots, as one can see that Grace is a Christian just like her father, but her grandmother is pagan. This shows how the new generation is returning to the African ways of life and culture. It also shows the acceptance and amalgamation of the new and the old African ways of life. The accord of Grace's return to visit Nwamgba on her deathbed, and the reference to *"The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria"* in her schoolbag, lightens the narrative into the conditional tense:

It was Grace who would read about these savages, titillated by their curious and meaningless customs, not connecting them to herself until her teacher, Sister Maureen, told her she could not refer to the call-and-response her grandmother had taught her as poetry because primitive tribes did not have poetry. Grace would laugh loudly until Sister Maureen took her to detention and summoned her father, who slapped Grace in front of the teachers to show them how well he disciplined his children. (216)

We can notice how this short story recalls Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which is a significant success in contributing to the struggle against sustaining clichés about Africa. By making the readers return to the historical setting of *Things Fall*

Apart, Adichie tells the same story of Igbo encounters with European missionaries and colonial rule, but from a different viewpoint. Eve Eisenberg discusses Grace's rewriting of history as:

A kind of literary thought experiment, a venue within which to consider the roles and effects of reading, writing, and recuperative rewriting; to think not only about Afamefuna/Grace's project of remembering, but also about Achebe's project in *Things Fall Apart*; and also, self-reflexively, to consider Adichie's place as a writer who takes up a pen in a literary world profoundly imprinted by Achebe – his oeuvre and his extra-fictional statements about why he wrote his most famous work. (Mikailu and Wattenberg, 54)

Therefore, by making Grace a female character and reclaiming African history and culture, Adichie challenges Achebe's silencing of Igbo women. The story acts as an extension or completion of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It also shows how African history can be about women. In her article titled "*Narrating the Past: Orality, History & the Production of Knowledge*", Egbunike mentions that the concept of 'eternal truths' was rooted in the seeming permanence of the written text. She believes that history or the past was not fixed and that there is the existence of more than one 'truth'. She notes that:

In retelling oral histories, the multiple narrative accounts in circulation created a sense of plurality to history. Adjustments could be made in each rearticulation of the past, and word choices could be altered. History was not singular or immutable; the past was not fixed or perpetual, but instead subject to a constant reimagining that characterized the act of retelling (Egbunike, 17).

Grace learns to value and interpret oral traditions like her determined grandmother, whose oral stories and handcrafted pottery preserve cultural memory. She grows into a bold historian who challenges traditional narratives, using oral histories, decaying archives, and her creativity to piece together her people's past. In doing so, she redefines the term "*headstrong*", turning it from a flaw into a strength rooted in intelligence and resilience.

Adichie effectively bridges personal narratives with historical fiction. In an interview, she revealed that the character of Nwamgba was inspired by her great-grandmother, Omeni, a strong-willed, outspoken, and courageous woman who was ahead of her time. Stories like Omeni's, centered on ordinary individuals, are often overlooked in historical accounts, which tend to glorify wars and male figures. Adichie challenges this tradition by bringing to light the lives of people who have been forgotten or marginalized. Omeni, an ordinary Igbo woman once considered so headstrong that even her parents hesitated to speak of her actions, is memorialized in

Adichie's work. By embedding her great-grandmother's legacy into her fiction, Adichie honors her ancestor and reclaims a space in history for women like her. Through frequent references to actual places and historical figures, Adichie reinforces the authenticity and historicity of her narratives. Her deep understanding of history enables her to offer alternative interpretations of the past that differ significantly from dominant, mainstream versions. By telling her stories through the perspectives of female protagonists, she foregrounds strong, intelligent, and assertive women, thus reshaping the historical narrative. Ejikeme notes that "one person's story cannot tell the story of an entire community; multiple perspectives are essential" (Ejikeme, 311). Adichie embodies this philosophy by presenting diverse voices, particularly those silenced or excluded. In doing so, her work deconstructs the 'single story' of history and reclaims voices once forgotten.

Conclusions

The focus of history writing is originally about public lives and events. Nevertheless, Adichie inverts this dominant tradition by diverting the reader's attention from the larger public events in her nation's history to ordinary women's specific and private lives. This relatively challenges the conventional way of writing history and contests the grand narratives about history and patriarchy. So, storytelling becomes a way of empowerment. This is particularly important for women who, by creating narratives, own their stories and lead their audiences through their specific experiences and perspectives. Storytelling affords a kind of personal agency. It gives a platform for everyone to use their voice. Ashcroft et al. defined 'agency' as: "Agency refers to the ability to act or perform an action. Contemporary theory hinges on whether individuals can freely and automatically initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by how their identity has been constructed." (Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, 6) The writer has somehow gained the agency of her voice, where she managed to narrate stories of her historical past by being selective of who her main characters would be. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty have also pointed out the need for and importance of a sense of agency in their work, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997):

Women do not imagine themselves as victims or dependents of governing structures but as agents of their own lives. Agency is understood here as the conscious and ongoing reproduction of the terms of one's existence while taking responsibility for this process. Agency is anchored in thinking of oneself as part of feminist collectivities and organizations. This is not the liberal, pluralist, individualist self

under capitalism. For precisely this reason, decolonization is central to the definition and vision of feminist democracy. (Alexander and Mohanty, xxviii)

Therefore, giving voice to oneself as an act of self-creation becomes a powerful means for women writers to claim authority and assert their identities through storytelling. The text explores personal narratives and deepens our understanding of colonial rule, social realities, and traditions within African society. It provides a platform for marginalized voices, allowing their unique perspectives to emerge. Through the characters' expressions of their experiences, desires, and struggles, readers gain valuable insight into lives often overlooked by dominant historical narratives. In doing so, the writer compels the audience to confront the complexities of history and recognize that it is shaped by multiple, diverse voices, thus challenging the notion of a single, authoritative story.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this present paper.

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