

Looking Past Our Own Grief: “The Shivering” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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English 200: The Writer

April 24, 2026

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* is a collection of twelve stories that move between Nigeria and the United States. "The Shivering," set in a graduate program in Princeton, brings two Nigerians together in the aftermath of a plane crash back home: Ukamaka, a Catholic student consumed by a recent breakup with Udenna (who may have been on the flight), and Chinedu, a stranger who knocks on her door to pray. What begins as a shared mourning becomes something more complicated, as the apparent symmetries between them (two Nigerians, two faiths, two lost loves) reveal themselves to be uneven in ways Ukamaka is slow to see. In "The Shivering," Adichie constructs a network of parallels to expose the moral cost of Ukamaka's grief: so long as she reads Chinedu's life as a mirror of her own, she fails to see him at all. Adichie argues that recognizing and empathizing with another person requires refusing the instinct to make it about ourselves.

Parallelism as a Comfort

Adichie opens the story by establishing surface-level similarities between Ukamaka and Chinedu, staging parallelism as a comfort, and letting Ukamaka think as such. This is apparent in the way she uses vocabulary, always returning to the pronouns "us" and "our," mashing these two different people into one entity rather than showing them as the distinct human beings that they are. When Chinedu knocks on Ukamaka's door, they meet for the first time; they are strangers. Yet she feels oddly close to him when he describes their country using the words "us" and "our," feeling that "those words united them in a common loss, and for a moment she felt close to him" (Adichie 145). Ukamaka establishes a false intimacy between herself and Chinedu, who are complete strangers. She infers shared experiences and connection from being from the

same country, and not from Chinedu himself. She absorbs his identity into a single “us,” leaving no room for him to display his unique characteristics, and thus, he is not fully recognized.

Ukamaka continues feeling this unwarranted comfort with this stranger due to their parallels, as she hugs him and is “surprised by the familiar comfort of it, certain that he instinctively understood her crying from the the relief of what had not happened and from the melancholy of what could have happened and from the anger of what remained unresolved since Udenna told her, in an ice-cream shop on Nassau Street, that the relationship was over,” converting a moment of mourning for both parties into one solely about *her* and *her* relationship (Adichie 147). She imports connection and intimacy onto a man she barely knows, reading him as already known because he is Nigerian. Additionally, she assumes their parallels allow him to understand the pain she felt in her relationship, simultaneously making this time of relief and comfort about herself, disregarding any feelings Chinedu had on the matter. She collapses their experiences into just hers, only because they have paralleled experiences.

However, while Ukamaka may believe the notion that Chinedu is not a stranger, her body certainly does not, as when they prayed together, “she felt awkward with their hands clasped together, his fingers warm and firm, and it was her discomfort that made her say... ‘Amen!’ thinking it was over” (Adichie 144). Adichie uses the body’s discomfort to illustrate that they truly do not know each other and are distinct human beings, despite Ukamaka’s attempt to put them under one (her) “umbrella”. They truly are strangers and know nothing about each other’s experiences, and while Ukamaka chooses not to believe that, her body does through the “involuntary quivering of her whole body (Adichie 144).” The body recognizes Ukamaka’s attempt to use parallelism as a form of familiarity and absorption and rejects it, emphasizing

Adichie's claim of empathy requiring connection via the distinct experiences instead of summing them up into one's own.

Seeing Beyond the Parallels

These differences become more apparent as the story continues, as beyond the surface-level similarities, the two characters' griefs are radically different, especially in terms of stakes. Yet Ukamaka's self-centeredness keeps her from seeing beyond the parallels. After Chinedu is vulnerable with Ukamaka and tells her the story of his lover, Abidemi, where he ends up marrying a woman due to social pressures, causing Chinedu to end their relationship, Ukamaka attempts to make it about her breakup with Udenna, even though the moments are radically different. She says, "Abidemi sounds a lot like Udenna. I guess I just don't understand that kind of love," rather than empathizing with Chinedu and lending him comfort after his vulnerability (Adichie 161). Ukamaka hears Chinedu's story and uses it as an opportunity to talk about her relationship, seeing herself mirrored in Chinedu's story, which does not respect his distinct qualities and does not help *him*.

However, Chinedu refuses to be absorbed into her narrative, insisting that "not everything is about Udenna," goes on to indicate the clear differences between his story and hers, and even postulates that Udenna may not have loved her (Adichie 161). He names out loud Ukamaka's instinct to make everything about herself, furthering Adichie's claim, as he felt unheard and not empathized with when Ukamaka made his life experience about her by only viewing the parallels rather than the concrete differences.

Ukamaka finally realizes her mistake when Chinedu reveals he is in the country illegally and could be deported, recognizing "all the weeks she had spent talking about Udenna while

Chinedu worried about being deported” (Adichie 164). The differences in their situation are clear here: a breakup versus imminent deportation were never parallel griefs when looking beyond the surface. Ukamaka’s shame is the recognition that she completely failed to see him and, throughout their friendship, had absorbed his experiences into her solely due to surface-level similarities and parallels.

Empathy Through Differences

With this newfound recognition of her tendency to absorb Chinedu's experience into her own, Ukamaka stops this behavior. Thus, the final movement of the story proves Adichie’s claim as Ukamaka begins to truly empathize only once she stops looking for herself in Chinedu and allows him to be unlike her. After Ukamaka and Chinedu’s argument, which pushed her to see Chinedu separate from her, she began to notice the many differences between them, causing her to rush to apologize for absorbing his experiences into her own. “She felt a sudden fear that he would ask somebody else on his floor to drop him off at church, and because she felt her fear becoming a panic, she went up and knocked on his door” (Adichie 162). Her first real act of care is motivated by the possibility of his absence from her life, not his presence as her mirror. She pursues him as a separate person for the first time, which allows her to truly empathize with him when he opens the door and explains his situation. She apologizes directly: “‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘That question about whether you are working on a dissertation was just my stupid way of saying I’m sorry,’” indicating her new intentions of focusing on him rather than herself (Adichie 163). She is no longer translating Chinedu’s situation into her own vocabulary; rather, she acknowledges that her earlier approach to him was indirect and self-protective. She becomes truly vulnerable and understands him better once she foregoes her self-centeredness and looks

past their parallels. Ukamaka makes an intentional effort to understand the differences, not combine the similarities.

In the final paragraph of the story, Adichie parallels the same religious sacrament being done in the United States and Nigeria, establishing how in America the priest would walk “up and down, flickering water on the people with something that looked like a big saltshaker” versus “how in Nigeria it would have been a vibrant green branch from a mango tree” (Adichie 166). Adichie preserves the parallel but refuses to collapse it; the ceremony is the same, yet the experience is not, ultimately arguing that empathy lives in honoring the differences rather than erasing them. Ukamaka, with her newfound realization, does not absorb one ceremony into the other simply because, on the surface, they both incorporate flickering holy water; rather, she highlights the distinct qualities, giving them the respect they deserve.

Conclusion

By the time Ukamaka and Chinedu sit side by side in Father Patrick’s church, laughing about Thomas Sankara, the parallels that opened the story have been transformed. Two Nigerians are still two Nigerians; two faiths are still two faiths; the lost loves are still lost loves. Nothing about the symmetry has changed. What has changed is Ukamaka. She no longer needs Chinedu to be a version of herself in order to feel close to him, and it is precisely this refusal (the willingness to let him remain unlike her) that allows the friendship to become real. Adichie’s final paragraph, with its imagery of a religious ceremony done in two radically different ways, makes her argument clear: likeness is not the same as recognition, and empathy begins where the instinct to see ourselves in another person ends. “The Shivering” is ultimately a story about what

it costs to look past our own grief long enough to see someone else's, and what becomes possible when we do.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Shivering." *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Vintage, 2010, pp. 142-166.