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## Auszug aus:

*Ch. N. Adichie: The Thing Around Your Neck*

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R.15  
Literature – Short stories, fables and fairy tales

Ch. N. Adichie: "The Thing Around Your Neck" – Analysing a short story

Xenia Riehl



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Die Unterrichtseinheit erkundet moderne nigerianische Literatur anhand von Ch. N. Adichies Kurzgeschichte „The Thing Around Your Neck“. Sie untersucht Nigerias gesellschaftliche Situation, das Thema Auswanderung, 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.

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## COMPETENCES

<b>Competences:</b>	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. Listening: understanding authentic listening materials
<b>Methods:</b>	discussion, listening/viewing comprehension, mediation, reading comprehension, research, role play, text analysis, (creative) writing
<b>Themes:</b>	analysis of a short story, Nigeria and its special situation, immigration, the American Dream, intercultural aspects, modern Nigerian literature

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## 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 Nsukka, 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 is sent 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 become 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 materials 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 of 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 first 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. M 5 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 the 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 new 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 a basis for further activities, like research on the Nigerian authors mentioned in the text and the study/presentation of one of their short stories.

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## 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/>

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## Overview

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### Topic 1: From Nigeria to the USA

**M 1**            Worksheet – Discovering Nigeria

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### 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?

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### Topic 3: Nigerian literature

**M 7**            Worksheet – Ch. N. Adichie: “The Danger of a Single Story”

**M 8**            Worksheet – Mediation

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