

## **POSTCOLONIAL DISCUSSIONS IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S 'THE AMERICAN EMBASSY'**

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### **1. INTRODUÇÃO**

The impact of European expansionism and imperialism in Africa has gone beyond political and economic domination. It shaped discourses and representations that defined African peoples as the “Other”. Systematically built as an upturned mirror of the West, these narratives legitimised colonialism as a supposedly civilising mission. Even after formal independence, such distortions persist, influencing global and local perceptions of non-European peoples. As Said (2012, 2014) argues, domination relies not only on violence but also on language, culture, and representation.

Hence, postcolonial narratives emerge as the opening of voices previously silenced as well as of marginalised and dehumanised subjectivities, in contrast to what Said (2014) demonstrated to be the Western discourse of constructing an inferiorised image of colonised groups. The literature of former colonies represents the active consolidation of rewriting the world and historiography, allowing historically oppressed peoples to reclaim memory, language, and identity.

The short story “The American embassy”, by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), portrays the remnants of pre-modern and modern colonisation on bodies and individual trajectories by narrating the experience of a Nigerian woman under a dictatorial regime in the country. In this paper, therefore, I discuss the short story “The American embassy” (Adichie, 2009) from a postcolonial literary perspective, seeking to understand how the text addresses and exposes the persistence of colonial relations and discourses in modern Nigeria.

### **2. METODOLOGIA**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in postcolonial literary criticism, drawing primarily on the theoretical framework of Edward W. Said (2012, 2014) to analyse how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s short story “The American embassy” (2009) reflects and critiques the persistence of colonial power structures in modern Nigeria. The analysis is based on close reading, emphasising narrative elements such as setting, characterisation, and symbolism—particularly the queue at the embassy, the protagonist’s embodied experience, and the interplay of discourse between colonial memory and contemporary migration.

### **3. RESULTADOS E DISCUSSÃO**

Considering that colonial structures of power and domination do not dissolve with the formal end of colonialism (Said, 2014), the colonial architecture represented in the short story highlights the social, political, and institutional

dynamics that preserve colonial hierarchies under renewed forms. In Adichie's narrative, the updated colonial system positions the United States as a promise of safety, justice, and possibility for the future, in stark contrast to Nigeria, which offers only violence, repression, and loss under military rule. According to Said (2012), within contemporary imperialism, North American triumph relies on a rhetoric of hope, benevolence, and philanthropic imperialism, which can only be sustained through the persistent instability of nations shaped by colonisation.

Within this framework, the queue—where most of the story unfolds—materialises the symbolic and structural hierarchy of the contemporary colonial logic, regulating who may or may not access the privileges of empire. The protagonist, one among many waiting outside the American embassy in Lagos, stands in sharp contrast to the absence of applicants at embassies of other nations, such as the Czech Republic's, whose gates were described as “smaller, vine-encrusted” (Adichie, 2009, p. 128). This juxtaposition illustrates the ascendancy of U.S. imperial power.

In the story, the queue functions as a bureaucratic performance of global inequality, where the African subject must once again prove that their life is worthy enough to be welcomed—or, ultimately, forgiven—by imperial power. The restriction that only fifty of the two hundred applicants may complete immigration paperwork relativises the supposed philanthropy of the United States, exposing “hospitality” as limited, conditional, and reserved for those able or desperate enough to reach the front of the line first. In this process, human lives are stripped of dignity and reduced to numbers. The narrative's reference to this as a “market” highlights how migration becomes commodified—a migratory marketplace where survival is contested, monetised, and negotiated at the margins of empire.

Similarly, the protagonist's lightened skin in her photograph and the advice from another man in line about the types of visas reveal how migration demands identity adjustment, even self-erasure, in order to be accepted. This reshaping of identity reinforces stereotypes of Nigerian subjects while reflecting the colonial imposition of a standardised identity that erases individuality and subjectivity (Said, 2014). The protagonist's efforts to fit within these parameters do not necessarily indicate a lack of resistance but rather expose the lasting consequences of colonisation, which constrains and diminishes African identities.

The man with whom the protagonist converses in line embodies pragmatic assimilation to imperial demands. He navigates the migratory “market” fluently, shares strategies, and reiterates the belief that Africans must “have something to offer” to be accepted—reinforcing the Western logic of selectivity and meritocracy. His stance, however, is complicated by his support for the protagonist's husband, who actively criticizes and resists the dictatorship of Sani Abacha.

The Abacha regime itself represents a structural continuation of colonialism. Abacha—who declared himself president of Nigeria in 1993, a formally postcolonial country—reproduced the same mechanisms of domination, violence, and control embedded during British colonial rule. After independence, Nigeria never fully freed itself from colonial structures, remaining trapped in cycles of political, religious, and social conflict fueled by imperial interference. Imperialism, as both practice and worldview, outlives colonial regimes because its cultural and symbolic power continues to sustain global hierarchies. In Adichie's story, this is dramatised through military violence.

The protagonist is a direct victim of this regime: she loses her son and witnesses the collapse of her marriage, both consequences of her husband's opposition to the dictatorship, which placed their entire family at risk. Her grief

becomes emblematic of the irreparable wounds of the colonial legacy. The suffering she endures is not merely personal tragedy but a symptom of systemic oppression rooted in colonial residues that shape Nigeria's political, social, and symbolic structures.

That her only hope for safety and dignity lies outside her homeland—specifically in the United States—underscores how colonial destabilisation fosters both practical and symbolic dependence on the West (Said, 2012, 2014). The protagonist suffers not only from the overt violence of the Nigerian state but also from the silent exclusion imposed by global structures that dictate who is deemed worthy of protection and who must be abandoned. Her suffering thus reveals the persistence of a colonial world order that dehumanises, marginalises, and erodes the possibility of dignified life for African bodies—especially for African women, whose experience exposes the intersection of gender and race in postcolonial oppression.

Her final act of resistance emerges when she refuses to commodify her grief by exchanging the memory of her dead child for a visa to the United States. This epiphany during her interview at the embassy marks a quiet, moral insurgency against a system that demands performance and self-erasure in exchange for entry. By withholding details of her son's death and declining to prove the Nigerian government's culpability, she symbolically reclaims what the regime had taken from her. Compared to her husband—who actively resists the dictatorship and must seek refuge within the empire—her silent refusal constitutes a moral rebellion against a world that treats Black lives as disposable commodities.

#### **4. CONCLUSÕES**

The story ultimately functions as both testimony and denunciation, rearticulating colonial memory in the modern era. The protagonist's experience demonstrates how colonial wounds persist under new forms: in the repression of the Nigerian dictatorship and in the illusory promise of salvation represented by the United States, whose migratory bureaucracy re-enacts the same imperial hierarchy that determines who may move freely and who must remain at the margins. By foregrounding the intimate pain of loss alongside the structural violence of global inequality, Adichie's narrative exposes the entanglement of the personal and the political, revealing how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the lives and bodies of African subjects.

In this sense, "The American embassy" not only dramatises the persistence of colonial power but also gestures toward resistance, however fragile or silent. The protagonist's refusal to commodify her grief in exchange for imperial validation marks a moral act of defiance that challenges the dehumanising logic of empire. Her decision underscores the possibility of reclaiming agency even within structures of oppression, while also denouncing a global order that transforms migration into a market and human life into negotiable currency. Adichie's story thus reinforces the central insights of postcolonial criticism: that colonialism survives in new guises, that memory and identity remain contested terrains, and that literature offers a vital space for exposing, resisting, and reimagining the narratives imposed by empire.

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