



# Perseverance Amidst Barriers in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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**Abstract**— Challenges bring out the most competitive part in human beings and make a significant improvement in their overall development. The Nigerian society has imposed their fair share of challenges on women internally and putting them in a foreign white land as an immigrant makes them triply marginalised. The field of psychology has dedicated the entire subfield of Resilience Theory to chart the positive outcome of characters in times of adversity and their process of reviving from a stressful environment. The models and works of Norman Garmezy can be used to critically analyse Adichie's selected works to understand the psychological aspect of the characters, taking into consideration Grace and Ifemelu, protagonists of *The Headstrong Historian* and *Americanah*, come out and thrive as individuals despite their adverse living situations.

**Keywords**— *adversity, challenges, development, revive, competitive.*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prolific Nigerian writer and is the voice to millions of African-American women in America. Being an admirer of Chinua Achebe, the forerunner of Nigerian Literature, Adichie too was influenced by the Igbo tradition, bringing to light the immediate need to preserve its rich culture and heritage. Her first novel, *The Purple Hibiscus* (2003), starts with the title of Achebe's famous novel *Things Fall Apart*, enunciating her love for Achebe's works. The last story from this collection, *The Headstrong Historian* can be considered as a positive continuation with a promising ending restoring hope to the upcoming generation. Achebe, amazed by Adichie's skill in writing appreciated her exceptional wisdom in storytelling after witnessing it in *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie is famously recognized for her TED talks and elaborate essays that profess the need for equality and the need to stay grounded in one's own culture. She has received honorary degrees from twelve Universities including Yale University and University of Edinburgh. Commonwealth Writers Prize' for Best First Book, National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, Ainsfield-Wolf Book Awards is some of the many awards

won by Adichie for her contribution to the world of literature.

*Americanah* by Adichie is one of the most prominent and relevant novels in the history of Nigerian Literature and has received esteem globally. This novel being a bildungsroman was published in 2013 focusing primarily on Ifemelu and her boyfriend, Obinze. Set in Nigeria, America and London, it explores the struggle of a young immigrant girl in America and race against all odds to become a public speaker inspiring young black people like her. Aunty Uju is introduced as Ifemelu's mentor but takes the wrong route to survive. Though educated and beautiful, she depends on a Nigerian General to pay her bills. After the General's demise she is forced out of her hometown with her son to America where she struggles culturally and mentally attempting to fit into the American standard of living. Soon she settles in embracing her differences and finding her love. Ifemelu decides to leave for Nigeria on her own terms hoping to fill the vacuum in her heart and stay satiated. From a broken soul to a self sufficient independent woman, Ifemelu remains an inspiration to millions of girls like her. The storyline becomes exceptionally plausible and achievable as the



novel is a semi-autobiography, reiterating the real life struggles of the writer herself.

*The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a short story collection published in 2009 containing twelve stories regarding the Nigerian society and its households. The last story, *The Headstrong Historian*, tranquilizes the mind as it ends on a very positive note and tries to remove the damages made by the tragic end of *Things Fall Apart*. Grace, the granddaughter of Nwambga is considered to be the reincarnation of Obierika, Nwambga's late husband. Nwambga believed that Grace was born to save her clan from forgetting their ancestors by the Christian missionaries. She narrated stories of their ancestors and the need to stay grounded in one's culture to Grace, making her rebel against her father Anikwenwa's staunch Christian beliefs. Grace breaks the clutches of her father's rules, her husband's hold and her colleague's cultural humiliation to return back to her ancestral village where tradition cradles her soul. Grace changes her name into Afemefuna, to pay respect to her grandmother and take pride in her culture.

Resilience theory is a subcategory of psychological criticism that focuses on the working of the mind and its response towards various circumstances. Resilience theory tries to understand the place or point of distress rather than the immediate method of rectification; the different methods used by the self to show positive development amidst adversity during the worst of situations. It traces the overall development of the individual against extreme situations, providing with the most positive of outcome. It studies the role played by the protective factors in assisting the individual in overcoming the risks and stressful conditions. The psychological crisis represented by each individual and identifying the competence amongst children is dealt in this theory. Michael Rutter, Norman Garmezy, Emmy Werner, Suniya Luthar, Ann Masten and Michael Ungar are the most important critics in the field of resilience. For this study, the work of Norman Garmezy will be used to analyse the texts and the characters mentioned above.

In *Resilience in Children's adaptation to negative life events and stressed environments*, Norman Garmezy explains resilience as, "... not necessarily impervious to stress. Rather, resilience is designed to reflect the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behaviour that may follow initial retreat or incapacity upon initiating stressful event" (459). Garmezy studied stress, resilience and competence in children and he is famous for being the Founder of Research in Resilience. In his Project Competence, he was able to derive positive outcomes in children as he identified competence in risk-children who

belonged to schizophrenic parents. Moreover, his project concluded that resilience increased with the increase of protective factors namely supportive peers, teachers, mentors and well wishers. It signifies that children experiencing mental and physical inhibitions due to negative factors like hostile society and cultural conditioning will be able to overcome them through the immediate protective factors available to them.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu struggles without food and money in America and for a brief period of time her boyfriend from Nigeria, Obinze, helps her by lending money. Soon she is overcome by guilt and shuts him out of her life without a warning. Ginika, her friend helps Ifemelu, gets a baby-sitting job in a wealthy family. Life takes a turn for the better from there for Ifemelu. Wambui, a good friend from University instigates Ifemelu to start her own blog as her voice was knowledgeable and would definitely help millions of other black women like her. The blog was named as [happilykinkynappy.com](http://happilykinkynappy.com) which was an instant hit. Her identity as a black woman made her way through the American air difficult but with the help of her friends Wambui, Ginika, Curt, Blaine and Shan she was able to withstand criticisms in her way. Garmezy pointed out that protective factor like good peers will help children in their teens or early adulthood enable them to lead a fruitful life assisting in the complex world around them.

The most rebellious protagonist, Grace in *The Headstrong Historian*, is a neglected child. Her father, Anikwenwa adopts the teachings of the Christian missionaries and prevents Grace from questioning the Church. The inquisitive child never gives up and constantly argues with her father. He reprimands her for the smallest of deviations from the teachings given from school and Church. Grace soon grows an intimate love for her grandmother and learns about her culture through the stories about their ancestors and tradition. Adichie in *The Things Around Your Neck* narrates, "It was Grace who feeling an odd rootlessness in the later years of her life, surrounded by her awards, her friends, her garden of peerless roses, would go to the courthouse in Lagos and officially change her name from Grace to Afamefuna" (219).

The top three fundamental influences according to Garmezy are Individual, Familial and Support factors that provide protective factors for a person to overcome risky situations and emerge as a strong individual. The Individual factors include the temperament and positive responsiveness, Familial factors include the warmth and cohesiveness provided by one's family and the Support factors include a concerned teacher that fill the maternal space or a good friend. Ifemelu happens to have strong

Support factors in the form of friends and boyfriends in her life who help in her progress selflessly. Grace on the other hand, has a strong Familial character who teaches her about the rich culture that is being consciously neglected by people like her father who reduce their customs to pagan worshiping and imbecile activities. Furthermore, both of these female characters can be understood using the compensatory and challenge model of Garmezy. In *Stress, Competence and Development* (1987) Garmezy puts forward his three models after his research 'Project Competence' that was based on resilience among children.

The challenge model makes the person highly competitive making them develops coping mechanisms that would help young people to face the real world outside. There is a huge stress level forcing them to enhance their level of accommodation. Ifemelu faces pressure from the society for her looks, her immigrant status and her gender. It breaks her to the point of forcibly pushing people out of her life. The high pressure experienced by her makes her highly competitive making her stand out in the crowd amongst millions of black immigrant women and becoming their voice. Ifemelu took the challenge positively only to become the best version of herself destroying all the barriers that came her way. She became very strong in her personality giving her the courage to throw away all her hard earned fame only to return to her native land. Competence is the biggest gift from this model.

Compensatory model as the name suggest explains the relationship between Grace and her grandmother, Nwambga. As her parents fail to provide a fruitful environment for Grace to argue about her perceptions, she turns to her grandmother; considering her as a parent figure. A byproduct of the model is the accommodating nature the child builds for the betterment of their future. The high-conflict home environment experienced by Grace makes her priorities her grandmother's warmth and this in turn makes the latter's place the home environment. The resilience Grace acquires comes from her grandmother as she is the motherly figure and it compensates for the shortcomings in her parents' house. In this model, there is less stress and high competence because the parent figure is replaced but not forsaken.

The paper analyses Ifemelu and Grace through their unique way of experiencing the world. Adichie through her characters can inspire any reader that is experiencing hardships due to the outside world or their own homes. The characters when analysed through the works of Garmezy provide an insightful understanding of the power of self efficiency and the need for quality people

around. The resilience they show is a testimony to a number of people around them as they have started from dust but reached the peak despite the hindrances on their ways.

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