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**Short Story**

**Lecture 4**

**“Cell One”**

**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-Present)**

Welcome again, having finished our discussion of Hemingway’s “The Battler”, we are going to start with a story by a contemporary female novelist and short story writer. Today we will discuss a story by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie is the author of many works including two famous novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for which she won many literary awards. Adichie is also a famous TED speaker, and active feminist.

Adichie’s works are influenced in many aspects by her personal experience both in Nigeria and in the United States of America, where she studied. She is one of the writers who defend the plurality of the human experience, and the importance of reflecting it in literature. It is highly recommended that you watch her TED speeches and TV interviews in order to have a better understanding of her perspective towards life, literature, and feminism.

The story we are going to discuss today is titled “Cell One”, and it appeared Adichie’s collection of short stories titled *The Thing Around Your*

Neck, 2009. The story is about a Nigerian family of a university professor. Their house gets robbed by their own son, but he gets away with it. Later on, the son is accused of joining a cult and committing murder. He is taken to jail where he lives a new experience and gets to know another aspect of life which he never knew existed. The story is told by the daughter of the professor, who is, needless to say, the brother of the protagonist.

### The Title

The title of the story is “Cell One”. The word “cell” by itself gives the impression of imprisonment. Although the imprisonment could be expected to be literal or metaphorical, the fact that it is given a number makes the reader anticipate a physical cell rather than a metaphorical one. The idea of an actual prison cell would leave the reader with at least two possible expectations about the events of the story. The first one is that the events take place in cell one, and the other possibility is that the story is going to trace the life of a person or a group of people who lived the experience of imprisonment in this cell. As you can see, the title of the story plays an integral part in setting the reader in the mode of the story itself. It is, usually, the threshold that brings the reader into the world of the story.

### The Beginning

The story opens as follows:

**The first time our house was robbed, it was our neighbor Osita who climbed in through the dining room window and stole our TV, our VCR, and the *Purple Rain* and *Thriller* videotapes my father had brought back from America. The second time our house was**

**robbed, it was my brother Nnamabia who faked a break-in and stole my mother's jewelry. (P.1)**

The first two sentences introduce many of the elements of the story. The first one is the narrator. It introduces the first person narrator, which also means it introduced the first character in the story. It also introduced four other characters. These characters are Osita, the neighbor who robbed their house, the narrator's brother named Nnamabia, and the parents. Not only are the characters introduced in these two sentences, but also more information about the characters and the general atmosphere of the setting is given to the thorough reader.

You would, as a reader, already know that burglaries seem to be a common thing in the neighborhood, and that the thieves are coming from now place other than the neighborhood itself. In addition, you know that this family was once in the USA, and that they are affected, in away, by the American culture represented in the two tapes that were stolen by Osita. *Purple Rain* is a rock musical movie starring the late singer Prince, while *Thriller* is a famous music album and video clip by the legendary Michael Jackson. Both of them were released in the mid of the eighties of the twentieth century. It even makes the reader speculate why these in specific were the stolen items. Does it mean that Osita is also influenced by the American culture? To answer this question, and to confirm the presumptions we have just made about the family being influenced by the American culture on, we need to continue reading the story and collect more clues.

What I want you to learn, as readers in general, and as professional readers, is that the short story is an intensified genre, and a good short story is condensed with relevant details that serve its purpose.

## The Setting

The story takes place in Nigeria, and this is something the reader knows from the names of the cities where the actions take place. First, the narrator tells us that the brother **“had pawned the jewelry to the Hausa traders in Enugu and all the money was gone”** (P.2). The city of Enugu is the capital of the state of Enugu in Nigeria, but it is not where the story opens. If you continue reading, the narrator tells, **“This was the season of thefts on our serene Nsukka campus”** (P.2). The city of Nsukka is another city in the state of Enugu. Although the story opens in Nsukka, the action extends to the city of Enugu, where the narrator’s brother was imprisoned.

Before we continue, I would like you to pay closer attention to the description of Nsukka. It was the season of *theft* on the *serene* Nsukka campus. The word *serene* describes calm and peaceful places where theft does not fit. This should make us wonder whether the narrator is not reliable as it is confusing the subjective with the objective in the presentation of the events. This could also mean that the neighborhood is going through a transformation or an unusual period of instability. Again, the answer to this question you can answer by paying attention to the details. In this case, you can go to page 4 where the narrator says, **“It was the season of cults on our serene Nsukka campus.”** Apart from replacing the pronoun “This” with “It”, this quote is identical with the one we have read in page 2. The only major difference is that the season is now the season of cults rather than theft. This means that the narrator is being ironic about the word “serene” that is used to describe the community of Nsukka.

The time of the story is not clearly defined, but it would be later than 1985. In this case, we can rely on the references of the text to extra-textual facts in order to define the time of the story. As mentioned earlier, the events of the story take place after the return of the family from the United States of America, wherefrom they brought “*Purple Rain* and *Thriller* videotapes” (P.1). *Purple Rain* was released in 1984, while *Thriller* was released in 1982.

However, the setting of the story is not limited to the city of Nsukka. With the imprisonment of Nnamabia, the setting extends to the city of Enugu. The narrator’s first reaction to the transportation of her brother to Enugu was, “**We got back into the car and a new fear gripped us all. Nsukka—our slow, insular campus and the slower, more insular town—was manageable; my father would know the police superintendent**” (P.6). This informs the reader that the town of Nsukka is a place where people can get away with their crimes depending on their communications. A couple of lines later, the fear they had knowing their son was transferred to Enugu was justified, because “**It was where the police could do what they were famed for when under pressure to produce results: kill people**” (P.7). Either place, the police service does not seem to be a reliable system.

### **Social and Political Criticism:**

As you can tell now, this is a realistic story. The setting we have just discussed leads us to the next point that is the social and political criticism presented in the story. Let us start with some of the elements of social criticism, with which the story is so abundant. As the narrator mentions at the beginning of the story, Osita, their neighbour is the one who burgled

their house the first time. Later one, she tells that her brother Nnamabia stole their mother's jewelry **“because other sons of professors were doing it”** (P.2). This mentality was dominant, and stealing was popular among the children of the professors. The real criticism comes when she explains that the fathers pretended they did not know about what their children were doing. **“Still, when their professor parents saw one another at the staff club or at church or at a faculty meeting, they continued to moan about riffraff from town coming onto their sacred campus to steal”** (P.3). This a direct criticism of the educated people of Nigeria, who turn a blind eye for the misbehaviour of their children. It was not only one or two of them who did it. Instead, it was the whole community of that university town. One of the moments where the criticism is directly presented is when the narrator expresses her feeling towards the mother's reaction to Nnamabia telling her that he sold the stolen jewelry. “I wanted to slap her,” said the narrator (P.2). It is funny that what bothered the mother more was the fact that her son failed to get the right price for the stolen items; it was not the fact that her son acted like a thief and was following the habits of the bad company.

Nnamabia's act did not come from a vacuum. On the contrary, it is shown in the story as the natural development of the internal and external social factors. In the house, his actions was the result of repeated acts of overlooking on the part of the mother. Towards the end of page 3 and the beginning of page 4, the narrator provides you with a summary of Nnamabia's history of misconduct. It shows you, how, every time, the mother would cover up for him. What I want you to pay attention to is that we should not think of blaming only the mother because this paragraph

shows her history with Nnamabia. Think of the father. Where was he? what measures did he take to rectify his child's behavior?

Based on the story, the father seemed to be easy on his side too. Even when Nnamabia stole the exam questions to sell them, he did not punish his son. Instead, he gave him more pocket money (P.4). After knowing his son stole from his mother, all he did is make Nnamabia **“write a report: how he had sold the jewelry, what he had spent the money on, with whom he had spent it”** (P.2). He did not even seem to be interested whether his son was going to report the truth or not. Both of them were not aware that the little things are building up to serious misconduct. Again do not be fooled that this is an individual case. If you link this behavior to that of the other professors at the meetings, where they pretended that their children were innocent, you realize that this is the characteristic of the whole community.

From this point, I would like you to think of the external factor affecting Nnamabia's choices and those of his parents. All the parents tend to overlook the mistakes of their children. Moreover, **“The thieving boys were the popular ones”** during the season of theft (P.3). As a teenager, Nnamabia would want to become popular not only amongst his fellow male friends, but also amongst girls. Remember that even the narrator used to like the thieving Osita and wished he would notice her (P.3). So, you can imagine what a teenager like Nnamabia would do to be accepted as one of the popular guy like the thieving Osita.

However, some pressing questions need to be posed here. How could all these crimes go unnoticed by the police. The explanation could be that they did not know because the families would not call due to fear of shame, as it was a community of university professors. However, if you get back

to one of the extracts we have read. The narrator tells that **“Nsukka [...] was manageable; my father would know the police superintendent”** (P.6). With such police system, you understand how these kids grew up to be more daring time after time.

All these factors and the little acts of theft that were left unhandled developed three years later to become more serious criminal acts. As a result, Nsukka moved from *the season of theft* to *the season of cults*. As you know, the word “cult” refers to a group of devoted religious group or sub-group that has its own special practices. However, the word cult as used in the story seems to be closer to the meaning of the word “gang”. It was the time of violence, and the cults were committing murder. Nnamabia broke curfew, and the Nigerian Younis had to handle the situation. Unfortunately, for Nnamabia, the Nigerian Younis was not a nice guy like our Younis. He gets arrested and the setting expands to include the city of Enugu, and its prison.

Here, the story shifts heavily to political criticism. The story moves from the micro image of Nsukka police department to the macro Enugu police. The **“mother bribed the two policemen at the desk with money and with jollof rice and meat, [...] and they allowed Nnamabia to come out of his cell and sit on a bench with”** the family (P.7). In order to be able to judge that it is a corrupt system rather than a corrupt group of prison officers, you need more incidents to prove it. In this regard, the story presents plenty of evidence starting with the fact that this police is ready to **“kill people”** to **“produce results”** whether you are guilty or not (P.7). At the same time it is the police system that once called a woman **“a whore because she had two cell phones and asked her for so much money that she knelt on the ground in the rain begging them to let her go since her**



**bus had already been allowed to go”** (P.10). Having all these incidents mentioned in the story provides you with solid evidence of the political criticism of the Nigerian system represented by its police system.

With this we reach the end of the first part of our journey with “Cell One”, and we will continue with it the next time.

### **Time in Fiction**

While you are reading the story for our next lecture, I would like you to think of the time of the story in light of the following variations of time as narrated in fiction, and I want you to read this section from the book (P.522), if you have it. You can also find it in the pdf glossary I sent you (P.16), which is scanned from the book:

#### **❖ Elapsed vs. Encompassed:**

Elapsed time is the time that passed between the beginning of the story and the end of it. It is the time that characters spend in the story or work. Encompassed time is all the time that is mentioned in story. For example, the story takes places in 2020 but it refers to actions from 2011. The events from 2011 are not part of the elapsed time, but it is a time encompassed within the story. In the “Battler” by Hemingway, the story of the past of Ad Francis and his ex-wife is encompassed in the one night elapsed time of the story.

### ❖ **Straightforward vs. Convolutd:**

Straightforward time is defined, moving from point A to point B. Convolutd time is when the story fluctuates between, for example, the past and the present. In convolutd time, we have a jump between the past, the present, and even the future.

### ❖ **Continuous vs. Discontinuous:**

If you have continuous time, you have one piece without breaks, while in the discontinuous we have breaks or interruptions. The interruptions can be like “after two years” or “three months later” or something like that. However, when we have something like “two years ago” then we have convolutd time because we have a jump to the past.

### ❖ **Objective vs. Subjective:**

These terms can apply to many things like characterisation, narration, and now we have them in time. Objective time is the real time that passes, the time you can measure by seconds, minutes, hours, days, etc. Subjective time is the time a character feels but that might not be the real time. For example, when you have to wait your friend and he is late, so you feel that you have been waiting for hours, but you actually have been waiting for minutes. The opposite is also subjective time; for example, when you are in

a happy situation and you feel that a few hours fly like a few minutes.

**Have a Nice Time!**

**Stay Safe!**