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**Short Story**

**Lecture 5**

**“Cell One” (Part 2)**

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

Welcome back, I hope that all of you have finished reading the story and enjoyed it. I also wish that you did some extra research, as I always expect you to do, on our author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. However, before we continue our discussion of the events of “Cell One”, I would like to pick up from where we left last time; I mean the time structure of the story.

### **Time in the Story**

Last time we differentiated between for way to describe the time structure of a story: Elapsed vs. Encompassed, Straightforward vs. Convolutd, Continuous vs. Discontinuous, and Objective vs. Subjective time. What you need to know is the time of a story can be described with more than one of these, and it could be discussed according to more than one of these categories. This is what we will see in our story.

The elapsed time of the story includes the time since the beginning of the story, that is when Osita first robbed their house, till the story closes, that is when they took Nnamabia back to Nsukka and he told them why he was transferred to cell one. Everything that took place in this interval, including the two burglaries, the season of theft, the season of cults, and the imprisonment, is considered part of the elapsed time. Although there is a gap of three years between the robbery and the arrest of Nnamabia, this still included in the elapsed time. Now you need to decide whether there is any encompassed time in the story. Here you need to realize that expository scenes present encompassed time if they address events that took place before the opening of the story. Here, **I want you to find at least one example of exposition in the story.**

Now let us decide whether the story presents a straightforward or convoluted time. With the references and the presentation of scenes from the past where the police insulted a girl from the bus because they wanted to take money from her, you can say that the time of the story is convoluted. However, this is not the best example of convoluted time because there is not real jump between the past present and the future. We have the narrator describing the reason why Nnamabia was transferred to the infamous cell one, which represents a sight jump to the past, which justifies our claim that the time of the story is convoluted. You need to know here that convoluted time is not a value-term. In other words, having a complex time is not always a good choice for the writer. It needs to serve a purpose for the plot and the theme, and it should be well knit. Now let us think of the expository scenes and the references to the past. Starting with Osita's robbery, to the scene from the bus with the checkpoint, and ending with the old man being humiliated by the prison inmates; these scenes serve

purposes for the story. The first one helps establish the background and the setting of the story. The second one helps generalize the practices of the prison guards to the whole police system. The last one allows the reader understand the transformation of Nnamabia from a reckless spoilt kid from a classy university neighbourhood to a person who would stand against the ruthless police system.

I am sure you can tell that the time of the story is discontinuous because you have some gaps like the “**three years**” between stealing the mother’s jewellery and the arrest of Nnamabia (P.4). Finally, **I want you to think whether the time in the story was objective or subjective.**

Having finished with the time of the story, I would like to get back to our reading of the story itself.

### **The Transformation of Nnamabia**

**“If we ran Nigeria like this cell,” he said, “we would have no problems in this country. Things are so organized. Our cell has a chief called General Abacha and he has a second in command. Once you come in, you have to give them some money. If you don’t, you’re in trouble”** (P.7).

These are Nnamabia’s words to his parents in the first visit. This quote is revealing. First of all, it shows you the corruption of the prisons of Nigeria. Bribery is the way; if you pay, you buy your “**peace in the cell**” (P.7). The irony is that, from the events of the story, it appears that this is really how the situation is in Nigeria. Because his parents could bribe the guards, he was able to see them and tell them his story. Notice here how Nnamabia is seems to be OK with this system. He even believes that it should be

generalized in the country. This, if you think of his history as presented in the story, fits his personality. He was a spoilt boy who never took responsibility for his misbehaviour. On the contrary, his mother taught him that money can solve the problems. **“When he stole the exam questions from the study and sold them,”** his mother asked his father to give him **“more pocket money”** (P.4). However, you need to keep in mind that Nnamabia was aware of how things are done in the prison, and that the police are not friendly at all. That is why he knew he had to hide his money to survive the prison.

The first person to notice the change in Nnamabia is his father, and that is after the first visit. It was the moment his father knew he should have taught Nnamabia that there are consequences for his actions. However, the father thought that the imprisonment itself is what shook his son, while the narrator tells that what really shook him is the brutality of the system. Even the tough ones who he seemed to admire, were vulnerable and weak in the prison. **“The boy was tall and tough, rumored to have carried out one of the killings, [...] was in the cell cowering and sobbing after the chief had given him a knock behind the head”** (P.8). No one is tough enough in front of the brutal system of the Nigerian prison. If you do not have money, you are subject to humiliation and violence.

This shock was not enough to tame him. The shock that really seemed to tame him is when he saw **“a swollen dead man”** being dragged out of Cell One. The policemen wanted to threaten all the prisoners, so they stopped by Nnamabia's **“to make sure the corpse was seen by all”** (P.8). The prison system was based on fear, and **“even the chief of his cell seemed afraid of Cell One”** (P.8). After seeing the dead man from Cell One, Nnamabia seemed to be tamed. However, Nnamabia does not seem

to be mature yet to recognize the reality of his situation. He appeared to like playing the role of the victim. His sister says, **“His tone was histrionic. I wanted to ask him to shut up, because he was enjoying his new role as the sufferer of indignities”** (P.9). *Historic* means dramatic. He was living a role to the extent that his sister felt sick with his humility. She hated that he did not seem, despite the shocks, to realize how dangerous his situation is. Maybe he thought it was just another adventure to be added to his story.

The first time Nnamabia shows signs of change is when he asked his father to bribe the police officers to get the old man out to have share him some of his rice. Since that moment forward, all Nnamabia talked about was this old man. Every time his parent visited him, he told them about how cruel the cell chief and the officers were to the old man. The man was unfairly jailed, and, unfortunately, he could not afford to buy his peace with money. The moment he realizes there is more to Nnamabia than just being a reckless young man is when he shed tears over the humiliation of the old man. **“When he looked up I saw my brother’s eyes fill with tears,”** said the narrator, **“and I felt a tenderness for him that I could not have explained had I been asked to”** (P.12). This moment marks even the change of the way our narrator perceived her brother.

Before this moment, you feel that the narrator, the sister, was angry with both her brother, her parents, and her community. At one point she broke the car shield to prevent her parents from visiting Nnamabia. She kept accusing Nnamabia of exaggerating his stories and of being dramatic. On the contrary, when he cried, she had a combination of feelings for him that she could not explain. Having said this, I want you to remember that we are being told the story through a first-person narrator, and from her

own perspective. This means that she is a subjective narrator, and the choice of the narrator is not arbitrary. That is why we need to keep an eye not only on the protagonist and his actions or reactions, we should also pay attention to the tone and comments of the narrator.

The full transformation of Nnamabia is when he stood up against the police officers and the cellmates who wanted to humiliate the old in order to give him **“a free bucket of water”** (P.16). Let us pause and read the confrontation as described by Nnamabia:

**“I shouted at the policeman. I said the old man was innocent and ill and if they kept him here they would never find his son because he did not even know where his son was. They said I should shut up immediately or they would take me to Cell One. I didn’t care. I didn’t shut up. So they pulled me out and beat me and took me to Cell One.”** (P.16)

First of all, you notice that Nnamabia exposed the flawed logic of the police, if they really had any. He explained to them that they were not going to get any result from the imprisonment of the old man. He also criticized the entire judicial system calling it unfair. Finally, he refused to be silenced even when he was threatened with Cell One, the cell that even the toughest of men fear. He was ready to lose his life to defend a complete stranger.

With this final scene, the full transformation of Nnamabia is completed. Throughout the story we can roughly divide the development of Nnamabia’s character into four stages. First, we have the reckless boy who would steal and break the laws. Then, we have the immature young man who is not aware of the grave situation he put himself into, and would not even regret it. Later, we have the compassionate Nnamabia who would shed tears for an innocent man. Finally, the defiant young man who would

stand against the system fearlessly. As you can tell now, the father seemed to be right, and the imprisonment experience really changed his son.

### **The Dream and Symbolism**

I want you to always remember to consider the way the story ends. The closing of the story usually carries its message, or the effect the author wants to leave on reader. Therefore, you need to think whether the ending is conclusive or implicative. An implicative closing is the ending that leaves it to the reader to imagine what would happen next. It does not end the story with a statement like, “and they lived happily ever after.”

The last words of Nnamabia were **“So they pulled me out and beat me and took me to Cell One”** (P.16). However, the story does not end with words of our protagonist; instead, it ends with the words of our narrator:

**Nnamabia stopped there and we asked him nothing else. Instead I imagined him raising his voice, calling the policeman a stupid idiot, a spineless coward, a sadist, a bastard, and I imagined the shock of the policemen, the shock of the chief staring open mouthed, the other cell mates stunned at the audacity of the handsome boy from the university. And I imagined the old man himself looking on with surprised pride and quietly refusing to undress. Nnamabia did not say what had happened to him in Cell One, or what happened in the new site, which seemed to me like where they kept people who would later disappear. It would have been so easy for him, my charming brother, to make a sleek drama of his story, but he did not.** (P.16)

We need to examine what the sister imagined. She imagined every detail of her brother defying not only the system but also those who are accepting the life of humility as imposed by means of fear. First of all, she imagined

her brother insulting the policeman and calling him names. When she gives us adjectives like, “**stupid idiot, a spineless coward, a sadist, a bastard,**” these are her words not her brother’s. She is expressing her own feelings by putting them into Nnamabia’s mouth. She also imagined how surprised the cell mates were to see that the boy from university could defy the police and say the word of justice. The third party involved in this scene is the old man, who felt proud to have someone defending him. He was encouraged to defend his dignity by refusing to undress. The last sentence of the story confirms the complete transformation of Nnamabia. Instead of making a drama about what he went through in Cell One and in the remote place where he was taken to be killed, he remained silent. If you compare this silence to the way he was boasting about he was being humiliated in the prison cell to his reaction to this experience, you realize that he has become more mature.

In order to understand the symbolism in the story, you need to think again of the Nigerian context, and Adichie’s stance on the practices of that system and on the social relations in Nigeria. It is worth mentioning here that the prison is one of the recurrent symbols for communities. Hence, you notice that the policeman symbolizes the corrupt authority of Nigeria. The silent cellmates represent the people of Nigeria who are not doing anything to change their circumstance. The old man represents the poor people who are suffering the consequences of corruption, and who are waiting for someone to defend their rights. Nnamabia represents the educated youth that needs to focus on reforming the society and the whole country rather than living a spoiled life.

This change, is the dream of the little girl who seems to represent our author herself. A quick check on the life of Adichie in any source would



lead you to detecting the autobiographical element in the story. Both our narrator and author are females. They are also both the daughters of university professors. Moreover, they were both raised in the town of Nsukka. On the wider scope, they both seem to share the criticism of the corruption in Nigeria and seek for a better future led by the educated youth.

### **Language Shift**

The last point in today's discussion addresses the shift in the use of language. You could notice that Nnamabia switched to English in three places in the story. The first time is when he told his sister that they were robbed, at the beginning of the story. The second time is when he apologized to his father for stealing his mother's jewellery. The last time he used it is when he boasted about how he impressed the cell chief with his ability to hide the money. If you try to figure out what is in common between the three incidents, you find that Nnamabia was being dramatic. We know he was lying in two of the incidents, which would make us doubt that he was being completely honest in the third time. You could argue that the English is considered, in this story, the language of lies in comparison to the native language that is the language of truth. However, what I want you to learn is that if there is a shift in language, we need to examine whether it has any significance to the them, characterisation, or any other element of the story.

This is all about "Cell One", and for our next lecture, I want you to read "The Kiss" by Anton Chekhov.

**Have a Nice Time!**

**Stay Safe!**