THERE IS NO OTHER: SITUATIONAL IDENTITY IN ADICHIE’S “A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE”

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Conceptions of Identity in Contemporary Nigeria

In contemporary Nigeria, any attempt to construct a sense of national identity is complicated by the remarkable diversity of cultural patterns and linguistic forms. Political leaders and scholars have drawn attention to this challenge for some time. In 1947, a leading Nigerian nationalist politician, Obafemi Awolowo, famously stated “Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression” (Awolowo 47). The vast diversity of ethnic groups in Nigeria, revealed by the existence of some 248 distinct languages, is an indication of the complexity involved in establishing systems of communication that could facilitate the goal of national identity (Coleman 15). Partly as a result of the way colonial institutions and policies encouraged the political structuring of ethnic, religious, and gender identities, many inequalities in contemporary life are also shaped by these distinctions.

This thesis examines a short story written by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, from her collection The Thing Around Your Neck. Adichie challenges fixed ethnic, gender, and religious identities by presenting them as situational; her characters display agency by actively choosing a construction of identity which is beneficial in a particular setting. The story advances a situational negotiation of social identity, revealing the flexibility of identity forms. For example, a Muslim Hausa woman sacrifices her head scarf so that it can be used for a tourniquet for another woman; as she chooses to shed a central symbol of her Muslim identity, the woman’s religious identity appears situational and arbitrary. Her negotiation of identity also addresses Catherine Acholonu’s concept of Motherism. Acholonu developed the
theory of motherism with the goal of finding an –ism which is not exclusive to a
gender, religion, or ethnicity; her goal of conceptual inclusivity supports the idea of
situational, negotiable identity forms. Further, Adichie’s presentation of situational
identity occurs in the diverse, transcultural setting of Kano, Nigeria, recalling
Chielozona Eze’s theoretical conceptualization of Cosmopolitan Solidarity, and the
complexity of identity forms which are associated with such a diverse setting.

Cultural, religious, and ethnic relations in Nigeria can be understood through
an examination of sociological approaches to individual and collective identity.
Donileen Loseke identifies four levels of identity, which are understood as cultural,
institutional, organizational, and personal. Cultural identities, located at the macro-
level, are the “imagined characteristics of disembodied types of people” that
“construct symbolic boundaries around types of social actors” (Loseke 661).
Similarly, at the meso-level, large-scale political processes creates institutional
identities, which also reflect “imagined characteristics” of certain people; in this case,
the people are often the intended targets of policies. The chosen characteristics serve
to “justify policy decisions” and “legitimize institutional arrangements” (Loseke 662).
Organizational identities are also produced at the meso-level, in an effort to structure
and reconfigure personal identity. Lastly, personal identity exists at the micro-level,
and is described by Loseke as the “self-understandings of unique, embodied selves
about their selves” (662). This work will focus on the relationship between the
collective understanding of attributed cultural and institutional identities, and the
individual’s perception of personal identity.
Considering the concept of cultural identity while observing the three most prominent ethnic groups which comprise roughly two-thirds of the Nigerian population (the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo), Diamond finds that each group shares a common history and “fundamental unities” among subgroups, clans, and villages (22). The sense of unity established by each ethnic group created a form of communal identity and allowed members to establish a sense of belonging. Throughout the early 20th century, the British enforced institutionalized ethnic identities through a political system that ruled Nigeria as two separate countries, divided between the North and the South. Because of the existence of separate administrations, and a greater emphasis on economic development in the South, tensions developed among the major ethnic groups. Some of these tensions were enforced and expressed in popular representations of the characteristics of particular ethnic groups. For example, as Larry Diamond explains in his work *The Origins of Crisis*, when Southern Nigerians migrated to the North, whether they were Yoruba, Igbo, or an ethnic minority, Northern Muslims were forbidden on “religious and administrative grounds to associate with Southerners, whom they were taught to regard as pagans and infidels” (26).

Regional consciousness increased even more significantly after the 1939 division of Southern Nigeria into Western and Eastern Regions. The British administration divided the country into three regions whose boundaries were based on a general pattern established by previous settlements: these included the Northern Region, home to the Hausa-Fulani; the Western Region, where the Yoruba were most
concentrated; and the Eastern Region, where the Igbo were a significant group. When Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom on October 1st, 1960, the relationship between a region and its dominant ethnic group was reinforced. Since regional identity came to be associated with the imagined characteristics of ethnic identity, up-and-coming politicians of newly-independent Nigeria appealed to their potential voters by inciting ethnic pride. The cohesion and unity shaped through this process could thus be said to be largely artificial and arbitrary, cultivated by forces in competition for political support. In a setting such as this, the creation of a common national identity was less attainable than other forms of collective identity; instead, Nigerian nationalism was composed of “separate ethnic nationalisms” (Diamond 28).

While tensions grew among people associated with different regions and dominant ethnic groups, the bonds of ethnic loyalty and identity strengthened within groups. As individuals recognized the pronounced effects of colonial traditions on their daily lives, Nigerian authors’ texts called out to readers to cherish their cultural and ethnic identity. This is illustrated most profoundly, as Wendy Griswold notes, with “the village novel” genre of Nigerian literature, which she labels as the “first generation” of Nigerian novels. The most notable authors of this generation are Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, and of course the Igbo author Chinua Achebe; generally speaking, the first generation of authors is associated with newly independent Nigeria, writing during the 1960s and 1970s. For these novels, the stability and simplicity of the village setting provided a model for a desirable social order. As a response to the
“disturbance from outside,” authors created an idyllic, “mythic,” setting where “traditional order” defined daily life (Griswold 717).

In texts of this “first generation” of Nigerian writers, set in rural communities, there was a marked focus on the relationship between a community and the imposing group from colonial institutions. In this society framed by the opposition between the colonizer and the colonized, ethnic pride reflected a desire to distance the group from colonial culture. The importance of ethnic identification in this genre, sometimes referred to as tribalism, also reflects a desire for unity and commonality during a time when the local cultural complex experienced fragmentation and internal conflict.

Nigerian authors responded to oppressive colonial structures with works which encouraged national unity through the idyllic features of rural communities. In turn, ethnic and religious identity proved to be a powerful force in the organization of urban centers such as Kano, Lagos, Ibadan, and Kaduna, where it helped to establish a sense of belonging and community among migrants. We can see, then, how colonial institutions contributed to the development of new social, cultural, and political forms during the years following colonization, and shaped new relationships among communities through transformations in ethnic consciousness.

Nigerian authors found ethnic identity useful in their attempts to liberate the country from colonial institutions. Similarly, nationalism was a perspective exemplified by post-independence Nigeria which also displayed a desire for oneness in a particular political context. The nationalist civil war slogan, “To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done,” expresses the view that national unity was a useful
vehicle for the creation of an identity distinct from those imposed by colonialism (Wambu 92). Though ethnic identity and nationalism served particular purposes in their specific historical contexts, it is possible to critically examine their value in contemporary Nigeria, where the imagined characteristics of cultural and institutional identities have become entangled. As the discourse of politicians and the media continues to center around cultural and religious identity forms, often employing extreme and pejorative language, it often results in the formation of oppositions among groups. Contemporary Nigerians such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recognize this, and Adichie’s work problematizes notions of ethnic, religious, and national identity that lead to people into conflict with one another, as well as the constructions of internal cohesion that can be used to emphasize distinctions among people based on their belonging to different groups.

The following comment made by a character from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ambitious 2006 novel *Half a Yellow Sun* demonstrates the importance of ethnic identity in the decades following independence. The Igbo character Odenigbo, who is called “a hopeless tribalist” by the Yoruba woman Miss Adebayo, states “I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. ... But I was Igbo before the white man came” (Adichie 25). Moreover, as Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa observed in 1961, just one year after independence, “Nigerian politicians, in order to gain advantage over their political adversaries, would exercise no scruples in fanning the fires of tribal jealousies and suspicion” (qtd. in Diamond 42). The pejorative dimensions of ethnic stereotypes had clear political potential. Rhetorical
forms employed during the 1959 election serves as an illustration: the president of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) called the Action Group of Western Nigeria “godless worshippers,” and used labels such as “incipient fascists” and “semi-literate” (qtd. in Diamond 58).

Examples of the media’s influence can be seen in the way it portrays politicians, with the Nigerian media revealing its “regional parallelism,” which Muhammad Yasha’u, in his text examining the media coverage of such events, defines as the “influence of regional, ethnic, sectional, political and religious considerations in the practice of journalism” (363). The phenomenon of regional parallelism, he asserts, compels the newspapers in Nigeria to be “divided by ethnic, political and regional influences. In some situations this has contributed to dividing the people along ethnic and regional lines” (357). In 1963, tensions were so great that the predominantly Igbo population of the Southeast organized a secession, forming the country of Biafra. This secession movement was one of many attempted in independent Nigeria. The country’s continued struggle for national unity is apparent in Nigeria’s war slogan: “To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done” (Wambu 92).

In 1979, thirteen years of military rule were put to an end as the army transferred power to civilians. The second generation of Nigerian authors, writing mostly during the 1980’s, continued the first generation’s expression of social and political protest; the emerging urban centers provided authors a setting to express the common theme of political corruption. These texts reflected the ever-increasing
dissatisfaction with the twenty-year tradition of an oppressive and ineffective democratic state.

It can be said that people in contemporary Nigeria now find themselves less inclined to conceptualize ethnic identity as unitary compared to multiple, since an individual’s identity may be entangled in associations with multiple cultural and ethnic groups (see Arana, Eze, and Maja-Pearce). Those writing during the 2000’s and continuing to the present day have been labeled the third generation of Nigerian writers. This group includes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an author whose texts acknowledge the vast complexity in perceptions of self and group identity. This development, as Wolfgang Welsch explains, has emerged in response to varied “migratory processes” within the nation (Welsch 198). This migration, involving the movement of people, knowledge, and material cultures of other places, has led Nigeria to a state of transculturality. Welsch’s notion attempts to capture the “multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive, understanding of culture” (Welsch 200). If contemporary Nigeria is indeed a transcultural setting, then it follows that processes like migration, interethnic marriage, and cultural transition challenge notions of both a static and unitary identity. It is in this exciting state of transculturality that we situate the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Inspired by this relatively new sense of transculturality, there are opportunities for young women writers such as Adichie, Helen Oyeyemi, and Sefi Atta to challenge naturalized conceptions of African femaleness, rejecting Eurocentric notions of femininity as they search for an alternate Afrocentric model. Adichie’s treatment of
subject matter, as well as the cultural insights she offers readers, reflects her positionality as an Igbo Nigerian woman. Adichie’s work features many examples of familial roles, particularly the role of the mother, that appear to be central to an African woman’s sense of self-identity. As I will later explain, Adichie’s distinctive portrayal of the role of the mother while describing social relations recalls Catherine Acholonu’s theory of Motherism.

Though she is a young, contemporary Nigerian author, Adichie’s work shows a deep awareness of both former and current issues facing people in her country; it is evident that aforementioned events and cultural collisions in Nigerian history inform her texts, such as those between Igbo and Hausa groups, as well as her portrayal of enculturated notions of gender and religious identities. Her works explore the ways that individuals perceive self-identity and attributed identity in ethnic, religious, or gendered terms.

During the colonial period, pre-existing cultural differences, which were fashioned and emphasized through state power, consistently resulted in practices that privileged one group over another. In politicized ethnicity oppositeness became institutionalized, as the state encouraged the identification of others based on ‘I/Other’ constructions. As a Nigerian who is mindful of these processes, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie not only engages in acts of deconstruction through her writing, but also makes an effort to heal the constructs themselves as she offers new models for human relations. Her works involve a critical analysis of the polarization of ethnicity, religion, and gender identities. Readers of Adichie’s work can perceive the author’s
implicit call for an un-doing of the imagining of ethnic relations, and, rather than simply criticizing the oppressive system, she proposes alternatives. These acts of imagination and creativity, it is to be noted, reveal her genre of work as distinct from the first and second generation of Nigerian writers.

In this thesis, I will analyze the way in which Adichie advocates a reformation of perceptions of the other based on the I/Other binary. It is my belief that Adichie’s work challenges the very notion of the Other, rendering forms of identity as situational and arbitrary. Though her textual settings vary greatly, ranging from the nascent country of Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War, to the northern Nigerian city of Kano during a riot, and even to a suburban home in Philadelphia, they all have certain elements in common. The settings of her texts are transcultural, with characters and locations constantly “undergoing transition,” echoing Welsch’s notion of transculturally (Welsch 200). In addition, characters in these texts are compelled, because of corruption or political conflict, to abandon older perceptions of ethnic and cultural difference as each “transcend[s] his or her own bigoted interest” in order to achieve a level of solidarity and cooperation (Eze 103).

This new kind of solidarity, labeled “cosmopolitan solidarity” by Chielozona Eze, recalls both Welsch’s understanding of transculturality and Ulf Hannerz’s notion of cosmopolitanism. Hannerz defines this as “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (Hannerz 239). The qualities of Welsch, Hannerz, and Eze’s conceptualizations converge in one important aspect: they express that notions of
static identity are insufficient to encapsulate the complexity of identity forms, which are the product of constant interaction with the knowledge and materials of other cultures. Along with the recognition that identity forms themselves are not stable, these authors assume that interaction among cultural forms is continual. They assert the view that culture is cooperative, “multi-meshed and inclusive,” rather than defined on the basis of “purity and distinctiveness” (Welsch 200, Hannerz 239).

Adichie’s short story reveals her cosmopolitan and transcultural outlook, presenting a setting where oppositional definitions of the Other are not considered to be useful in characters’ lives. She offers an idea of community, then, that is no longer restricted to people from the same ethnic group or the same geographic location, as it was in the “village novel genre” (Griswold 717). Our recognition of the complex history of ethnic consciousness in Nigeria allows us to observe how the Igbo author Adichie approaches ethnic identity from a “cosmopolitan,” “transcultural” perspective (Eze 103). Overall, this work seeks to examine Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s portrayal of ethnic relations in the short story “A Private Experience.” This is one of twelve which comprise the 2009 collection entitled The Thing Around Your Neck. I show how characters challenge particular constructions of identity and move their relationship towards the goals of solidarity and cooperation. As I will show, Adichie’s orientation reveals her skepticism about the rhetoric of national, religious, gender, and ethnic unity. Intriguingly, this author is unique in her attempts to formulate solidarity and cooperation without participating in the dangerous rhetoric of national and group cohesion.
Chapter One: Words and Bodies

As Adichie’s “A Private Experience” begins, readers are thrown into the middle of a riot scene in the ancient city of Kano; the protagonist, Chika, and another woman clamber into a deserted store for cover from the violence that surrounds them. Almost immediately, Adichie creates comparisons between the noise and brutality occurring outside the small store and the silence and peace within it. The narrative lurches from describing the “shouting” in various languages, the “running” and “pushing” of the market crowd, and the “sweat and fear” that Chika smells while she runs, to the silence and peace, where the two women “stand silently” near the window of the stuffy room (44-5).

The author continues describing the opposition of the inside and outside settings throughout the story; further, she parallels it with the intimate relationship between the two women to observable indications of their ethnic groups. Upon entering the small shop, the women talk about the riot, and Chika notices immediately that the woman is “a Northerner, from the narrowness of her face, the unfamiliar rise of her cheekbones; and that she is Muslim, because of the scarf” (44). The woman’s scarf, Chika also notices, is long and flimsy, with “the garish prettiness of cheap things” (44). Likewise, she wonders if the Hausa woman can tell that she is Igbo and Christian while they first look at one another. The women’s first impression of one another is thus based on their perception of ethnic identity and the physical signifiers of that identity, such as the Hausa woman’s scarf. Interestingly, though the observations that occur during the first impression may be based on ethnic identity,
there is no language used to express this; it seems that the women acknowledge their difference without drawing attention to it. Adichie writes that while the women look at one another, “Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones” (44). The violence of the outside scene is in stark contrast to the shop: “This place safe,” the woman says softly (44).

Readers quickly realize the language barrier in this scene; the women’s limited conversation is in English, but the Hausa Muslim woman is somewhat restricted in her English usage. However, the absence of certain grammatical structures does not inhibit our overall comprehension of her utterances, and, in turn, it may occur to readers that language may not necessarily be as useful as they previously thought. Even more significantly, the Hausa Muslim woman is not given a name by the author; she is labeled simply as “the woman,” evoking an identity based on biology rather than ethnicity. Neither the woman nor the narrator provides readers with her given name, and the rest of the short story continues the practice of excluding assigned labels. For example, during the conversation, the woman says, “Every time when they are rioting, they break market” (49). Her use of the pronoun “they” excludes any characterization of who is rioting, and is thus not connected to either Christian Igbos or Hausa Muslims. From the woman’s perspective, the rioting group is defined by its actions rather than its ethnic identity.

As they sit in the deserted store, Chika wonders how many riots the woman has witnessed, and reflects on what the titles of news articles she read in the past: “Hausa Muslim zealots attacking Igbo Christians” and sometimes “Igbo Christians”
seeking revenge. Chika “does not want a conversation of naming names” (49). She, it seems, recognizes that “naming names” serves no useful purpose in this situation; it could only lend support to the ethnic boundaries and the separation that occurs while labeling the other. This intentional lack of “naming names” is particularly notable; though there is a Muslim and an Igbo woman together, they do not mention these aspects of identity. From the woman’s viewpoint, the rioters do not seem to have an ethnic or religious identity in their present situation – the group is simply referenced as “they” – and their actions define how we feel about them. They riot and break. Likewise, the women’s actions define them rather than cultural, social, or religious labels.

The significance of the lack of naming in the story is reinforced when Chika later searches throughout Kano for her lost sister, Nnedi. She observes how partially-burned bodies line either side of the road, Adichie writes:

She will look at only one of the corpses, naked, stiff, facedown, and it will strike her that she cannot tell if the partially burned man is Igbo or Hausa, Christian or Muslim, from looking at the charred flesh (53).

At this point, Chika is evidently conscious of the arbitrariness of ethnic identity. The description in this passage aligns readily with the beginning scene presenting Chika running with the escaping crowd, where she was “not sure if the man running beside her was a friend of enemy” (45). It is significant that in the story, the media’s descriptions of the riot always mention ethnicity and religion while Chika, as a witness to the violence, can only perceive the group as a collective body of victims.
The contrast between the reported account of the riot and Chika’s first-hand experience of it displays the role of politicized ethnicity in Adichie’s story. If the group’s ethnic identities can be so unstable that they are not apparent to Chika, who is standing only inches from them, the reader has the opportunity to consider just how arbitrary and socially-constructed are notions of attributed identity. Additionally, the theme displaying the arbitrariness of ethnic identity is also shown by the role that chance plays in the incitement of the riot; Adichie writes that “a man who happened to be Igbo” drove over the Holy Koran which lay on the side of the road, and men nearby, “men who happened to be Muslim,” attacked him, cutting of his head “with one flash of a machete” (46). Similarly, the two women of “A Private Experience” meet by chance during the chaos of the riot. Throughout the story, Chika appears to become increasingly aware of the arbitrariness of language and identity, and thus begins to question the usefulness of words and labels; an opposition between words and bodies is formed while this understanding develops.

This opposition is significant because Chika’s understanding of life outside of the riot she experiences in Kano could be said to be based on words rather than bodies. Adichie expresses early in the short story that Chika “knows nothing about riots;” her knowledge of the situation is limited to her experience at a pro-democracy rally at the University of Lagos, where she “held a bright green branch and joined in in chanting ‘The military must go! Abacha must go!’”(44). She and her sister Nnedi, an outspoken political science student, passed out flyers and talked about “the importance of ‘having our voices heard’” (44).
The story reveals that Chika has been thrown into a situation where she must confront new and unfamiliar social and political conditions. She did not perceive her life as a medical student to be affected by the riots that she read about in the newspaper, so when she finds herself separated from her sister, she thinks that they should not have been affected by the violence: “riots like this were what happened to other people” (47). Her perception of “other people” is not stated, but in any case, it does not include herself and Nnedi; before her time in Kano, Chika understands the riots solely from sources like newspaper and radio, and that leads us to question the usefulness of these sources which rely on the language of opposition that employ arbitrary words and labels like Hausa, Igbo, Christian, and Muslim to transmit information. Adichie reveals the ease with which Chika perceives people within the I/Other binary, and the story goes on to display the ways that Chika is forced to reflect on ethnic and religious boundaries in unaccustomed ways, even though she is a university student in Lagos during a time of significant student opposition towards the military dictator, Sani Abacha.

The critical political consciousness accessible in the university environment is represented by her sister Nnedi; when Chika reflects on her sister, she imagines her “political arguments … Like how the government of General Abacha was using its foreign policy to legitimatize itself in the eyes of other African countries. Or how the huge popularity of blond hair attachments was a direct result of British colonialism” (47). Chika seems to follow Nnedi’s politically conscious example, but, notably, she does not appear to identify with that role. Nnedi’s goal, “having our voices heard,”
does not seem to be beneficial for Chika; it appears that words are not as influential on her as this experience, where her thoughts are prompted by physical interactions (44). The opposition between words and bodies is represented best in the moment when Chika sees the charred body in the streets: the fallen man had no physical reminder of his identity, and this seems to leave a lasting impression on the character. Though Adichie does not explicitly critique the limitations of language, we can observe the relative significance of the way Chika is affected by seeing the body, in comparison to the lack of influence that “voices” had on her.

The author explains that after Chika returns home from the deserted store, she listened to BBC Radio, which included descriptive statements about the riot such as “religious with undertones of ethnic tension.” Chika will then throw the radio against the wall while “a fierce red rage will run through her at how it has all been packaged and sanitized and made to fit into so few words, all those bodies” (54). After Chika has seen the bodies and has bonded with the Hausa Muslim woman, bodies and physical contact begin to define her reality more than the words and labels that formed her previous perception.
Chapter Two: Shared Bonds among Women

The women of “A Private Experience” bond through a shared, intimate experience; while they pass a number of hours together, a sense of solidarity is formed between them, brought about by a mutual appreciation for the notion of family and the qualities of mothering. This bond, led by physical interaction, contributes to Chika’s renewed understanding of “other people;” that’s to say, those whom she did not directly experience before this scene (47). Notably, Chika’s reflections about the Other develop after this unforeseen encounter rather than as a result of her education and medical experience. One of the most important interactions inside the shop begins as the woman, after abruptly saying, “My nipple is burning like pepper,” frees her breasts and holds them toward Chika, as Adichie writes, “as though in an offering” (49).

Chika recalls the nervousness felt during her clinical experience at the university before examining the woman’s nipples. “She became sweaty, her mind blank” while examining a young boy’s heart murmur; this suggests that Chika is perhaps not comfortable in her role as a doctor. This is comparable to the way that she did not truly identify with the role of the politically conscious university student. Also, Chika’s medical ability does not appear to factor in to her diagnosis of the woman’s ailment in this scene. Though the Hausa woman appeals to Chika’s medical knowledge in this situation, Chika’s response does not seem to be as informed by her medical studies as it is by the image of her mother. After advising the woman to apply lotion on her breasts after feeding her baby, she explains, “It was the same with my
mother. Her nipples cracked when the sixth child came, and she didn’t know what caused it, until a friend told her that she had to moisturize” (50). This statement, however, is a lie, and Chika wonders what the purpose of her lie is: “this need to draw on a fictional past similar to the woman’s” (50).

We find out that Chika and her sister Nnedi are their mother’s only children; thus there are two parts to Chika’s lie. The first lie implies a shared experience of the woman and Chika’s mother, and the second lie is that her mother had six children during her lifetime. Both parts to this lie are significant; the idea of her mother having six children may serve to present Chika’s childhood as similar to what she thinks the woman experienced as a child. In addition, it places her mother in a similar position as the woman, who states that she has five children. The lie alluding to the shared experience of Chika’s mother and the Hausa Muslim woman displays Chika’s desire to seek likeness in her relation to this woman. Most importantly, readers understand that it is indeed Chika’s medical knowledge that informs her recommendations for the woman, even if she is putting up the front that she has personal experience in a situation similar to the woman’s.

Up to this point in “A Private Experience,” the two characters may seem quite different when considering their personalities, beliefs, education, and socioeconomic situations. However, this intimate moment shared between them presents an image which connects them: the image of the mother. In a story where the characters’ ethnic groups are generally defined by their violent behaviors and by opposition, it is perhaps surprising that the two women bond after evoking such a simple and central symbol.
The physical interaction that occurs between them seems to contribute to the increasingly insignificant and arbitrary sense of ethnic boundaries in the story; after Chika’s “disclosure … created a bond,” the woman wipes her eyes and says, “Allah keep your sister and Halima in safe place” (51). The woman prays for the Igbo Christian woman just as she does for her own daughter, Halima; she disregards ethnic boundaries and identification in the hope that both Nnedi and Halima are “in safe place” (51). Furthermore, there is another occasion in the story where Chika’s impulsive thoughts disregard any thought of ethnic identification; when Adichie describes the riot scene where Chika blindly runs down crowded streets, she writes that Chika is “not sure if she should stop and pick up one of the bewildered-looking children separated from their mothers in the rush” (45). Again, we see a blatant disregard for boundaries as a maternal concern momentarily occupies Chika’s mind.

In addition, arbitrary identity in Adichie’s story is expressed by the changing function of a particular material item: the headscarf. The role of the Hausa Muslim woman’s scarf is compelling because its function and significance transforms through the action of the story. When first described, Adichie writes of a “long, flimsy pink and black scarf, with the garish prettiness of cheap things” (44). The scarf contributes to our understanding of its owner; the pink and black colors remind us of the woman’s femininity, and the second part of the description alludes to the socioeconomic situation of the woman. Similar to the way that Chika later looks at the woman’s “green … threadbare wrapper” and thinks that “it is probably one of the two the
woman owns,” readers may form the assumption that the scarf may be valuable to the woman partly because it is one of the few that she possesses (44).

Likewise, it is also immediately apparent to Chika that this scarf signifies the woman’s religious identity. The scarf remains loosely wrapped around the woman’s neck during most of the story; however, she removes it for two distinct purposes. The first is when she prays in the dusty store, and the other is when Chika fearfully returns to the store after her attempt to return to her Aunt’s home:

Chika sits on the floor and looks closely, in the failing light, at the line of blood crawling down her leg. Her eyes swim restlessly in her head. It looks alien, the blood, as though someone had squirted tomato paste on her.

“Your leg. There is blood,” the woman says, a little wearily. She wets one end of her scarf at the tap and cleans the cut on Chika’s leg, then ties the wet scarf around it, knotting it at the calf (54).

In this excerpt, Chika appears to be helpless and confused - almost childlike. Demonstrated by her sentiments throughout the story, one sees that this situation is alien and surreal for her, expressed here by her impression of her own blood as foreign, like “tomato paste” (54). Her apparent helplessness is contrasted with the Hausa woman’s immediate jump to action, taking off her scarf and tending to the wound. When considering the religious, feminine, and cultural significance that this woman’s scarf holds, her choice to use it as a tourniquet on Chika’s leg adds yet another dimension to the object: it is now associated with healing.
This newfound function of the woman’s scarf helps to form an intriguing development in the story. As a trained and educated medical student, it is perhaps surprising that Chika seems helpless as she watches blood run down her leg. In this moment of weakness, the woman is a ready healer, washing and dressing the wound. Comparing this moment to the other doctor-patient experience in the story, one can note a role reversal. As Chika examines the woman’s breasts and advises her, she assumes the role of the doctor, but now the woman adopts that role as she heals Chika’s wound.

The role reversal in “A Private Experience” is significant because it contributes to Chika’s perception of identity as unstable and arbitrary. After all, if roles can be so easily reversed, how can we perceive them as stable in our lives? Though the women choose not to discuss ethnic or religious roles, they are nonetheless able to find likeness and respect one another. In addition to helping one another through healing, Adichie’s characters bond because of their expressions of mothering, compassion, and generosity. Since these qualities prove to be more influential in determining the behavior of the women than their religious and ethnic identity forms, it leads one to question the usefulness of these identities in the women’s lives. The final interaction between the women, described below, serves to reinforce Adichie’s theme of situational identity.

In the morning following the long evening spent together, as the two characters are finally able to exit their refuge, Chika unties the woman’s scarf from her leg and shakes it, “as though to shake the bloodstains out,” and hands it to the woman (55-6).
After telling Chika to wash her leg well, the woman turns to exit, only to hear Chika ask “May I keep your scarf? The bleeding might start again” (57). Her reaction is perhaps surprising; after appearing for a moment “as if she does not understand,” she nods. Adichie writes,

There is perhaps the beginning of future grief on her face, but she smiles a light, distracted smile before she hands the scarf back to Chika and turns to climb out of the window (57).

The idea of a Muslim woman offering her scarf to another individual who does not appear to be Muslim is remarkable because it is a material item which symbolizes her religious identity in the most profound way. The woman is thus sacrificing an essential symbol of her religious and cultural identity; I use the term sacrifice because of Adichie’s allusion to the possibility of “future grief on her face” (57). We can observe the importance of the exchange by the way that the object changes its function. As a scarf, it is emblematic of the woman’s ethnic and religious identity, even more so than an important aspect of femininity and fashion in Hausa Muslim society.

After the woman removes it from her neck and cleans Chika’s wound with it, making a tourniquet, the older functions no longer apply to it. The scarf, wrapped around Chika’s leg, is now used for healing. Therefore, the woman chooses to sacrifice an intimate aspect of her clothing which signifies her religious, feminine, and ethnic identity in order to provide an object for healing another human being.

The woman then reenters the public sphere after shedding this identity market. She disregards this aspect of her identity relatively easily in Chika’s time of need, and
while this is a good judge of her character, it is also important in a larger sense. This exchange reminds us of the unstable nature of identity that can be observed throughout the story, and suggests that the woman’s “gentleness” is a much more significant representation of her character than her religious and ethnic identity. After all, one can recognize that the Hausa Muslim woman gave her scarf to an Igbo Christian woman that she did not know before this riot scene, and a woman whom she will likely never see again. It is a chance encounter between the Igbo and Hausa, similar to the spontaneous violent interactions between the Igbo and Hausa outside the store, also occurring by chance. Though it is true that the boundaries between the inside and outside of the store also seem to be signifying the boundaries of ethnic identification in the story, the woman exits the building without her scarf. This allows for an extended expression of her arbitrary ethnic and religious identity, and since Adichie ends the story with the woman’s exit from the store, there is an unvoiced hope that it is possible for people to live their lives without their religious and ethnic identities too greatly directing their actions.
Chapter Three: Choosing to Challenge Social Institutions

In this section, I explore the relative personal and social significance of ethnic and religious identity in the story. At the beginning of the story, Chika meets a woman whom she identifies as a “Northerner” and a Muslim because of her physical appearance (44). Here, we witness Chika identifying the woman by the physical features she has learned to associate with her cultural identity. The woman’s high cheekbones and scarf are physical attributes which reveal her as a Northerner and Muslim because these characteristics are incorporated into Chika’s accumulated cultural knowledge of Hausa Muslims. Bearing this in mind while observing the woman’s exit from the store at the final moment of the story, when she sheds her scarf and thus casts away the physical representation of her Muslim identity, it is evident that those who see her outside are less likely to recognize her as a Muslim woman.

The reaction of the woman when she sacrifices her scarf hints at her “future grief;” though she may feel relatively comfortable without a scarf within the boundaries of the store, she seems to grow weary at the idea of entering the public space without it. Adeline Masquelier, in her ethnography exploring the influence of religion on domestic life in Hausa society, recalls the story of a Hausa Muslim woman named Bebe who feels distinctly uncomfortable and insecure outside of the comfort of her seclusion. Similar to Adichie’s story, it seems that there are physical boundaries within which the women “safely anchor their selfhood” (Masquelier 216). Bebe, Masquelier notes, was a “self-assured” and “assertive” woman with “resilient confidence;” however, after she agreed to walk to the tasha, or market, she grows
uneasy and told the author that the “presence of so many men had made her feel deeply ashamed” (215, 6). Bebe’s professed *kumya*, or shame, occurred due to her “intense feelings of vulnerability upon being exposed to the outside world” (216). Adichie’s story, taking place in a *tasha* a few hours away from the town that Masquelier describes, illustrates a similar example of a Hausa Muslim woman who seems aware of the personal significance of violating a social rule.

Therefore when Adichie writes of the woman’s “slight, distracted smile” that follows her expression of “future grief,” there is an implication that Hausa readers, and those familiar with Hausa culture, understand the sacrifice that the woman is making by entering the public sphere, particularly the marketplace, without a central symbol of her Muslim identity. One might make the argument that Bebe’s sentiments cannot compare readily to those of the woman’s, since they differ in terms of nationality and status in seclusion. However, it is evident that Adichie makes an effort to characterize the Hausa Muslim woman as exemplary of Hausa Muslim women in general, regardless of geographic difference. Importantly, the story is set in the Kano *tasha*, which holds daily markets and is perhaps the largest market in the Hausa market system. Frank A. Salamone writes that Hausa markets are “vital links in the state and even international area;” Adichie thus chose the setting where the Hausa community is linked to other communities in an obvious way (Salamone 2).

While Salamone focuses on the economic functions of the market, which brings “units together in a cash economy,” Adichie also uses the setting to illustrate the “vital links” among individuals of the various ethnic groups of the Kano state.
Beverly Mack writes that Kano, as a “terminus for the trans-Saharan trade routes for the past 500 years,” is a city with a “cosmopolitan mix” of immigrants (Mack 13). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie likewise characterizes the market for its diversity; at the beginning of the story, Chika recalls the sudden shouting that she heard: “there was shouting in English, in pidgin, in Hausa, in Igbo” (Adichie 44). This detail makes reference to the marked diversity of the market crowd; the representation of the market as a place with cultural others is also seen by observing the two women of the story. Chika, wearing “high-heeled sandals,” a “denim skirt,” and a “T-shirt embossed with a picture of the Statue of Liberty” finds herself hiding alongside a woman of a different socio-economic, religious, and economic status than she (43,46). Thus we can perceive that the story’s setting is essential for Adichie’s transcultural presentation.

Because of the women’s physical differences, the woman’s ethnic and religious identities are instantly apparent to Chika. From Chika’s perspective, the initial process of identification assures that the Hausa Muslim woman is drawn by certain imagined characteristics which are incorporated into Chika’s mental image of Hausa Muslims. Readers experience the story from Chika’s point of view, and as a result we also participate in this process of ethnic and religious identification; for this reason the woman seems exemplary of Hausa Muslim women in general.

Further, the woman in the story is a “trader,” “selling onions” in the daily market (48). Within this description is an important trait which distinguishes the woman from Masquelier’s account of Bebe; the woman, as a market trader, is used to
moving within and among people in the public sphere. Bebe, in contrast, lives within the boundaries of her *kubli*, or her seclusion within her home. Nonetheless, both of the women’s journeys into the *tasha* violate a primary social rule, and just as importantly, leave the women without the comfort of “pious interiority” that results from veiling, that which “is integral to their moral selfhood” (Masquelier 213). Masquelier notes that *kumya*, meaning shame in Hausa, can also be understood as “social inadequacy;” the professed *kumya* of Bebe reflects a sense of both personal and social inadequacy (217). It follows that the woman of Adichie’s story would also be vulnerable to feelings of *kumya* upon taking the long walk home.

In addition, the cultural significance of the character of the Hausa Muslim woman can be observed when considering the story’s setting and the character’s description. “A Private Experience,” which takes place in the market, a vital setting in Hausa society, features a woman who works every day selling products, contributing to the cash economy of the area. Lastly, this is the vast *tasha* of Kano, a densely-populated city inhabited principally by Hausa Muslims. In sum, the woman in the story holds an essential role in her society, working day by day at perhaps the most significant location in Hausa society. This characterization enables readers to find similarities between the woman and other Muslim Hausa women, like Bebe, featured in Masquelier’s work. Bebe’s feelings of intense vulnerability “upon being exposed to the outside world” recall the woman’s choice to enter the outside world without her scarf (Masquelier 216). As I will expand on later in this text, the similarities between Masquelier’s ethnography and Adichie’s fiction show perhaps the most important
“underlying principle” of Adichie’s writing, “the delineation of the human condition” (Eze 107). After observing the professed shame of Bebe and considering the possible consequences of the woman’s actions, I have chosen to call the woman’s choice a sacrifice rather than simply an offering.

The role of choice is crucial in this interpretation; though the Hausa Muslim woman is aware of the implications of her actions, she makes the choice to part with her scarf in order to benefit Chika. This choice is comparable to an earlier moment in the story, when the woman unties her threadbare green wrapper to spread on the dusty floor, and while she stands in “only a blouse and a shimmery black slip torn at the seams,” she simply says to Chika, “Come and sit” (46). The images of Hausa and Igbo interactions in the story visibly oppose each other during these moments of sacrifice; indeed, the section with the woman laying down her threadbare wrapper immediately follows a vivid description of the initial action that sparked the riot. She describes Muslim men pulling a “man who happened to be Igbo” out of his truck, “cutting his head off with one flash of a machete,” and then carrying it to the market, calling out that “the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book” (46).

This interaction between the two ethnic groups forms a stark contrast to the moments shared between the Hausa and Igbo woman, and this provokes readers to question why the two interactions are so acutely different from one another. As I have attempted to illustrate, there are certain processes at work in postcolonial societies, such as politicized ethnicity and identity politics, which actively influence the perception of others. The story demonstrates this with its depiction of the initial
violence between “a man who happened to be Igbo” and “men who happened to be Muslim” (46). This suggests that the process of identification results in behavior that is to a certain extent limited by preconceived, naturalized perceptions of others. However, it is not that simple, because the Hausa and Igbo women in the deserted store are not limited to the same behaviors as the group outside, though the same ethnic parties are represented. The women show us that while cultural and social constructions of others in society are inescapable, we all have the freedom to recognize the limitations and dangers of structures and can consciously choose how to respond to them.

In the case of the women in the store, they choose to allow certain aspects of their identity to come forward in that situation. Recall the lie that Chika tells to the Hausa Muslim woman; through her fabrication of the truth, Chika de-emphasizes the differences between them and formulates a sense of commonality that ultimately “creates a bond” and alters the mood of the story (50). Chika elects to not reveal her education here and therefore does not distinguish herself from the woman in that way. She instead chooses to appeal to the woman’s gender identity; more specifically, she appeals to her role as a woman in the context of mothering. During this moment Chika prioritizes specific aspects of her identity and de-emphasizes others; her identity, then, seems situational, meaning that certain aspects come forward given particular situations.

The character’s formulated story is a creative response, comparable to a performance. It is apparent that Chika is aware of the dominant cultural ‘script,’
which constructs fairly predictable behaviors and perceptions as a result of existing social and political structures. However, she appears to consider the dominant script too limited and not useful for the present situation. Chika chooses creativity rather than fixedness, and her choice results in the resemblance of an actor in a performance, reinterpreting the usual props of performance and redeploying them in order to relate to and include her audience, the Hausa Muslim woman.

Consider for a moment that Chika had followed the dominant cultural script during this scene. Chika, following her role as a biomedical doctor or healer, would seem to have followed the usual script for a medical examination: “Your nipples are dry, but they don’t look infected. … while you are feeding, you have to make sure the nipple and also this other part, the areola, fit inside the baby’s mouth” (50). After this recommendation, however, Chika alters her behavior and creates the lie about her mother also having many children and the same medical ailment. If she had continued employing the same medically informed, detached language, the women would not have bonded and the difference between them would have been perpetuated rather than de-emphasized. Chika’s lie, Adichie writes, seems to “create a bond,” a bond which influences their perceptions of one another and drives their behavior for the remainder of the short story (50).

Correspondingly, the Hausa Muslim woman proves that her religious identity is situational when she exits the store without her headscarf; she chooses to sacrifice the object that signifies that aspect of her identity, and in doing so her appearance de-emphasizes her role as a Muslim woman. Because of the woman’s sacrifice, the story
ends with Chika in possession of the scarf. In this moment, the Hausa Muslim woman and Chika exchange their roles of performer and spectator, and the woman is now the actor who renegotiates cultural norms and offers inclusivity to the spectator, a cultural Other. Notably, the ease of exchanging roles in the story recalls traditional African performance in general. Osita Okagbue, in his text discussing performance in African societies, writes,

A performance happens wherever the spectator encounters and engages with the performer, and the two automatically define, and continuously define, the enveloping space of their meeting throughout the duration of their performance. Equally, their roles, as performer or spectator, go through a similar process of renegotiations and re-definitions as the performance progresses (2)

As Okagbue explains, the relationship between the performer and spectator is characterized by a continuous process of redefining the “enveloping space” of the performance, which allows performers and spectators to actualize opportunities for creative exchange. Exemplary of traditional African performance, the women both offer inclusivity to the spectator. Chika’s lie, created by her “need to draw on a fictional part similar to the woman’s,” offers inclusivity to the woman in the way that it de-emphasizes their differences and attempts to connect the performer and spectator (Adichie 50).

The perpetual, collaborative process of redefining the roles of the performance reminds readers of the arbitrary and situational nature of religious and gender roles.
Furthermore, the women demonstrate that their ethnicities are also situational, since they elect to not discuss their ethnic groups as the violence occurs outside the walls of the store. The author therefore offers the notion that there are opportunities in society to question the dominant cultural script.

Chapter Four: Responding to Motherism and Cosmopolitan Solidarity

In “A Private Experience” it is evident that the understanding of ethnic and religious identity as situational leaves a marked impression on Chika. Her newly altered perception of reality is displayed when she hears descriptions of the riot from the media; though she may have previously accepted accounts of the riots that were in the newspaper, describing “Hausa Muslim zealots attacking Igbo Christians,” Chika is no longer satisfied with such generalized and inaccurate characterizations (49). After hearing BBC radio’s explanation of the riot as “religious with undertones of ethnic tension,” Chika will fling the radio against the wall in anger, thinking about “how it has all been packaged and sanitized and made to fit into so few words, all those bodies” (54). Chika’s rage at the language employed by popular media, such as BBC News and the Lagos-based newspaper, The Guardian, shows how this experience has informed her perception of ethnic identification as a potentially dangerous force; she seems to recognize that labels such as “reactionary Hausa-speaking Muslims” and “non-Muslims” are exploitive terms that emphasize certain kinds of difference and fan the flames of ethnic conflict (55). Instead, Chika stops “to remember that she
examined the nipples and experienced the gentleness of a woman who is Hausa and Muslim” (55).

For Chika, the woman’s gentleness defines her more accurately than her Hausa Muslim identity. Chika realizes this in retrospect, but as the women interact in the store it is equally apparent that their ethnic and religious identities are less significant than their familial roles, as a sister and a mother. Chika worries endlessly about the wellbeing of her sister Nnedi, and she recalls her humor, intelligence, and activism while she sits silently with the Hausa Muslim woman. Similarly, the woman cries for her lost daughter Halima, and she tells Chika how she ran “up and down the market” despite the surrounding violence, trying to find her (50).

The Hausa Muslim woman tells Chika this after she examines her breasts, and the two women proceed to express how they are worried about the other’s lost family member. The woman stops crying to say, “Allah keep your sister and Halima in safe place” (51). This is a telling example of the way that difference is de-emphasized in the story; during this sentence the woman displays her religious identity, but she presents it as including a force that is not limited in its application to Muslims. She offers religious inclusivity, extending her hope that Allah will also protect the Igbo Christian woman, Nnedi. She makes a conscious effort to formulate likeness, and while Chika “is not sure what Muslims say to show agreement,” she nods, accepting the woman’s wish (51).

Further, the woman’s religious identity extends to affect Chika during her few moments of prayer occurring in the dust-filled store. Upon discovering that there was
water to wash with, the woman “smiles for the first time” and begins to pray (51). It is evident that her religion is a source of strength and happiness in the woman’s life, and, surprisingly, her newfound strength is also apparent within Chika, who feels “strangely energized” after she sees the woman facing Mecca, “praying with her head to the dust floor” (52). Though she expresses aspects of this identity, the woman also chooses to de-emphasize it when she gives Chika her scarf. Through this and other instances in the story, the woman extends and offers the benefits of her religious identity to Chika.

Though the women both make an effort to de-emphasize their differences and offer inclusivity to the other, it is also evident that their differences do not direct their gender roles. The women have both been enculturated as a result of their gender identity, and the cultural significance of women as mothers, sisters, and daughters is readily apparent when observing their behavior. While Chika examines the woman’s breasts, she appeals simultaneously to her gender role and, in extension, her role as a mother. She did this to seek a connection with the woman; we understand therefore that Chika made an assumption about the great personal significance of the woman’s role as a mother. We also see that Chika was right in her assumption, since the interaction created a stronger bond between them and altered the mood of the story.

It is interesting that, though the women differ in ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic aspects, Chika nonetheless knew that appealing to the woman in the context of mothering could “draw on a fictional past similar to the woman’s,” creating a situation where likeness is more apparent than difference (50). Chika’s lie and its
consequences thus support my claim that gender was most significant in the women’s enculturation. It follows that the two women’s personal experiences as mothers, daughters, and sisters reflect their positionality more than their experiences as members of Hausa, Igbo, Muslim, and Christian groups, since their gender identity seem to drive their actions more than their ethnic or religious identity forms.

The family is of paramount importance within the structures of Igbo and Hausa cultures; in her ethnography, Beverly Mack distinguishes Hausa Muslim culture for its interiority, or inward focus, “with the family at its core and the wife and mother as overseer of this context” (7). Catherine Acholonu, a Nigerian poet, playwright, and literary critic, writes in her 1995 work *Motherism* that, though “neglected by researchers,” women’s roles as sisters and daughters allow them to occupy a position which “commands much respect, autonomy, and power” in society (28). Echoing Mack, Catherine Acholonu goes on to characterize the position that the mother occupies in African societies: “It is not an overstatement that motherhood is the anchor, the matrix, the foundation on which all else rests in African society, especially the family (Acholonu 31).

Considering the significance of the family, containing the mother figure at its center, one can begin to understand the grief of the Hausa Muslim woman who cries silently for her lost daughter. Acholonu writes that, as a mother, the woman is “in a position of immense and ever increasing strength” (30). In my opinion, this “strength” refers to both the social distinction of holding the position of the mother, and also the personal signification of taking up that role; that is to say that Acholonu’s quote refers
equally to the self-identity and the attributed identity of the mother. In other terms, similar to ethnic or religious identity, identifying a woman as a mother recalls certain qualities and behaviors attributed to mothering. The personal significance of identifying with that role, however, occurs within individuals and becomes apparent by their behavior.

The difference between a mother’s self-identity and her attributed identity is displayed in Adichie’s story; again recalling the moment when Chika tells the woman the lie about her mother, we see that Chika first identifies the woman as a mother while examining her cracked nipples. After suggesting cocoa butter to help with the pain, Chika listens as the woman suddenly begins to talk about her lost daughter. It is in this moment that the woman reveals the personal significance of her role as mother; though Chika has identified the woman as a mother by her physical attributes, the interior, true nature of the woman’s role as mother reveals itself in the form of her behavior. She tells Chika how her daughter Halima, who had been selling groundnuts that day, disappeared during the riot, and the woman then begins to cry silently. Adichie asserts that the “woman’s crying is private, as though she is carrying out a necessary ritual that involves no one else” (51). The language that Adichie employs reinforces the idea of the woman’s mother role as one that is “private” and personal; it cannot be observed simply by looking at her physical attributes, like her cracked nipples.

Similarly, this can be compared to other aspects of identity which cannot be fully understood simply by observing an individual and proceeding to identify him or
her as Hausa, Igbo, Christian, Muslim, male, or female. Chika and the woman immediately perceive the ethnic and religious aspects of the other’s identity, but the roles which affect them most apparently are not necessarily those obvious, attributed identities. As I noted earlier, there is a difference between social identification and one’s personal choice of how to represent that identity, and Adichie makes efforts to present this distinction. In the case of the woman’s religious identity, for example, her actions demonstrate that she is able to look past the way in which others perceive her while she walks through the market without her scarf. The scarf, the symbol of her religious identity, is not necessary for her self-identity as a Muslim, yet it is necessary for those in the market to identity her as a Muslim woman.

As another telling example, I will recall the moment when the woman prays in the store. For the first time in the story, the woman smiles, after realizing that she is able to pray. Her role as a Muslim gives her strength and holds a level of personal importance. We also see that “she removes the scarf from her neck” to perform the ritual, again displaying that the physical object is not necessary for her personal religious identity (52). Like the “woman’s tears,” Chika sees the prayer as a “private experience,” which relies solely on the personal, interior significance of the woman’s religious identity (52). The two “necessary” rituals that the woman performs in the story, one emanating from her role as mother and the other from her religious role, characterize her understanding of her own identity. Correspondingly, that which characterizes Chika most effectively is derived from her role as a sister rather than being an Igbo Christian medical student from Lagos. She worries unceasingly for her
lost sister, and does not seem to focus on other aspects of her identity. Recall for example her unease as a medical student (49) and as a politically active university student (44).

It can be observed in the story that ethnic and religious identity are situational, able to be called upon as a source of strength and de-emphasized when found to be unnecessary or harmful; however, there are aspects of the women’s identity that do not seem as arbitrary and situational: their roles as a sister and a mother. We have seen how they are concerned most with their lost family members, and there is another intriguing moment which is consistent with themes in Catherine Acholonu’s *Motherism*. At the beginning, while Chika runs through the crowds, she feels tempted to “pick up one of the bewildered-looking children separated from their mothers in the rush” (45). This momentary desire displays the way in which she has been enculturated with qualities of mothering because of her gender identity. Importantly, these qualities are also indicative of the difference between Chika and the rioting crowd. Echoing *Motherism*, Chika displays a desire for “love, tolerance, and service” rather than “antagonism” and “violent confrontation” (Acholonu 111). These tools – “love, tolerance, and service” – are, in Acholonu’s opinion, the “weapons” of motherism (111). These “weapons,” in contrast to the swift machete outside, contribute positively to the relationship between the two characters.

Acholonu writes that “the essence of motherism is partnership, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding, patience. The motherist is a builder, a healer, not a destroyer, a co-creator with God, a lover of the child” (112). Catherine Acholonu
developed the theory of motherism with the goal of finding an –ism which is not exclusive to a gender, religion, or ethnicity. She sought to distance herself from those theoretical approaches, like Eurocentric, “Beauvoirian” feminism, which she considers individualistic and competitive in nature (84). Though Adichie does not explicitly make reference to Acholonu’s theory of motherism, it is nonetheless present in the characteristics and behaviors of the women; in fact, the qualities of the women seem to run parallel to, as Acholonu writes, the very “essence of motherism” (112).

Recall, for example, the women’s roles as healers in the story. Catherine Acholonu asserts that the motherist, among other things, is “a healer.” Chika adopts the role of healer as she examines the woman, while evoking the image of the mother in her efforts to find commonality with her. Later in the story, the woman tends to Chika’s wound; the Hausa Muslim woman reacts immediately when Chika returns to the store with blood running down her leg; removing her scarf, she wets it, “cleans the cut on Chika’s leg, then tries the wet scarf around it, knotting it at the calf” (54). As they exchange roles and attempt to heal one another, the women work in “partnership,” with a clear goal of “cooperation” and “tolerance” (Acholonu 112).

The story reveals an exchange of services, and this exchange supports the women’s roles as healers. In addition, I have discussed how the Hausa Muslim woman sacrifices her scarf so that Chika can keep it wrapped around her wounded leg. Acholonu’s Motherism asserts that a motherist, like the Hausa Muslim woman, is “ever ready to make personal sacrifices for the good of others like any mother would, for no matter his/her age or sex the motherist is essentially a mother” (113). One can
see that the woman’s sacrifice and her act of healing recall two distinctive qualities of motherism, and the similarities do not stop here. Acholonu writes that a motherist “sees no others” (112). As I have stated in different sections of this text, there are multiple instances in the story when the women avoid perceiving people as others. The Hausa Muslim woman, for instance, does not find it useful to identify the ethnicity or religion of those rioting outside. She simply uses the pronouns “them” and later “they” when referring to the rioting crowd (45, 49). Of course, the violence is another important factor in the woman’s characterization of the crowd; it is possible that the riot forces individuals to be identified as a group, assuming an identity based on their physical actions rather than cultural identities. The woman tells Chika, “Every time when they are rioting, they break market” (49). The ethnicities of the people in the crowd are rendered insignificant to the woman because their actions mold them into an inseparable mass; the group has become one unit, without ethnic, gender, or religious identity.

The lack of Othering in Adichie’s story, we can see, corresponds with Acholonu’s claim that a motherist “sees no others;” she writes further that the motherist female “must be able to see herself first as a human being, and then as a woman” (Acholonu 112-4). Though Acholonu’s statement is based on the gendered identity of the motherist female, Chimamanda Adichie extends this guiding idea; in her short story, there is an appeal to Nigerian readers to perceive themselves first as human beings, and later as Igbo, Hausa, Christian, or Muslim. By doing this, she embraces the foundation of Acholonu’s theory, imbuing her characters with the very
“essence of motherism” and evoking the image of the mother in her story (Acholonu 112).

Adichie’s text reveals that there is nonetheless space for an extension of Catherine Acholonu’s theoretical base; Adichie differs from Acholonu in that she seeks to challenge differences constructed in all identity forms. It is my opinion that Acholonu’s text is limited because of her reliance on gendered identities to explain her theory; this is partly due to the fact that Motherism is a response to Western feminist ideas which are based on gender distinctions and competition. Her portrayal of difference between genders can also be observed in Acholonu’s 1993 short story “Mother Was a Great Man;” when explaining why the Nigerian family desired a daughter instead of a son, a female character states, “A daughter cares for the well-being of her parents in their old age, sons only care for their immediate families. … A son caters for continuity of the family-name and external image, but a daughter caters for love, understanding and unity within the family circle” (Acholonu 11). The daughter, from Acholonu’s perspective, embodies qualities which the author also lists as the qualities of a motherist; it appears that Acholonu perceives the daughter in idealistic terms in comparison to the son’s less desirable qualities.

It is true that Catherine Acholonu wrote a text in which she envisioned society in a new and different way, but she is also writing in response to certain modern social institutions which emphasize the difference between men and women, and those institutions also inform her consciousness while writing. In short, she must rely on the gender relationships that she is familiar with in order to describe her
theoretical conceptualization, which in turn limits her viewpoint about the conceptions which inform those social institutions. In “A Private Experience,” the ideas behind motherism are applied to a contemporary setting, where the author is able to imagine a new way to perceive the relationships between identity forms without emphasizing one identity form, like Acholonu has done with female gender identity. Adichie’s conceptual extension of Acholonu’s ideas proves to be useful in the development of a positive relationship between the Igbo and Hausa women.

Beyond Adichie’s representation of motherism, there is another theoretical perspective present which, like Acholonu’s theory, has the goal of seeing people “united in a noble purpose” (Acholonu 108). This literary perspective, called “cosmopolitan solidarity,” was introduced by Nigerian writer Chielozona Eze. She writes that contemporary authors who embrace this perspective “focus on Nigeria as a cultural, transnational and hybridized space with the goal of enhancing human flourishing there;” in this setting, “community is no longer restricted to the people of the same ethnic group. Community becomes a group linked by a common concern for humanity irrespective of ethnic origin” (Eze 110, 104). Eze and literary scholar R. Victoria Arana lists Adichie among those of the “third generation” of Nigerian writers whose work reflects this cosmopolitan, transcultural perspective (Arana 270).

From the viewpoint of the third generation of authors, Nigeria is a hybridized nation; it follows that institutional identities are defined by a collection of fluctuating, transcultural identities, rather than by fixed identity forms. Eze’s perspective reveals the complexity of achieving unity in a nation containing diverse such identity forms,
but Adichie’s story reconciles this issue by presenting characters that are united by their motivations and actions. Since identity forms are situational, self-identity and agency serve to unite individuals. In multiple instances, Adichie reveals her overall cosmopolitan perspective; Kano, for example, is a setting with a “cosmopolitan mix of immigrants” (Mack 13). The significance of Kano being a cosmopolitan setting lies in its diverse ethnic and religious composition, with individuals being accustomed to urban, busy spaces. Further, the character of Chika appears cosmopolitan; Adichie carefully describes her clothing: a “denim skirt and red T-shirt embossed with a picture of the Statue of Liberty” which she bought while visiting family in New York (Adichie 46).

Arana continues to express that the quality which distinguishes the third generation of African writers from earlier groups, especially those writing in the “village novel” genre, is their attempt to accurately expose “subtle underpinnings” of culture in a contemporary, globalized setting (Arana 275). In doing this, authors are said to write realistically, in comparison to the idealistic portrayal of pre-colonial rural communities that is associated with certain postcolonial works. Recalling Eze, I use the term postcolonial to describe texts which are characterized for the “unavoidable mention of the former colonial masters” (Eze 109-10). Literary sociologist Wendy Griswold explains that the structure of “the village novel” portrays the “mythic structure” of “traditional order,” followed by “disturbance from the outside,” which ultimately “disintegrates” the community of the novel (Griswold 714). In works with
these features, there is, invariably, an expression of difference, borders, and a distinction between those in the community and those from the “outside”.

Readers can observe how African literature has shifted away from postcolonial concerns; Adichie challenges the very existence of borders and does not allow for the idealization of any particular culture, ethnicity, religion, or gender. She is not critical of any specific group and avoids attributions of blame. This can be seen by her articulation of the role of chance in the riot, writing that a “man who happened to be Igbo” started the violence. In Eze’s terms, this text, alongside the works of Nigerian writers Helon Habila and Chris Abani, reveal “a shift from the postcolonial concern of blame to the inner, transcultural one within the African socio-political setup” (Eze 109). Indeed, as we have seen, the process of de-emphasizing difference, revealed in part by the intentional namelessness of the woman and the emphasis on bodies instead of arbitrary forms of identity suggests that Adichie adheres to this perspective (Adichie 53-5).

In her interdisciplinary text, Arana writes that a critical quality of Adichie’s portrayal of cosmopolitan solidarity is that it is designed to “emanate from an emic (or insider’s) perspective” (270). This is in contrast to the etic (outsider’s) perspective; here, Arana is employing the terms of anthropologist James Lett, who distinguishes emic and etic perspectives within ethnographic approaches. Arana writes that the emic perspective of Adichie’s story allows the insider (Chika) to engage in “self-reflexive social critique” (Arana 270). Comparing this perspective to the ethnographical novel *Return to Laughter* (1954) by Laura Bohannan, Arana recalls the
way that this view is “effective in portraying not merely how societies change but also how individuals do” (273). In Adichie’s story, for example, Chika’s understanding of ethnic and religious identity is transformed as a result of the experience.

Arana continues to explain that the emic perspective “amounts to an effort to expose the world, including fellow Nigerians, to the important if subtle underpinnings of recent African history and to reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding and the likelihood of further ethnic conflicts and calamity” (275). Her claim is that Adichie’s work and Bohannan’s resemble one another because of their “evolving, first-person point of view,” and that this allows the texts have the ability to portray how both individuals and societies change (273).

However, as a response to this claim, I pose a question: Is this not typical of fiction writers in general when they engage readers through a first-person perspective? Many authors, ranging from Ernest Hemingway, to Vladimir Nabokov, to J.D. Salinger, write novels in which the narrator is also a character in the story. One could claim that these authors write through an emic perspective, but I believe that this term is much more useful in the context of the social sciences, when comparing the emic and etic perspectives of anthropological works. There would be a similar result if one attempted to incorporate a term like participant observer into literary theory. Though it may be understood as useful for the author’s understanding, it does not necessarily contribute to our understanding of Adichie’s story, nor does it have an apparent connection with the qualities of the first-person literary perspective. Though I agree that Adichie’s story engages in “self-reflexive social critique” (Arana 270), I do not
perceive this quality as one which makes her work particularly distinctive from other works of literature which engage readers from a first-person perspective, nor do I consider it a continuation of an anthropological tradition.

Though I contest the usefulness of anthropological terms applied to literary criticism, Arana’s article is nonetheless an essential contribution to conceptions of cosmopolitan solidarity in the third generation of Nigerian authors. She writes that the subtext of Adichie’s work consistently expresses one idea: “we are all in this together” (Arana 277). Adichie’s depiction of transcultural community-seeking asserts a view of universal humanity, which suggests that the “we” of Arana’s statement is not limited to ethnic, national, religious, or gender identity. Rather, it recalls the universal quality of Adichie’s message, with which she examines “the delineation of the human condition” (Eze 107, emph. mine). Adichie’s cultural comprehensiveness is displayed by the way in which identity forms are de-emphasized in her story, and are replaced by the importance of “all those bodies” (Adichie 54). As a result of her transcultural orientation, “community becomes a group linked by a common concern for humanity irrespective of ethnic origin” (Eze 104).

Adichie’s contribution to the understanding of cosmopolitan solidarity stems from her attempt to challenge processes of naturalization that prescribe identities that make boundaries and separate human beings. She questions the qualities which support traditional ‘I/Other’ constructions, and proceeds to echo Motherism by revealing the mother as a central image which has the ability to connect those whose identities are typically defined by difference. Difference, then, becomes less useful to
those seeking to understand the formation of ethnic, religious, and gender relationships. The story’s relevance to contemporary political and social conditions provokes conversation among her international audience; this boundless quality of Adichie’s work suggests that her message is, like her remarkable characters, not constrained to one particular geographic or cultural situation.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to understand and respond to the indications of Adichie’s portrayal of identity forms and social relationships in her short story “A Private Experience;” I have found that the expression of situational identity in the story is presented as the choice made by an individual character to acknowledge certain qualities that mark similarity rather than difference. Difference is challenged and de-emphasized, and when difference is perceived, it is often described by the author with positive language. For example, an accent on the oral production of language is a typical indicator that this person is from a different culture; in the story, Adichie writes that the woman’s Hausa accent “sheaths the Igbo name,” Nnedi, “in a feathery gentleness” (47).

In Adichie’s story, Chika and the woman are positioned to make particular choices in the private space, while those in the public sphere of the Kano market respond to the situation at hand with violence. The short story’s title reflects an emphasis on *private* experience, and signifies a connection between the private space
and its potential link to choice and agency. The women’s experience demonstrates that political and ethnic identity categories may not be as influential in the creation of human relationships in the private space as they are in public spaces. Though readers understand this, there is nonetheless a much larger, even universal message to readers, calling for a reexamination of the way Others are identified in our own lives and how that process affects our behavior. Under what conditions can individuals mediate the influence of dominant constructions based on difference? Are these choices existentially available for all? Is it truly possible for people around the world to conceive a comparable way of perceiving difference, in both the private and public settings?

It is my opinion that the story is positioned precisely to encourage such questioning and conversation. Adichie purposely employs oppositional language, provoking readers to question the fixedness of the characters’ identities. The masterstroke of Adichie was to choose not to name the woman. By describing her as I have done throughout this text, readers are forced to call her the Hausa Muslim woman, and this title almost instantly seems artificial and arbitrary. The intentional omission of her name is made all the more meaningful by the way that her adopted title, the Hausa Muslim woman, does little to characterize her.

The formation of situational identity in the story brings about an intriguing discussion. As a reader, a question pulsed through my mind during the whole of the story: Why must the two interactions be so different? In an interview, Adichie explained that she wanted to “provoke conversation” for Nigerians (qtd. in Arana
Notably, the incitement of conversation is a communicative and cooperative goal; a tête-à-tête conversation allows individuals to use their own life experiences to inform their understanding of Adichie’s message. Through conversation, one also negotiates his or her understanding of the subject after hearing others’ opinions and views. This differs tremendously from an author who translucently states his or her view with the intention of imparting the same view to readers.

Participating in conversation provides the opportunity for comprehension and empathy while encouraging individual choice; these qualities run parallel to those that the women exhibit in “A Private Experience”. One could claim that readers may use the two women as a model of interdependent, harmonious interactions in their own lives. As R. Victoria Arana states, Adichie’s subtext is “We’re all in this together” (Arana 277). In addition, Chielozona Eze writes that Adichie’s texts examine the “delineation of the human condition” (Eze 107). Both of these quotes recall the hope for unity and collaboration among all humans; they indicate that the concepts and themes of Adichie’s text are not limited to those in a similar geographic area as the setting of the story. Instead, it is my belief that these choices are existentially available to all humans.

“When the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand washes the right, and both will become clean.” This phrase, Osita Okagbue writes, is “a popular Hausa proverb about mutual dependence and cooperation between people” (52). The relevance of this Hausa proverb in our text is undeniable; it supports the qualities of motherism and cosmopolitan solidarity displayed in the story, emphasizing
cooperation rather than competition among people who differ from one another. The metaphor is clear: we understand that the left hand is not able wash itself completely; it requires a level of cooperation from the right hand in able to become clean. Though our minds categorize the left and right as different, we also understand that they must work together for us to do most physical actions in our lives. There is no use in emphasizing that one is left and the other is right, when considering what they can accomplish while working together. This proverb reflects and supports Adichie’s boundless message.

Adichie and her character Chika both participate in the act of questioning and challenging existing social and political institutions, and by doing so, they ultimately deconstruct and identify the constructs. The ‘unmade’ constructions are replaced with new models which were imagined by the characters. This reminds us that these constructions are arbitrary in nature, able to be picked apart and reformed in a more desirable way. Thus Chika and Adichie are alike in their creative reinterpretation of rejected identity forms. Again recalling Motherism, Adichie’s novel presents a new interpretation of the novelist as healer, equally offering textual solutions to the characters within the story and proposing that model as existentially available to all readers, no matter how their identities have been formed.

The transformation that occurs within the character of Chika, which we experience from a first-person, or as Arana states, an “emic” perspective, is exhibitive of the construction of situational identity in the story. Towards the beginning, Chika’s outlook on the ‘I/Other’ binary is clear; she feels that she should not be effected by the
riot, believing that “riots like this were what happened to other people” (47). The
turning point of the story occurs as she becomes aware of the arbitrariness of words
and labels as she experiences the hard reality of a burnt, identity-less body. Chika
becomes conscious of the negative effect of defining groups by opposition and within
the language of violence; the author describes Chika throwing the radio against the
wall upon hearing how the burnt victims in the market had “been packaged and
sanitized and made to fit into so few words” (54).

My understanding of Chika’s change in consciousness motivated my choice to
explore aspects of Motherism and Cosmopolitan Solidarity. Both theories have the
goal of reducing cross-cultural misunderstanding and promoting cooperation among
all groups. As Chika begins to understand the distinction between the dominant
cultural script and an individual’s agency to react to it, her behavior reflects qualities
attributed to the texts of Eze and Acholonu. I chose to examine these theoretical bases
in relationship to “A Private Experience” because it is a text that has not received
significant scholarly or critical examination in comparison to Adichie’s other work.
Like “A Private Experience,” both motherism and cosmopolitan solidarity challenge
the construction of ethnic, religious, gendered, and even national borders. Adichie’s
text portrays features and occurrences which are present in many peoples’ lives in the
contemporary world. Those who live in less stable states or who have experienced
violence structured along the lines of ethnicity or religion may be likely to identify
with certain issues that the women experience in the story, but the message she
provides about human cooperation and empathy are applicable to all human beings. I
maintain that this quality of Adichie’s work marks it as a text that demands questioning, debate, and criticism. I hope that my work provides a basis for the provocation of conversation that Adichie intended.
Works Cited


