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**Unrealised Desire and Narrative Restraint in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's  
*On Monday of Last Week***

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines the unrealisation of desire in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *On Monday of Last Week*, arguing that it is portrayed as simultaneously present and unrealised. Desire is not openly articulated but formed in silence, restrained in expression and circumscribed by social and cultural constraints. This study explores how female desire is delayed rather than fulfilled within the intersecting spaces of domestic labour, migration and gendered power relations. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the paper analyses how Kamara expresses her emotional and erotic desire. This expression takes place through observation, imagination and introspection rather than direct action. It further examines the domestic space as a site of control over emotional expression, where women's inner lives are rendered invisible. Diasporic displacement contributes to Kamara's emotional suspension and limited agency, intensifying her sense of dislocation. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that desire does not disappear and instead takes the form of silence and acts of watching. By shifting attention from expressed longings to unrealised ones, this study contributes to existing research on desire. Ultimately, it argues that Adichie employs narrative restraint as a critique of the social conditions that inhibit women from articulating and realising their inner lives.

**Keywords:** Adichie, *On Monday of Last Week*, desire, feminist criticism, diaspora

**Introduction**

What happens when desires exist but remain silent and never manifest outwardly? Many narratives present desire as something that must be expressed, acknowledged, or resolved. In contrast, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents desire in *On Monday of Last Week* as unresolved and inwardly confined. The narrative does not emphasise the eventful.

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Instead, it foregrounds moments of silence, hesitation and emotional restraint. Through this narrative focus, Adichie suggests that absence and delay are significant aspects of women's emotional experiences.

Adichie is widely recognised for her portrayals of women's inner lives and emotional struggles within societal systems shaped by gender inequality, migration and unequal distributions of power. Much of her fiction centres on female characters who struggle to articulate emotional conflict and reveals how social structures shape private feelings. *On Monday of Last Week* was originally published in *Granta* magazine. The story reflects this concern through the character of Kamara, a Nigerian immigrant working as a nanny in an upper middle class American home. Kamara's daily life revolves around childcare and domestic labour, leaving her with few opportunities to meaningful social interaction. As she cares for the children, she begins to silently observe Tracy the woman of the household. These observations do not develop into speech or action. Instead, they unfold through imagination and internal emotional responses.

The narrative style emphasises the close relationship between desire and silence. Desire is neither fully expressed nor absent. It remains an emotional presence that is repeatedly delayed. The domestic environment in which Kamara lives and works regulates labour and emotion while offering little space for self-expression. Kamara's position as a migrant woman intensifies her invisibility and emotional stagnation. Her displacement from familiar cultural and social contexts further limits her ability to express personal longing and deepens the internalisation of her emotions.

This paper examines how Adichie portrays desire as never fully realised yet constantly present. Rather than framing desire as fulfilment or confession, the analysis focuses on restraint, delay and narrative quietness as modes of experiencing desire. Desire is examined as a condition shaped by structure rather than individual choice. Feminist and postcolonial perspectives provide a framework for understanding how domestic space and diasporic displacement intersect to restrict women's emotional expression.

Through close textual analysis, the paper explores how Kamara's silent watching and emotional repression function as central narrative strategies in *On Monday of Last Week*. By attending to what remains unspoken, the paper argues that Adichie offers a subtle critique of the social conditions that limit women's ability to recognise and express desire. The story also unsettles conventional narrative expectations and highlights the importance of women's emotional experiences that remain unresolved.

### **Literature Review**

Research on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short fiction has increasingly focused on desire, diaspora and women's inner lives, particularly in *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Critics note that *On Monday of Last Week* resists narrative closure and privileges emotional

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restraint over action. Desire in the story is often located within silence and fantasy rather than fulfilment.

One of the most comprehensive studies of desire in *On Monday of Last Week* is offered by Okunhon. She argues that Adichie constructs female same sex desire without explicit bodily consummation and instead foregrounds internal focalisation and fantasy. According to Okunhon, the narrative avoids physical action while intensifying emotional longing. Desire therefore appears as frustration rather than liberation (28–31). This reading highlights how desire in the story remains inward and unresolved due to social constraint and internal suppression of the self.

Narrative ambiguity is another recurring concern in critical discussions of the story. Tunca situates *On Monday of Last Week* within a broader tradition of diasporic writing by contemporary African authors marked by open ended conclusions and interpretive openness. She argues that Adichie employs internal focalisation to convey perceptual instability and to withhold narrative resolution. For Tunca, the lack of emotional fulfilment in Kamara's experience reflects the uncertainty and disillusionment associated with diasporic identity. Desire is thus linked to both displacement and narrative indeterminacy.

Diasporic Identity and emotional fragmentation are examined by Cruz Pereira in her analysis of *The Thing Around Your Neck*. She suggests that Adichie's diasporic characters experience sustained tension between expectation and reality, resulting in psychological dislocation and silence. Cruz Pereira discusses Kamara's migration narrative and the internalisation of disappointment following the collapse of the American Dream (53–54). Although desire is not her primary focus, this reading contributes to understanding of emotional restraint within diasporic environments.

Kekeghe explores the psychological dimensions of migration through the concept psychophysical mobility. He argues that Adichie presents migration as a process in which mental movement precedes physical relocation. In *On Monday of Last Week*, Kamara's imaginative expectations are contradicted by lived experience. Kekeghe suggests that desire emerges in the gap between anticipation and reality and remain internalised and unresolved (68–72). This perspective reinforces interpretations of desire as anticipatory rather than fulfilled.

African feminist criticism further contextualises Adichie's work in relation to feminist traditions on the continent. Fazakas characterises Adichie as a writer whose fiction consistently examines womanhood, femininity and emotional endurance. She argues that Adichie's female characters often negotiate social constraint through silence rather than open resistance (55–58). From this perspective, desire is shaped by constraint and containment rather than liberation.

Taken together, these critical studies demonstrate that desire, diaspora, psychological interiority and narrative ambiguity are central concerns in *On Monday of Last Week*. Although critics acknowledge frustration and silence, there has been limited attention to desire as something that fails to occur. The study builds on existing debates by examining unfulfilled desire as a deliberate narrative strategy in *On Monday of Last Week*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this research is to draw on Black feminist theory, feminist affect theory and postcolonial feminism. These frameworks are used to examine desire as an experientially constrained phenomenon in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *On Monday of Last Week*. Together, they allow desire to be understood as a socially and spatially regulated experience shaped by gendered labour, migration and silencing.

Jennifer Terry's concepts of the "glocal home" and the "Black Feminine Domestic" provide a key theoretical lens for understanding Kamara's emotional existence as a domestic worker. Terry describes the *glocal home* as a domestic space produced through global capital and transnational labour flows. Drawing on Alexis Pauline Gumbs's work, she demonstrates how domestic labour creates conditions of intimacy while simultaneously reinforcing the invisibility of Black women's bodies. The home is therefore not a neutral or private space. It operates as a site of care, labour and emotional restraint.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs further theorises this condition through her articulation of the Black Feminine Domestic. She argues that Black women's domestic labour has historically been associated with invisibility, endurance and emotional regulation. Domesticity, in this framework, generates forms of care that require self-erasure and restraint. Gumb's work makes it possible to interpret desire as something muted by the structural demands of domestic responsibility.

Sara Ahmed's feminist affect theory offers an additional lens for this analysis. Ahmed argues that emotions are not private internal states but social orientations that direct bodies towards or away from objects and others. Desire is therefore shaped by social norms that determine which desires are permitted and which are constrained. Ahmed also suggests that silence often signals restriction rather than emotional absence. Feelings that cannot be expressed continue to exist but are redirected internally. Kamara's silence and sustained watching can thus be read as affective responses to the limits imposed on her body. Ahmed's later work extends this argument by linking feminist survival to endurance rather than emotional expression. She suggests that survival within restrictive spaces requires careful emotional regulation and bodily negotiation rather than overt resistance. This perspective supports an interpretation of desire in *On Monday of Last Week* as persistent yet unrealised. Desire remains present because the conditions necessary for its expression are unavailable.

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Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist theory connects these emotional constraints to global systems of power. Mohanty argues that women's agency must be understood through labour, migration and economic dependency rather than abstract idea of choice. She also maintains that silence and negotiation frequently function as survival strategies within oppressive structures. This framework is essential for understanding Kamara's restraint. Her desire is not absent due to personal hesitation but limited by migrant insecurity and economic dependence.

Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic space further clarifies Kamara's emotional suspension. Brah defines diaspora as both physical movement and lived contradiction marked by ambivalence and uncertainty. Diasporic space produces fragmented identities and emotional instability rather than coherence. This framework explains why Kamara's desire exists in a state of suspension. Her emotional life is shaped by displacement, unfamiliar social codes and uncertainty about belonging.

Taken together, these theoretical approaches allow desire in *On Monday of Last Week* to be understood as shaped by domestic labour, affective restraint and diasporic uncertainty. Desire does not fail to exist. It remains present but unarticulated due to the social and spatial conditions that structure Kamara's life. These frameworks guide the analysis by establishing silence, containment and delay as central to Adichie's portrayal of female interiority.

### **Desire as Silence and Observation**

In *On Monday of Last Week*, Adichie represents desire as a suspended inner experience that develops through silence and observation rather than vocalisation and physical action. Desire does not move towards confession or fulfilment. Instead, it unfolds within Kamara's consciousness and intensifies through repetition, imagination and restraint. By avoiding dramatic declaration, the narrative presents desire as a quiet and persistent emotional state rather than a decisive event.

Kamara's desire is conveyed through her practice of gazing. She does not communicate verbally with Tracy, nor does she physically engage with her. Instead, Kamara observes, notices and internalises Tracy. This pattern suggests that desire is shaped by distance rather than proximity. A significant example occurs when Kamara turns her focus inward and rehearses intimacy with Tracy through imagination. Adichie writes that "since Monday of last week, Kamara had begun to stand in front of mirrors" (74), slowly rotating as she envisions Tracy's touch on her body. Desire here is not directed towards Tracy as an external object. It is staged internally through reflection and fantasy. Kamara observes herself while imagining how she might be seen, which allows desire to exist without exposure.

The inward turn from relational desire to self-directed anticipation is evident in Kamara's use of the mirror as a substitute space where longing can be explored without risk. Kamara does not seek validation through action. Instead, she rehearses desire privately, suggesting that fulfilment is secondary to the continuation of longing. Laura Mulvey's discussion of visual attention as a means of sustaining desire through suspension rather than resolution helps clarify this moment (18). Kamara looks without claiming the object of her gaze and in doing so preserves desire through separation.

Silence further intensifies this observational process. Kamara's emotional life becomes most acute in the absence of speech. She does not articulate her desire either outwardly or inwardly. This lack of articulation does not weaken her longing but deepens it. Silence provides a protected space in which desire can exist without consequence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument that non-confessional forms of desire often preserve intensity rather than diminish it (22) supports this reading. Kamara's silence is not ambivalence. Rather, it is a means of containment that allows her desire to endure.

Adichie reinforces this containment through narrative pacing. Moments of heightened emotion are brief and quickly interrupted. When Tracy's presence generates emotional intensity, the narrative does not linger on dialogue or interaction. Instead, it returns to Kamara's interior emotional state. This structure prevents desire from reaching fulfilment. Each encounter heightens longing but offers no resolution. Observation replaces interaction as the primary mode of emotional development.

The domestic space further sustains this pattern. Kamara occupies a position of physical closeness to Tracy yet lacks agency. She is attentive and emotionally invested but remains socially marginalised. Her role allows her to observe but expression would require leaving the space altogether. As a result, desire remains silent and sustained through watching. Expression would disrupt the fragile stability of her position. Adichie presents Kamara's restraint not as a failure but as a consequence of circumstance.

By sustaining desire through silence and observation, Adichie challenges conventional narrative expectations that equate desire with articulation or fulfilment. Desire in this narrative does not conclude but persists. The failure of desire to be realised becomes a defining feature of the story. Through this portrayal, Adichie exposes the emotional costs of restraint and illustrates how longing exists quietly yet intensely under the limits imposed upon women.

### **Domestic Space and the Containment of Desire**

In *On Monday of Last Week*, domestic space does not simply provide the backdrop for desire. It actively creates and shapes longing. The home in Adichie's narrative is a site of emotional proximity without social inclusion. Emotional closeness exists alongside structural separation. Desire emerges in domestic space through habituation, repetition and

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containment. Domestic interiority therefore disciplines longing rather than enabling fulfilment.

Kamara's role in the household is defined by access without ownership. As the family's nanny she moves freely through rooms that belong to others while remaining socially marginal. This spatial marginalisation intensifies desire by placing Kamara in close proximity to Tracy while denying her participation in that closeness. As a result, much of Kamara's desire develops in shared and visible areas of the home, even as the relationship remains hierarchical.

Routine further restricts Kamara's emotional life. Her movements are repetitive, structured and carefully regulated. Although she enters spaces that are intimate to Tracy, she remains emotionally unobtrusive. Desire grows through daily repetition and habitual movement rather than progressing towards expression or resolution.

Gaston Bachelard's account of interior space as a site where emotions accumulate through repeated use is especially relevant to Kamara's experience. He suggests that interior spaces transform feelings into something internal and enduring rather than external and fleeting. The home becomes a repository of Kamara's desire. Each day she inhabits the same spaces and carries the same longing without any possibility of release.

A significant moment occurs when the hierarchical order of the domestic space is briefly unsettled through physical contact. Tracy touches Kamara's chin in a gesture that is intimate yet ambiguous. Adichie describes how "Tracy's hand was still on her chin, slightly tilting her head up, and Kamara felt, first, like an adored little girl, and then like a bride" (87). This moment takes place entirely within the domestic interior. The home enables the encounter yet immediately limits its meaning. The emotional shift remains private and produces no change in Kamara's position. The contact creates no further opportunity for intimacy. Instead, it sharpens Kamara's awareness of what remains inaccessible.

The domestic space absorbs this moment and restores routine. There is no articulation, no continuation and no disruption of order. Desire intensifies precisely because it is denied. bell hooks's discussion of the home as a space where marginalised individuals provide care while practising emotional restraint helps to explain Kamara's silence. The home requires her labour and attention but does not allow her emotional presence.

Adichie reinforces this containment through spatial division. Kamara's desire surfaces in transitional areas such as kitchens and hallways rather than private rooms. These spaces permit proximity while denying privacy and prevent desire from reaching completion. The domestic interior thus functions as a mechanism of deferral. It generates desire without permitting fulfilment.

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By situating desire in domestic space, Adichie demonstrates how longing is shaped by hierarchy and labour. Desire persists because the home allows it to emerge only in restricted forms. The domestic interior does not erase longing but disciplines it. Through this spatial arrangement, Adichie illustrates how desire remains emotionally potent through containment.

### **Migration and Emotional Suspension**

In Adichie's narrative, migration is portrayed as a sustained state of emotional paralysis rather than a process of transition or possibility. Adichie represents Kamara's migratory existence through waiting, repetition and muted expectation. Migration does not relieve longing. It relocates longing and creates an extended emotional present in which desire persists without resolution.

Kamara's migratory experience is defined by dislocation rather than arrival. Her life in America lacks narrative momentum. The future does not open outward but contracts into routine and emotional flatness. This condition is most visible in Kamara's relationship with her husband Tobechi. Although migration was meant to reunite them, it produces emotional distance. Kamara reflects on their intimacy with detachment when she notes that, She was finally with Tobechi in America, finally with her good man, and the feeling was one of flatness. (Adichie 86)

Migration here appears as affective failure rather than fulfilment. Arrival does not revive desire but suspends it.

This emotional paralysis shapes how Kamara experiences longing. Desire does not disappear but loses direction. Her emotional life becomes defined by endurance rather than anticipation. Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is useful in this context. Berlant argues that individuals often remain attached to hopes that no longer sustain them because such attachments provide structure (1). In Kamara's case, marriage functions in this way by providing structure without emotional fulfilment.

Migration also fractures Kamara's experience of time. Past and present do not intersect and the future remains indeterminate. Memories of Nigeria function as contrasts rather than continuities. This temporal disruption intensifies emotional stagnation. Stuart Hall's account of diaspora as a condition of becoming rather than being clarifies this effect. Hall suggests that diasporic identity is marked by delay and discontinuity, producing a subject that is always unsettled (225). Kamara's emotional life reflects this state through instability and continual postponement. Desire cannot stabilise or settle because her sense of self remains displaced.

Adichie reinforces emotional stagnation through narrative structure. The story resists decisive turning points. Moments that suggest emotional change are interrupted or redirected internally. Kamara's desire for Tracy emerges within this stagnant emotional context. It

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intensity is heightened because her marital and migratory life lacks emotional vitality. Migration creates no new possibilities. It produces a void in which desire attaches itself to transient moments.

Migration also reshapes Kamara's sense of agency. Economic dependence and legal limitation restrict her choices. Her waiting is not voluntary but enforced. Desire continues to exist but cannot move forward. Emotional life therefore becomes an act of maintenance rather than progression.

By presenting migration as emotional stagnation, Adichie challenges celebratory narratives of mobility. Migration does not liberate Kamara. It immobilises her affectively. Desire remains unfulfilled not due to weakness but because migration restricts its conditions. The unrealisation of desire is thus inseparable from migratory experience. Desire waits, endures and remains unresolved, suspended by displacement.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that *On Monday of Last Week* is structured around the unrealisation of desire, not as a lack of narrative development but as a deliberate aesthetic and ethical strategy. By locating desire in silence, domestic space and migration, Adichie presents longing as an experience shaped by constraint rather than fulfilment. Desire persists precisely because it is withheld, internalised and suspended. By resisting dominant literary expectations that frame desire as declaration, action, or resolution, the story challenges linear models that prioritise visibility and consumption.

The significance of this reading lies in its challenge to conventional understandings of women's emotional lives as organised primarily around endurance, observation and restraint. Adichie's narrative suggests that women's emotional experiences acquire meaning not through realisation but through the sustained presence of desire under limiting conditions. This perspective complicates celebratory narratives of empowerment and choice, particularly in domestic and diasporic contexts where emotional expression is often subordinated to survival and stability.

This analysis also contributes to feminist and postcolonial literary criticism by foregrounding emotional suspension as a productive analytical category. The unrealisation of desire offers a way to examine forms of intimacy that do not reach completion yet remain central to the formation of subjectivity. It also invites a reconsideration of silence not as absence but as a mode of emotional negotiation.

Further research may extend this framework through comparative analyses of suspended desire across Adichie's wider body of short fiction, particularly in relation to migrant women's emotional experiences. Further studies might also explore how the unrealisation of desire operates in other contemporary African or diasporic narratives

concerned with domestic labour and intimate economies. Interdisciplinary approaches drawing on affect studies, migration studies and sociology could provide additional insight into how emotional restraint is lived beyond the literary text.

By attending to what remains unfulfilled in the narrative, this study underscores the critical role of restraint in representing marginalized emotional experiences. *On Monday of Last Week* ultimately shows that desire need not be realised in order to matter. Its continued presence reveals the emotional costs of constraint and illuminates the complexity of women's interior lives shaped by silence, labour and displacement.

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