

# On the Ephemerality Of Personal Identity in Collector Of Memories

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## THE AKO CAINE PRIZE FOR AFRICAN WRITING

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Joshua Chizoma's "Collector of Memories" weaves the epistemological to challenge the principles of our moralities while also entangling that with personal identity. In the "Collector of Memories", one of the shortlisted stories for the prestigious 2022 Caine Prize for African Writing, Chizoma draws us to carefully read this poignant and visceral story that questions the standard of our beliefs and truths. The author, through the female protagonist, tells an unusual story—yet concurrently happening—of a child that was adopted by a woman who, due to her inability to bear a child of her own, took a mad woman's child on a glistening new year eve in the urban city of Aba, in Abia State, Nigeria.

"Collector of Memories" is a short story that addresses the issue of personal identity and raises skepticism about the nature of knowledge of oneself. The author tells the story of a girl named Chibusonma who, at one point was confronted by an existential crisis—due to the sudden revelation that her mother wasn't her real mother but she was adopted from a mad woman some weeks after her birth—have to decide what forms her identity. The opening paragraph serves as a reminder to the reader that the theme of identity that revolves around the story isn't about the fictional characters in the story alone, but peculiar to everyone that is alive and that once lived: "Mother made me a collector of memories. She taught me that we carry our histories in sacks tied around our necks, adding to our burden as years lengthen our lives." This opening statement instills in a reader

the desire to read on.

The plot of the story is Nollywoodish: a barren woman takes advantage of the fact that another woman is mad and carts away her baby, Chibusonma. Chibusonma, then, built her identity upon a false edifice and couldn't believe it when the daunting truth is revealed. Chizoma captures this very well when Chibusonma asks her adoptive mother and her sisters "*You erased my mother?*" Sometimes, she is even kept in the dark until something strange starts happening (such as sickness) to the adopted mother and her family traces this to one of her past histories: the mad woman places a curse on her when she elopes with her child. However, Chibusonma is made to believe she is an abandoned baby in a dump until her adoptive mother falls sick.

The story examines how much is lost when we build our identity off what others tell us. It is also about how identity isn't a static element of a person's existence, but an ever-changing and incorporeal —though based on the corporeal elements in the world— core element of one's authenticity, an existential mode that is achieved through the choices one makes. The author confirms this in a 2021 interview with *Africa in Dialogue* by stating that this is what he was writing to show and what the story shows: *identity is ephemeral*. The power and fluidity of Chizoma's answers and how he engages the issues of personal identity during the interview resonated with me, mostly due to my studies of Plato's illustration in *Allegory of the cave*.

Plato uses this succinct illustration to examine our knowledge of things in the world and as they appear to us, but the protagonist in the "*Collector of Memories*," who is also the narrator, takes us beyond what we know about the world, the real and the unreal. Chibusonma takes us, with her poignant (and sometimes witty) narrative, to a point of self-reflexivity: What do we believe about ourselves? What do we, as a result of this belief, in fact, know about ourselves? Is the truth of our identity based on what we were made to believe or what is real? Can repeated lies count as the truth? What does it mean when the truth about yourself, your identity, becomes a mere lie that was rooted in a beloved effort to keep you together and save you from falling apart? And what becomes of a person's identity and how does one identify with the world when the substructure of the edifice he/she has been made to believe isn't really there? These jabs, pries, fluid use of language, and questions all coalesced to make Joshua Chizoma's "*Collector of Memories*" a beautiful story carefully narrated.

The story is didactic and it raises moral issues, too. The reader towards the end of the story is made to pause and question his/her moral stand. For instance, despite the adopted mother's commitment to the girl's growth reflective of that of a 'real mother', is she then exempted from the objective condemnation of "taking what is not your own?" And more daring is the question: would she have acted the same way if she was able to bear children and she, prior to seeing the girl in a mad woman's haven, had a child of her own? After the realization of the true identity of her birth mother, is it still morally defensible for the girl to keep calling her adopted mother 'Mother' rather than her name Florence?

Despite their loving-kindness to the girl, why didn't her aunties —Rhoda and Chidinma— let her know the true story around her birth given how stories around our birth shapes our identity? Is such love a true and unconditional one that is not predicated on what their sister stands to earn? Even when their love is grounded in veracity, are they exempted from moral badness because of such loving-kindness? I think the author's aim is to justify the girl's choice to go with her contrived identity, a fictitious one that is not actually the real one. He aims to show this choice is valid, too. He didn't shed a light on other questions I have highlighted that a reader's mind might inquire about while reading the story, and this, I think, is the power of the story: to put the readers through a thought process.

Joshua Chizoma's "Collector of Memories" is attentive to details in terms of the vivid imageries it offers. We can see this all over the story. For instance, when the protagonist was on her way home after her aunties came to her office to summon her, we see the author detailing how Chibusonma paid for both oranges and bananas in order not to offend the seller. Or when Chibusonma notes that "*The light was on when I stepped into the house.*" And, I think to myself, these details are what makes a narrative beautiful.

Suspense isn't an integral power of the story. But the author, just like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (a former winner of the Caine Prize) in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, pulled a "Kainene" character on us. Just like we didn't know what happened to Kainene at the end of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and we are left to our imagination, and some assumptions, we—the readers—didn't know what happened to the girl's adopted mother at the other end of the girl's call after she visited her birth mother.

"Collector of Memories" isn't an uncommon story (or gossip) we hear in our neighborhoods and watch in Nollywood movies, yet it is a visceral, powerful, and daunting story. It is a total shift from the common stories around issues of personal identity, existential crisis, morality, and solipsism. Even when the story isn't a hallmark of suspense, the narrative style makes a reader glued to the pages and keeps the mind off from requiring rest from the body, and instead, it subconsciously asks that the reader turns to the next page in order to know what next and how this—story—ends. Unfortunately, it never ends. The reader's imagination keeps inquiring what might have happened at the other end of the call left unanswered.

"Collector of Memories" is a poignant and visceral story that leaves us breathless. The story questions our sense of moralities, how and why we choose our truths which later go on to form our identity.

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