

Short Fiction Sample

Adaobi Enlightened

'Adaobi, Adaobi!!!'

'Adaobi, Adaobiiii!!!' Nkemezi shouted at the top of her voice. "Where is this child?" she grunted in annoyance. Nkemezi was a striking woman. Her body built like sculpted steel. You could tell from her walk and her gait that she had lived many lives. She was purposeful in her speech and her expressions. There was a vexed look in her eye. Then there was a way she spoke; her voice was peculiar, like the sound of the echoes the nearby Ogboora streams gave off when the women interrupted its flow with their wading and washing. She would utter her words as though she were daring you to provoke her, so she could tell you her many stories.

As she paced back and forth, huge droplets formed on her face in the sweltering heat, they appeared to roll and plop down to her chest. Beads of sweat had begun to roll down her back, her faded floral blouse streaked and stained with the perspiration. The corners of her eye stung and she wiped her face with the back of her, her calloused fingers grating into her skin despite the moisture from the sweat.

And as though the heat were not enough, the fumes from the burning wood and plastic filled the air, as the clans' men fired up the refuse heaps at the neighboring fields. Nkemezi was already feeling irritated by the heat, and the smell only worked to make her feel even more irate. Her rising anger was being fueled by panic as Adaobi was yet to respond to her calls.

Nkemezi had circled the compound at least seven times. Though not a large piece of land, it was space enough for Nkemezi to circle in frustration. The wrinkles around her eyes crinkled and her dark freckles made her face appear peppered with fury. Tired of pacing frantically, she stood still watching the path, hoping Adaobi would make an appearance, still nothing. Feeling too angry, too hot, and too irritated, she sat on a crooked three-legged cooking stool.

Her thoughts raced around her mind, raising red fumes the way the legs of the little children in the village raised the red dust as their feet beat the ground, in hot pursuit of the worn tires they rolled about their compounds. Restless, she got up and started to pace again. It was futile to walk around the compound in this heat. Where was this child, she wondered in continued frustration.

She sat back down with her back facing the mud hut where she lived with her husband Ndudi, her son Nayo, and her daughter Adaobi. Laid out in front of her were her usual companions, her coal pots which she had inherited from her mother, the now jagged grinding stone that she had used for years to turn fresh peppers into paste, and all the worn-out utensils. Nkemezi looked at the now crooked old knives and cooking ladles which no longer had their original handles. Nkemezi couldn't help but feel a little like the old, jagged, and broken utensils. Constantly in use despite their apparent wear.

Nkemezi was once a very beautiful woman, her face freckled with dark spots that resembled the dotted marks created when dak tar is spattered. Her eyes which were once just as striking as her gait now looked heavy with disappointment, she always looked like she was ready to cry. Her eye lids appeared as though they were heavy with precipitation.

She was preparing to cook their evening meal. She had burned some firewood, the flames were easing now, the wood now crackled, its embers distributing pillowy fumes throughout the compound. The air was inundated with the unmissable/distinct scent of aged firewood which now burned away slowly. This was where she made their family meals every day no matter the weather, with the use of her "old reliables".

This evening, she was preparing Bitterleaf soup. everyone's favorite! It was her failsafe, Ndudi, Nayo and Adaobi always sang her praises whenever she made this meal. It made her feel proud and reminded her that she was adding value to her family in a way only she could. She made this meal whenever she needed a boost in her morale, a reminder that she wasn't wasting her life away.

For a moment, she was in caught in thought, the bitter leaves which she had now washed and chopped sat in faded plastic bowl. This plastic bowl had been one of the items her mother had given her when she began her marriage to Ndudi. It had been a part of her for years. As she sat looking at the faded bowl, it made her think of all the hopes and dreams she had allowed to fade away over years. All the ideas she had once dreamed up, that she never pursued. She now clung to her identity as mother and wife to justify her decision to stay here.

Nkemezi had wanted to move to the city to become a tailor. She had figured that she could become an apprentice to one of the fashion designers in the city. She had plans to learn as much as she could till, she could have a tailoring store of her own. Somehow that plan never materialized.

Nkemezi was jolted back to her reality by the smell coming off the empty but now very hot coal pot. She grabbed an old cloth to take it down, and then she remembered Adaobi had still not returned.

"Adaobi, Adaobi!" she started to shout again. This time at the very top of her lungs.

Adaobi always responded to her name by the third call without fail at least, even when she had wandered off to her friend, Nkiruka's hut, just off the beaten path. It was just the way it was. They had lived in this small village so long, Nkemezi could walk through the entire village in her mind without omitting a single palm tree. She and Ndudi owned a small farm in the neighboring town of Nchemuno. They all went there daily without fail.,

Adaobi had gone to the farm and returned with her mother every day since she turned 7, the only exceptions were Sundays, Christmas, and New Year. If you ever fell ill, you were never ill enough to not go to the farm. The routine was always the same, like clockwork only varying in harvest season.

Unknown to Nkemezi, Adaobi was at this time, lost in her thoughts as she kept company with the secrets she had been keeping for months. Adaobi had discovered a world of illustrated books, broken pieces of chalk board and multi-colored chalks.

Ncheluche, Adaobi's admirer, worked at the tip. He had taken an interest in the books and broken chalks and chalk boards when he would have to scrimp through the waste heaps. The colors and pictures fascinated him, but they fascinated Adaobi even more. When they no longer appealed to him, she became the new owner of these items of wonder.

The first time Ncheluche gave her an illustrated book, some broken chalk boards, and chalk; she hurriedly ran to show them to her mother. Nkemezi turned out to be not quite as pleased. Especially because, from what she could gather, the loot had come from an even more distasteful man. Distasteful, only because he could offer nothing of material value or pleasure to Adaobi or her family.

Nkemezi had snatched the items of wonder from Adaobi in anger and irritation, as if they were stained underwear being hung out to dry, 'Ha! Adaobi, what are you doing with these?' She asked in annoyance. 'Where did you find them eh?' 'Who gave them to you?' Nkemezi questioned her, fuming impatiently.

'Mama, mama! Why do you seem so angry?'

'I got them from Ncheluche, he found them at the tip, and he brought them for me, aren't they wonderful Mama?'

'Wonderful! Did you say wonderful eh?' Nkemezi turned around dramatically. She planted her hands on her hips and grunted as if in hysteria. The look on her face remained puzzling to Adaobi.

'Mama, I don't understand. What is wrong?' Adaobi asked innocently. She was confused that her mother did not share her glee.

'Adaobi, Adaobi, Adaobi! How many times did I call your name?' Nkemezi replied with an animated look on her face. 'There is a reason your father and I did not put you in that school run by Father Nchanwa' she continued. 'Books are of the devil my child. Even worse are these colorful ones with pictures of strange people wearing wayward garments and doing carnal things.'

'Adaobi, you will not kill me, as I did not kill my mother.' Nkemezi was releasing a steady stream of words. 'These items are bad, very bad. They corrupt people and make them behave badly to their parents. 'You shouldn't even look in them or they will fill you with bad ideas, you would start to think you know more than everybody'.

Adaobi could not hide her shock.

'Why are looking at me like that Adaobi?' Nkemezi asked 'Don't let that foolish boy, Ncheluche brainwash you with the white man's ideas.'

'You are a good girl, and when you are old enough you will get married, start taking care of a farm, just like me, and you will bear children of your own.' Nkemezi kept on with her remarks 'Please let this be the last time I see you with this nonsense, no man will marry a girl who thinks she knows too much'.

'But Mama, Mama.' Adaobi's words trailed as her mother snatched the items from her and tossed them into the flames of her burning firewood. Adaobi still remembered the hot emotion she felt burning through her as she watched them disintegrate in the fire, even the unusual smell that tore off them."

But on this day, unlike other days Adaobi had not hurried back after peeping in on her collection, rather she lingered. She lingered to draw. She drew patterns of flowers and hills as she longed to do. Adaobi could not read but the illustrations in the books educated her, they flooded her imagination and informed her of possibilities that existed in the world beyond the bounds of Nchemuno and all its neighboring towns. Her imagination took her on flights to the white man's world. She entertained thoughts that her mother Nkemezi would forbid, thoughts of pretty dresses and handsome men, of bread and of butter, of beaches and oceans.

As she sat there, the only light streaming in coming from the flickers of the sunset that escaped through the cracks on the planks of wood that formed the shelter. Adaobi allowed herself to dream, to sing and to smile. She admired her chalk drawings of pastel colors. Bringing the broken pieces of board towards her face, she smelled them, the smell reminded her of rain and hope.

"If only I could, I would run away from this town" she thought to herself "I would go to school, I would learn the wonders of this world and I will not live forever on a farm."

Just then her mother's calls for her drew closer, Nkiruka had told Nkemezi that she had seen Adaobi going back to the farm and she had come there to find her.

Nkemezi had looked over the farm and still there was no sign of Adaobi. Her trepidation growing, the knot in her stomach tightening as she began to imagine the worst. Had someone taken her? Had she been lured away by Ncheluche? Were they up to no good? – these thoughts were bouncing off her mind like the grains of rice she often sifted to separate grain from shaft on the boarded grain beater.

"Adaobi, Adaobi!!!" she screamed even louder "Where are you? This girl, you won't kill...!"

Adaobi came out from her hiding place. The way and manner with which she emerged from behind the storage shed confirming Nkemezi's fears. "Is he in there too?" Nkemezi shouted as she leaped towards the broken shed door.

"Is who in there mama?" Adaobi retorted but her words fell on Nkemezi's hot and angry ears.

What she found behind the shed gave her some relief, but she was still confused. Whether to stay relieved or to be disappointed, Nkemezi could not decide. She couldn't make any sense of what she was seeing but something told her to be angry still. "Adaobi, what is this I am looking at", "what have you been doing here?" "When did you start hiding things here eh?"

Adaobi stared beyond her mother and into her imagined future. She realized in that moment that she was the only one who really wanted what she wanted for herself. Her moment to speak up had presented itself. She could no longer hide or stifle her dreams. She didn't even want to. She did not want to have to explain it, nor did she want to be deprived of it. Adaobi had been enlightened!

"Mama, I am leaving Nchemuno."