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Embodied histories: Foodways, gendered inequality, and decolonial memory in *Dream Count*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines *Dream Count* through the lens of food and foodways, arguing that everyday practices of eating, cooking, and refusal function as central narrative sites through which memory, power, gender, class, and diasporic identity are negotiated. Rather than treating food as a cultural backdrop, the novel positions it as an embodied archive that registers emotional history, colonial afterlives, and systems of social regulation. Through close textual analysis, the paper traces how food operates across multiple dimensions: sensory memory, gendered labor, class performance, moral discipline, intra-African difference, and communal care. Drawing on postcolonial theory, feminist food studies, and Black diaspora scholarship, the analysis demonstrates how ordinary food practices carry political and ethical significance without resolving structural violence. While food often functions as a mechanism of control and exclusion, the novel also foregrounds shared meals as spaces of endurance, recognition, and limited resistance. Ultimately, the study argues that *Dream Count* reconfigures the everyday act of eating into a narrative medium through which inequality is exposed, memory is sustained, and marginalized voices reclaim presence within conditions of vulnerability and loss.

Keywords: *Dream Count*, Chimamanda Adichie, Food and foodways, narrative archive, sensory memory, colonial afterlives, Black diaspora.

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1. Introduction

Several papers on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction have highlighted the role of food as a narrative device employed to articulate questions of power, social hierarchies, and cultural belonging. In particular, eating practices in *Purple Hibiscus* have functioned as markers of class differences (Sindhu and Lydia, 2019) and have been utilized as symbols for patriarchal and colonial domination (Santhiya, 2019). Recently, the politics of eating in the same novel symbolized by the family table demonstrate the intersectionality of religious fanaticism, gendered control and neocolonial power (Githire, 2023). In

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Americanah, food employed to negotiate female subjectivity and cultural translation within diasporic contexts (Kharazi and Bahmani, 2022).

Taken together, they are foundational studies that offer a metaphorical and symbolic reading of food in Adichie's novels. However, food is mainly treated as representational. On the other hand, this paper rethinks how food in *Dream Count* functions within narrative time, memory, and embodiment. Therefore, food is treated beyond the symbolic function as mentioned in previous studies. Food and foodways, instead, operate as narrative archives: embodied and cumulative practices through which colonial memory, gendered labor, class inequality, and diasporic affect are preserved and transmitted in the absence of formal historical narrative.

In *Dream Count*, food and foodways emerge as central narrative tools through which the novel explores memory, gendered power, class hierarchy, diasporic identity, and the lingering presence of colonial history. Rather than functioning as a decorative cultural motif, food operates as an organizing lens that shapes how characters confront the past, negotiate intimacy, and interpret social hierarchy. Through everyday acts of cooking, eating, and refusal, Adichie positions food as an embodied site where private emotion intersects with historical inheritance.

The novel's pandemic setting provides a crucial narrative frame. Lockdown operates less as a dramatic event than as a condition of enforced stillness that sharpens perception and disrupts habitual distraction. Within this pause, the novel's primary narrators—Chiamaka, Zikora, Omelogor, and Kadiatou—are compelled to confront experiences long deferred. While Chiamaka anchors the opening and closing movements of the narrative, the shifting perspectives of the four women prevent lockdown from functioning as a universalizing experience, revealing instead how introspection itself is unevenly distributed across lines of class, migration, and security.

Chiamaka notes that it was during lockdown that she “began to sift through [her] life, and to give names to things long unnamed” (Adichie, 2025, p. 8). This act of naming unfolds not through abstract reflection but through sensory encounters, particularly those associated with food. Smell, texture, appetite, and refusal become catalysts through which emotional memory resurfaces. Food thus mediates recognition, allowing experiences previously minimized or normalized to be reinterpreted within the stillness of confinement.

Across the novel, food functions as a multilayered archive—sensory, emotional, and historical. Rather than preserving memory through formal record or explicit testimony, food encodes history through repetition, omission, and habit. Intergenerational trauma, colonial violence, and displacement persist within ordinary culinary practices, where absence can carry as much meaning as ritual or abundance. In this way, Adichie redefines archival memory as something lived and transmitted through practice rather than documentation.

This archival function is particularly evident in moments where family history surfaces through everyday consumption. Domestic meals become sites where ancestral memory is sustained without narration, positioning food as a medium through which the past quietly endures within the present. At the same time, food also exposes contemporary systems of power, revealing how gendered labor, class aspiration, and cultural authority are negotiated through taste and nourishment.

By foregrounding food as both archive and practice, *Dream Count* reframes the everyday as a critical site of meaning. Food becomes neither a neutral background nor a stable symbol, but a dynamic medium through which inequality, memory, and belonging are continually produced and contested. This study therefore examines how foodways structure the novel's engagement with power, vulnerability, and resistance, tracing their significance across sensory memory, gendered labor, class performance, moral regulation, intra-African difference, and communal care.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper draws on interdisciplinary frameworks from food studies, feminist theory, postcolonial memory studies, and African diaspora scholarship to analyze how *Dream Count* deploys food and foodways as narrative tools. Rather than treating food as metaphor alone, this framework approaches everyday practices of cooking, eating, and refusal as material sites through which historical experience is lived and transmitted. Central to this analysis is Frantz Fanon's concept of the “archives of the ordinary,” which positions everyday practices as repositories of colonial trauma and cultural

survival (Fanon, 1963). This framework enables a reading of food as embodied historical practice, where violence and displacement persist through bodily habit rather than formal historical narration.

Fanon's framework is particularly useful for interpreting moments in the novel where food refusal operates as an embodied counter-archive. The great-grandfather's lifelong rejection of cocoyams following his abduction during colonial-era raids is not framed as a symbolic gesture but as an inherited practice that silently encodes historical trauma (Adichie, 2025, pp. 57–58). Recalled through Omelogor's family lineage, this refusal demonstrates how colonial violence persists within domestic routine. Rather than functioning as overt resistance, such acts preserve memory through repetition and absence, turning the dinner table into a space where historical accountability is lived rather than declared. By choosing what not to consume, the ancestor asserts a form of bodily sovereignty that quietly challenges colonial control over land, labor, and appetite.

A second foundational lens comes from Arlene Voski Avakian's feminist food theory, which emphasizes that food preparation and consumption are deeply social practices shaped by gendered expectations, emotional labor, and unequal power relations (Avakian, 1997). Avakian's work clarifies how domestic foodwork often functions as invisible labor, disproportionately assigned to women and framed as natural obligation rather than effort. This perspective is essential for reading kitchens in *Dream Count* as spaces where care, endurance, and silence converge.

Through Avakian's framework, scenes involving Kadiatou and Zikora reveal how cooking operates as emotional labor that sustains households while simultaneously constraining female autonomy. Foodwork becomes a medium through which these women manage conflict, absorb humiliation, and preserve social harmony, often at personal cost. For Kadiatou, the kitchen is a space of strategic silence, while for Zikora, it is where the weight of maternal expectation and care-taking is most intensely felt. Rather than presenting the kitchen as either liberatory or oppressive, the novel stages it as an ambivalent site where gendered power is negotiated through routine acts of nourishment.

Scholarship on African foodways and diaspora is used in a supporting capacity to situate the novel's attention to culinary difference within broader histories of migration, colonial encounter, and cultural valuation. Scholars such as Bogue (2010) emphasize that foodways within African and diasporic contexts reflect regional specificity, displacement, and everyday survival, resisting homogenizing notions of "African culture." This framework illuminates moments in *Dream Count* where culinary difference operates as a marker of identity rather than deficiency. Kadiatou's confident preparation of fonio, ndappa, and folere contrasts with Omelogor's unfamiliarity with these foods, revealing how African identities are differentiated through taste, practice, and memory rather than unified under a single cultural category. Such moments challenge Western-centered hierarchies of refinement while also exposing internal hierarchies shaped by class and colonial inheritance.

Christina Sharpe's work on the "afterlives" of historical violence further contextualizes the novel's pandemic setting without functioning as a primary analytical framework (Sharpe, 2016). Sharpe's emphasis on how historical trauma becomes newly visible during moments of disruption helps clarify how the enforced stillness of lockdown intensifies sensory awareness and emotional vulnerability across the novel's narrative voices. In *Dream Count*, the pandemic does not produce these inequalities but renders them more perceptible through everyday practices such as cooking, eating, and provisioning.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks position food not as narrative ornament but as a lived practice through which memory, gendered labor, and historical inequality are carried and negotiated. By prioritizing Fanon and Avakian while situating other perspectives in a supporting role, this framework remains closely accountable to the novel's narrative texture rather than allowing theory to overwhelm textual analysis. The analytical sections that follow build on this grounding through sustained close reading rather than abstract application.

3. Analysis

3.1 Food as sensory memory and colonial echoes

In *Dream Count*, Adichie constructs food as a layered mnemonic system in which taste, smell, and embodied routine reactivate memories that Chiamaka has long suppressed. From the opening

chapter, Chiamaka frames the pandemic lockdown as a sensory rupture—“it was during lockdown that I began to sift through my life and give names to things long unnamed” (Adichie, 2025, p. 8). This process of naming is mediated through food-related domestic acts, as boiling, chopping, and stirring surface buried experiences and inherited histories. Read through Christina Sharpe’s concept of wake work, the enforced stillness of lockdown intensifies sensory perception, allowing emotional and historical knowledge to resurface through ordinary domestic routines (Sharpe, 2016).

One of the most striking examples appears in Kadiatou’s storyline, where cooking becomes a direct bridge to ancestral presence. As she prepares ndappa and folere, she feels her father’s essence “close... because he had grown up here,” and even the act of sifting fonio carries an “almost spiritual” connection to her lineage (Adichie, 2025, pp. 167–168). Here, food functions as embodied memory, aligning with Frantz Fanon’s concept of the “archives of the ordinary,” where everyday gestures preserve histories that formal memory suppresses (Fanon, 1963).

The most vivid example of food as an embodied archive of colonial memory appears in Omelogor’s maternal family history. Her great-grandfather’s lifelong refusal to eat cocoyams after being abducted during colonial-era raids becomes an inherited act of remembrance: “He never ate cocoyams... which is why today my mother’s soup is different” (Adichie, 2025, pp. 57–58). This refusal preserves memory through habitual absence rather than explicit narration. The domestic meal thus becomes a site where colonial violence persists within everyday routine.

This logic of embodied memory is echoed through the novel’s reference to the Parsley Massacre, where Haitians were killed based on their pronunciation of the word *parsley* (Adichie, 2025, p. 219). In both instances, food and food-related language operate as markers through which historical violence is carried forward. through Fanon’s framework, these moments demonstrate how history remains sedimented in the body and the tongue rather than confined to formal archives.

The novel further shows that sensory memory is spatial and intergenerational. Cooking in the same spaces where her grandmother once cooked allows Kadiatou to inhabit memories she never consciously formed. Ingredients such as hibiscus leaves, cassava, and fonio carry cultural and emotional resonance across generations, allowing inherited memory to be lived rather than merely recalled.

Sensory memory also surfaces unacknowledged emotional wounds in Chiamaka’s present. During lockdown, scents and textures sharpen her awareness of belittling incidents she once minimized, including the Paris mimosa episode and Darnell’s description of his former marriage as “stale” (Adichie, 2025, p. 63). These moments illustrate how food-related language becomes entangled with emotional diminishment.

Across these scenes, food operates as a site through which memory, lineage, and emotional rupture resurface. By foregrounding sensory experience, Adichie aligns with Fanon’s insistence that history resides in bodily habit. As these sensory memories emerge, they prepare the ground for the novel’s examination of how food practices also structure gendered expectations and emotional labor, a dynamic explored in the following section.

3.2 Gendered labor, emotional burden, and quiet feminist resistance

In *Dream Count*, Adichie exposes how foodwork becomes a site where gendered expectations and emotional labor intersect. While Chiamaka is not physically responsible for the labor of feeding and hosting due to her upper-class status—relying instead on Kadiatou’s labor—her reflections reveal a different kind of pressure. For Chiamaka, food becomes a site of social management rather than manual chore. Her role illustrates how responsibility for care persists even when physical labor is delegated.

The novel’s most vivid exploration of gendered food labor appears in Kadiatou’s storyline, where cooking functions as a cultural measure of womanhood. When she prepares ndappa and folere for the first time, her mother praises her ability as evidence that she will “make a good wife” (Adichie, 2025, p. 168). This moment links a woman’s value directly to her capacity to feed others, reinforcing a system in which domestic labor is expected rather than chosen.

Kadiatou’s emotional burden becomes clearer when contrasted with her sister Binta. While Binta resists deference, Kadiatou learns to “shrink herself,” apologizing excessively to compensate for her sister’s boldness (Adichie, 2025, p. 168). This dynamic extends into her culinary role, where she

internalizes the expectation that harmony must be maintained through service and silence. Foodwork thus operates as an unspoken emotional contract, binding nourishment to restraint rather than expression.

Adichie further demonstrates how gendered food labor becomes entangled with violence. In the kitchen where Mariama works, cooking becomes grounds for punishment when she is beaten for preparing yogurt that was “not properly soured” (Adichie, 2025, p. 174). The triviality of the mistake exposes how women’s culinary labor is policed as a moral obligation rather than evaluated as skill.

The Paris mimosa incident illustrates how gendered discipline operates through taste. Chiamaka’s craving becomes a moment of correction when Darnell mocks it as “ugly American shit” (Adichie, 2025, p. 63). When he later repeats the criticism at home “like a school headmaster delaying punishment,” her autonomy is further diminished (Adichie, 2025, p. 62). Darnell’s silence when Charlotte publicly humiliates Chiamaka for eating meat leaves her to absorb the discomfort alone, highlighting the uneven distribution of emotional labor within social and intimate spaces.

Yet the novel also presents moments where food becomes a medium of quiet resistance. Kadiatou’s mastery of fonio offers comfort and grounding, allowing her to reclaim a sense of self outside patriarchal judgment (Adichie, 2025, p. 168). Here, cooking shifts from obligation to a limited form of self-assertion. Similarly, Chiamaka’s later refusal to accommodate others’ expectations around food signals a gradual assertion of emotional autonomy.

Across these narratives, *Dream Count* shows that gendered food labor is neither neutral nor benign. It functions as a site of emotional burden and social conditioning, while also offering constrained spaces where women negotiate endurance and agency. These dynamics prepare the ground for the following section’s focus on class, taste, and the performance of refinement.

3.3 Class, taste, and the performance of refinement

In *Dream Count*, class emerges most visibly through the politics of taste—how characters articulate refinement, measure sophistication, and distinguish themselves through culinary preferences. Rather than appearing through overt displays of wealth, class is negotiated through everyday judgments about food, language, and social behavior. Taste operates as a form of social currency, and Chiamaka gradually learns that what one eats, rejects, or praises can function as an unspoken declaration of status.

A central illustration of this dynamic appears in the novel’s treatment of fonio. When Omelogor encounters the dish for the first time, she describes it as “the latest American superfood,” a remark Kadiatou meets with amused disbelief: “My people eat fonio for long time and now they say superfood” (Adichie, 2025, p. 218). This exchange highlights how classed discourse redefines indigenous foods through Western validation. Kadiatou’s response resists a hierarchy that elevates African ingredients only after global rebranding.

This resistance is reinforced through Kadiatou’s rejection of catered Western food. Her calm dismissal—“This kind of food, I don’t eat. No taste” (Adichie, 2025, p. 55)—asserts the legitimacy of taste grounded in tradition rather than aspiration. Unlike Chiamaka, who often experiences taste as a site of scrutiny, Kadiatou bypasses the language of refinement, positioning her relationship with food as cultural dignity rather than social performance. Through this contrast, the novel foregrounds tension between lived culinary knowledge and performative consumption.

At gatherings where Charlotte and her peers comment on meat, sugar, and processed food, dietary choices are framed as markers of moral and intellectual superiority (Adichie, 2025, pp. 31–32). In these settings, taste functions as a disciplinary practice rather than a personal preference. Darnell’s silence during moments of public judgment reinforces Chiamaka’s marginalization, suggesting that classed authority is often maintained through quiet complicity. Chiamaka gradually comes to read these exchanges as mechanisms that police belonging.

Class performance also shapes Chiamaka’s recollections of her career as a travel writer. She recalls producing restaurant pieces designed to signal cosmopolitan belonging, language that later strikes her as performative and shallow (Adichie, 2025, p. 30). This retrospective embarrassment marks her growing awareness that refinement was learned imitation rather than inherent distinction.

Markets in the novel further operate as spaces where class is negotiated. Chiamaka views them as arenas of access and exclusion, where imported ingredients, niche diets, and sensory cues—such as the “musty smell of stockfish” in the African market in Catonsville—function as markers of social positioning (Adichie, 2025, p. 77). In contrast, Kadiatou’s relationship to food remains shaped by continuity rather than curated consumption, quietly unsettling these hierarchies.

Taken together, these moments present refinement as a performed identity rather than a neutral attribute. Chiamaka’s movement from mimicry toward self-defined preference signals an emerging awareness of class pressure. Zikora similarly navigates elite spaces where taste and status intersect; her relationship with Kwame begins at a vegan cookbook launch among “stylish people” and “complicated canapés,” where the playful exchange over the word “nutty” becomes a shared marker of belonging (Adichie, 2025, p. 105). Yet this cultivated refinement coexists with earlier experiences of bodily discipline, exposing its fragility. These dynamics prepare the ground for the following section’s examination of food as a mechanism of control and moral regulation.

3.4 Food as control, punishment, and spiritual anxiety

In *Dream Count*, Adichie shows how food becomes a mechanism of control and punishment, exposing women’s vulnerability within patriarchal and communal structures. Unlike the gentler memories attached to food elsewhere in the novel, this dimension foregrounds coercion, fear, and the moral weight imposed on women’s culinary labor.

The clearest example appears in Mariama’s story. Her husband beats her until her eye swells shut “because she served him bad kossan, the yogurt not properly soured” (Adichie, 2025, p. 174). The triviality of the mistake highlights how domestic cooking is policed as a moral duty rather than a skill. A minor culinary error becomes grounds for violence, illustrating Fanon’s argument that power embeds itself in everyday acts of discipline, where domination is exercised through routine practices rather than exceptional force (Fanon, 1963).

Food also becomes entangled with spiritual danger. Kadiatou avoids sharing meals with her husband, Saidou, after his wrongdoing—drinking alcohol and thus becoming cursed—believing that “the curse would remain solely on him” if she refused to eat anything he had eaten (Adichie, 2025, p. 189). After Saidou’s death, she avoids bringing her baby to his family until “the curse no longer lingered” (Adichie, 2025, p. 191). Here, food functions as a protective boundary rather than a site of communion, allowing limited agency without direct confrontation. Cultural belief systems thus embed morality and power directly into the act of eating.

Cultural anxieties further surface through fears of *jazz*—mystical spells believed to be hidden in food. The warning, “Be careful eating in women’s houses... they will put jazz in your food,” reveals a contradiction: women are expected to nourish, yet are simultaneously feared as sources of coercive power (Adichie, 2025, p. 347). This is reinforced by claims that “women are desperate these days... and with someone like Chijioke, they will make every love potion there is” (Adichie, 2025, p. 347). Food thus becomes a means of policing women’s reputations and regulating female autonomy. Omelogor later recalls rumors accusing her of using *jazz* to attract men, underscoring this dynamic (Adichie, 2025, pp. 303–304).

Food also carries the burden of historical blame and political violence. Darnell’s claim that “Chia’s people probably sold my people” links Chiamaka’s family’s palm-oil wealth to the history of slavery (Adichie, 2025, p. 27), turning an ingredient into a vessel of inherited guilt. This entanglement is intensified through the reference to the Parsley Massacre (Adichie, 2025, p. 219), where the pronunciation of a single herb became a lethal test used to identify and execute Haitians. By juxtaposing palm oil and parsley, the novel shows how food becomes a medium of moral accusation and historical judgment.

Across these scenes, food is revealed as far from neutral. It operates as a conduit through which power, fear, and punishment circulate in everyday life. Yet women respond with subtle forms of resistance—leaving abusive marriages, refusing contaminated meals, or rejecting imposed narratives—demonstrating that even within restrictive systems, food can be used to negotiate survival. These dynamics prepare the ground for the following section’s focus on communal eating and the conditional possibilities of healing.

3.5 Pandemic stillness and the intensification of emotional perception

In *Dream Count*, the COVID-19 pandemic does not function as a dramatic plot engine; rather, its stillness exposes how characters experience emotional vulnerability and material security in unequal ways, particularly in relation to food. Lockdown disrupts routines of access, preparation, and sharing, transforming food from a background presence into a site of heightened awareness shaped by anxiety, restriction, and reflection.

For Chiamaka, confinement sharpens attentiveness to everyday food practices. She recalls that during lockdown she “began to sift through [her] life, to give names to things long unnamed” (Adichie, 2025, p. 8). Within this slowed temporal frame, domestic routines such as cooking and eating become moments of emotional reckoning rather than distraction. Darnell’s description of his previous marriage as “stale,” a term Chiamaka associates with food, resurfaces with renewed force during lockdown, revealing how food-related language carried emotional weight she had previously minimized (Adichie, 2025, p. 94).

By contrast, Kadiatou’s experience of the pandemic foregrounds material precarity rather than introspection. Her attention remains fixed on provision, safety, and the protection of her child. Concerns about what food can be cooked, shared, or trusted intensify under conditions of restriction. Lockdown thus amplifies an existing awareness of scarcity, exposing how access to nourishment is unevenly distributed along lines of class, gender, and migration. Food here operates as necessity rather than metaphor.

Omelogor encounters scarcity differently. Accustomed to mobility and abundance, she experiences the disruption of supply and the absence of familiar ingredients as disorientation rather than deprivation. What had once been taken for granted becomes intermittently unavailable, revealing dependency on stable systems of access rather than immediate hunger. Scarcity is thus registered through interruption and delay rather than lack.

Across these perspectives, food functions as what Bogue describes as an “archive of the everyday,” storing emotional and historical residues that surface under pressure (Bogue, 2010). The pandemic intensifies these residues, rendering visible inequalities that had previously remained latent. This process echoes Sharpe’s argument that moments of crisis sharpen the afterlives of inequality, making them perceptible through ordinary practices such as eating and provision (Sharpe, 2016).

Ultimately, the stillness of lockdown does not affect characters uniformly. Instead, it reveals how relationships to food—shaped by security, precarity, and memory—govern the ways individuals confront fear and uncertainty. Scarcity shifts food from routine habit to heightened awareness, preparing the ground for the novel’s subsequent exploration of African culinary difference, where access, value, and identity are negotiated across cultural and diasporic boundaries.

3.6 African difference, culinary translation, and the politics of intra-continental identity

In *Dream Count*, Adichie challenges homogenizing notions of “African cuisine” by foregrounding the continent’s internal diversity. Food functions as a cultural language through which characters negotiate belonging, hierarchy, and pride. Rather than presenting African foodways as unified, the novel emphasizes regional difference shaped by migration, memory, and unequal systems of recognition. Frantz Fanon’s critique of colonial valuation, focuses on internal distinction reveals how hierarchies imposed under colonial rule continue to structure cultural recognition within postcolonial contexts (Fanon, 1963).

A key moment occurs when Kadiatou prepares ndappa, folere, and fonio upon entering the household. Her dishes are described as “extraordinary” by Omelogor, who is astonished by flavors unfamiliar to her (Adichie, 2025, p. 218). This encounter highlights intra-African difference, where foods grounded in Senegalese practice feel foreign to a Nigerian palate. Rather than framing this difference as deficiency, the scene presents it as cultural specificity rooted in regional history.

Culinary hierarchy also appears through Chiamaka’s mother’s reaction—“Why would anybody eat cassava leaves? That is goat food” (Adichie, 2025, p. 44). Her comment reflects internalized systems of value shaped by class anxiety and inherited notions of refinement, illustrating how culinary prejudice operates within African communities rather than exclusively through Western judgment.

This tension resurfaces when Omelogor refers to fonio as “the latest American superfood,” prompting Kadiatou to respond, “My people been eating fonio for long time” (Adichie, 2025, p. 218). The exchange reverses dominant hierarchies of validation, rejecting Western market authority in favor of lived cultural continuity. Rather than accepting global rebranding as confirmation of worth, Kadiatou asserts legitimacy grounded in memory and practice.

Diasporic translation further complicates these negotiations. Omelogor’s Nigerian background and Darnell’s African American lineage produce competing interpretations of ingredients such as palm oil, whose meanings are shaped by histories of slavery, migration, and colonial trade. Food thus carries unresolved historical associations into intimate conversation, aligning with Christina Sharpe’s concept of the afterlives of historical violence (Sharpe, 2016).

Markets emerge as additional sites where difference becomes legible. While accompanying Kadiatou through the aisles, Chiamaka observes how ingredients she once overlooked become central to another woman’s sense of self (Adichie, 2025). Taste here operates relationally, revealing how cultural recognition is learned through embodied encounter rather than assumption. For Chiamaka, the market becomes a space where class, migration, and access intersect.

The domestic sphere intensifies these tensions. Omelogor, arriving from Nigeria, “didn’t affect a blindness to life’s pecking order,” treating domestic requests as transparent exchanges (Adichie, 2025, p. 209). In contrast, Chiamaka and Zikora—shaped by American social norms—feel compelled to soften hierarchy through apology (Adichie, 2025, p. 209). For Kadiatou, this performative guilt is alienating rather than affirming, registering as “pity that was not in any way useful to her” (Adichie, 2025, p. 209). These interactions expose how diasporic etiquette reshapes labor and authority without dissolving inequality.

Through these scenes, Adichie demonstrates that African foodways are neither uniform nor interchangeable. They constitute a mosaic of practices shaped by geography, movement, and memory, where food becomes a medium for asserting dignity and negotiating difference within and across African identities. These dynamics prepare the ground for the novel’s final movement, where food shifts from marking difference to enabling collective presence and shared resistance.

3.7 Shared meals as defiance, communal healing, and the reclamation of voice

In *Dream Count*, communal eating becomes the novel’s most sustained counterforce to isolation and social fragmentation. While earlier sections reveal how food can wound, discipline, or estrange, the narratives’ later movements emphasize shared meals as spaces of collective repair rather than resolution. Food becomes a medium through which characters reclaim dignity, reestablish connection, and assert forms of belonging denied by exclusion and violence.

A pivotal moment occurs during Omelogor’s stay in Chiamaka’s home. Withdrawn into depression, Omelogor exists in a state of emotional stagnation. This condition shifts not through spectacle but through the preparation of fonio. When a conversation emerges about fonio being marketed as a “superfood” in America, Kadiatou’s response prompts a rare moment of laughter from Omelogor. The nourishment of the meal, described as acting “like a tonic,” coincides with Omelogor’s renewed capacity for self-care; the following day, she showers, her face appearing “marginally brighter” (Adichie, 2025, p. 218). Here, cooking functions as a restorative act grounded in presence rather than intervention.

For Chiamaka, these shared meals register as moments of emotional recalibration within her relationship with Omelogor. The kitchen becomes a space where social judgment momentarily loosens its grip, allowing Omelogor to exist beyond earlier experiences of exclusion, including the memory of being falsely accused of using *jazz* to attract men during her university years (Adichie, 2025, p. 303). Where earlier accusations associated food with suspicion and isolation, communal eating here reclaims its capacity to sustain connection. This domestic practice aligns with Sharpe’s description of “wake work,” in which everyday acts support survival amid ongoing histories of harm (Sharpe, 2016).

This form of communal restoration stands in contrast to Zikora’s experience. Zikora’s relationship to nourishment remains shaped by solitude and maternal pressure, underscoring how the absence of a shared kitchen intensifies emotional isolation. The juxtaposition emphasizes the social function of communal food spaces within diasporic life.

Shared meals are further situated within a longer lineage of care through Omelogor's memories of Christmas in an Igbo village. In this setting, the table functions as a site where stories circulate and kinship is reaffirmed, positioning food as a medium of collective presence rather than individual consumption. Communal eating also carries intergenerational memory, as reflected in Omelogor's account of her maternal great-grandfather's refusal to eat cocoyams after his abduction by slave raiders. This refusal persists as a familial practice: "He never ate cocoyams, which is why today my mother's onugbu soup is different" (Adichie, 2025, p. 58). Here, shared food practices transmit memory without narration, linking ancestral violence to everyday continuity.

By the novel's end, food emerges as a language of agency rather than cure. Communal meals do not erase trauma, but they enable recognition, endurance, and mutual presence. In *Dream Count*, shared eating becomes both a personal resource and a quiet form of defiance, allowing marginalized voices to reclaim space and transform histories of judgment into moments of collective affirmation.

4. Conclusion

This study examined *Dream Count* through the lens of food and foodways, demonstrating how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mobilizes everyday acts of eating, cooking, and refusal as narrative sites through which memory, power, gender, class, and postcolonial identity are negotiated. Rather than treating food as a peripheral cultural detail, the novel positions it as a sensory archive that registers emotional history, colonial afterlives, and intimate forms of social regulation.

Across the analysis, food emerges as a site of contradiction. It operates as a medium of discipline and exclusion—marking class aspiration, gendered labor, moral judgment, and violence—while also enabling endurance and limited forms of resistance. Through characters such as Chiamaka, Kadiatou, and Omelogor, the novel reveals how taste and nourishment are shaped by colonial hierarchies, diasporic translation, and inherited trauma, without fixing them as static or uniform experiences.

By drawing on Fanon's conception of everyday resistance, Sharpe's articulation of the afterlives of historical violence, and feminist food theory, the analysis has shown how ordinary food practices carry political significance. Acts such as refusing a dish, preparing a meal, or eating together function as embodied responses to histories of erasure and silencing rather than abstract symbolic gestures. Food becomes a language through which characters negotiate dignity, agency, and belonging within unequal conditions.

The novel's closing emphasis on communal eating reframes food as a practice of care rather than resolution. Shared meals do not undo trauma or structural violence, but they create relational spaces where recognition and presence are restored. In these moments, food operates as an ethical practice grounded in continuity, memory, and mutual attention.

This paper shifts the critical focus from what food symbolizes or represents metaphorically to how it structures memory, mediates power, and sustains knowledge grounded in the body. It intervenes in postcolonial memory studies by relocating memory in the everyday; situating colonial memory within the domestic sphere that is often feminized, privatized and overlooked rather than privileging testimonial narration and collective catastrophe as primary sites of remembrance. By reading foodways as narrative archives of memory, this paper extends existing scholarship on Adichie while making a shift in her use of food from social marker to affective record.

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