



Negotiating the Discourse of Equality in Adichie’s Fiction and Non Fiction

MARTHA OMOTETOBORE EGBEDI
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

Abstract. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has shot herself to limelight because of her achievements as a writer, public intellectual, feminist activist, as well as being recognised as a fashion and beauty icon. Her essays and interviews on different social media platforms have continue to encourage feminist discourses around the globe. She has also drawn severe criticisms for her feminist viewpoints of agitating equality for her African sisters from far-off and eliminating trans-women from her feminism. This article interrogates Adichie’s feminist philosophy in her fiction and nonfiction. It argues that women in her novels are not epitomes or defenders of the feminism promoted in her essays, but are relegated to the margins of culture and patriarchal abuse; shattering the basis of feminism in her nonfiction. Drawing instances from some of her novels and nonfictional works, this paper concludes that Adiche’s fiction and nonfiction showcase dissimilar feminist world views.

Keywords: Adichie, Feminism, Fiction, Nonfiction, Equality, Gender. *Americanah*

1. Introduction

Feminism is a western coinage that promotes female emancipation and equality of sexes through shades, waves and movements such as women liberationists, Socialist, Marxist feminist, Asian, American, French, Irish, Black British, Gynocritics, Gynesis, Psychoanalytic, Myth, Third Wave, Deconstruction, Lesbian-feminist-to mention a few from unending list. However, feminist activism can be dated to the eighteenth century with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin’s published essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (1792). Charles Nnolim (1994,48) observes that “Simone De Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*); Germaine Greer(*The Female Eunuch*);Betty Friedan(*The Feminine Mystic*);and Kate Millet(*Sexual Politics*), have put forward robust arguments for the liberation and total emancipation of women.”

Owing to the contentious nature of western feminism, it is considered with distrust and caution among African gender intellectuals who are generally from Nigeria such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Obioma Nnaemeka, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Catherine Acholonu, Mary Kolawole, Theodora Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Chielozona Eze. The range of theoretical variations in the African alternatives include femalism, African womanism, gynandrim, stiwanism, motherism, and nego feminism which are not as Davies, (1986,9) puts it, “antagonistic to African men but challenge them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalised oppression of all African people.” Ogunyemi (1996, 5) sums up the grouping of African models on women rights thus: “it is accommodationist...It wants meaningful union between black women and black men, and will see that men change their sexist stand. This ideological position explains why {African} women do not end their plots with feminist victories.” Despite the long existence of feminism and significant progress made by feminist, men still dominate and have not changed their sexist stand. Patriarchal culture and religious Limitations have contributed a lot to the inferior position of the Nigerian woman.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie may well be viewed as one of the most famous contemporary feminist of her time, having influenced quite a lot of people through her fiction and nonfiction. Unlike African female writers before her such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ and many more, Adichie fully adopts the feminist tag to educate people on her type of feminism, and also uses online technology to critique negative labels about women, feminists and feminism. Adichie’s novels perfectly align with the thematic preoccupations of African female writers, while her non-fiction is critical of African feminist theories which she finds not suited for her feminism. Thus, Isabet Aninat argues that “Adichie’s novels and essay display a separate

worldview...that fights not just western stereotype about African life, but also against her own culture prejudices (n.p).”

1.1 What then is Adichie’s Feminism?

Adichie discards the variations of African feminist theories, saying, “I feel discomfort about what becomes of alternative words like womanism...it made me feel some sort of motherly mystical thing that i just thought, Not my thing” (Atria ,29). She fails to mention African female literary mentors even though her novel follows the established tradition of African female writers (Akpome 2017, 9848). She argues for a feminist philosophy that will completely displace and abolish patriarchy. Her male inclusive feminism is a clamour for equality that de-emphasises the principles of complementarity which is rooted in the African culture. In reality, it will be difficult to achieve the Nigeria of Adichie’s dream. This will amount to rooting, uprooting and destroying the fundamental base of the people. Therefore, this paper questions Adichie's feminist views in *We Should Be All Feminist*, and *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, most importantly; her approach to feminism in her nonfiction.

1.2 Defining Feminism in Adichie’s Non-Fiction

In the introduction to her speech, “We Should All Be Feminists,” Adichie’s comments on the misconception evoked by the expression feminist and feminism and her resolve to challenge the stereotypical thinking. She relates personal experiences to affirm that feminism conveys negative meanings in many areas. Feminists are portrayed according to Adichie as “un-African, men haters, unhappy women who cannot find husbands.” The many pessimistic labels which Adichie encounters later in her life confirm that it still conveys negative connotations. Her response is a resolve to call herself a “Feminist”, “ A happy feminist”, “ A happy African feminist”, A happy African feminist who does not hate men and who likes to wear lip gloss and high heels for herself and not for Men.”

Adichie quotes the commonly mentioned definition of feminism to be, “the belief in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.” As opposed to this female centered struggle for equality, she offers her own definition thus: “My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, “Yes there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better.” According to Adichie, gender roles are a human creations that have been

accepted for many years. Her experience with a waiter and cab driver who ignored her and welcomed her male friend serves as an example of this. She believes that although there are undeniable biological differences between boys and females, these differences are exaggerated by socialization. Duties such as cooking, cleaning, maintaining the home, and raising children are learned skills that shouldn’t be assigned to people based solely on their gender.

Adichie disagrees with how gender is expressed and calls it "a grave injustice" to women, pointing out that it is more about regulation than "recognizing how we are." She shares some notable instances of gender bias she encountered as a child, adolescent, and adult. For instance, in primary school, a student who was completely unqualified and indifferent was appointed class prefect instead of her, who had received the highest grade and was eager to fill the role. She also shares a personal story about a childhood friend who called her a feminist in a way that implies that she supports terrorism. Adichie visits the topic of masculinity, power, and the elevated position that society accords to men. Though there are slightly more women than men worldwide, she notes that males still retain the majority of significant positions and influence. She contends that in the past, leadership capacity was determined by physical strength, placing men—who are often regarded as stronger than women—in these positions. Today, however, intelligence, knowledge, creativity, and innovation—qualities that transcend gender—are what define leadership.

Adichie then discusses how boys are brought up, saying, "We suffocate the humanity of boys. We have a very specific idea of what masculinity is. We confine them to the narrow, rigid cage."She admits that boys are taught "to be afraid of fear, of weakness, and of vulnerability." Men who meet this requirement tend to have "fragile egos." Adichie urges alternative child raising that will place a greater emphasis "on interest instead of gender" because she believes that both boys and girls suffer from this style of education. . Adichie proclaims: "We have evolved, but our ideas of gender have not evolved very much." Adichie points out that that culture is dynamic and created by humans, it can be changed; “Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.”

In *Dear Ijeawele*. Adichie promotes gender equality by changing the focus of her essay from "the problem of gender" to strategies for creating a gender-balanced society. Adichie employs two feminist

frameworks to demonstrate that "feminism is contextual" (6). The first argument is that "I matter. I matter equally;" (6) the second argument is the question of whether we can get the same result by switching genders, or "Can I reverse X and get the same results?" These methods encourage girls to question and defy gender norms (6).

Adichie advises Ijeawele to show women "as a full person" rather than just as married women or mothers (8). One of Adichie's concerns in this essay is oppression and inequality in marriages. She rejects the notion that women should be forced to give up their freedom and jobs for marriage or to stay at home and bear children while being completely reliant on their husbands (8–9). Adichie attacks women's ability to "do it all" and asserts that taught skills like cooking, cleaning, and child care "should be gender-neutral" (11) as opposed to "being independently female spaces." She discusses the ways in which marriage can impede women's advancement and rejects "the possibility of marriage as an award and accomplishment." Adichie questions why women's brilliance and influence must be kept secret (24). She advises Ijeawele to reject the notion of "Feminist Lite," which she describes as "a restrictive female equity" (20) and is illustrated by the idea that the woman serves as the neck (20–21). She dislikes the terms "allow" and "permit" because they have a patronizing undertone that promotes patriarchal dominance (22).

Adichie advocates for gender-neutral language, toy and clothing. The term also conveys the idea that women are vulnerable, seductive, and in need of a man's protection. Adichie asserts that "A girl's task is to be honestly aware of the equal humanity of people" (36). She advises her friend to teach her kid about sex and sexuality, the fact that "female sexuality is not about shame" (53) Adichie also criticizes instances in which women have brushed off the label of "feminist," saying that this "makes us see the extent of the problem" (60–61) and "that not all women are feminists and not all men are misogynist." (61).

2. Adichie's Feminism and *Purple Hibiscus*

Purple Hibiscus focuses on the violence perpetrated by a father on both his wife and children. Eugene maintains his patriarchal control through domestic violence. He seems to have been raised in the way Adichie describes as "a hard, small cage" (WF) that "stifle the humanity of boys" Eugene is a product of Catholic missionary education, but also influenced by Igbo cultural idea of manliness. Through the eyes

of Kambili, the first-person narrator, Adichie show women, young and old, who suffer forms of maltreatment from the patriarchal system. Beatrice is the major victim of Eugene, having suffered severe beatings, miscarriages and life-threatening injuries. She finds it difficult to leave her abusive husband and continues to endure his violent attacks. which is generally endorsed as a form of discipline (Qayum & Ray, 2010). Violence against women can cause long term psychological problems. Consequently, some men have killed their spouses or partners as a result of domestic violence. Even though Beatrice eventually kills her husband, the end result is not that of female victory over patriarchal oppression. With Adichie's vocal feminism, we expect her female characters to confront abusive partners or rebel against patriarchy. Thus, Beatrice could have fought back or chose to walk away instead of taking the radical step of poisoning Eugene.

Ifeoma maintains a tight bond with Beatrice through her ordeal. She is an outspoken woman, liberal catholic, mentor, and role model to traumatised members of the Achike family. Kambili describes her as a vocal person (85), a strong woman (237). Ifeoma is educated, economically independent, in a better position to challenge Eugene for maltreating his wife and children. Ife With the death of Ifediora, Ifeoma's husband, male domination patriarchy and the traditional gender role is removed. Thus, Aghogho Akpome (2017) attributes the autonomy and independence enjoyed by Ifeoma to a reversal tactics by Adichie to erase male power: "Ifeoma emerges as an alternative vision of the new nation where the domineering figure of the powerful patriarch is absent and where the polity may enjoy greater civic and individual freedoms." (9859)

The idea on marriage as a prize and achievement for women which Adichie rejects (DI:15) is indicated by Beatrice's words, "a husband crowns a woman (75). Beatrice defines a woman by her husband which support the idea of marriage as an achievement for women. This made her question Ifeoma's status as a woman with children but without a husband (75). This portrayal may be Adichie's own way of ridiculing or censoring the prevalence or predominance of this cultural norm. However, this thought is also uttered by one of Ifeoma's students while describing her upcoming marriage. She discusses her soon-to-be husband with the pride of someone who has won an award. The student tells Ifeoma that she probably won't get back to college in order to have kids since she does not want her husband to feel that "he married me to have an empty home." (234) which implies that She dismisses her

own ambitions to amend to, and gratify her husband's wish. Ifeoma did nothing to stop her. She only communicates her dissatisfaction by consoling herself that "She was rarely especially brilliant, so I shouldn't be sad." (234) In the same way, Adichie's speech on the view of marriage as a form of ownership (WF, 30) is expressed in Ifeoma's uncertainty about her female students, several of whom are married and dependent on their husbands. Ifeoma observes that when they graduate, the husbands own them and their degrees (75)

When Beatrice voices her pain and suffering from Eugene's beating to her sister-in-law, Ifeoma did not question or confront him. Her advice to Beatrice is: "When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head" (213). Ifeoma appears not to challenge the system that oppresses women. On one occasion, she tries to cover up for Eugene. When Chima, her son, asks what happened to Jaja's finger, Ifeoma quickly answered that he had an injury.

Beatrice prefers to remain in affluence and suffer the consequences. This is what informed her question to Ifeoma, "Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go?"(250). Ifeoma offers no alternative, no protection for the uneducated, economically dependent Beatrice. Since Beatrice cannot leave Eugene, murder is by all accounts the only conceivable method of getting away from the snare of her marriage. Ifeoma fails to convince Beatrice to stay away from her abusive marriage. In doing so, she fails to challenge the seemingly fixed stereotype about married people that leave matrimonial victims with no other choice but to remain in an abusive and oppressive relationship. Ifeoma is an outspoken woman but certainly not an advocate of gender equality.

Adichie also explores the negative effects of patriarchy on men, which is manifested in obligatory male control, using Obiora and Jaja as examples. Both of them show interest in assuming the role of the head of their respective families. They are expected to be physically strong, tough and fearless. Ifeoma's 14-year-old son Obiora suppresses his tears after the passing of Papa-Nnukwu "because he was the *nwoke* in the house, the man Auntie Ifeoma had by her side" (184). Obiora is younger than his sister Amaka and not more capable than her. Nevertheless, he takes up the role of family head due to his gender. This motivates Jaja to imitate Obiora and takes up the duty of the head of the family to himself, saying: "I should have taken care of Mama. Look how Obiora balances Auntie Ifeoma's family on his head, and I am older than he is" (289). Jaja successfully shoulders the responsibility of his mother's crimes

when he admits to having killed Eugene and is arrested (291).

3. *Is Americanah* a Feminist Text?

In *Americanah*, Adichie depicts a wide range of male and female interactions, some of which reflects various female characters who either embrace, accept or conform to female gender stereotypes criticized in Adichie's non-fiction. Ojiugo for instance, contrasts the rebellious young Nigerian woman with her more mature self, who has settled down in England and abandoned the goals of her adolescence. Obinze remembers that when she was younger, Ojiugo "provoked vicious gossip and dislike from other girls for wearing bright lipstick, torn jeans, being blunt, and smoking in public." (238). Obinze is taken aback by Ojiugo's transition from a headstrong, young woman to a wife and mother who is completely preoccupied with her children's education. Ojiugo's interpretation of her role as a mother is in stark contrast to Adichie's advice to the implied reader of *Dear Ijeawele* to define herself as a complete person instead of a mother alone (DI, 7-8). In Ojiugo's case, marriage has led to her acceptance of the stereotypically traditional role of a mother and wife, despite her rebellious youth.

Obinze also sees this restriction of gender role in Isioma and Jonathan, a couple he is acquainted with. "The few things she allowed herself to say were thoughtful, but she often remained silent, shrinking herself, pretending not to be as intelligent as she was, to salve Jonathan's ego" (373). Jonathan, on the other hand, dominated the evening with lengthy anecdotes about his involvements in business and politics (373). This description of Isioma echoes Adichie's observation that girls are often expected to "shrink themselves" (WF, 27) and temper their ambition and success in order not to pose a threat to men (WF, 27-28).

Kosi, Obinze's wife, is another case of a woman who is very concerned with fulfilling gender expectation., Kosi never liked the idea of her husband in the kitchen. She thought that his wanting to cook is an indictment of her. Obinze says "So I stopped, just to have peace... There's a lot of pretending in my marriage". (450-451). Obinze acknowledges that his wife's association of cooking with gender is rather common in the society. Obinze also recalls Kosi's first reaction to the birth of their daughter Buchi, which shows she has internalized sexism. Kosi apologizes to Obinze and informs him that their upcoming child will be a male (458).

Another gender assumption that Adichie opposes is Kosi's attempt to be likable (WF, DI: 36–37). Kosi, in the words of Obinze, "flatten[s] her personality so that her beauty does not threaten" (28). Obinze was constantly taken aback by how crucial it was to her that she be wholesomely pleasing and devoid of any harsh words. (28). Kosi insists on helping with lunch service and cleanup when she first meets Obinze's mother (28). This illustration demonstrates how Kosi associates her desire to be likeable with stereotypically "female" home chores. She is viewed as "such a well-meaning, devoted woman" by Obinze (30).

The relationship between The General, a Nigerian military figure, and Ifemelu's, aunt Uju is marked by financial imbalance. The General provides Uju, his mistress, with a car and a job using his wealth and influence (45). Uju reveals that she has no money on her own account and never receives sizable quantities from The General but must ask for money (76–77). Ranyinudo and Priye are friends of Ifemelu. Their relationships with men are predominantly characterized by males acting as the givers and women as the recipients. Adichie critiques Priye and Ranyinudo for their strong links between materialism and masculinity (26). Their conception of marriage, which assumes that males should be the breadwinners, necessitates the ladies' financial dependence and, as a result, unequal relationships. Adichie portrays Ranyinudo and Priye's relationship attitudes as being quite typical of many young women in Nigeria (422).

The relationship between Uju and Bartholomew, a fellow immigrant from Nigeria to the United States, demonstrates Adichie's opposition to the notion that domestic labour is solely a female activity (10). Uju complains to Ifemelu about the unfairness of her relationship with Bartholomew: "Both of us come home at the same time, and do you know what Bartholomew does? He doesn't do anything more than sit in the living room, turn on the TV, and inquire about our dinner plans." (217) Bartholomew appears to think that cooking is solely for women, whilst Uju seems to think that his expectation that she should perform additional work is unfair. Additionally, Bartholomew requests to be paid Uju's salary. " He said that since he is the head of the family, this is how marriages are, that I should not send money to Brother without his permission, that we should pay for his car out of my salary " (217). Adichie rejects the phrase "permit and being allow" as a component of an unequal marriage (22). Bartholomew has internalized "the idea of marriage as a prize to women" and views cooking as a sign of

a woman's marital worth (15). Likewise, Aisha appears to adhere to the concept of "marriage as an achievement" and places more value on getting married than on the person she marries or any feelings she may have for them. Aisha, Ifemelu's hairdresser, is very eager to get married because she asks Ifemelu, whom she has just met, to persuade at least one of her two boyfriends to marry her (17–18), declaring that "Any one is okay. I wish to wed". (18)

In "Imitation" The power dynamics in Nkem and Obiora's relationship is evident, as Nkem complies with all of Obiora's ideas. Obiora is a controlling husband but not violent. When her husband speaks, Nkem pays attention. Just like Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, Nkem is a silenced wife whose husband holds power over all decisions involving her and their children. It doesn't matter what she prefers. Nkem and Obiora's marriage is a classic example of inequality. Nkem's relationship with Obiora hints at what Adichie terms "Feminism Lite," which subtly reinforces masculine superiority. (DI, 20). Due to her complete financial dependence on him, Nkem must cooperate and submit in marriage. For Nkem, marriage is an achievement that is intimately related to social status and wealth. Obiora exerts his power more subtly than Eugene does in *Purple Hibiscus*, yet it is still just as effective at keeping his wife under control. In Adichie's non-fiction, this imbalance is frequently criticized (WF, DI, 31). "Imitation" dramatizes the scenario of an unequal marriage in which the woman is the only one who makes concessions and yields in to her husband's wishes. When Nkem finally confronts Obiora about her plan to go back to Nigeria, he stares at her and she realizes he has never heard her speak up or take a stand. (41).

4. Conclusion

Adichie promotes gender equality, women's empowerment, social transformation, and a change in how boys and girls are raised as the first steps in tackling the issue of gender in both of her feminist non-fiction books. However, women are still marginalized and discriminated against in Nigeria today. Most leadership roles are held by men. The restrictions placed on Nigerian women by culture and religion are significant. In Adichie's 2009 viral TED talk entitled, "The Danger of a Single Story," Adichie argues that a single story can rob a people of their dignity, rendering them incomplete, flat and one dimensional. Nigeria is a nation of rich cultural diversity. Our story of Nigerian women should reflect that diversity rather than limiting the experience of all Nigerian women to that of a group or an individual. Adichie seems to be a victim of her

argument by generalising her individual experience of sexism. We can understand that in the relationship between men and women all over the world, there are imbalances that need to be addressed. However, we may be reading a single story of Nigerian women if we generalise Adichie's personal contact with gender discrimination. While not denying the existence of gender discrimination even in the 21st century, it will in fact, be near impracticable to classify every woman within a society as having exactly similar experience because all women have their own experiences with feminism, and all of them cannot be the same. Women are the main characters of Adichie's novels. Women under oppression make up her main characters. While she fails to project strong feminist role models to mirror the feminist concepts in her nonfiction, the multiplicity of female characters in her books portray African women's experiences under patriarchy. The novels stress patriarchal views about gender roles that maintain women's inferior status. The goals of Adichie's feminism are in direct opposition to the behavior of female characters like Ranyinudo, Kosi, and Beatrice who are economically helpless and credulous. She does not offer them as role models for feminist behavior.

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